Moral Shock and Trans 'Worlds' of Sense

ABSTRACT: *This paper has two aims: to explore the affective dimensions of moral shock and the way it relates to normative marginalization of those furthest from dominant society and also, more specifically, to articulate the trans experience of constantly being under moral attack because the dominant 'world' normatively defines trans individuals 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, which creates 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 frequently experience being asked *the* question, a question that demarcates the border between the world trans people live in and the world the rest of society 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. It is easy to 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. We may feel shame, finding the question to be more than mere inquiry but a reminder of one's fraught relationship to one's own body. It is also easy to imagine being struck by shock, a shock that comes despite knowing that trans women are frequently asked this question, despite having experienced

this question and its variants before; one can still be left motionless, frozen, like a statue.

In a recent article, Kate Stockdale draws philosophers' 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 one realize that the moral norms that shape their individual life are not shared by others. This bewilderment is jarring; breaking our attention, at times leaving one paralyzed and unable to respond. 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, shock still seems to play 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's 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 contours of the emotion. Shock contributes to existent affective conditions, which may inhibit a person's ability to recognize its presence in their 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 all of us not only to '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 nonbinary people directly undermines this organizing belief, causing trans people to have a queer experience of the world, watching its inhabitants being 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 explains that 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, and this not only makes being shocked more likely but makes the experience of *cycles* of shock more likely, creating a chronic affective condition that when paired with other sources of burnout can exacerbate one's struggles.

This paper has two aims: to explore the affective dimensions of moral shock and the way it relates to normative marginalization of those furthest from dominant society and also, more specifically, to articulate the trans experience of constantly being under moral attack because the dominant world normatively defines trans individuals out of existence. I begin with an explanation and expansion of Stockdale's view on moral shock before articulating how shock is contextualized to Lugones's 'worlds' of sense (2003). I then turn to the details of the trans experience of moral shock and the ways it contributes to trans burnout, concluding with brief thoughts on what all of our responsibilities may be. I gesture at a possible solution using Lugones's notion of 'world'-traveling as a way of moving toward 'world'-building, creating new governing norms that work for marginalized and privileged people alike.

1. The Very Concept of Moral Shock

One can be shocked by several things: a runaway bride, when one trips over oneself, fireworks in the middle of March, and so on. But none of these cases have a moral element to them (unless, perhaps, you are the bride left at the altar). These incidents seem to be shocking because one is not expecting them. For example, you are 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 one's 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 one shocked; it 'disrupts [one's] 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 does not 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, I hold that 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 one's racist aunt who says something antiracist over dinner (2022: 4). For example, if the racist aunt says that mandatory minimum sentences are racist and should not 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 the moral lens through which one perceives the world or, perhaps, the normative landscape one perceives when taking the point of view of morality (Baier 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.[1] Of course, one's sense 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 even if a person is wrong about some moral judgment, that person can still have a particular (or peculiar) normative outlook that classifies the actions in question 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 actions being wrong. However, shock 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.

Let us 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 the person off with a bewilderment that leaves them motionless and frozen. Stockdale argues that moral shock can render one unable to act in an appropriate or significant manner, leaving the wrongdoer without the criticism they deserve (2022: 12). Shock can emotionally

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[1] Stockdale states the cognitive component of shock is perceptual instead of something like a judgment (2022: 4). I do not 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).

strike us, puncturing our emotional tank, leaving us without the energy to respond with an emotion like anger, which would be ethically and politically valuable here (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 one realize the vulnerable position they are in, having their 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 is not shocked by their obnoxiously sexist or racist student, for example, a professor, who, when asked when she is having kids, responds in a straightforward, critical, yet appropriate way without hesitation or emotional disorientation. In such cases, the person is not shocked because they are emotionally prepared. Stockdale argues that preventing this experience requires either conscious preparatory work or learned experience that makes one 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 experience-based resilience and numbness to be of a kind; my view is that resilience 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 do not register and are avoided (or numbed) instead of being prepared for. Such numbness is often a result of an emotionally tumultuous life where a person's regular experiences of emotionally difficult or uncomfortable situations make them shut down that source of information—a response to shock to which I will return later.

