

Negotiating Trans Affect in Luka Holmegaard's *Havet i munden*

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Their PhD project investigates the ways in which trans-queer imaginaries navigate a cultural moment shaped by the current surge of trans visibility.

Abstract

Identifying a dominant affective polarization pertaining to contemporary trans discourse and the constraints this poses in accounting for trans experience, the article turns to the sphere of trans poetics. Through a reading of *Havet i munden* (2023) [The Ocean in Your Mouth] by Danish author Luka Holmegaard, the article discerns poetic strategies for navigating the politically pressurized present. The article argues that in troubling the relation between pleasure and pain, exhibiting representational restraint, and attuning to bodily sensations, *Havet i munden* offers a renegotiation of trans affect, exhibiting the desire to move beyond the constraints of marked identity entirely.

KEYWORDS: affect, transgender, queer, poetry

Introduction

"Is it cold in the water?"

-- SOPHIE, *OIL OF EVERY PEARL'S UN-INSIDES*

På vej tilbage til huset spørger E, hvordan det føles at bade. Om jeg er nervøs, selvbevidst. Jeg siger nej, siger: Jeg har det, som om min krop er fyldt med lys.

[On our way back to the house E asks me how it feels to swim. If I am nervous, self-conscious. I say no, say: It feels as if my body is filled with light.] (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 10)

Poetic images of lightness, ease, and pleasure radiate from Danish author Luka Holmegaard's recent book of poems *Havet i munden* [*The Ocean in Your Mouth*] (2023), a collection in four parts "about pleasure, pain, testosterone, and swimming in the ocean" as the back copy reads. The work opens with a bathing scene. The narrator and a friend, named only with the initial V, have been training outdoors, a bit outside of Copenhagen. It's mid-May, still off-season in terms of bathing in the chilly coastal waters of Denmark. The bathing scene describes an encounter of mixed pleasure as the narrator submerges his body in cold water (it is 13 degrees we are told). The meeting between body and environment is rendered with precision and restraint:

Til at begynde med gør det vildt ondt i benene. Så bliver det bedre, men ikke meget. [...] jeg er jo allerede herude og ved, at først bliver det koldt, og så bliver det dejligt. / Havet bliver blødere i løbet af sommeren, lige nu er det hårdt som glas.

[In the beginning it just really hurts in the legs. Then it gets better, but not by a lot. [...] I already know that first it will feel cold, then good. / The ocean becomes softer over the summer. For now, it is hard, like glass.] (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 7)

This is simply an act of exposing the body to a different milieu--another temperatural surround--something the body needs to get accustomed to. An astute and razor-sharp awareness is directed at this--for people living in the vicinity of water at least--fairly common and familiar activity.

The trans and queerness of the scene is introduced from the outset by the mention of the friend's pronoun "den" (it)--which is not unusual in the Danish queer community, where "de"/"dem" (they/them) and/or "it" are the most commonly used pronouns to signify a nonbinary or gender-queer identification--and the mention of scars on the narrator's body. But there is no explanation or further context provided in reference to either pronoun or the origin of the scars: "The scars have healed, but I can still hardly lift any weight in the arms" (p. 7) is the only description provided. Indeed, an unceremonious descriptiveness attends to the markers of gendered difference²: Without any prior knowledge of the signs particular to trans and queer people and communities, a reader would most likely find themselves in the dark as to the meaning of the friend's pronoun and the narrator's bodily status.³ The author's initial description is reduced to a bare minimum; we get a hint at the location of the scars as probably somewhere on the upper body, since lifting with the arms poses a challenge, and scars in plural also gives a hint by ruling out certain scenarios. But for a readership in the know no further clues are needed for it to be clear, that the narrator is healing from top surgery.

