

# THE CARBON CHAINS THAT BIND US

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Beatriz Preciado sits alone in a room at night, trapped in an anxious state of distrust.<sup>1</sup> S/he opens and shuts a box quickly, carefully taking out only one sachet of gel and smoothing it over his/her shoulders. After the act, s/he writes for hours, his/her body plugged into the energy of distant planets. S/he tells no one. Writing is the only thing that won't betray him/her for what s/he has just done, for this "secret addiction": using testosterone "as if it were a hard drug" (Preciado 56). As s/he asserts in the philosophical memoir *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, Preciado is a "gender hacker" (55): s/he uses hormones as "free and open biocodes" in an effort to achieve a "molecular becoming" (55; 143). To Preciado, "masculinity and femininity are pharmacopornographic fictions retroactively defined in relation to the molecule with which they are treated" (60). In other words, Preciado argues that testosterone and the characteristics it produces are not inherently masculine but are treated as such because they have thus far primarily belonged to the cisgender male. When used by someone other than a man, testosterone is no longer seen as a natural hormone, but as a hard drug.

No matter how difficult it is to define masculinity, "in order to legally obtain a dose of synthetic testosterone, it is necessary to stop defining yourself as a woman" (60). The instructions on the brand of testosterone Preciado uses, Testogel, assume that the user is either biologically or legally male and imply that "for women, whether they're athletic or not, taking testosterone is a form of doping" (65). Preciado writes that s/he is not "taking hormones as part of a protocol to change sex," but belongs to a group of transgender people who "are fooling with [hormones], self-medicating without trying to change

<sup>1</sup> When *Testo Junkie* was first published in 2008, the author was using the name Beatriz Preciado and s/he and him/her pronouns. The text has since been republished under the name Paul B. Preciado, and the author now uses he/him pronouns. For the sake of clarity, we will use the author's name and pronouns in use at the time of publication throughout this essay.

their gender legally or going through any psychiatric follow-up” (55). Through such “fooling,” Preciado is transgressing legal, pharmaceutical, and social boundaries of gender.

Preciado considers this experimentation with testosterone to be a protest against the limiting definitions of gender imposed by the legal and pharmaceutical systems; however, s/he also acknowledges the ambiguous nature of this protest as potentially helpful or harmful to society. Using testosterone “outside the aegis of a medical protocol” could be counterproductive as it may “[give] bad press to testosterone at the very moment when the law is beginning to integrate transsexuals into society” (56). Such gender-hacking could threaten the rights of transgender people to access hormones. While ideally testosterone would just be “a molecular door, a becoming between multiplicities,” the political gravity imposed on Preciado’s use means that “what [s/he’s] actually giving [him/herself] is a chain of political signifiers” (143; 139). Preciado knows that this experimentation would not be significant if not for the set legal and pharmaceutical boundaries of gender. While the experiment is inherently personal, its implications extend into everyone’s lives, for disregarding the gender binary disrupts the social order. As Preciado states, “All of us are united by the same carbon chains, by the same invisible gel; without them, none of this would have any meaning” (61). Preciado’s emphasis on our lack of differences places stress on the systems that rely on those differences in order to function.

The pharmaceutical and legal systems’ policing of gender can be seen as a symptom of a larger cultural trend: rejecting that which doesn’t lend itself to easy categorization, and making it monstrous in order to preserve systemic coherence. In “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen posits that monsters embody the “fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” of a culture (456). In systems relying on the opposition of binary categories, the monster, “a form suspended between forms,” “threatens to destroy . . . the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed” (458; 462). Monsters’ existence exposes the fragility of the system, as the differences that society capitalizes on to maintain hierarchy are “arbitrary and potentially free-floating” (462). However, monsters also preserve societal order by acting as an outlet for deviant desire.

Cohen states that “the monster is continually linked to forbidden practices” in order to set clear boundaries for normal behavior (464). We can relate to and even enjoy the monster’s violence in contained settings like the cinema, because we know such practices are prohibited in real life. The abjection of difference—wherein we reject an unthinkable threat emanating from far outside or deep inside and distance it from ourselves by embodying it in a monster—allows for the formation of personal and cultural identity. However, monsters are born from our culture; we can’t deny our connection to them. Their existence begs us to ask ourselves why we reject them.

