

CAR AND I

The gaze lingers on the car's metallic surface. Fingers caress it. The fleshy, soft body presses against the metal. At the same time, the tantalizingly slow fingers caress another human body, its contours. In the background, a premonitory, enticingly slow music plays.

The car is an extension of the body, an accessory, and a sex toy and cyborg-like metallic skin surrounding flesh.

The car symbolizes unfulfilled desire and pleasure, the unattainability of climax. At the same time, it is also a central symbol of the binary gender system and the pollutants caused by humans. Like this confusing fusion, the car encapsulates the complexity of desire, the pursuit of intense and exhilarating life, the seeking of pleasure, destruction, and death in one object. The effects of the car are haunting, arousing, sickening, slowly and rapidly fatal, invisibly floating in the air, entering the lungs and bloodstream, and oozing out from within.

This text, too, arises from the car. I see it in my mind as a knot of interchanges composed of highway ramps, an accelerating landscape with multiple directions and lanes. I stand in the midst of that landscape, amidst the noise of highways, and I write.

Over the past two years, I have spent a significant amount of time exploring desires related to cars and driving. I examine the car as a birthplace of technosexuality and technocorporeality.

I envision myself driving on the freeway, accelerating as Bon Jovi's "It's My Life" plays on the radio. During the chorus, I turn up the volume and sing along. I AM LIVING TO THE FULLEST. As the scenery changes, I think that this is it, my life. Four minutes later, the song ends, and I'm left with an agonizing feeling that life still goes on, but not in the same rhythm. Why couldn't I extract all the potential from the song and the moment? The car gives, but never enough.

In this text, I examine the connections between gender and car culture, contemplating the masculinizing effects of car culture both within myself and on a broader social scale. How has my father, who lived actively through driving, influenced my perception of masculinity? And how does my own transmasculine identity relate to car culture? The disease that killed my father is also partially present: he died of lung cancer, having inhaled toxins in various forms throughout his life — diesel oil, asbestos, construction dust from different materials, and cigarette smoke.

I also inquire into how ecological studies on the effects of environmental toxins on the gender of organisms can be integrated into discussions on the relationship between cars and gender. I follow the path laid out by gender studies professor Eva Hayward and evolutionary biologist Malin Ah-King (2019), as well as transgender feminist researcher Wibke Straube (forthcoming). I find myself asking: why are the potentially queer effects of environmental toxins seen as more horrifying than their lethal effects? Why do ideals of a “pure” and technologically untouched body still dominate the discourse on ecology?

If the car — a technological body that pushes petrochemical toxins through itself — has influenced the sexual development of my own body and if technologically produced environmental toxins have made me transgender, then I am the embodiment of the technoloop.

This is not petro-nostalgia. This text is my pseudoscientific and artistic gesture in a world filled with pollution. Although I do feel nostalgia for the current times and past decades when I think about the future world, where the human relationship with cars will inevitably be different from what it was in my youth in the 90s or even today, nostalgia is not the fuel for this work. The fuel is a genuine desire for technology, a genuine relationship with my deceased father and his cars, in which I experienced my most intimate moments with him, and a genuine relationship with my own technologically modified transmasculine body. I attempt to think towards worlds where the relationship with cars is different than now, where the relationship with technology is something other than exhilarating and patriarchal, and where the relationship with pollutants is complex — not longing for purity, imaginary neutrality, and naturalness.

ON MASCULINITIES

In this text, I repeatedly use the word masculinity referring to three different concepts of masculinity.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Manifests in various forms such as misogyny, white supremacy, ableism, the separation of masculinity from femininity, heteronormativity, and the valorization of power and rationality. Hegemonic masculinity is psychologically, historically, materially, and psychosomatically multi-layered in its production.

Subcategory of Hegemonic Masculinity: PETROMASCULINITY

Emphasizes the historical role of fossil fuels in supporting the white patriarchal order. It denies climate change and idealizes car culture and pollution. This current model of petromasculinity would not exist without fossil capitalism. The binary gender system as a whole relies on fossil capitalist production and technology. (Daggett 2018.)

TRANSMASCULINITY

Here, I specifically refer to the masculinity experienced and performed by individuals assigned female at birth who identify as transgender. Transmasculinity can also take forms of hegemonic masculinity.

