The Invisible Presence of Trans- Bodies: Unpacking Regimes of Visibility and Visuality Through Tom Cho's *Look Who's Morphing*

By

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At the summer 2014 conference *Writing Trans Genres: Emerging Literatures and Criticism*, Tom Cho presented a paper titled “Who Will Read Disappearing Ink? Trans* Voices in Plain Sight” on behalf of Boogie Man, the supposed author of the paper who was unable to attend the conference. I was on the same panel as Cho – in fact, I was sitting next to him – and I watched over Cho’s shoulder as he called Boogie Man on Skype, though the video function was not working on Boogie Man’s end. Cho kept one ear bud in his right ear as he read Boogie Man’s paper and subsequently responded to audience questions on Boogie Man’s behalf. The paper spoke about Boogie Man’s life as a transgender man who is “stealth;” a term used in trans communities to mean someone who has transitioned, is read by the general public as cisgender, and chooses not to out him or herself as trans. Boogie Man was stealth in his close relationships with friends and coworkers. Because the conference audience never saw or heard Boogie Man, it is impossible to know whether there was actually another human for whom Cho was presenting, or whether Cho’s presentation was itself a performance of a form of stealth identity in which Boogie Man was an imaginary figure that existed just to displace Cho’s own writing and feelings about navigating the world in stealth mode.

In reading someone as trans, we rely on visibility and visuality to disclose a supposed truth of the body and identity. The Skype performance and the paper about living in stealth both point to the fact that visual cues are not reliable ways to “discover” or “know” *what* someone is or *how* they move through the world. In other words, to know someone’s trans status (without their disclosure) is to *read* them as trans – but to be functionally stealth is to be *unreadable*, or carry an *invisible* trans status. Similarly, Boogie Man’s indefinite Skype presence brings into question the utility of visuality as a primary technology by which we interpret the world. From both the audience’s and my perspective, the performance of telemediated presence was *real*,

though there were a number of context and character clues suggesting that Cho orchestrated this presentation.

Cho's presentation bears forth questions about reality: what counts as a real body, and what's a body, *really*, under the clothes and behind the screen? As I will describe later, work in feminism, posthumanism and new media studies have responded to both questions by arguing that real bodies transcend the dimensions of reality in which we operate day to day; in the contemporary world, real bodies can be fleshy, metallic, digital, tangible, and/or mediated. Though all three fields have reached similar conclusions about embodiment in a digital age, I am using those fields as a basis to discuss a quality that becomes a crucial consideration within the field of new media studies: *how*, not just if, the body exists in mediated spaces. New media studies has made the claim that we establish the presence of a body, especially in mediated spaces, through visual cues—we gaze into or out of a screen, we are transported to virtual realities in which our eyes are the camera, guiding us through a pixelated landscape. Yet, as I indicated in my discussion of Cho's conference presentation, visuality is not a consistently reliable cue for establishing reality, especially when the reality might be about blending, merging, crossing, or passing. In this paper, I contend that the ways in which trans-ness functions within telemediated spaces disrupts the conventions of new media studies that assume that reality is established primarily through visual engagement. In Tom Cho's collection of short stories, *Look Who's Morphing*, trans characters navigate their identities through an affective system, rather than operating on the level of visibility. My understanding of "affect" and definition of "affective system" comes from Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, which I will address directly in the third section of this paper. Roughly put, affect is a description of the exchange between an object/presence, and its

surroundings (which may include other objects/presences). In some contexts, affect is equated with "feelings" or "emotions," but here I am using affect to escape Enlightenment ideas of major emotions and humanist conceptions of feeling. Affect is not necessarily conscious or agential—Massumi considers affect to be "prepersonal". An affective system, as I am using it, is a network of recognizable similarities and continuities constructed by exchanges between objects and presences.

In *Look Who's Morphing*, Cho writes primarily from the perspective of a series of introspective first-person narrators who are embodied with or through digital and/or visual technologies and their mediated cultural products. Within this paper, I will refer to the narrators broadly as "telemediated" to encompass the range of media through which they are embodied. Sometimes these narrators are embodying United States pop cultural figures, such as the shy and wealthy talented dancer, Frances "Baby" Houseman from the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*. In other stories, the narrator and other characters embody beyond-human qualities of Cho's invention: one narrator is an evil ninja who attacks a call center and watches an employee morph herself into a deadly cyborg with fax machines and desktop computers as limbs. Finally, in some stories, the narrator is a man named Tom who is preoccupied with family history and drama—the meaning of his Chinese name, how his grandparents met, and reprogramming his uncle's brain after it was co-opted by a university lab performing neural interfacing research.

Among other definitions, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "morphing" first and foremost as "[t]he action or process of smoothly transforming one computerized image into another through a series of imperceptible stages by gradually manipulating parts of the first image to correspond with comparable parts of the second." This definition of morphing emphasizes a "computerized image," suggesting a particular importance in regards to the

presence of telemediation within Tom Cho's text. There is a proliferation of transhuman/cyborg bodies – bodies that have been enhanced or altered beyond or outside the normative limitations of human bodies with the help of science and technology – in the book. For me, this definition of morphing begs many questions about embodiment in the text as a whole: if morphing is transforming one image into another, what is the relationship between these images, or is there one? Although we perceive a discontinuity between morphed images, I argue that these visually disparate images can function as part of a cohesive narrative. We could consider the morphing narrator as a copy without an original—as a figure brought together through shared identity concerns and ways of speaking that does not rely on wholeness, or integrity of identities, that we cannot find.