The paralyzing, draining, and diminishing nature of shock can leave one 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, through numbing. The disruptive nature of shock may mitigate backward-looking responsibility, that is, blame, but as Stockdale argues, shock can also create a forward-looking responsibility to prepare emotionally for bewildering events (2022: 13). For instance, if we know we are likely to face morally bewildering events, we may have a responsibility to 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 will be unable to intervene, but this is exactly the kind of case where it seems that person *should* be intervening. While it may seem unfitting to blame that person 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, I 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 the perceiver's negative

moral judgment. Furthermore, this experience of shock creates a significant emotional toll on the perceiver 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 prepare emotionally 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 it often enough. While this detail escapes Stockdale, it follows directly from her account. Moral shock's intensity can vary significantly, but when the shock has the intensity Stockdale at times describes, emotional recharging would certainly be required to move past it fully; otherwise one is depleted and vulnerable to more instances of shock. Even less intense but more frequent cases of shock could similarly deplete someone, making navigating the world far more draining.

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 is, for Stockdale 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 is a shared normative outlook. Consider the January 6 attempted coup on the United States Capitol that was shocking for many, but for others it was not. Both the shocked and unshocked alike find the actions morally indefensible, but people may be so used to the exaggerated actions of the US right wing that they no longer find it bewildering. In contrast, 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 people do not 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, one in which the sense-making features vary wildly from those prevailing in the rest of society. One's experience of shock will accordingly be different. It is not that privileged people cannot find such cases shocking, but they will not be aware of the normative tension at all. 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.

2. 'Worlds'

In presenting Stockdale's account of moral shock, I used the notion of a normative outlook to stand in, roughly, 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. After all, multiple sets of norms govern how people go about their lives and shape the way they perceive, judge, and interact with others. Typically, people do not recognize all these norms, all the values, principles, and ideas that they 'buy into' when going about their daily routines. Those things simply constitute their world.

In a series of now foundational papers, María Lugones develops this idea of worlds of sense to describe the way people differently inhabit and understand the world around them (Lugones 2003). While at times obscure, this idea holds great intuitive appeal. In my experience of teaching Lugones's papers to undergraduates, my Latine (and other culturally marginalized) students feel her idea's explanatory pull. What the students relate to is in part the normatively disorienting experience of coming to or being in the United States, an experience that 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 points to the experiential aspect of moving between different worlds.

For Lugones, this notion of worlds is more than just an experience; rather, it constitutes part of the political issue at hand. Most people who are privileged enough exist in an entirely different world from those whose lives are shot through with oppression. The former 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 privileged people 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 them. 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 economic comforts, which people can achieve if they simply work hard enough.

This dominant world, however, is a world that is inhospitable to people born outside of it, to people who are brown, poor, queer, trans, disabled, and so on. Even if these people try and force themselves into the dominant world, they will likely be rejected. Alternatively, people can choose to inhabit their world of difference resistantly, 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 do not suppress our differences but value and integrate them into a world of sense. Many

of us inhabit multiple different worlds at a time so that our intersectional experience of oppression leads to moving between these different worlds depending on where we are or who we are with.

In Lugones's 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 people often righteously angry when they are wronged, but sometimes the ways in which they are wronged constitute a pattern that makes it obvious that they are living in a world that is not meant for them (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: 110–12).

Building on a different insight of Frye's, Lugones articulates the experience of travelling between 'worlds' (Frye 1983; Lugones 2003).[2] 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 coalitions 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 people inhabit, these worlds of sense contribute more to an understanding of how people relate to the world around them beyond those things that are just or unjust, good or bad. I was recently talking with a white friend who explained that she has an *auntie* who was not really her aunt but a close friend of her mother's, elaborating that this was a 'Hawaiian thing' because her auntie is Hawaiian. I remarked this is not *just* a Hawaiian thing, many nonwhite 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 nonwhite immigrant communities in the United States (Chatters, Taylor, and Jayakody 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 used respectfully and endearingly 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).[3] This constitutes a difference

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[2] 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).

[3] 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 such kin, they report significantly more help from said relations than Blacks (Taylor et al. 2013). Furthermore, Margaret Nelson argues that while nonwhite and immigrant communities often have more examples of fictive kin, whites sometimes do have functionally similar social

between the dominant white/Anglo world in the United States and many other worlds of sense that are outside of that culture.

It is worth noting here, first, that worlds are shaped around an individual's existence. The value of using the concept of worlds is in the way 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 might be called a social imaginary—a shared resource of information that everyone in a community or subcommunity draws on to interpret and understand the world around them (for more on social imaginary, see Medina 2012). My white friend, despite being white, has the concept of *auntie* in her world even though it is clear (by her explaining it to me) that she knows it is 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 do not 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, that concept of family has been 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 such terms 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 in 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 is not 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 Tuennerman 2013; Lewis 2022).

Let us 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 human beings 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, that this belief is rarely recognized as a discrete belief people hold but exists as a given—a norm that orients

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networks that do not fit the typical understanding of 'fictive kin', reflecting a difference 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.

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).Of course, this 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 the above-described 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.