Preciado’s experimentation with testosterone outside of legal boundaries is an example of the kind of “forbidden practice” that cultural monsters warn against. However, Preciado’s practices are even more threatening than those of monsters, because s/he is not “contained by geographic, generic, or epistemic marginalization”; Preciado’s existence as a real, living example of the “crisis of categories” threatens, in Cohen’s terms, to “deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture” (Cohen 464-465). While we can use the monster as an alter ego to escape these arbitrary categories in controlled settings, we shun the monster in everyday life to maintain order and identity. Preciado, however, is undeniably real. His/her existence denies the separation of the fear and fantasy associated with a “mixed category” (Cohen 458). By identifying as a “Testo Junkie,” s/he challenges the established binary and calls for the acceptance of “a nonbinary polymorphism at the ‘base’ of human nature”—that is, for us to acknowledge that binary categories are arbitrary and all of us exist outside of social boundaries in some respects (Cohen 459). S/he also shows us the possibility for liberation from categories and embodies our desire for it, while still acknowledging the danger of dissolving existing cultural boundaries. Preciado is aware of this conflict, even referring to testosterone as “the devil in a colorless gel” (140). S/he feels the pressure of the forbidden and adopts the secretive nature and shame of a hard-drug user. S/he toes the line between a becoming and an addiction, showing that it could go either way.

The existence of cultural monsters, as well as Preciado’s complex identity, make us confront “how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place” (Cohen 466).

Without the monsterization of human difference, without imposed societal borders, the use of testosterone outside of a protocol to change sex wouldn't be anything more than a "molecular becoming," a gateway to traits once unattainable for half of the population. Cohen describes a similar transcendence as "the threshold . . . of becoming," marking what we could be *if we could accept monsters and the difference they represent* (Cohen 466). Preciado's experimentation embodies both the monstrous call for liberation and the human fear that we will fall apart without borders. S/he shows us what could be the beauty of freedom if our society could survive the restructuring and force us to try to reconcile that beauty with our fear of the dissolution of cultural and personal identity as we know it.

Nearly a decade after the publication of *Testo Junkie*, society is still trying to reconcile changes in gender identity and expression with the need for easy categorization. One social solution encompassing difference has been the recognition of in-between categories such as non-binary or genderfluid. Many of these people shift between gender identities, believing that gender is not in fact static, but something that evolves over time. One genderfluid person, Payton Quinn, states, "The only reason why I feel I should put a label on it is just to make it easier for other people" (Marsh). This is an acknowledgement of what Preciado calls the "political fiction" of gender. These people live and identify in the realm of the "mixed category" of gender; their existence would prove, though through personal rather than pharmaceutical means, the fiction of our binary system. So, in order to preserve some semblance of boundaries, they try to institute the spectrum of gender as another category. They preserve order by creating another fiction; however, this solution has not been readily accepted. People from older generations are often confused by these identities, feeling that there is leeway in the current binary system. A masculine woman is still a woman, a feminine man still a man, and so the categories are preserved while not completely dictating our actions.

A similar attitude has been taken up broadly in popular culture. For example, experimentation in fashion with non-gendered clothing has been featured on runways and promoted by celebrities like Gigi Hadid, Zayn Malik, and Jaden Smith (Singer). However, these celebrated figures are separated from the common lives of the public, as

fashion is elevated as art and meant to be experimental. These instances still dwell in the realm of fantasy and ultimately do not seek to abolish the fictions of gender; they instead aim to redefine their implications. They ultimately do not abolish the binary system but rather extend its scope. Despite the younger generation's movement towards acknowledging and embracing abject difference within themselves, they and others still try to fit their identity into a categorical system, either by expanding the traits associated with currently recognized genders or by acknowledging other ones. They are not free to transcend boundaries and explore new versions of themselves as Preciado envisioned, but they are starting to be able to accept that the differences between them are more or less arbitrary. We have not destroyed the system to reach a "molecular becoming," but at least we have begun to dissect it.

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