In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard contends that our current reality is actually a hyperreality in which the image of authenticity has become more authentic than the thing itself. A "simulacra" is the object of hyperreality, or the copy that has no original referent—to paraphrase one of Baudrillard's famous examples, it is as if a map of New York City existed after the city itself was destroyed, so that the map becomes as real as (or more real than) the city ever was. I am appropriating Baudrillard's idea of "a copy without an original" a bit different than he did. For Baudrillard, the copy, or simulacra, eventually replaces the original, or real—I am not using this phrase to signal a loss of referent and/or materiality, but rather to suggest that any body, or material, is always already inauthentic, or a copy of an imagined referent. The morphing narrators in Cho's book don't, then, refer to a first image, but refer only to the process of change, evolution, or transition. I am interested in extending this analysis of the title of Cho's collection to also think about the "look" and the "who". The process of morphing brings into question the stability of visually identifying continuity between

the narrators, or morphs, lending a certain irony to the command "look". The singular "who" brings to the fore the tension between a series of narrators in apparently different situations and story arcs and the characteristics of the narrators that echo throughout the collection. These narrators, I claim, share characteristics with each other as well as Cho, providing us with a sustained look at articulations of transcultural and transgender identities even as the setting of each story shifts drastically.

In this paper, I have three sections that build toward my thesis. In the first section, I discuss the forms of trans-ness that are present in the mediated worlds of *Look Who's Morphing*. The three forms of trans-ness that I address – transgender/transsexual identity, transcultural existence, and transhumanism – form the core of my paper in which I will try to understand what trans-ness, as a concept, does, both in the context of posthumanist studies and across realities. In my second section, I use posthumanist theory to frame trans-ness as a broad concept that can intervene in how we understand bodies outside of liberal humanist discourses, and especially within mediated spaces. I then turn to new media studies as a theoretical space in which I can operationalize the trans bodies that I described in my first section—I am interested in seeing beyond the existence of trans bodies to what trans-ness, as a general concept, can *do*. Finally, in my third section, I will explore the more abstract concepts of affect and reality. I will establish more clearly what I mean by reality, how new media encompasses multiple realities, and the unique work that trans-ness can do across multiple realities, drawing heavily on Micha Cárdenas's written and performance work on transreality. To close my intervention in new media studies, I will explain how trans-ness calls for an affective relationship to telemediated presences rather than a presence that relies on visuality.

Articulations of Trans-ness in *Look Who's Morphing*

Look Who's Morphing constructs a world in which transgender and transcultural identities are related. One might suggest that transgender identity applies to self-conceptions of the body while transcultural identities are about self-identification with different social ways of being. However, in *Look Who's Morphing*, it seems that both gendered and cultural identities are materialized through narratives of shifting embodiment. In this section, I will explore the ways that transgender and transcultural bodies and narratives co-constitute each other in Cho's collection. By drawing upon trans theory that applies primarily to transsexual/transgender identities and embodiments, I will unpack the prefix "trans-" and extend it to think further about other forms of trans-ness, such as transcultural identity, or later in the paper, transreality. Therefore, I am also making an argument against the exceptionalism of transgender/transsexual identities—crossing or realigning gender/sex boundaries is not a remarkable case, but rather one among many of the ways that bodies and selves change over time. In this section, I am going to focus on two stories from *Look Who's Morphing*, "Dirty Dancing" and "Dinner with Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang." These two stories are not unique within the collection; rather, they encompass many of the themes that span the book. My exploration of these stories should be taken as representative of an exploration of the collection as a whole, while also allowing for the chance to unearth the textual nuance of Cho's narrative voice and characters.

The narrator of Cho's "Dirty Dancing" is ostensibly in the role of Frances, or "Baby" Houseman. In the original 1987 movie, Baby is a wealthy young woman vacationing at a resort in the Catskill Mountains with her family. She develops a crush on Johnny Castle, the hotel dance instructor famously played by Patrick Swayze. Though her father does not approve, Baby continues a romance and dance lessons with Castle in secret. The movie finale is a famous dance

scene between Baby and Castle in front of the resort guests – including Baby's family – winning her father's approval of their relationship and signaling Baby's coming-of-age. In Cho's story, the narrator is visiting a resort with her Auntie Feng and Uncle Stan where she meets Castle and begins impromptu dance lessons in preparation for a performance. The dance lessons lead to a friendship based on a shared passion for 1980s pop culture, which culminates in Castle and the narrator having sex. However, the narrator doesn't feel particularly invested in the romance and so steps out of her body and watches as she is replaced by Bruce, a large, handsome white man wearing leather. The narrator – now genderless, as they have abandoned the role of Baby and the heteronormative romance plot of the original film – describes the "the hottest sex you can imagine" (10) and the ensuing romance between Johnny and Bruce. Eventually, Johnny and Bruce get approval for their unorthodox relationship from the narrator's Auntie Feng and Uncle Stan, and decide to leave the resort where Baby/the narrator/Bruce met Johnny. The narrator returns to their parents in Melbourne, where they enact the climactic final dance scene from the film. In Cho's story, however, the dance scene is not a stage for a heterosexual romance to replace the role of the father in a daughter's life; rather, the finally of Cho's "Dirty Dancing" takes place in the Melbourne airport, where the narrator insists upon their own adulthood when they shed the name Baby and insist upon their independent sexuality by performing "a big raunchy dance number" (13).