The poems actively engage the power dynamics of familiarity/unfamiliarity: a personal intimacy with the language and bodily sensations relating to trans-queer experience allows for a certain access to the material--which my reading of *Havet i munden* will surely reflect. The author's way of conveying lived experience of transness is clearly informed by a mode of trans-for-trans (t4t) ethos; that is, it exhibits a conscious privileging of trans mutual understanding while foregoing the oftentimes tiring labor of explaining what is common knowledge for trans people, but might not be immediately accessible from a cis-gendered perspective.⁴ Yet, this is not to claim the work as an example of a literary trans separatism. In fact, the

text seems quite uninterested in sharply defining or delineating transness (the word 'trans' does not even appear in the book. The word "transsexuals" appears once as an explanatory aside). But neither is trans experience rendered in the metaphorical: Unlike the epigraph by musician and producer SOPHIE, water and bathing are not readily evoked by Holmegaard as allegories of gender transition.⁵ Rather, as I will demonstrate in the following, the work in poetically juxtaposing concrete bodily sensation and evocative poetic imagery actively pushes against established cultural narratives of transness. Indeed, in the poetic questioning of the expected affective demarcations of 'trans,' the poems speak into a central impasse currently pertaining to the very category of trans as a marked identity.⁶

As much of the overall positive critical reception of *Havet i munden* takes note of, there is something inherently *out of the ordinary* in the very reticence, the restrained stylistic lucidity and tranquil sensory delight with which this contemporary narrative of gender transition presents itself. The book's "tender simplicity and undramatic lightness" is "striking", one critic noted (Gregersen, 2023); "surprisingly subtle" remarked another (Nexø, 2023); "[...] it feels unusual that a narrative about trans experience centers on pleasure" a journalist interviewing the author candidly points out (Adamsson, 2023). As I will discuss in the following, it's not that difficult emotion is at all missing from this poetic account—there are sections touching on humiliation, dysphoria, disorientation, and numbness—it's just not the book's dominant mood.

Reading the critical reception of the work there is something telling—perhaps even borderline absurd—in the very fact that poetic motifs of quotidian experience spur such attention when narrated from the perspective of contemporary trans experience. Indeed, the fact that until recently accounts of trans pleasure have been virtually absent from the Danish cultural sphere (and beyond) seems to illustrate the very narrowness pertaining to the narrative parameters of contemporary trans representation. But considering the long history of association of transness with 'bad

feeling'—arising from the self-alienating distress of gender dysphoria and intense social stigma alike—this may hardly come as a surprise. As a matter of fact, since its very conception the term 'transsexual' has been inseparably tied to negative affect (Amin, 2022). So, seeing as the book centers a trans masculine narrator in the process of transitioning, and given that the writer himself has openly transitioned (though, the two do not necessarily correspond) activates a set of culturally and politically coordinated limitations on the imaginable, and indeed on trans imaginability beyond the already established trajectory of misery.

Yet, if the (trans)gendered framing of this poetic narrative leads to an impasse of imaginability, and given the text's own insistence on rendering some trans-specific markers opaque, does it mean that a reading of Holmegaard's work would be more solidaric in de-centering the work's gendered situatedness and significance? And does the focus on pleasure and ease within a narrative of trans experience signal a form of apolitical contentment; that is, that we have finally reached a longed for "trans paradise" (See Raun, 2010)? In both cases I would argue to the contrary. In this article, I wish to demonstrate that understanding the cultural and political mechanisms governing narratives of trans representation is vital, not only for grasping the range of poetic strategies deployed by Luka Holmegaard, but also the political trajectories of their poetic imaginary.

The following analysis is part of my wider PhD study on the poetic and aesthetic strategies for countering representational violence in contemporary trans-queer cultural production. My aims in this article will be twofold: Firstly, I want to illuminate the narrative and affective constraints impacting contemporary trans intelligibility and, by extension, transgender modes of being in the world. Here I attend to work within contemporary affect theory concerned with the uneven distribution of affect among differentiated bodies to sketch out the polarized affective terrain shaping the conditions of possibility of trans narratives (Malatino, 2022; Ahmed, 2010; Love, 2009; Amin, 2022). Secondly, through a reading of Luka Holmegaard's *Havet i munden* as embedded within

and deeply concerned with these conditions and constraints, I shed light on the possible poetic strategies for navigating this highly politically pressurized field—and possibly transcending it. In this part, I begin by turning to the status of difficult affect in Holmegaard's book before shifting my attention to selected poetic images of attunement to sensory pleasure. Overall, I seek to demonstrate how a deeper understanding of the gender political context in which a trans imaginary is rooted may work to elucidate the political openings such work gestures towards. In carefully choosing its mode of (non)engagement, I contend that Holmegaard's book exemplifies a way of negotiating the parameters of trans narrative economies: by textually weaving a different, sensuous mode of being in the world.