CAR

The car is desired. The car is desired as an extension of the body's technology. The car transforms bodies. The car pollutes. The pollutants end up in human bodies. Bodies want technology that assists in living with pollutants. Pollutants transform bodies. Technology transforms bodies into more livable ones. Bodies want more livable bodies. The cycle gradually repeats itself, changing.

Car culture* is an activity that actively constructs techno-genders, techno-subjects, and techno-sexualities.

*I use the word "car culture" with some liberties in terms of what I think it signifies. I refer to car culture as both driving a car, refueling a car, being in a car in general, petting, washing, and admiring a car, engaging in sexual activities in a car, and traveling in a car as a non-driver, but also being in nature/cultural environments where the presence of cars permeates the atmosphere.

Lifestyles, ideals, and norms generated by fossil capitalism and petro-culture have come to define the evolution of desire and pleasure-seeking. Technosexual desire directed towards cars is one area within the ecology of fossil capitalist desire. The cycle of enthusiasm and frustration that propels fossil capitalism is a significant aspect of car culture.

Car culture is desired, people grow tired of it, and they want more. Car culture is addictive.

Car culture has a fast-paced, consumerist rhythm that fuels and sustains petroleum-based desires for pleasure.

Car culture itself has created a certain type of petrosexual individual, directly influencing their interests and desires, or at least serving as a platform for imagining possibilities. Petrosexuality, as broadly conceived in the artistic and theoretical work of Madeleine Andersson (2022), refers to a sexuality that is shaped, formed, and maintained by the culture produced by fossil fuels.

Desire related to cars and desire generated by cars build both around the car itself and in direct relation to it. Acts of car culture fuel desire: acceleration, speed, penetration during refueling, where the fuel nozzle is inserted deeply into the fill pipe, or voyeuristic glances through rear view and side mirrors. Touching various car parts produces haptic pleasure – handbrake, gear lever, steering wheel, smooth laminated windows. Desire for cars is charged in different ways – partly directly sexual and partly latent libidinal. The desire is directed towards the car as both a sexual object and a facilitator of experiences. The car creates a sense of agency for the driver, which in turn reinforces self-esteem. Increased self-esteem can affect sexual desire and the feeling of sexual capability; the car becomes a sexual exudation for the driver.

Cars are an architectural part of society; they are both interior and exterior spaces that create separate living and dwelling capsules but also shape urban space through movement and parking.

In his book "Pornotopia" (2014), Paul B. Preciado writes that if one wants to change a man, one must change his home, and if one wants to shape gender, one must shape the architectural environment of the body. Cars "transform men" – transform bodies into technological, cyborg-like, wild (but restrained), skilled, smooth-moving, petro- and technomasculine entities.

A car is also a pornographic and sexual space. I believe that car-related sexuality stands out from other forms of sex due to the historical gendered coding of the car and its cyborg nature. Car ownership has prosthetic dimensions: the car owner is contributing to the sexual act happening inside their car even if they are not physically present; their body extension is involved in the act.

Gender is actively constructed in relation to car culture. The gender-coded meanings associated with cars are historically and politically influenced, encompassing drivers, passengers, owners, and even those who do not own cars. Desires targeted, marketed, and closely associated with cars create an endless cycle of desire, consumption, and frustration.

Masculinity in car culture is constructed through the entanglement of cyborgization, intimacy, flesh and metal, customization, and acceleration, all immersed in the black oil of fossil fuels.

The masculinizing* impact of car culture is captivating. The car entices one to embark on an adventure. It embodies the promise of speed, exhilaration, escapism, "freedom", and power. It makes the body strong and capable but is also potentially deadly in an instant.

*I perceive the masculinizing effect of cars to be pervasive, not limited to men or those who identify as masculine but also extending to women, femmes, and those who identify as feminine, without negating their femininity through the masculinizing force of cars. Instead, I believe that masculinization occurs regardless of individual experience because car culture is so deeply encoded as masculine.

In a binary culture, gender and sexuality are closely intertwined with the manufacturing processes of cars and with the performance of gender connected to oil trade and capitalist production.

