

Foreword

"Portmanteau" means both "a large suitcase" and "a word blending the sounds and meanings of two words." The title of this journal is appropriate, both because the essays published in it work to unpack the "luggage" of cultural expectations and because they consider the intersectional meanings of those expectations within systems of privilege and disempowerment. Our bodies and psyches are cultural texts, produced, policed and contested in myriad ways which can reinforce but also resist structural biases. The essays in this volume of Portmanteau explore, unmoor and interrogate multiple norms: sexism, racism, ableism and ethnocentrism, among others. In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" (1972), feminist writer Adrienne Rich writes, "Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves." Almost fifty years later, her point stands – and this is more the case for those who inhabit subject positions which give us access to power, whose embodiment and emmindment more closely approximate what Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls a "normate." Authors Cassidy Leasure, Autumn Murphy, Kourtney Kotvas, and Rachel Frey remind us of this in their thoughtful and evocative essays, which engage the damages of toxic masculinity, the privileging of the phallus in a cisgender porn culture, the eugenicist negation of women of color and the pervasive power attached to whiteness in a white supremacist culture. Lauren Fedorek extends this in her essay on how anti-Muslim porn supports Islamophobic, xenophobic and misogynistic prejudice.

Yet even if, on the surface, we might approximate a cultural normate, these essays also remind us that what is visible does not necessarily tell the whole or the primary "truth" about an individual. As Emma Martin reminds us in her essay on invisible disability, what is absent can accrue as much meaning as what is present in a scopic regime. Conversely, reading the "visible" body can ignore complex realities, as Kelsey Boyle argues in her essay on the hormonal discrimination of female-identified athletes. When Olympic champion Caster Semenya loses a landmark legal case with the IAAF and is told she must reduce her naturally-occurring testosterone levels in order to compete as a woman, we need to grapple with the imbrication of visible and invisible in ways that deconstruct binary thinking. Chealyn Leitzel compels us to do this when she writes about the risks and benefits of embodying a disability, and Margaret (Maggie) Calvert re-frames our ability to do so in her essay on feminism and Buddhism, in which she writes, "it is difficult for some to accept that the categories of man and woman are intrinsically empty." Shrija Shrestha complicates the complexities of intersectional oppression in her essay about the mental health crisis of refugees. While many of us think of physical challenges facing refugees, too rarely do we contemplate the psychological support that they may require. As Shrestha puts it, "Not all refugees suffer from physical (visible) torture." In the binary taxonomic schema which structures so much of western thought, questioning binary concepts is difficult but also imperative, as these authors remind us.

Finally, in a journal focused on intersectional issues, questions of language are key. How do we “speak” privilege? How are systemic bias and oppression articulated? How do discursive choices and patterns contribute to the construction of “normates” while stigmatizing non-normative ways of being? In “Hate Speech and Censorship,” Alexandra Baddour trouble the waters of First Amendment rights by asking when/if speech should be censored, under what circumstances and to what end. Such debates are rooted in structural inequities but are also necessary to move us closer to social justice and equity. In a volume whose words resonate, inspire and provoke, we invite you to read on.

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