Affective polarization

Structured in four parts, beginning and ending with encounters of bathing in the ocean through the duration of a season, *Havet i munden* follows a transmasculine narrator as he gets acquainted with the inner and outer effects of taking testosterone. Snippets of text document him bathing, attentively registering his surroundings, and hanging out with friends in everyday scenarios such as going to a wedding, helping a friend move, going on dates. The longest poem attends to the humiliating and drawn-out process of going through the Danish state's gender clinic in order to access trans-specific health care, while meditating on the conditions for transforming pain into pleasure (for instance through consensual BDSM-play—or indeed, through the act of writing). The poems dwell carefully and caringly on the body's sensations: touching and being touched, what feels good. Not least, the poems highlight the surrounding presence of community, most notably in the final part gathering reassuring voices of trans and queer friends; quotes of common things friends would say are interspersed throughout the pages, mingling encouragingly in between the everyday scenes of bathing.

What seems to be especially noteworthy in the foregrounding of scenes of pleasure, leisure, and caring community in *Havet i munden* is the active downplaying of difficulty and tension that usually accompanies narratives rooted in the experiences of socially marginalized identities. This tension is what usually comes from displeasure, dissatisfaction, commonly signifying wrongdoing and mobilizing towards political change. Pleasure may indeed seem like an odd bedfellow for politics suggesting—through for instance a series of leftist ideological stances—stagnant contentment at best, and harmful hedonism at worst (See Jameson, 2008). The orientation towards pleasure in *Havet i munden* however is not, I argue, to be understood as a privileged expression of indulgence, but rather as expressing a desire to move away from a particularly tired script of trans people as tragic and suffering social pariahs. Again, it's not that displeasure, difficulty, or even violence is absent from the narrative, but rather that the author seems to be playing with levels of intensity and tension in the poems, sometimes deliberately zig-zagging between 'negative' and 'positive' affective poles, sometimes conflating them, sometimes simply lingering in comfortable sensory delight, testing the waters for different trans affective narratives. Before unpacking the role of sensory attunement to (dis)pleasure and its mixtures in *Havet i munden*, it will be useful to map out the contours of the politically charged affective terrain of contemporary trans experience.

As a minoritized group, the act of sharing experience through different forms of self-narration is of particular importance for trans and gender variant communities.⁷ But given that gender transition is a highly politically pressurized and regulated issue, trans narratives are brought to bear nearly impossible political weight: In sharing trans-specific experiences and concerns in a given (cis majority) public arena, there is, from a trans perspective, always a sense of risk that one may unknowingly tip some uncertain political scales, potentially affecting trans people as a whole. Moreover, the often strictly gatekept routes to trans-specific health care tend to put a considerable burden on the affective self-narration of trans

subjects in need of treatment (See Friborg, 2023). These amorphous pressures are some of the more dubious aspects of the tendency towards public representations of 'trans joy' as a means of countering the historically pervasive perceptions of trans people as miserable, suffering, and mentally ill.⁸ Trans pleasure, joy, and affirmation--as genuine as they may be, and are--are nevertheless "mediated by the deeply bifurcated affective discourse that governs tropes of trans representation" as trans scholar Hil Malatino notes in his recent book *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad* (2022). In this timely defense of what we may call "the right to feel bad" within a trans affective discourse, Malatino seeks to counter the affective flatness too often assigned the socially marginalized. "Trans people should not feel compelled to sweep self-narrative clean of [...] negative affect, or be corralled into associating bad feeling exclusively to the "pre-" of transition," he writes, arguing for trans people's right to multidimensional and complex personhood (2022, p. 3). Indeed, even beyond a medical context, high levels of pre-transition distress and the sometimes elusive promise of post-transition alleviation form the narrative arc structuring trans existence, allowing for a restricted affective palette.

