

SEAWATER/C-CUP: FISHY TRANS EMBODIMENTS AND GEOGRAPHIES OF SEX WORK IN NEWFOUNDLAND

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Abstract: *In this work of autoethnographic research-creation, I think with my augmented breasts—beyond the medical archive and away from the clinic—as an embodied inquiry into trans geographies of sex work in the island world of Ktaqamkuk/Newfoundland, Canada. Employing the felt knowledges of my breasts in visuals and poetics, I illustrate fishy entanglements shared between my sex work and breast augmentation that have reframed my social and sexual embodiment. Engaging with my breasts as a contact zone of embodied dis/pleasure, economic promise, and social violence, I suggest that paying creative attention to trans women’s breasts might reimagine notions of trans sex-working desire.*

Resume : *Dans ce travail de recherche et de création autoethnographique, je pense avec mes seins élargis—au-delà de l’aspect médical et clinique—comme dans une enquête incarnée sur les transgéographies du travail du sexe dans le monde insulaire de Ktaqamkuk, à Terre-Neuve au Canada. Utilisant visuellement et poétiquement les expériences tactiles de mes seins, j’illustre les relations complexes qui se sont établies entre mon travail sexuel et l’augmentation de mes seins qui ont transformé mon incarnation sociale et sexuelle. Examinant mes seins comme une zone de contact entre le dé/plaisir corporel, l’espoir de gain économique et la violence sociale, j’avance qu’un intérêt créatif pour les seins des femmes trans pourrait créer une nouvelle image des notions de désir dans le travail sexuel des trans.*

INTRODUCTION

Dry-swallowing preciously mint-scented turquoise and peach cream pills, the growth of my breasts began in late 2014. One morning, two weeks into hormone replacement therapy (HRT) with estrogen, I squeezed my right nipple and a milky clear substance (pathologized as galactorrhea) shot out for the first time. More exciting than alarming, this experience symbolized the female leaking out of me. Over the next few months, while new kinds of tingles and feelings figured into my embodiment as a young trans woman, my body began to shift. Textures of my coarse skin, hair, and nails became thinner and softer while breast buds pushed through. Fleshy interactions and sensuous engagements with the environments around me grew out of my chest. All my growing pains became corporeal guides through sex change and the nippy island weather systems of Ktaqamkuk/Newfoundland, Canada.¹

As I moved further away from an embodiment that could be read as male, my medical transition became intimately connected to my experience as a sex worker. Many of my Johns would inquire about my interest in surgeries: breast, facial, and genital. While some of them sought my companionship for a one-time fling and realized that I could not yet provide the ultimately troubled transsexual fantasy they desired, recurring clients would remark about the beauty of my “transformation” as my face softened and my breasts began to round out with each passing month. These clients formed two kinds of affinity with my breasts: while a number of them loved my A-cup boobs, and preferred small and perky tits over a large and pillowy bosom, the rest had shown excitement at the idea of fondling big, soft breasts on my body. I too had a complicated relationship with my breasts. Eight months into my medical transition, as my fishy social body became increasingly read as female, a lack of boobs that were big enough to balance out my physical frame triggered a growing experience of dysphoria with my chest. In my longing for gender pleasure, and in the realization that breast implants would also be an

investment into the unknown timeline of my future as a sex worker, I knew that I desired breast augmentation.

After consulting with a physician in late 2015 about my needs for top surgery, a single plastic surgeon in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) welcomed me as a patient without hesitation. A year and a half into my medical transition, while balancing my undergraduate studies, creative practice, and survival sex work, I had saved enough money for breast implants. In July 2016, two months before I started grad school, my \$8,000 augmentation mammoplasty was performed at the Health Sciences Centre in the capital city of St. John's. My first surgery of any kind, it signified a major step in my transsexual body project, but I had absolutely no idea what to expect. A fish out of water, I didn't know any other trans women islanders who were able to access top surgery. The only critical knowledge that I could find about trans breast augmentation came from documentary YouTube vlogs of both pre- and post-operative surgical bodies, as well as from discouraging articles within the medical archive.