3. 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 social life that make this kind of shock possible and both have to do with worlds. The first is the point I have been stressing: 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 cannot *not* live in the dominant world. It is central to Lugones's analysis that the marginalized are forced to travel to the dominant world. We trans people need that world because that is the world that provides paychecks, food, and health care; 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; trans people 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 trans people 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 the listener when recognizing the vast distance between the worlds the three of you inhabit. Cases like this one may not be difficult to handle; it is an action far enough removed from trans persons' lives that does not drain them of their energy despite gender reveal parties being immoral due to the underlying conception of gender being conferred at birth.[4] But the sheer volume of shocking instances creates a problem. Consider a few 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,

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

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

There are two common elements 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 the 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 as urinating in a public restroom into a cost-benefit analysis. If he chooses the men's room, then he may pass, safely surviving the experience with a little gender euphoria to boot. But if he does not, he is 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 because there is less chance of a violent interaction. Many cis women, though, enforce gendered restrooms, for often understandable, though ultimately misguided, reasons. So, while Archibald is 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 nonarbitrary reason why public restrooms are organized across gendered lines. The first known sex-segregated restrooms occurred in 1739 France, largely as an eccentric novelty for a ball that a Parisian restaurant was hosting (Cavanagh 2010). Through an extended portion of Western history public restrooms for women simply did not exist until around the Victorian era—the implication being that women ought to stay home (Cavanagh 2010). The creation of women's public restrooms was a step toward equality, making it easier for women to live out in the world. But like most things in the 1800s in the United States, public restrooms were sex-segregated, mirroring the sex-segregated train station waiting rooms and public library reading rooms (Cavanagh 2010). 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 from men—though restrooms 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: 325–26). 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 people conceptualize actions such 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 are 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—that is, 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 does not 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.

As trans people, of course, we expect this, and 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 any 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, is it not? It is bewildering that this woman is so concerned with someone as harmless as Archibald merely washing his hands at the sink, that this mundane action, washing one's hands, requires exclamations about the room they are currently in. How is this an acceptable 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 vast distance between the two worlds involved. We have two conflicting worldviews at play here. The view from the dominant 'world' comprises important moral reasons why restrooms are separated along lines of gender, reasons so important that civilian enforcement is required to protect this division. Whereas seen from trans 'worlds', this division is arbitrary, largely unnecessary, and needlessly creates opportunities for harassment. 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 seen 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: 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 trans people aware of how different they are, of their lack of belonging in the dominant world, and of the great distance they must travel to a place of comfort. Lacking a felt sense of belonging can weigh heavily on trans people, and this feeling of lack is an affectual response to our social position that does not require shock to be felt. Moral shock, however, can hit trans people with this feeling of alienation when they 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. Trans people can find moments of belonging, living among others who appreciate and attend to us in ways that affirm our place in others' lives—until some woman enters the bathroom and yells at us. It is no wonder that many trans people would prefer to simply stay home, carefully planning any outings so that they do not have to use a public restroom. A circumstance that is eerily similar to what women dealt with in the Victorian era—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: 110–11). Anger, though, has revolutionary potential. It can root a cutting response or admonishment that holds a wrongdoer 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 quips 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). 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, a person can become vulnerable to cycles of shock if they experience it often enough—and, well, trans people often experience a lot of shock. I have gone into detail about how public restroom encounters can lead to shock, but the underlying elements of these encounters—that is, misgendering, genital verification, unwanted attention, and so on—manifest in several ways that can lead to shocking experiences. (Again, imagine experiencing such incidents all in one morning.) Trans people then are well placed to frequently experience shock, chronically having their emotional energy drained merely trying to survive their expeditions through the dominant world.

These cycles of shock contribute to trans burnout. Burnout is often talked about as working past exhaustion, and therefore it is considered that anyone can experience burnout regardless of what work they are doing. However, as Hil Malatino argues, this understanding ignores important dimensions of the phenomenon that lead 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 underlying transantagonism of these medical institutions (Malatino 2022: 134). This brings trans burnout closer to Herbert Freudenberger's original intention of coining the term 'burnout' to describe the experience of free clinic workers in the 1960s and 70s. Furthermore, in putting the way medical institutions treat trans people at the center of 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 trans people emotionally and lead to burnout. Moral shock is an appropriate response to the many ways medical providers limit trans people's access to life-saving medicine and use us to care for each other in lieu of providing professional care in medical institutions. But the problem goes beyond that. Although Malatino focuses on the specific ways in which the medical industry causes burnout for trans people, our affective lives are affected by far more than that. It is not solely that as trans people we must be our own case workers and emotional support through medical transition, but we are doing this in the context of a transphobic dominant world where we face regular harassment, facing the same transantagonism and barriers wherever we go. (Cis people keep showing up for their gender sheriff 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 (Whitney 2018). This moral shock 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 because 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 prepare emotionally 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 they require larger, more significant changes and forms of resistance. The difference between privilege and oppression alone may show that trans people do not have a responsibility to remove their shock.