"Dirty Dancing" is, as I will show, a transgender and transcultural story. Bringing this story together through the lens of trans-ness thematically unifies this story in what may seem to be a disparate collection of events—in other words, picking out the themes of trans-ness brings forth the purpose of mediation, or what can be present when this narrative is mediated through a well-known film. Within this story, we can observe the close relationship between trans-ness

and telemediation, how the former relies on the latter to highlight its narrative presence. We begin with a narrator who is operating within the role of a young, wealthy, white woman, although this narrator is marked as culturally "Other" through their association with Auntie Feng—an aunt with a traditionally Chinese last name. Already, then, the narrator is occupying an ambiguous space both racially and culturally. Furthermore, the narrator quickly dissociates from their role as a female protagonist. While the narrator is having sex with Johnny Castle, they "feel very detached from the experience. It is like [they are] a bystander" (9). The person who takes Baby's/the narrator's place during her sexual encounter with Johnny Castle is a paragon – almost a parody – of masculinity: "…a Caucasian man with a moustache. This man is tall and very well built. He is wearing a leather cap and leather chaps" (3). The narrator's (dis)identification with white masculinity and male cultural icons has led me to read "Dirty Dancing" as a transgender story rather than as a narrative that is only about cultural assimilation or ambiguity. Cho's choice of a white model of masculinity is set against a backdrop that includes the narrator's Chinese-Australian cultural signifiers. This aesthetic move serves as a remark on the status of transgender identity as a Western cultural import, a colonial identity that the narrator understands as such and is pursuing all the same. Though the narrator continues on to Melbourne after Bruce and Johnny have left the story together (seemingly severing the complicated identification between the narrator and their replacement, Bruce) the narrator is only able to acknowledge and defend their adulthood to their parents after they have completed their experience with Castle, a plot device that continues their relationship with Castle and thus their (dis)identification with Bruce, which concludes with a successful transition into adulthood.

In Cho's story, "Dinner with Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang," the narrator is a man named Tom. Tom visits his relatives' small, one bedroom apartment, where his aunt serves him and his

uncle lemon chicken and sweet and sour pork. As the three are conversing over dinner, Tom's Uncle Wang begins to discuss the fact that he has been volunteering as a subject for neural interfacing research being conducted at the local university. As he discusses the research, Uncle Wang trips over a bug in his system and begins to speak in raw code. Tom, however, has a background in IT, so he is able to use C++ to debug his uncle over the course of a few hours. As Tom is leaving his aunt and uncle's apartment, monsters from the game Dungeons & Dragons attack them, against which Tom quickly defends.

Unlike "Dirty Dancing," "Dinner with Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang" does not have a source narrative. In this case, the narrator has morphed into a version of the author (or at least, into a man that shares the author's name and cultural heritage). In this story, I am interested in the confluence of transcultural and transhumanist narratives. Though Tom's Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang have lived a large portion of their lives in the Gobi Desert, the traditional northern Chinese food that Auntie Ling makes is similar to the Chinese food someone might get from a Chinese-Australian restaurant. Auntie Ling's kitchen has a large, neon sign that says "Oriental Kitchen," marking her food as generic. At the same time, Uncle Wang is described as a sort of cyborg or robot that functions on C++ coding rather than human organs. As I understand these scenes, they aren't so much separate statements about culture and technology, but rather scenes that both speak to lack of authenticity (such as cultural authenticity or an organic human body) or a state of fabrication—the food is a fabrication of Chinese culture, and Uncle Wang is a fabricated or mechanical human body. This is not to say that the food and Uncle Wang are not real or genuine; rather, I am suggesting that both are expressing components of their identity and presence through otherwise superficial means. The food that Auntie Ling serves is not an expression of an essential Chinese-ness, then, but an expression of a complicated transcultural

relationship suspended between Chinese roots and Western culture that has no essential or authentic Chinese-ness. Similarly, Uncle Wang is not discovered to be a fake or corrupt body, but rather his malfunctions facilitate an earnest relationship with the narrator and bring them closer together.

Within these two stories, trans-ness is operating in at least two ways: in "Dirty Dancing," a transgender presence becomes evident through transgression of a clichéd cultural narrative and through a remediation of an already mediated story. In "Dinner with Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang," transcultural and transhuman presence are re-narrativizing assumptions about embodied authenticity and cultural essentialism. Trans-ness, then, can both be expressed through a remediated presence and also ruptures the stability and certainty of a knowable and transparent body or person. I am not arguing that trans-ness signifies a sort of postmodern fragmentation in the work that it does; rather, I suggest below that trans-ness does its work somewhere between wholeness and fragmentation, or encompasses both. As we have seen, the prefix "trans-" resonates throughout Cho's collection: transcultural, transgender, and transhuman. "'Trans-,'" writes Eva Hayward in her essay "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves," is "a prefix weighted with across, beyond, through (into another state or place—*elsewhere*), [that] does the now familiar work of suggesting the unclassifiable. To be *trans-* is to be transcending or surpassing particular impositions, whether empirical, rhetorical, or aesthetic" (68). Hayward's narrative essay is an exploration of the many meanings of the Antony and the Johnson's song "Cripple and the Starfish," alongside her own experience as a trans woman who has undergone sex-affirming genital surgery. Hayward re-theorizes the act of cutting as growth rather than lack, like a starfish whose appendages can regenerate. She tells the reader that she is always of her body; that her body always signifies itself, not, say, the lack of a

phallus. Hayward argues that the prefix "trans-" "disturbs purification practices" (68). Her argument ultimately capitulates to humanist logics because she suggests that to be transsexual is to desire bodily integrity, that certain forms of surgical modification (cutting, folding, adding) are "re-generative". This language implies that there is a "re-turn" or a "re-newal" *to* anything, and undermining her argument that she is *always* of her body. Furthermore, Hayward's investment in "re-" seems to abandon other invocations of trans-ness, notably those present in *Look Who's Morphing*. Is there less generative potential in transgender/transsexual subjects who don't undergo "cutting"? What about transcultural and transhuman subjects? The former is not entirely *of* a culture, and the latter is neither human nor robot, neither entirely metal or flesh.