While feminist scholars have used qualitative research to explore issues of desire in trans women's sexual, surgical, and social embodiments (Bauer and Hammond 6; Vartabedian 58), there is a significant gap in the qualitative literature regarding trans women's breasts. For several decades, our breasts have been objected to primary study by clinicians and medical researchers in order to illustrate a variety of complications (Kanhai et al. 480; Pritchard et al. 2278). From conditions of breast cancer to skin necrosis to symmastia (breast confluence at the middle of the chest as a result of implant displacement), the study of trans women's breasts within the clinic has warned both patients and physicians to be forethoughtful of uncertain risks associated with hormones and surgery. While this body of scholarship draws attention to very real exceptional outcomes of breast augmentation, and it demonstrates the importance of grappling with medical risk, I am unsettled by the way it dangerously frames trans women's desires. Recognizing how trans women's bodies have been grossly objectified and inappropriately examined—with our desires made invisible—in much academic inquiry (Namaste, *Invisible Lives* 1), I ar-

gue that there is a critical need for creative and heartfelt figurations of trans women’s breasts beyond the clinical theatre (Ross 74).

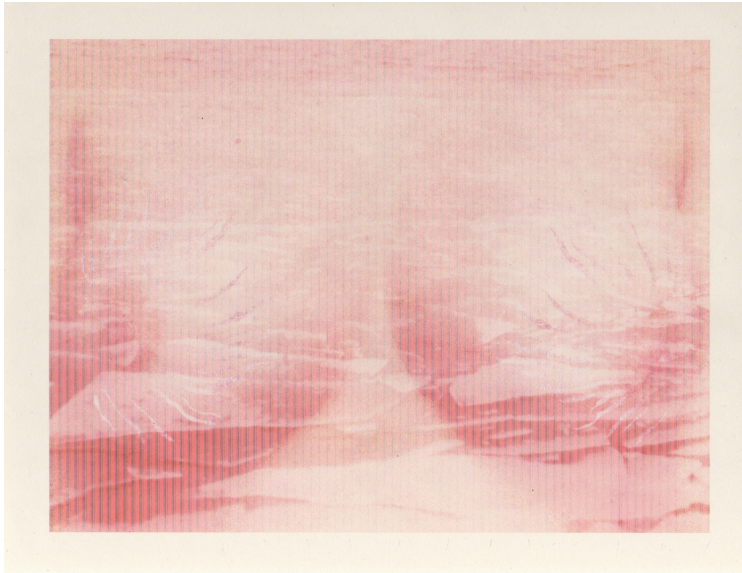


Fig 1. Some Numb (digital photography and illustration printed with distorted ink on recycled paper). 2019.

Using creative methods of inquiry (research-creation) to explore the breasted embodiments of trans women’s lives is one way toward such an artful transsomatechnics (Stryker 38; Sullivan 283). Following the curious interest of medical professionals to study the effects of breast augmentation upon trans women’s “work and artistic production” (Weigert et al. 1429), this essay furthers intellectual conversations about the use of creative practices to situate trans women’s embodiments within social and geographic environments (Arsenault 66; Plett 221; Ross and Karbusicky, *Tremblement de Chair*). In the next section, I briefly outline the current medico-legal landscape of trans care in NL to illustrate how trans women’s access to coverage for breast augmentation is made troublesome by medical policy. Calling attention to my sex work as a domain that made accessing

top surgery possible on my own terms, which in turn fundamentally changed my social embodiment and marketability as a trans escort, I suggest that trans women's breasts must be imagined otherwise. Within the context of a rural island geography, I ask: How might creatively working with breasts, beyond the medical archive and away from the clinic, be one way of doing transsomatics in Newfoundland? How might breasts be central to trans matters in this place?