I view the car as a symbol of body modification and the construction of gender. It is an addition to a finite body. Similarly, I consider transitions and other body modifications and body-altering procedures as additions or edits to a finite body or limited biology. Hormone replacement therapy and surgical transition, technologically produced, edited, modified, developed, and designed for my body and gender, provide me with a similar sense of capability as driving a car.

The fluids in cars are linked to oil politics through petrochemical production. I contemplate the car in relation to my own technologically assisted transition, where the plastic materiality of my body changes through testosterone. Sustanon, the synthetic testosterone I inject monthly, is tied to the same petrochemical production structures.

I applied testosterone gel to my skin for the first time on August 8, 2019. On that day, I wrote the following sentences in my diary:

It's 13:32. I'm standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom with an opened tube of Testim in my hand. A drop of clear, noxious-smelling gel oozes out from the small opening of the tube. I look at the drop in horror and awe. Mostly horror, though.

M says it's maybe one twentieth of the tube's content. It's enough for me today. I take the drop on the middle finger of my right hand and quickly spread it on the outer side of my left forearm, precisely on the other side of where the Nexplanon implant used to be under my skin. My hand is a testing ground for hormones. This time, I'm the one administering my dose and keeping track of what the experiment does to me.

I still smell the scent of the gel. I feel nervous. It's not so much about whether I dare to stop using the gel when I want to, but rather the fact that there is something new in my body. I think about walking on the city streets, I think about the smog hovering over Los Angeles that I saw from the hills of the Getty Museum on a clear sunny day. The cloud was like a mountain. I ponder inhaling pollutants and the body's vulnerability in any place. I think that this is not a distinct process, nothing stranger or scarier.

The gel gradually dries on my skin. I imagine feeling a burning sensation, I imagine microscopically sensing how it absorbs through my pores and infiltrates my bloodstream.

How many red blood cells do I have? I need to get blood tests. I wonder, what if my psyche and mental health actually need this? How would it feel to be on testosterone for my entire life? How would I look?

What kind of project is this? Is it art or life, the restoration of body image, self-realization, or chaos? I bring myself back to memories of my teenage years and let go.

Hormone replacement therapy has been both essential and an experiment for me. My relationship with my body has always been curious in a way that I've wanted to change and modify it. Partly, behind that desire, there may be dysphoria or dysmorphia, but there's more to it; the desire to become different, the desire to edit and test the potential of the body is exciting and invigorating for me — as it is.

I remember the first time I saw Marilyn Manson's music video for "The Dope Show" in 1998 when I was 8 years old. I was bewildered, experiencing a mix of fear and excitement from the body modifications portrayed in Manson's video that I haven't forgotten to this day. Later on, my excitement was fueled by Stelarc's and Orlan's body modification art, as well as Genesis P. Orridge and Lady Jaye's Pandrogeny Project, which made me question the limits, potential, and needs of my own body.

Driving a car creates a sense of capacity and agency, similar to self-administered hormone medication. The gender-producing characteristics of cars are linked to testosterone, as both cars and testosterone are thought to masculinize the body. In a pharmapornographic society (Preciado 2013), the fluids of cars, bodily fluids, and synthetically produced testosterone are all interconnected through the politics of sexual arousal, excitement, desire, passion, fervor, and speed.

Testosterone doesn't straightforwardly make the body faster or stronger, but the socially accepted, normalized, and problematic narratives surrounding it can create an experience of increased power. This applies to bodies that internally produce testosterone as well as those externally administering it to themselves. The experience of power is inevitably linked to the neoliberal, competition-maintaining, and speed-glorifying social system. It essentializes testosterone bodies as more suitable for capitalism, which is based on masculine power and dominance.

Transmasculine bodies inevitably reflect themselves in those models of masculinity that we have learned and grown up with. I think my father taught me something about petromasculinity. His work was intertwined with building materials, some of which are directly derived from oil, and all of which require the use of fossil fuels for production. My father's relationship with cars was also petromasculine, based on the cyborg-like connection between man and machine. He didn't want to drive automated cars; manual control — the ability for my father to personally steer the car, to become one with its movements — was important to him.

The car was my father's technologically produced extension of his soul. The car gave meaning to my father's life — as a companion, as a prosthetic aid for expressing emotions and attachment, and as a home.