The trans body "is…a question of experiencing multiple and continually varying interactions between what can be defined indifferently as coherent transformation, decentered certainty, or limited possibility" (Hayward 73). I contend that Cho's work is participating in a posthumanist discourse such that the trans-formations his narrators undergo can be articulated within the scope of an embodiment that does not give primacy to a singular identity (for example, it is no longer the case that gendered trans-ness is inherently embodied and material while transculturalism is not). What follows, then, is a discourse around trans-ness and shifting embodiments/identity that can be less dependent on surgical modification and instead can escape the trap of reifying humanism. The possibility for a trans-ness that does not have a "limit" to its ability for moving across, beyond, and through begins to emerge.

In their article "Animals Without Genitals: Race and Transsubstantiation," Mel Y. Chen, like Hayward, is also interested in prefixial notions of trans-ness, though Chen is explicit that they are invested in a trans-ness that does not limit itself to gender as its main category of analysis. Chen's definition of the concept of "trans-animality" is a useful bridge to thinking

about trans-ness through the lens I propose above. Similarly to my present work with *Look Who's Morphing*, Chen chooses to focus on the prefix "trans" as a mobile term that encapsulates and extends transgender and transsexual identities, and Chen's thinking around animality is a useful tool to help think about non-human or not-only-human forms that we also see at play in Cho's transmediated characters. Animality can be placed on a continuum with cyborg creatures in their mutual investment in analyses of non-anthropocentric embodiment, a topic that I will expand upon in my next section. Chen spends the majority of "Animals Without Genitals" looking at three images of sexualized and racialized non-human animals and theorizing the shared transness of such indeterminate subject positions. In the same sense in which Chen's trans-ness "locates zones of possibility" in "marginal loci in gender, race, species, and sexuality matricies," I contend that Cho's trans narrators are not only giving form to transgender and transsexual characters that happen to be transcultural, but rather that in their morphs are equally embodying and materializing transculturalism, as well.

However, I am arguing more specifically that trans-ness can move across, beyond, and through modes of reality. To return to the introduction, one way to think about trans-ness moving across modes of reality is the ways in which trans-ness reveals the hyperreality – the inauthenticity of constructs such as, for example, gender – of the everyday. It is also possible to think of the ways that many of us move daily between modes of reality: our realities shift from analog to digital, we are present in a room and we are present in a video game. If the category of trans-ness can suggest or invoke that sort of movement, then trans- identities are also implicated in the making of how we perceive reality, (in)authenticity, and various spaces. I am relating trans-ness in Cho's collection specifically to telemediated embodiments both because the narratives include telemediated bodies, and because many of the stories are remediations of older

narratives. Because I am invested in forms of trans-ness that do not rely on "cutting," and forms of trans-ness that move beyond gendered trans-ness, I am interested in exploring the possibilities that lie in the telemediated presences in Cho's collection. I believe that examining Cho's use of trans-ness through a lens of technology and new media studies can grant it a potential that is more difficult to find without that framework. In her article "Self-Insertion and Identity in Tom Cho's Look Who's Morphing," Emily Purvis writes, "[b]oth essentialist and anti-essentialist understandings of identity formation are an important feature in the conception of *Look Who's Morphing* as interrelated narratives, and the wider meaning of the morphing motifs that they employ" (3). I am asserting, however, that the narrators are not oscillating between essentialist and anti-essentialist identity spaces, but rather that they are embodying both frameworks as it is crucial to narratives of trans-ness.

I am also arguing that technology/new media are the spaces that allow for simultaneous essentialist and non-essentialist embodiments. Even in the language of Cho's stories, the narrators are suspended between essentialist and anti-essentialist formations. Essentialist, in the sense that elements of the narrators and settings remain similar throughout the stories, and anti-essentialist in that the embodied experiences of the narrators shape how the narrator is experiencing those somewhat consistent identities. This move within Cho's text can also tell us a lot about how we might be able to see bodies carry over reality formations – the body of the person morphs, but still carries with them identities that can be shaped by the new embodiment. I claim that this experience is essentially trans—that we can, in fact, use the idea of trans-ness, including but not limited to its embodiment in transgender, transcultural, and transhuman subjects that I have sketched above, to understand how bodies operate across various modes of reality and to destabilize a regime of visuality.

Bodies in New Media: Establishing Visual, Virtual, and Narrative Presence

Look Who's Morphing is, I believe, best read through a posthumanist framework, or a theoretical approach that looks at human and non-human subjects alike to think through broad topics such as ontology and reality. Bodies – whether they are digital, corporeal, or something else – have a history and a presence, and posthumanism is an attempt to read those histories and presences outside the ideology of liberal humanism. In this sense, then, I am not making the claim that the characters in Cho's work, trans-ness in general, or trans-identified people are posthuman subjects; rather, I am eager to explore if and how posthumanism provides and supports a vocabulary through which trans-ness can be granted a broader intellectual history and world. The first half of this section will be dedicated to defining posthumanism and applying it in the context of visuality, virtuality, and trans-ness. In this second half of this section, I will begin to move beyond the definition and application of the terms that frame my paper and I will start to outline the place of bodies in contemporary new media theory as well as describing why the trans bodies in *Look Who's Morphing* undo some of the current thought on embodiment in new media.