From letters written to MHAs (Members of the House of Assembly), calling for the accessible coverage of transition-related surgeries (TRS), to protests at Trans Marches to sex-working ads to a range of life writing, visuals, and performance art—embodiments and figurations of the breast have been used by trans women, trans men, and non-binary Newfoundlanders to negotiate with our body projects and politics for a number of years.² For example, in my piece, *Some Numb* (Fig. 1), layering my bosom upon pans of harboured sea ice is a way to map the titillation of my incredibly sensitive post-operative breasts within Newfoundland's difficult climate and island geographies (an assemblage of sensuous socio-spatial relations). Guided by trans scholar Viviane Namaste's ways of producing trans knowledges beyond the medical archive, I think with my breasts as an inquiry into trans fishy embodiments and geographies of sex work in Newfoundland (Namaste, *Oversight* 43). Using visuals and poetics, I begin to creatively map how my breasts have reframed both my marketability as a sex worker and my social embodiment as I navigate through this island world. Engaging with my breasts as a contact zone of embodied dis/pleasure, economic promise, and social violence, I suggest that paying creative attention to trans women's breasts might reimagine notions of trans sex-working desire.

GEOGRAPHIES OF TRANS CARE IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

While trans people in NL have been able to access HRT with informed consent for over a decade, and we have recently gained increased access to affirming gender

markers on medico-legal documents, until a short while ago we have been stuck in the only Canadian region to still require an out-of-province assessment for transition-related surgeries (TRS). Before late 2019, in order to access surgical care funded by the NL government, trans patients were first required to obtain a referral for surgery at the CAMH (Centre for Addictions and Mental Health, formerly the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry) Adult Gender Identity Clinic in Tkaronto/Toronto, Ontario. An arena of erasure, gatekeeping, and negligence in which trans bodies are selectively authorized to access care, this clinic has been critiqued by trans activists and community members across Canada (Namaste, *Invisible Lives* 190). Actively seeking to avoid the drama of this clinic, many trans folks in NL have chosen to fund surgeries with our own labour, on our own terms. At the same time, community members and our allied physicians have continued to push for accessible trans care, and the result is a changing landscape of TRS that are eligible for provincial coverage. While breast augmentation has long been mis/understood as a cosmetic surgical practice, as of early 2019, it now qualifies as an insured procedure for transfeminine patients under NL's Medical Care Plan (MCP), but only when there is breast aplasia (non-development of breast tissue) after 18 months of HRT. This means that most trans women who desire breast augmentation will not be eligible candidates for surgery if the slightest bit of breast tissue exists.

How might physicians measure breast aplasia differently across the diversity of trans bodies? What doctors are willing to challenge this criterion as an act of transmisogyny? While I know many trans women islanders who desire augmented breasts, and a handful of local girls who are funding their own surgeries, the possibilities of accessing coverage for breast augmentation are made troublesome by the work of erasure in medical policy that does not recognize top surgery for trans women as a more-than-cosmetic encounter. According to many trans women islanders, who are not sex workers and who do not have the income of an independent trans escort, this added coverage as it currently exists was a failed victory from the start. My social position as a highly desired sex worker made accessing breast augmentation a quick possibility at the age of 21. While

often pushing me into a network of fetishization, secret desire, and disembodiment as a trans escort in a small city, the labour of my sex work has been an economic safety net within which I have been complexly tangled. In the context of my life outside CAMH’s clinical theatre, as a way to better understand “the value of not assuming that official narratives of our clinical history tell the whole story, or real story” of trans women’s lives and embodiments, I observe the relationship between my breast augmentation and sex work as a way of navigating through NL’s messy medico-legal institutions (Namaste, *Oversight* 43).



Fig 2. A Hundred Hands All Over (digital photography and illustration printed with distorted ink on recycled paper), 2019.

Following works in transsomatechnics that refuse colonial logics of gender to imagine trans embodiment otherwise (Benaway 113; cárdenas 52), this essay illustrates the significance of creative academic inquiry into trans women’s breasts. If trans women’s top surgeries are to be understood as embodied processes toward improved quali-

ties of life, as well as acts of creative transfiguration (Ashley and Ells 24), activists and physicians in NL must continue to challenge the ethics and medical discourse of augmentation mammoplasty as an unnecessary cosmetic procedure. Simultaneously, we must also recognize a series of fleshy, material, and social complications that can take form through breast augmentation. The second half of this essay grapples with some of these troubles by asking: How are pleasure, risk, sex, and violence complexly mapped upon trans women's social bodies by way of un/bearing breasts? Outside of the clinical theatre, and the genital-centric model of trans surgical care (Spade 324), what might become of trans women's breasts? Thinking with these questions, I creatively map a flux of fishy relations (disembodiment, microaggressions, and objectification) that have materialized through my breast augmentation in order to complicate the spatial politics of trans women's surgical bodies.