The difficulty of accounting for lived experience with a sense of depth, nuance, and complexity is part of a history and politics of trans and queer misrepresentation where a persistent lack of words, images, and archive material form a shadow of denied existence and misrecognition hovering over trans- and queer life-worlds, still impacting trans lives. Considering this history, making space for negative affect and experience--or even, polemically, embracing it-- can feel like a breath of fresh air. The perspective of embracing various accounts of negativity gained notable traction in queer theory with works as otherwise varied as Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), Sianne Ngai's, *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* (2007), and Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). From a trans studies perspective, a renewed preoccupation with 'bad feeling' was stirred by trans thinker and critic Andrea Long Chu's polemic opinion piece in *The*

New York Times, "My New Vagina Won't Make Me Happy. And It Shouldn't Have To" (2018). This longstanding line of critical engagement serves to underscore the immense importance of negative affect in trans and queer studies: "To narrate unhappiness can be affirmative; it can gesture toward another world, even if we are not given a vision of the world as it might exist after the walls of misery are brought down," writes queer affect scholar Sara Ahmed, simultaneously acknowledging the pervasiveness of unhappiness as a trope within narratives of queerness, with all the tolls it can take on queer lives (2010, p. 107). Unhappy narratives then, are a central part of trans- and queerness; they may feel disparaging or empowering, stifling or liberating, depending on the context within which they are wielded.

This 'reversible' quality of hurtful discourse is something that queer resistance to stigma historically has been especially adept at tapping into (the most notable examples off course being the notion of 'pride' as an antidote to 'shame,' or indeed the claiming of 'queer' as a positive descriptor of selfhood.) (See Butler, 1993). In her book, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), queer scholar Heather Love describes what she calls the "turn to the negative" in queer studies. She attests a large part of the scholarly preoccupation with queer suffering to the engagement with the work of Michel Foucault, and especially his notion of the "reversibility of power", that is, the ways in which dominated groups may 'flip' instances of domination to their advantage. Queer identity is built on and shaped by the effects of this reversibility of discourse:

[O]n the one hand, [homosexual identity] continues to be understood as a form of damaged or compromised subjectivity; on the other hand, the characteristic forms of gay freedom are produced in response to this history. Pride and visibility offer antidotes to shame and the legacy of the closet; they are made in the image of specific forms of denigration. Queerness is structured by this central turn. (Love, 2007, pp. 2-3)

Following Love's inquiry we may ask: are there parts of queerness so fundamentally tied to forms of "feeling backward" that the prospect of relinquishing the clusters of negative affect shaping queer as a marked identity would also mean altering queerness itself beyond recognizability? Love ultimately points out an impasse here: Without queer misery, there would de facto be no (need for) queer resistance.

A similar paradox around negative affect is currently receiving invigorated critical attention in trans studies. Trans scholar Kadji Amin, in tracing gender dysphoria as "the definitional symptom of transness," goes on in claiming transness as discursively "soldered to negative affect" (Amin, 2022, p. 33). In following the burgeoning accounts of trans misery in sexological archives and medical definitions and tracing their effects in the social world, Amin identifies a sociogenetic impulse: that narratives of trans misery ultimately *generate more trans misery*. This is not to say that trans negative affect cannot be productive. After all:

"Negative affect is powerful. It can inform us of social oppression and draw us toward others similarly oppressed; its very discomfort can serve as an incitement to move or to do something—to transform ourselves, our communities, and our larger life worlds. [...] But that does not mean that shame, stigma, and dysphoria are thereby left behind forever. Affect is non-linear, and shame, stigma, and dysphoria live on in the very selves—the very transsexual flesh—formed in and through them." (Amin, 2022, p. 40)

Negative affect, according to Amin, is thus an inherent part—both socially and bodily—of what it means to be trans. Against this bleak backdrop notions of post-transition 'trans joy,' circulating vehemently for instance in YouTube transition videos and popular media, may constitute the "opposing" affective end, yet are fundamentally bound to the same affective mechanisms, forming an overall tendency of affective polarization in contemporary trans narratives.

In the following, I turn my attention to the poetic strategies of *Havet i munden*, demonstrating the book's way of working through this seeming dichotomy.