The narrators in Cho's stories are posthuman as N. Katherine Hayles defines the term in her work, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. She writes, "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). This statement is meant, on the one hand, to destabilize entrenched notions of subjectivity and subjecthood: Hayles defines the liberal human subject as one that exists naturally and wholly outside economic and social systems and is subsequently exposed to and shaped by those systems as they arise. The posthuman subject, however, is predicated on the

knowledge that no subject such as the one liberal humanists imagined has ever existed—any being is always already an amalgam of heterogeneous parts and enmeshed in the world of credit and commodities. On the other hand, Hayles' definition of the posthuman subject points toward an *embodied* subject that humanists and posthumanists alike have failed to recognize. In contrast to the typical conception of detached, free-flowing, information-based posthuman subject, Hayles' posthuman is inseparable from its body—"for information to exist, it must *always* be instantiated in a medium" (Hayles 13). Hayles offers a useful articulation of the body from a posthuman perspective when she writes, "…the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born" (3). If this remark seems familiar, perhaps it is because of the resonances with Baudrillard's phrase, and my application, of the idea of "a copy without an original." To imagine the body as the "original prosthesis" renders the body an artificial limb, or something that is replaceable, echoing my use of Baudrillard's copy as something inauthentic and non-essential. Again, this is not to deny the materiality of bodies, that they are and do *matter*, but rather to point to the fact that a body can be both functional and prosthetic, something that is *of* itself but never unified or complete, both mutable and coherent.

Within Cho's stories, on the one hand the narrators' present embodiment shapes their experience of the world, on the other hand, the narrators retain some meta-cognizance of their morphing and seems to understand that their body is mutable, and they are able to carry out a linear narrative thread (rather than, say, having to re-orient themselves in relation to the story with each new embodiment). As Hayward writes, "Transsexuals do not transcend gender and sex. We create embodiment by not jumping *out* of our bodies, but by taking up a fold in our

bodies, by folding (or cutting) ourselves, and creating a transformative scar of ourselves. There is no absolute division, but continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my different historical bodies" (73). In Cho's story, though, the narrators do not need to either take up a fold in or cut their body; they simply have to reimagine their body and then it transforms. To be posthuman is another way to think about a living version of the "trans-ness" for which Hayward argues. Yet, in a posthuman context, there is not the distinction between transgender identity as conceptual identity and transsexuality as a materialization of that identity. Within posthumanist logics, information cannot be separated from its material base and so it seems arbitrary to argue that a body is *incongruous* with the information inside it. This is not to suggest that modifications aren't necessary, generative, relieving, or more; but rather to state that, from a posthumanist standpoint, a surgical modification would be one possible morph rather than a teleological technology. Cho's stories are exemplary of this embodied trans-ness.

I would like to return now to "Dirty Dancing," the story that opens Cho's collection. With a deeper understanding of posthumanism, we can now read this story through a posthumanist lens. Throughout the course of the story, the narrator is "Baby," and sleeping with Castle, and then the narrator leaves that body which is transformed into Bruce, the beefy white man who continues to have sex with Castle. Though the narrator's desire to be embodied by Bruce is what gave rise to him in the first place, the narrator still has a separate body that finishes out the story when they return to Melbourne and are received by their family. Here, I am not particularly interested in the morphing itself, but rather the way in which the narrator relates to their many embodiments. Though the body of the narrator changes over the course of the story, is divided, and shape-shifts, the narrator maintains a sense of continuity for the reader. I also want to think through how, exactly, the narrator maintains that continuity. More specifically, I

want to think about the demand the title of Cho's collection makes on the reader: we are supposed to watch the process of morphing, we are supposed to orient ourselves visually in this world of shape-shifting. Thus, despite Cho's demanding title, it is not productive or even possible for us to orient ourselves visually within this story: the narrator switches mid-story from having sex with Castle to watching Castle have sex, and the reader must, throughout the story, visualize the narrator as the female lead of *Dirty Dancing*, as someone with an embodied relationship to the leatherman Bruce, and as a person small enough to be swung about in their parents' arms. I mean to highlight the disjuncture between posthuman and trans embodiments, in which the body functions as a prosthetic, and the domain of the visual.

I would like to jump, now, from a discussion of *Look Who's Morphing* and ways to read embodiment in Cho's text to bringing those bodies into conversation with new media theory. Both *Look Who's Morphing* and much of the posthuman theory I have used to unpack and extend it have foundations in what is known as "new media." In *Look Who's Morphing*, the characters are not only trans, but embodied as trans through mediation—their characters operate through film, computers, television, and more. Posthuman work such as Hayles' has its roots in cybernetics and the sorts of virtual realities and virtual embodiments that were made more prevalent by digital technologies. These concerns are best articulated, then, within the field of new media studies. A three chapter section titled "Self" from the book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* outlines contemporary conceptualizations of embodiment within new media studies. Largely, *Remediation* employs the visual to make evident the body or as a way for a body to establish its own presence within a mediated space. I argue that "the visual" is not a generative approach to establishing selfhood/embodiment across realities/mediated fields. In this half of my paper, posthumanist thought, new media theory, and *Look Who's Morphing*

collide, making way for me to begin to describe how my thinking around trans-ness and posthumanism implicate and alter work in new media theory. Here I will start to focus on how trans-ness, as I have described it so far, disrupts visuality and requires us to call for a new approach to establishing realities.

In chapter 15 of *Remediation*, "The Remediated Self," the authors discuss the potential for understanding the body as mediated, and remediated – both how the body is a site of remediation for identities (such as gender identities) and also how new media technologies remediate the body, and craft its identity and experiences. The authors pose the argument that media consumption is also inherently a remediation guided by the consumer: following Hayles, they highlight the fact that a version of the self is still embodied, rather than removed or overwritten, in the use of digital technologies. They write, "To say, for example, that the self is expressed in its email affiliations is not to say that the self is disembodied but that it is embodied in a particular mediated form (as electronic text, with a return address, a user ID, a signature, and so forth)" (234). In this sense, then, new media is as much a part of how our bodies define our sense of identity as any part of our fleshy corporeality. My question, in using Cho's book as an intervention and in suggesting that he proposes a newly imagined relationship between body and new media is about the form this embodiment can take. In other words, I am asking questions about how we realize and materialize our remediated selves—like trans-ness, I am interested in what facilitates the crossing and the perception of being held in two realities, rather than the fact of remediation itself.