FISHY FELT KNOWLEDGES OF BREAST AUGMENTATION

The visuals and poetics that guide my felt knowledges have been formed in relation with the larger conceptual framework of my current research-creation that I call *feeling fishy* (for more on felt knowledges, see Million; Springgay; Tremblay; Vaccaro). A dynamic point of encounter between trans embodiment, queer ephemerality, and Atlantic ecology, feeling fishy materializes in my work as a creative and critical mapping of the ways that trans women's lives in Newfoundland are entangled with the island's oceanic geographies (Jefferies, "Myths" 21). Informed by histories of the term *fish* in communities of trans women across Turtle Island—queerly endearing vernacular that emerged in the 1970s as a way to symbolize the different market niches of cis and trans women's sex-working bodies—feeling fishy, in this essay, represents a slippery embodiment toward livable futures (Ridley 483). Following Black trans scholar Dora Santana, whose transatlantic poetics flow between body, water, and energy, and for whom "water is the embodiment of trans orientation," feeling fishy is a way of coming to

terms with a disembodiment that is in constant flux both at and in the hands of others (Santana 183).

“Fishy ... That’s something we say amongst ourselves ... It means she looks real ... Two perfectly shaped D-cup breasts on a tiny frame. God damn it, bitch. Those are fishy,” articulates trans artist Nina Arsenault in her autobiographical production, *The Silicone Diaries* (212-13). In my reading of this quote, feeling fishy speaks to the divine artfulness of many trans women’s body projects. Both iconized and made abject over her surgical transfiguration, Arsenault’s work offers insight into the effects of surgery upon her social body. In her article, *A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture*, she describes the slippery complexities of sex work, surgery, and sociality upon the temporalities of her embodiment. She says: “Because I was personifying new social and sexual roles, people treated me accordingly. This quickly and radically altered my relationships to others and my environment—power, privilege, oppression” (66). Arsenault’s lived experience illustrates the coexisting disposability and desirability of trans women’s bodies that shift with and across the spaces we inhabit. Feeling fishy, then, is also about queer displacement. Recognizing the different spatial relations of my breasted embodiment, one that is desired and objectified by Johns within the privacy of the home, and my social body, one that is often made spectacle and disposable by strangers in public space, I understand how my breasts continue to frame my fishy social location as a young trans woman islander.

Over the past three years, in the act of moving through public space in St. John’s, my breasted embodiment has been subject to an array of social violence, including harassment and catcalling, transmisogynistic slurs, looks and expressions of disgust, as well as non-consensual touches from strangers. Frequently objectified by others, my large and perky breasts have facilitated gross harassment from men and continuous shaming from women, specifically in moments of uncontrollable nipple show-through. I generally find this ignorant behaviour more illuminating than disorienting because it offers insight into the workings of transmisogyny in social space. However, the unwarranted stares, scoffs, winks, whistles, and comments each shape a troubled relationship with the augmented breasts that I could not

imagine becoming anything more than gender-affirming as a young transsexual. Although I am often able to ignore the weight of these environmental microaggressions, the most challenging part of moving through St. John's as a trans woman with visibly augmented breasts is encountering the smug misgendering and the intentional erasure of my womanhood by strangers, primarily other women (I am left to wonder why). At the beginning of my medical transition, I had no way of knowing how much social violence would be directed at me simply by embodying trans womanhood with breast implants. Taken together as ongoing challenges that I continue to experience as I move through social space, these forms of ignorance influence the difficult temporalities of my breasted embodiment.