Like you can't see the air

There are important reasons, then, for continually engaging with negative affect, especially in a trans and queer context. Even if the pleasurable takes center stage in *Havet i munden*, the book in fact addresses trans-specific difficulty, albeit in a deliberately restrained manner.⁹ The most comprehensive accounts of working through this difficulty are to be found in the book's longest poem "No face, no match". Here, the trans masculine narrator processes his experiences in going to the gender clinic for trans-specific health care. This narrative account is crosscut with—and in some places seamlessly blends into—scenes of dating, flirting, and engaging in consensual BDSM-power play. Actively resisting writing about 'trans suffering'—"I will never write what they ask me at the clinic. / I will never write it down and send it to print," the narrator asserts with tangible anger (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 47)—the poem nevertheless remains ambivalent. In flowing in and out of specific instances of pain and juxtaposing them with pleasure, the poem meditates on broader questions like: Is it possible to write about the experience of a violence without reproducing it? How and with whom can one share experiences of painful emotion? Under what conditions can pain become pleasurable? And how to begin the labor of taking care of oneself and others?

The poem registers the violence of the clinic as dull and stupid: easy to see through, to anticipate, to pick apart "like a roasted chicken." And yet, as the body can attest to, it works:

Jeg kan skrive, hvordan det føles; / varme i kinderne, hænderne, maven / noget, der trækker fremad i brystet og / en enorm utålmodighed. / Vipper med foden hele vejen hjem i toget / [...] denne her lyst til at

*brænde et eller andet ned, men / det må nok
blive mit eget liv igen, / for jeg har jo brug for
recepten.*

*[I can write how it feels: / A heat in the stom-
ach, the hands, the face, / a forward pulling
feeling in the chest and / this immense im-
patience. / I tap my foot all the way back on
the train, / [...] this desire to burn something
down but / it might have to be my own life
again / because I need the prescription.]
(Holmegaard, 2023, p. 47)*

There is a trans-specificity to this rage; one that a trans subject can impossibly direct at its proper target—an amorphous system of medical, cultural, juridical, and governmental actors—and losing one's composure in front of 'well-meaning' medical professionals only risks blowing one's chances to gain access to treatment.¹⁰

The text's way of laboring through these instances of emotional strain is to go first through the body, its singular sensations and their reverberation within wider webs of power. Here language itself is littered with pitfalls, and the text moves in and through the points of convergence between the lack of language, or its not-being-enough, and the violence of language, its being-too-much. The text examines alternative routes. BDSM-play is introduced as one counterweight (jokes and laughter being another) to the subject's loss of self at the clinic: In the consensual play with power, the loss of self may be inverted, and an agency gained in a different loss of power and control, this one willfully given. A passage rendering the drawn-out humiliation of 'playing the part' of the 'good' trans subject before the clinic personnel, is mirrored formally in the text with line-spacing becoming more frequent so that only one or few words are left before the line breaks. Words become sparser and sharper. Jagged and irregular and demanding attention. The extended lingering on the trans subject's subordination at the clinic then blends almost unnoticeably into a BDSM play scene, where the narrator willingly offers his body to receive pain:

*hvordan vil de have mig / til at tale / hvor /
vil de have mig / til at sidde / dér, på stolen
/ og / hvad står jeg til rådighed for / og /
for hvem / vil / jeg / skal / jeg / være / en /
stakkels lille dreng / Vi gennemspiller / en
scene / Jeg elsker / virkelig / at blive / slået
i / ansigtet / beder / ofte / om det / Min el-
sker siger / at jeg skal / holde munden holde
øjnene / åbne*

*[how do they want me / to speak / where /
do they want me / to sit / there on the chair
/ and / what am I available for / and / for /
whom / will / I / do I have to / be / a / poor
little boy / We are / playing / out / a / scene
/ I / really / love / being hit / in / the face / I
/ often / ask / for it / My lover says / to keep
/ my eyes my mouth / open] (Holmegaard,
2023, p. 49-50)*

In her essay "Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism" (2008), trans historian Susan Stryker eloquently argues for BDSM's capacity for bringing about new configurations of trans existence. In this auto-theoretical account, through a flash-back to the dim depths of a once regularly visited dungeon, whip in hand, she meditates:

*I envision my body as a meeting point, a
node, where external lines of force and so-
cial determination thicken into meat and cir-
culate as movement back into the world. So
much that constitutes me I did not choose,
but, now constituted, I feel myself to be in
a place of agency. I occupy a critical space,
a distance between stimulus and response
created by the complex social pathways con-
verging in the dungeon, in which through my
presence I gain the capacity to choose which
patterns I will repeat, or which new patterns
I might envision and enact. I invent new cho-
reographies of space and time as I dance my
whip across the creature's ass. (p. 42)*

Similarly, in Holmegaard's text we get a glimpse into the ways in which power and positionality

work to condition our given constitution in space and time, offering an embodied perspective of navigating within and at times gesturing beyond their given configuration. In the passage above, the poem formally redirects its focus almost seamlessly from one constellation of power to another in one uninterrupted stream of words; across the page a different whip does its dance.