The authors address the idea of altering the body later in the chapter when they discuss the performance artists Orlan, Stelarc, and Kate Bornstein in the ways that they all embody the technologies of cosmetic surgery, bodybuilding, and visual technologies to construct peoples'

interpretations of the artists and the artists' interpretations of themselves. They write, "[T]hrough strategies of hypermediacy, new media refashion the normative gaze and its implied views of male and female identity, which is exactly what Orlan does by remediating her body as a new media display. Because transparency always passes into hypermediacy, these same new media can both enact and critique traditional beliefs about gender and self" (240). While the authors discuss work by Orlan and Stelarc, they do not go beyond mentioning Kate Bornstein's work. Kate Bornstein is a transgender performer, writer, and gender theorist and while she does not attempt to obscure her trans status, her work is not exactly *about* transparency. Transparency is a poor way to frame trans-ness especially when a lot of trans-ness is about being less transparent. We don't want people to know what is in our pants, under our shirts, and how it got to be there. There's no inherent investment that trans folks have in undermining the normative gaze, and if they do, they don't necessarily want that undermining to come from being transparent about their so-called "biology". Similarly, Cho's book is highly performative in the sense that his narrators are in the midst of literal spectacles, but trans-ness itself does not seem to be the spectacle, nor is Cho engaging the spectacle with transparency. In other words, the characters morph from story to story, or within a single story, but it is the situation and relationships that become the drama of Cho's world, rather than the morphs. After the reader settles into Cho's high-energy world, shape shifting becomes normal. Furthermore, the drama of Cho's stories does not come from the visual spectacle of morphing, but rather the experiences that the narrators have in each embodiment. For example, the central drama of "Dinner With Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang" is not the fact that Uncle Wang has a brain implant that runs on C++, but rather its malfunction, or a trait that emerged *after* the initial morph.

Cho's work problematizes the idea of "transparency" as it relates to hypermediation, performativity, and embodiment: it's actually the case that Cho's hypermediation and performativity obscures and confuses the gaze rather than undermining it. By obscurity and confusion, I mean to suggest that there is an opacity to the hypermediation in Cho's text—the gaze is not turned back toward the viewer, as the authors of *Remediations* contend that it is in the performances by Orlan or Stelarc. Rather, the gaze does not make sense as a response or interrogation of the characters in *Look Who's Morphing*. When I described the many morphs within his story "Dirty Dancing," I explained how visuality is not a useful means by which the reader can interpret the narrator's lens or experience. Similarly, the scene I opened with – about Cho's performance at a conference – is about escaping visuality, legibility, or transparency. These instances are similar to how Cho both reveals and does not reveal anything about his transcultural identity: we know that the narrators in *Look Who's Morphing* are Chinese Australian, but the narrator never rests upon a Chineseness that can be understood as "authentic". My questions, then, are about the difference that thinking about trans-ness makes in the context of understanding the relationship between new media and the body. How does understanding the problem and absence of transparency around the telemediated bodies in *Look Who's Morphing* reframe the relationship between bodies and new media technologies that are proposed in *Remediation*?

In his work *What is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe problematizes Hayles' theory of the posthuman by way of calling into question Hayles' framing narrative of a humanist history and culture that tends to figure mutation, especially, as an external force instead of embedded within a system or environment (xvii-xviii). Wolfe's text approaches "posthumanism as a mode of thought…and…posthumanism as engaging directly the problem of anthropocentrism and

specieism and how practices of thinking and reading must change in light of their critique" (xviii-xix). Though I have established Cho's text as a posthumanist text in the context of Hayles version of posthumanism, I also want to attempt to extend and reframe it in light of Wolfe's interventions. Beyond defining what a body means in a posthuman world, Wolfe attempts to reframe intellectual history in a posthumanist light—Wolfe is invested in changing greater humanist concepts such as subjecthood and agency. Wolfe's reframing does not stop at extending bodies beyond humanism, but asks more fundamental questions of how we determine what bodies are, how they exist, and how they operate in a reality we previously understood through a liberal humanist lens. Thus, while Hayles is useful in thinking about the potential of trans bodies in *Look Who's Morphing*, especially in relation to technological mediation, Wolfe's work is more productive toward thinking about the possibility of a posthumanist intervention both in an intellectual field and in conceptualizing posthuman realities. In a chapter titled "Learning from Temple Grandin: Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Comes after the Subject," Wolfe writes about Temple Grandin, an autistic woman who writes extensively about how language is not her first order of communication. Rather, she interprets her world through the lens of other senses, and then reinterprets her world through language to share with readers. This, Grandin states, is how she can have such a close connection with animals, which also do not use language as their primary mechanism of communication. In this same sense, I have questions about the primacy given to vision in thinking about the way the remediated and the virtual selves are understood as selves. In *Remediation*, the virtual self is defined on a filmic continuum—a continuum of visual media, the difference being that virtual realities allow the viewer/user to control the vision/angles of the camera. If vision defines a virtual self, does that mean that blind/low-sighted folks cannot have a virtual self? In *Look Who's Morphing*, I don't

think the characters rely on vision—or really, that there is any sensory given-ness to the characters' embodiments. Above, I wrote about how the characters are not transparent in their identity, while their performativity is visible, it is not about "being seen" or "undermining the gaze," or, their performance does not rely the audience's ability to visually interpret that performance. Similarly, the characters' ability to occupy these mediated spaces is not founded on their ability to change the camera angles, per se. Furthermore, within the worlds of *Look Who's Morphing*, it is not the case that there is, on the one hand, an outside to either the remediated character or the virtual character, so it is not as if they are either "seeing the inside" of the world or cognizant of an outside that is watching.