At the same time, as one of the few local trans women escorts in St. John's, whose current body project aligns with the archetype of erotic transsexual desire for many male clients, my bosom has ushered me into a new economic milieu. For Johns who specifically and only desire a trans partner with soft curves and big breasts, my body is a market niche. As these men fondle my chest and suckle my nipples, the phantasies of their trans-amorous desire corporealize in the act of synchronously touching my breasts and genitals. For a large number of these clients, whose hegemonic masculinities prevent them from thinking critically about their desires to share touching encounters with trans women, or from doing the work of opening up to the beautiful diversity of transfeminine embodiments, my breasts become erotic spectacles and the most significant markers of my womanhood. Read side by side, these brief experiences of disposability and desirability illustrate how, for both social strangers and sexual clients, the imagined geography of my body is fishy in different ways. As my augmented breasts incite violence from strangers in public space, and become spectacle to my clients in the privacy of our encounters, feeling fishy is a form of knowledge that comes to me like a slow berth,

washing over
jelly-like jiggles
of more-than-skin
and nipples suckled

by hundreds of men
whose
oil-stained hands
cling to my chest
as if they might drown
in the fiction
of my pleasure
while I wait
to escape
each other's capture.

Grappling with the fishy intricacies opened up by my bosom in sensuous socio-spatial relations, these poetic fragments attempt to re-frame notions of pain and pleasure in my life as a trans woman sex worker. In her beautiful novel, *Little Fish*, writer Casey Plett interrogates the inevitable complexity of trans girl drama that shapes her protagonist Wendy's everyday life. Set in Winnipeg, a city with a significantly larger population than St. John's, she writes: "When Wendy first transitioned, there was someone to notice and comment every step of the way ... She had no language for it at the time. And she didn't think any of it out of place ... Like, duh, if you grew tits, your friends were gonna talk to you about your tits" (Plett 220). By recognizing how our many ways of moving through the world are structured by transmisogyny and gender-based violence, I identify with Wendy's awareness that trans women's bodies are bound together with the politics of place. And when Plett writes, "In every section of the city it seemed Wendy had a memory of someone who had treated her body with the casualness they would only treat their own" (Plett 221), I can't help but feel the touch of embodied memory on my breasts again.



Fig 3. Quare Ticks in Scum (digital photography and illustration printed with distorted ink on recycled paper). 2019.

Outside of the objectification and ignorance that have facilitated a difficult personal relationship with my bosom in social and sexual environments, my post-operative embodiment has also been refigured by sensory complexities beneath my skin stretched over silicone. In my piece, *Quare Ticks in Scum* (Fig. 3), the assemblage of water, light, breast, and moon jellyfish symbolizes several imagined geographies and sensuous temporalities of my embodiment. Shortly after my top surgery, I lost all sensation in my breasts and nipples for half a year. As nerve functions slowly began to return, I experienced searing pain and electric shocks on the regular. From total numbness to incredible discomfort, I continued to do survival sex work with my recurring clients. Aside from the fact that moon jellyfish look like floating breast implants, drawing relations between the sting of a jelly and my post-operative bursts of searing pain is an attempt at mapping the sensory vulnerability of my breasts over months of being fondled by Johns. Needing to work with my

sexual body for economic necessity, my negotiation of displeasure was a way to avoid the risk of jeopardizing my relationship with clients who secured my income each month. Feeling fishy, I creatively interrogate this transaction as a form of disidentification within which:

here
in transatlantic scum
my kind of whore
is known to sink,
make kin
with a rugged bottom
(the weight of
his body,
an ocean
to drown in)
and wait
for the stinging
to grow weak.

Reflecting upon a loss of feeling in my bosom for the first six months of my surgical recovery and the present erotic hypersensitivity of my nipples—both of which have complicated my sex work—allows me to take the fishy felt knowledges of my breasts elsewhere. In my attempt to trouble creatively what might become of trans women’s breasts outside of the clinical theatre, contextualizing the vulnerability of my skin stretched over silicone, alongside the disposability and desirability of my social and sexual body, helps me think more critically and emotionally about the influence of augmentation mammoplasty on trans women’s lives and embodiments.