After his death, I drive with my father's soul. I let it traverse the world with my intentions. When I sit in the car, I feel closer to him than I ever did before. I enter his soul and he enters mine. His spirit takes hold of my body in the form of memories and visions, like the Holy Spirit; he establishes himself within me. My flesh transforms into the contours of his soul.

ENVIRONMENTAL TOXINS

Ecological processes, the circulation of organisms, and experiences of the world have been affected by the environmental toxins generated by fossil capitalism. Everyone is caught in the cycle of chemicals and pollutants, whether they want to be or not.

Some long for an unpolluted, untouched, and culturally detached nature. Others, on the other hand, deny the progression of climate change and environmental destruction, and crave even more accelerated pollution. Both of these one-dimensional, eco-fascist, petromasculine and normative discourses are united by a fear of the increasing presence of transgender bodies.

Wibke Straube writes in their forthcoming article "Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals and Gender Dysphoria" that recent research in the life sciences has garnered interest in the idea that endocrine-disrupting chemicals, or hormone disruptors, could be responsible for the increasing prevalence of transgender and non-binary individuals in the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines hormone disruptors as external substances or mixtures that alter the hormone function of organisms and cause adverse health effects in healthy organisms, their offspring, or populations (WHO/IPCS 2002).

According to Straube's argument, it is believed that environmental toxins can affect fetal development in a way that "disrupts" the processes of sex determination. Straube writes that in their research, they have repeatedly come across articles that hypothetically suggest possible connections between hormone disruptors and transgender identities. All this speculation is based on the "brain-organizational theory" neurological school of thought, which posits that gender formation occurs in the womb (Straube, forthcoming).

There is currently limited research evidence regarding the effects of hormone disruptors on individuals. However, studies reveal the underlying transphobic attitudes of scientists in the research conducted: studies that ultimately link transgender identities to environmental toxins tend to imply that transgender identity itself is somehow "abnormal" and "toxic," as Straube writes (Straube, forthcoming).

While not all scientists use transphobic language in their work, this research has also gained visibility in publications that are openly transphobic. Investigative journalist Eric Francis, who has focused his career on environmental toxin damage, writes the following in Ecologist online magazine: "Whereas once science worried about skin pustules and cancer, today the main concerns about pollution are its effects on sex hormones, and the way they blur the distinctions between the genders." Referring to Monona Rossol, Francis writes that if we see sex configurations changing in fish and alligators and we know that "...people have been exposed to the same detergents and compounds for years, we seem to have an issue" (Francis 2008).

Francis believes that "LGBTQAI+ movements" do not want to examine the relationship between environmental toxins and queerness because if research on the effects of environmental toxins were correct, and the toxins were "cleaned up," transgender and homosexual individuals would also disappear from the world. Francis's claim is almost touching in its naivety: the idea of returning to an imaginary, pristine starting point is delusional and comical, but at the same time, it is simplistic and appealing to the attention of many individuals who are already transphobic.

Francis also writes in his article about transgender rights activist, physician, and surgeon Dana Beyer, who suggests that hormone disruptors (as a general category) may influence gender identity through exposure in the womb but adds that this information does not tell the whole truth. Beyer reminds us that transgender individuals have existed in the world long before chemical hormone disruptors. In response to this claim, Francis writes that Beyer's assertion "may be true," but it does not explain the increasing "trend" of diverse gender expressions. With his thoughts, he paints a transphobic and sensationalist vision of the future: "If a whole population is increasingly affected to the point of increasing transgenderism in many people, then the ultimate result is a severely weakened species, reproductively speaking." (Francis 2008).

The petromasculine concern about transgender identities is intertwined with all of this in a peculiar way: petromasculine individuals do not believe in climate change, and it is important for them to continue to reinforce pollution, even derive pleasure from it. However, at the same time, they are horrified by the existence and potential growth of transgender individuals or any form of queerness.

Throughout history, transgender identities have been pathologized with various emphases. Straube writes that while transgender identity was previously interpreted as a psychological and mental disorder, in light of this new research, it is viewed as a form of environmental disorder. They continue, "I will argue here that the trans body is currently, in both life sciences and popular media, materialized as a molecular site of petrochemical pollution, and as such is dismissed as an environmentally contaminated body" (Straube, forthcoming).