I am arguing that Cho's narrators are performing, or embodying, presence differently than the historical lineage of new media theory would suggest: the narrators are not reliant on a visual, or even sensory, element to establish presence in the world that he creates. I now want to turn to thinking about the relationship between Cho and his narrators because they mirror the non-sensory relationality of Cho's narrators. Though different in body and story, the narrators are often, like Cho himself, Chinese-Australian, queer, and perhaps a bit anxious. Indeed, in "Self-Insertion and Identity" Purvis argues, "there is a distinct deliberateness in self-inserting himself, that is, writing his own sense of self through characterisation [sic], into the short fiction of his collection" (1). Cho also discusses his conscious self-insertion into his creative work in an essay titled "'No One Puts Baby in a Corner': Inserting My Self into the Text," stating, "My self-insertion into [*Look Who's Morphing*] is…an ironic contrast to my inability to see other aspects of my self—including my Asian-Australianness—reflected… Textual self-insertion is a powerful form of literally 'inhabiting texts' to respond to what can sometimes be painful subject-text relations." Purvis focuses on the "ironic contrast" Cho writes into his text when she highlights

rather Westernized Chinese dishes – lemon chicken and sweet and sour pork – that Cho parodies as "traditional [recipes] that [have] been passed down from generation to generation," (27) and "the best of northern Chinese cuisine," (31) the latter of which is cooked in a kitchen in which a neon sign that reads "Oriental Gourmet Kitchen" hangs on the wall. In other stories, the narrator inhabits United States-based cultural productions with an Auntie Wei (in "The Exorcist,") or Auntie Lien (in "Today On Dr. Phil,") at his side. As Purvis rightly suggests and Cho's article emphasizes, these scenes point to the difficulty of navigating the world with a transcultural identity—even the representations of his ancestral culture that Cho does grant himself have been filtered through Australian/Western notions of what comprises Chinese culture. Cho's narrators, like Cho himself, are not inauthentic, but rather suspended between a rich but distant cultural history that is supposedly theirs and the immediacy of Western cultural productions that do not reflect their bodies and families. These examples open an interesting parallel whereby the author is mediating his social identities through the technology of a narrative, while constructing a world where the narrators mediate their identities through televisual and digital technologies. As I move into my final section, it is important to keep in mind these multiple constructions of reality: a narrative reality, a telepresent reality, and our reality, and how they are all operating in relation to the bodies that inhabit them.

Theorizing Presence Across Realities

In this section, I theorize spaces and ideas that are beyond the problematics that I have unpacked in the past two sections. Grounding my thinking in the idea of the "transreal," I discuss modes of being in a body across mediated realities and how we are able to establish that sense of presence. As my work in the previous section displays, visuality doesn't seem to be a tenable mode for interpreting realities. I assert that affect – a system that doesn't rely on sense or

agency – can do the work of revealing presences in and across various realities. To begin this section, I will more explicitly define and apply the idea of the transreal/transreality and I will look once again at Cho's stories, "Dirty Dancing" and "Dinner With Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang," to theorize how characters in Cho's collection are operating both as transreal and through states of transreality. Finally, I will conclude by turning toward a consideration of ontology—the stakes of this paper do not end at the discoveries I made within Cho's work, but reach toward a re-articulation of how we define and attribute the possibility and process of being.

Following the close of the previous section, I want to pick up by providing a more in depth definition of transreality and the transreal. As Hayward and countless others remind us, the prefix trans- carries the multiple meanings of across, beyond, and through. Transreality, then, has at least two meanings: on the one hand, transreality is beyond reality, and on the other, across realities. Either there are realities beyond our own—some that we participate regularly in building and changing, and others that are still undiscovered, or there are realities that we are moving across, that intersect with our own, realities that have shifting borders, some of which are encroaching upon and altering what we thought was a stable reality. And all the while, our bodies are with us, moving across and beyond the boundaries of convention, across and through realities. Bodies and space are relational—a point that pulses subtly under my arguments in the previous two sections. In her work *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities*, transgender artist and academic Micha Cárdenas writes,

> Now that the possibility exists for any bodily transformation, to become any gender one wants with enough time and money and willingness to bleed, we want more. We want to be real and unreal at the same time, to span realities, to be multiple, a digital body and a physical body, and also multiple digital bodies, alts, bots, clones. Are you talking to one

> of my bots, or clones, or to me? Does it make a difference? I am fleeing regimes of identification and visibility. I reject anyone's ability to ask me if I'm a real woman, because real woman is a fantasy. Our lives are a rapid series of switches between registers, swapping out levels of real sensor(y) experience, fantasy, symbolic names we have for ourselves. And, as Ronell says, existing on multiple registers simultaneously (76).

Reminiscent of Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman*, Cárdenas's work is ripe with performative examples of our own already transreal bodies. She draws upon performance art and scholarship by herself, Stelarc, Zach Blas, Ricardo Dominguez, and others to highlight the trans-ness of bodies, realities, and also national borders, theorizing all of these forms of trans-ness while unpacking their relationship to capital, surveillance, and trauma.