What might my breasted embodiment come to represent beyond the growing transmisogyny I experience as I move through and with this island world? How might I think about pleasure beyond the domain of survival sex work and the ways that my body has been clung to by hundreds of rural men with complex desires and rough hands? Acknowledging the assemblage of embodied dis/pleasure, economic promise, and social violence that has materialized with my breasts,

my top surgery cannot simply be understood as an act toward the improved quality of my life. Certainly, it has troubled and influenced my embodiment as a trans woman sex worker in ways that I could not imagine before surgery. Three years post-op, I continue to question the oceans of felt knowledge that my breasts have opened up. I do not believe that being made spectacle by Johns in the privacy of the home, or by strangers in social space, fits into the schema of gender affirmation that I had imagined before top surgery. Nonetheless, these acts of objectification and transmisogyny shape a fishy embodiment that I am forced to grapple with as a trans woman in a small city at the edge of a dying world.

CONCLUSIONS

In the sublime isolation of my sex work, a geography of performance within which the phantasies of clients go unpoliced, the story of my gender dysphoria that has been lessened through breast augmentation is complicated by Johns who pay good money to co-create sensuous temporalities with me based on their imaginations of transsexual embodiment. In public space, the narrative of my top surgery as an act of agency is troubled by the fact that I have learned to keep my breasts concealed most of the time in order to avoid unwanted violence. In fishy relation with the social and sexual environments I inhabit, working with the felt knowledges of my breasts—from social violence to bawdy fetishization to sensory numbness—reveals something slippery about the co-constitutive natures of trans bodies and sensuous geographies (Hayward 245; Tourmaline, *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*; Twist 48). Using visuals and poetics to make sense of my embodiment helps me question: Who and what am I becoming with hundreds of hands and lips all over my bosom? How do I escape psychic capture from the economic marketability that has changed my life, and the social violence with which I have been faced, as a trans woman sex worker in Newfoundland? As a contact zone between bodies and worlds apart, what are the precarious temporalities and unknown futures of my breasts?

In this essay, I have contributed to a collection of creative and intellectual works that explore the embodiments of Newfoundland women using affective and sensuous engagements with place (see Jefferies, "Intimacy" 130; Norman and Power 59). By interrogating creative and emotional geographies of my sex work, I have tried to illustrate how my augmented breasts continue to shape and guide my trans self-in-creation through embodied, economic, and environmental troubles. Pulled back and forth through felt knowledges, thinking with my breasts has been both unsettling and therapeutic. As I write and visualize together the fishy entanglements of augmentation mammoplasty and sex work in my life, I feel the hands of clients, chasers, strangers, and lovers all over my body again. As I reflect on my painful disembodiment during the first six months after my surgery, I am tickled by the numbness of my body's reaction to jelly/fishy implants placed under my skin. As I continue to experience microaggressions and objectification, I think toward the future temporalities of my breasted embodiment in social and sexual environments. Returning to the fishy fragments of my research-creation, I acknowledge my position as just one body within a community of trans women islanders who, for several decades, have desired and fought for surgical care that is medically necessary, complexly affirming, and fundamentally entangled with our survival (Hilliard 1). In the context of my social location as a sex-working trans woman islander, using creative methods of inquiry to make sense of fishy trans embodiments and geographies of sex work has allowed me to better understand the contemporary and historical natures of trans women's lives in Newfoundland. Mapping the felt knowledges of my breasts in slippery movements through sex-working time and social space, I am learning to embrace an ocean of unknown futures for this buoyant, fishy body.

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IMAGE NOTES

All images created by Daze Jefferies.

NOTES

1. I include both geographic regions of the province Newfoundland and Labrador in my writing only when referring to medico-legal policy and access to care on a provincial scale. When working with trans women's creative geographical and ecological relations to the island of Newfoundland, I do not make reference to Labrador. ↵

2. See my self-published poetry collection *Milky Moksha* (2016), which explores embodiments of my sex work to interrogate the complexities of island trans womanhood in Newfoundland. The poem *CAME THROUGH*, in particular, interrogates my relations with clients during the first two months after my breast augmentation: “two great circles intersecting / float me on / absorb me into the culture of another / out on the water” (73).⁴

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