Both petromasculine and eco-normative perspectives can be traced back to eugenic undertones. Francis's language also arises from this eugenic and novel eco-normative cis-heterosexism. Sir Francis Galton coined the concept of eugenics in 1883 from the Greek word "well-born" (English, 2016). The word itself is inherently essentialist, based on birth, origin, and an imaginary pristine "goodness." The eugenic cis-normative language used to discuss gender in both popular and scientific discourses paints an idealized picture of an original and proper binary, where bodies that deviate in any way are somehow unnatural and deviate from "good birth."

Similarly, the dominant ecological "green" discourse that has gained space in environmental discussions adopts rhetoric based on purity, where chemical pollution is believed to be responsible for the perversion or deterioration of "naturalness" – i.e., so-called natural bodies, biologies, ecologies, and reproductive processes (Di Chiro 2010).

Directing media attention towards the "distortions" of gender and sexuality caused by environmental toxins is a politics of shifting focus that takes the discussion further away from examining the effects of environmental toxins on the climate, ecosystems, and the habitats of humans and other organisms.

Bodies permeated by environmental toxins resulting from car culture are never pure, whether they are trans or not. Humanity is intertwined with technology: we are always, albeit unintentionally, in relation to technology. "Biological" and "technological" existence build upon each other like an intertwining fabric, penetrating and emanating from one another endlessly. All bodies are in a techno-loop, just in different ways, and transgender bodies are ultimately no more technological than any others.

TECHNO-TRANS-MASCULINITY

Archetypes and stereotypes of masculinity emerge as opposites to femininity and are associated with a defined and tightly sealed form of manhood that is a limited space for any individual man to live in.

Understanding, accepting, consciously constructing, and maintaining my own masculinity have helped me to grasp the mechanisms of masculinity formation as well as the tools, practices, and technologies needed for gender performance.

Through technology, my lived embodied experience undergoes transformation. Technology assists me in living and enjoying that experience and, in this era of history, the construction of my gender is inseparable from fossil capitalist production and technology.

The body can be viewed as a technological construct that is shaped, tuned, edited, and uploaded. While in hegemonic gender discourse, the association of technology with the human body is primarily linked to masculinity, masculinity is not inherently tied to technology, and technology itself is not masculine. Technology is also not inherently progressive; it can be used for destruction and subjugation. It is crucial to ask how, by whom, with what assumptions and projections technology is being used.

I want to consider the relationship between future technology and the body from a gender-abolitionist perspective, like the xenofeminists. The xenofeminist collective Laboria Cuboniks writes on their website that gender abolitionism means desiring to build a society where the traits that have been gendered in this era are no longer seen as a coordinate system for asymmetrical exercise of power. They write that technology's task must be to design technologies to combat the unequal access to reproductive and pharmacological tools (Laboria Cuboniks 2018).

According to Laboria Cuboniks, the true emancipatory potential of technology has yet to be realized, but if technoscientific innovations were more strongly linked to collective, theoretical, and political thinking where women and minorities occupy central positions, technology would then have the potential to act as a liberating, corrective, and body-enhancing tool. "The biological body should be technologically touched upon in the name of reproductional justice and in the name of creating more livable and adequate gender expressions and gendered bodily realms." (Laboria Cuboniks 2018).

The experience of my personal relationship with technology is complex, but analyzing it from a distance, I dare to claim it as transfeminist: I think about the technologization of my body daily because it is vital to my existence.

I perceive technology as masculinizing something within me — if we consider certain physical features and vocal patterns as masculine, which the use of synthetic testosterone and plastic surgery have made possible for me. According to this interpretation, I can argue that new masculine territories have opened up in my body, making it easier for me to live; previously, I felt that these territories were unsuitable for flourishing. Through technology, my body has transformed and generated new territories, and that's why I refer to them as techno-trans-masculine territories. I use the term "territories" because I perceive my body as actively embodying much more than just masculinity: I also experience it as actively feminine and something completely different, unrecognizable to myself. At times, I don't perceive or feel the existence of masculinity or femininity within me at all. Rather, they are read onto me from the outside — my body just is. I feel more masculine due to testosterone use because I am perceived as more masculine than before, not because I am inherently more masculine or less feminine than I used to be. I consider my masculinity to be a form of techno-trans-masculinity that is sensitive but strong — sensitive because I believe sensitivity is an important part of compassionate humanity, and I consciously practice it in relation to masculinity, and strong because I don't perceive my masculine territories being as threatened as normative masculinity.