Considering the passage from Cárdenas's work as a whole, I would like to highlight many of her points as they relate to Cho's work and support my interventions in new media studies. My work provides the context of an intellectual life, performative life, and fictional life in which we can now think about Cárdenas's desire to be both digital (or perhaps telemediated) and physical. When Cárdenas writes that "[w]e want to be real and unreal at the same time," this framing echoes Purvis's categorization of Cho's collection as an example of writing and being that hovers between essentialist and anti-essentialist. Furthermore, in Hayles' work around the history of cybernetics and the bodies of posthuman subjects, we can see the roots of Cárdenas's feeling that she wants to be and is embodied within "multiple digital bodies," or as "alts, bots" and clones. Cárdenas's writing is given a performative life through her own performance art: in one work, Cárdenas lives her transreality by wearing virtual reality goggles to facilitate her constant participation in the computer game *Second Life* for over 100 hours. Cárdenas is also

someone whose body exists already as transreal: by exposing herself to hormone replacement therapy, her body is brought into a new reality by way of synthetic hormones.

Finally, I contend that Cárdenas's work has a fictional life within Cho's collection—his narratives and narrators are, as I have explained, embodied and morphing, mediated and narratively independent from their medium. In the case of both "Dirty Dancing" and "Dinner With Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang," characters exist simultaneously as bodies that are agential but also mediated through technologies that have already been co-opted by a cultural imperialism or an institution. The characters in these stories often exist simultaneously in forms of trans-ness, and in the collection as a whole, the morphing narrators exist simultaneously across realities. There is a simultaneous essentialism and anti-essentialism, a realness and unrealness, to Cho's work, whereby the characters both embody identities and also shift how those identities look and what they can mean. Thus, I also want to emphasize the idea of simultaneity that Cárdenas describes, and how the idea of simultaneity undergirds themes that run throughout Cho's text. None of these ways of being, or simultaneous forms of presence, can be captured or identified through the lens of the visual. In fact, Cárdenas stresses the fact that all of these attributes that encompass transreality, and encompass her as someone who embodies not just transgender but transreal ways of being, are escaping "regimes of identification and visibility."

The question remains, though, of how this simultaneity operates, or rather, how transreality exists outside of identification and visibility. If not visually, then we need to rethink how we can establish presence, move across realities, change our bodies through mediation or other forms of technological assistance and still know ourselves, and recognize our selves and our bodies as our own. I argue that transreality and mediated presences are more accurately reflected through a study of affect. Affect, as Brian Massumi defines it in *Parables for the*

Virtual, is an exchange between the virtual and the actual, or "the autonomy of relation" and "functional limitation" (35). In other words, affect is what arises from that exchange between two or more objects coming together and the ways those objects come into contact given the limits of their bodies. Affect does not preclude the possibility of morphing, but rather depends on it to define the specificity of an exchange. Massumi makes explicit the fact that affect is not about emotion or identification, but rather about the qualities that trickle out before we can articulate or express a recognizable emotional state. Affect does not operate on a sensory level, per se, but rather has already escaped by the time our senses are able to capture it as emotion.

In Cho's work, he writes the narrators into mediated or remediated bodies. I argue that the characteristic similarities of the narrators are not because they are the same person, but rather they are releasing the same affect. This is to say, the relationship between the narration and the mediated bodies – before it is articulated as a story – releases qualities that are recognizable as similar. I also want to contend that this affective similarity, or perhaps we can call it affective simultaneity, is a trait inherent to the idea of trans-ness in general. As we walk through the world as bodies hovering somewhere between essential and anti-essential, real and unreal, affect – or the projection and presence that is born when we engage with stimuli around us – is what equals our ability to experience the world and have the world experience us as cohesive beings.

I want to further explore the idea of affective presence in *Look Who's Morphing* by turning to a moment in Cho's story "Dirty Dancing," when the narrator is saying goodbye to Bruce he is about to drive off into the distance in Castle's black Chevy. Cho writes, "Bruce and I turn to each other. We do not say anything for a moment. I say, 'I guess we surprised everybody.' He smiles at me and says, 'I guess we did.'" (11). This moment is referring to the fact that Bruce is both his own being, but also a product of the discomfort or dysphoria that the

narrator experienced while having sex with Castle for the first time. In other words, Bruce is a character that was given life only through an affective experience—the narrator experienced a sense of detachment when they had sex with Castle, but rather than producing an affect of distance or disembodiment, the functional limitations of Cho's world allowed the narrator to replace themselves with Bruce. While Bruce is now a different person than the narrator – who has his own "autonomy of relation" – the exchange between the narrator and Bruce at the end of the story is an acknowledgement of their relationship as co-constitutive bodies. As I discussed in the first section of this paper, the relationship between Bruce and the narrator signals a transgender experience. I want to reiterate the fact that, visually, the narrator and Bruce are unidentifiable as having the relationship that they do. The narrator marks the fact that they are not white, muscular, or manly. Their relationship is instead marked by the fact that the narrator and Bruce have an affective bond; Bruce was once mediated through the narrator, and they surprised everyone together by giving Bruce his own mediated embodiment.

The relationship between trans-ness, affect, and telemediated presence gives rise to larger questions of ontology. Within a humanist framework – in which a body is stable, fundamental, and essentially unmediated – it is possible to imagine visibility and visuality as tools for establishing presence and navigating realities. However, from the vantage point of posthumanism – where bodies and presences can span realities and be multiple and simultaneous – it makes less sense to assume that one can visually map being, presence, and embodiment. As my readings of Cho's stories show, trans- bodies provide a foothold through which we might begin to understand a relationship between reality, bodies, and presence that relies on relational qualifiers, such as affect, and goes beyond the ultimately empirical logics of humanist scholarship. While I conclude this paper, I am left with larger questions about what it means to

be, across various realities. What are the as yet undiscovered possibilities of the body? How can we change our bodies in unimagined ways, and how do our daily affective relations change our bodies in ways that we cannot see?

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