But the case can be made much stronger when considering the nonideal 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 our emotions (Malatino 2022). I have 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 have 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 the experience of shock. Unfortunately, each requires a sacrifice of its own.

Emotional preparedness helps preserve and direct emotional energy. It is not hard to imagine that when Archibald channels his rage into a cutting remark, he is emotionally prepared for such an encounter. That is, when doing his cost-benefit analysis of which restroom to use, he took a few deep breaths before entering the women's room, knowing that if someone yelled at him, he could defuse 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 people are often numb because of burnout, but people can also selectively use numbness to protect themselves by cultivating their numbness through drug use (Malatino 2022: 57–69). As Malatino puts it, the effectiveness of numbing should close this reaction off to criticism, and saying 'fuck feelings' can be a useful form of affective modulation that helps trans people survive our conditions (Malatino 2022: 76–77). Saying 'fuck feelings' comes at a cost, though, 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 them more fragile. In this vein, Malatino notes that a common kind of fragility and brittleness is born out of distrust of cis people in power over trans people (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 as the impossibility of such preparedness when living deeply marginalized lives. Preparation is too difficult to maintain under continuous antagonism; one spends more emotional energy than one gets by trying not to get caught off-guard, not to be shocked into immobility. In attempting to become emotionally prepared, trans people can find ourselves burnt out all the more frequently, sacrificing our mental health for physical safety.

The point I wish to draw out here is that no clear, ideal options exist 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 anyone should be forced to move about in 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. There is little trans people can do about the shock we experience without also giving up something else of value. If philosophers 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 on someone else.

4. Where Do We Go From Here?

If individual solutions to shock are either unavailable or nonideal, then where does one turn? As Malatino indicates, all of us need to look toward changing the overall structure of society and political institutions by engaging in structural transformation, solidarity work, coalition-building, prefigurative politics, and resistance (Malatino 2022). As should also 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 I return to Lugones on 'world'-traveling. All of us have a lot to learn when we travel to other's 'worlds' and this process helps build understanding and coalitions with those differently oppressed as well as with those with privilege. This is because 'world'-traveling is not a purely empathetic exercise in exploring what another's life is like, but involves understanding how those experiences are created through the conflict between 'worlds', and 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. Everyone could benefit from building complex care networks, valuing self-determination, and creating better access to health care; that is, these steps provide solutions to the many kinds of isolation and poor material conditions that

most people experience due to the way the dominant world is structured. At the same time, these steps can also prevent the normative tensions that produce moral shock.

The difficulty is that one 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 being a blood relation. Consider how differently the practice of pronoun sharing has become implemented in the dominant world compared to the trans and queer 'worlds'. While this addition has had a positive effect on some trans people's lives, it has been taken over by the organizing logic of the dominant 'world'. Consequently, pronouns have become the central, and often only, way to support trans people in the dominant 'world', and people do not realize that designating one's pronoun is a minimal ask that is safe because it does not 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 and 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 they cannot be simply added in isolation to the shared resources in the dominant world because doing so leaves the oppressive structure of that world unchanged.

Instead, 'world'-traveling should be a means toward 'world'-building. As we travel 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 prefigurative 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 oppression.

Here I return to fictive kin and what that linguistic flexibility might tell us about our emotional flexibility. The flexibility in recognizing someone as kin in nondominant 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, 'world'-traveling can become easy and practiced. The flexibility of emotionally adopting someone unrelated as part of one's own family, is built into the way many of us talk about each other, 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 with the people we happened to be with as a child, but with people who can love us for us and who can be attentive and supportive. For some people, that is their biological family, but for many others it is not. Knowing that *family* may require active searching, some of us must practice traveling to other's worlds in getting to know others, to find out whether our worlds overlap or whether there is room for us to build new worlds together. An emotional flexibility is facilitated by this practice, a flexibility that 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 the only 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 the tensions are compounded when one person lives in a number of these 'worlds' at once. In building community, we as trans people are often also building community with people of color, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized and oppressed populations. As trans people, we 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 (Young 2010). While moral shock is a specific phenomenon that is seen in individual, social lives, it is caused or exacerbated —like many forms of social and affective oppression—by structural injustices that work for next to no one and require everyone's efforts to undo.

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