For me, testosterone replacement therapy is primarily about enabling life; the body needs to be shaped and edited in order to thrive. I believe that masculinity constructed through desired and sought-after technological intervention in the body can enable experiences of masculinity that deviate from norms.

The relationship between transmasculinity and technology is embodied, molecular, hormonal, and performative — it is linked to the fields of medicine, cosmetics, culture, and fashion. Similarly, cisgender people's lives are intertwined with technology from birth. Cisgender individuals also maintain masculinity through performance, hormones, and various chemicals. Practices that reinforce gender are often similar for both trans and cis individuals. However, what sets transmasculinity apart from cis masculinity is how technology becomes noticeable in certain ways in the everyday life of a transmasculine person. When you have to construct your identity externally, materially, and mentally in relation to societal models that do not align with the gender you were assigned at birth, it is inevitable to analyze those construction methods. Understanding the immense effort required to maintain masculinity can increase understanding of the functioning of the gender binary in society.

Now, let's still speculate for a moment that I am trans because while floating in my mother's womb, various environmental toxins were transferred to my body through the placenta connecting me and my mother, and because during childhood, I drank water and used cosmetics containing hormone disruptors. Let's imagine that the habits and pollutants that emerged alongside the rise of car culture, on the same timeline, caused my dysphoria and the need for a technologically assisted transition. I am polluted and unnatural, a marginalized techno-toxicological-man, whose relationship with the car is like a looping cycle: it represents the patriarchal fossil capitalist masculine figure that has caused my techno-dependent body. I also reflect my masculinity onto that figure: admiring, loathing, critiquing, and marveling at it.

In the end, I don't care why I'm transgender. I'm not interested in finding a reason for my own gender. I'm not interested in asserting anything essential about transness. It doesn't matter to me whether the number of transgender people in the world increases and why it happens if it does.

If being exposed to chemicals and pollutants was the foundation of my transness, I want to make peace with it. Giovanna Di Chiro reminds us that a queer body "...can be reclaimed and refigured as home — that desired place of connectedness, family, and well-being — with full realization that the body/home is sometimes the site of exposure to just the opposite: abuse, hunger, polluted water, and air" (Di Chiro 2010). Technology is one way to facilitate this process of re-homing the body, constructing a home, and self-determination of the body.

I think about building a car. I think about building a body. I think about designers working on cars, searching for the perfect shape that attracts and captivates, that gives you goosebumps. I think about applying Tostran testosterone gel to my thighs every day for a couple of years. I think about examining 3D-printed models, cleaning composite parts, and making molds. I think about Sustanon testosterone oil, an androgen and anabolic steroid medication, and a testosterone ester that I inject into my buttocks monthly with the assistance of a nurse. I think about the mass molding and cutting of large car body parts. The nurse opens the package and the ampoule, draws the liquid into the syringe through the needle, changes the needle, cleans a small area of my skin, and injects the needle into my flesh. I think about the thousands of factory workers in their jobs, protective gear, and tools. I think about myself in the surgical ward just before anesthesia, thinking about the hospital lamps that dazzle my field of vision. Body parts are welded together, metal is shaped, and pieces are moved along assembly lines in the factory. I think about the anesthetic. Thousands of parts and components are attached to the car frame. I think about the scalpel, the forceps — hands that operate on my chest, removing fat and mammary glands, flesh and blood. I think about painting and finishing, how the final result is inspected multiple times to make the car as good as possible for driving. I think about stitches, needles, rubber gloves, and painkillers. I think about how many times I visited nurses and doctors for examinations, so that my body would be as good as possible for living.

I get in the car, not to drive, but to touch it. I stroke my skin and run my fingers along the scar tissue on my chest.

The car hasn't brought a well-born individual into the world. The children of the car are not pure or immaculate. They don't believe in normalcy, they are neither natural nor technologically untouched. They are permeated by petrochemical, technologically produced pollution, their desire is directed toward technology, toward the source of their existence. They embody the technoloop.

In the end, maybe we are the same. Me and the car.

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***but like I only had time for the Finnish version...sorry for the Helvetica, babes**

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