But the poem also meditates more explicitly on shifting attention away from being restrained to telling tales of suffering. It would much rather attend to pleasure, rather than write about the clinic, yet seemingly, almost performatively 'gives in':

Klinikken, et powerplay jeg aldrig vil genopføre. / Bliver ved med at tænke på de der små plastikkrus / en umådeligt usexet beholder, giftig, uduelig og uholdbar, / jo, jeg kan skrive et spørgsmål, de stillede mig: Vil du have noget vand? / Fuck medlidenhed.

[The clinic, a powerplay I have no interest reviving. / Keep thinking of these small plastic cups / a tremendously unsexy container, poisonous, useless and untenable, / yes, I can write one question down, that they asked me: would you like some water? / Fuck pity.] (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 49)

The narrator seems to be caught in a trap of representational restrictions: On the one hand, not wanting to keep reproducing tales of trans suffering, and on the other, acknowledging the need for documenting trans existence, still haunted by historical erasure, still lacking the words for sharing our experience.¹¹ How to tell and not tell at the same time? In refusing to narrate humiliating experiences at the gender clinic, yet continuously edging on this very refusal, Holmegaard also refuses to abide by a particular script of suffering, one that has come to be tacitly expected of trans people in need of trans-specific health care.¹²

Another complex and somewhat thorny element at play in the author's ambivalent withholding of poetic images of trans suffering relates to the intense stratification of the category of transness and the narrator's position within wider structures

of power. Because—and this relates to Hil Malatino's "right to feel bad"-line of argument, only from the opposite affective end—there are also, importantly, contexts and moments where trans people are *not* suffering. After all, everything indicates that the text's narrator is a young adult, a white, able-bodied, trans man living in a country with state-secured trans-specific health care, a caring and understanding community of friends and lovers around to support him, and generous amounts of free time for bathing and connecting with others. *I am not arguing whether this is an easy or difficult position to inhabit.* However, I do want to point to the narrator's inhabiting, from a structural perspective, a new and less hostile relation between disadvantage and privilege, something the text demonstrates an awareness of (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 41). This is, of course, a difficult discussion, especially within the parameters of trans and queer studies where high levels of suffering are associated with 'outsiderhood' and thus 'radical' political potential (Amin, 2017). When painful affect is presented in *Havet i munden*, rather than taking center stage, these feelings are "held" within the text as affective conditions one may float in and—crucially—out of again (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 47). The narrator experiences instances of systemic violence that are in moments *analogous with* but, importantly, *not the same as* what may be experienced by those incarcerated or waiting indefinitely in asylum centers.

Er begyndt at tænke på fængsler på grund af de meget lange køer, jeg står i. / Systemerne, klinikkerne, sluger min tid, vores tid, / skødesløst og i store portioner / Det er ikke på grund af noget, vi har gjort.

[I'm thinking of life in captivity because of all these very long queues, I'm in. / A system is spending my time, our time, recklessly, in big chunks, / it is not because of something we've done.] (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 47)

I read these points of convergence as crucial points of alliance among those in positions of disadvantage in relation to hegemonic power (See

Cohen, 1997). In part, the strategic refusal to narrate trans pain and humiliation is a way of forwarding a more capacious understanding of what trans life may look and feel like in moments unhinged from its co-constitution with misery.

Finally, the ambivalent resistance to narrating trans-specific pain also signals a way of working through complex states of absence of feeling entirely. Dysphoria—the trans-specific state of not feeling at home in the gender one has been assigned at birth—is mentioned only once in the entire book (p. 42). Here, the narrator's account of dysphoria indicates not only an individual body's take on handling difficult emotion, an 'internal' condition designated as 'personal' or 'private', but poses it in direct relation to an external element: "Har ofte sagt, at jeg ikke var særlig dysforisk / men det var bare den eneste følelse, jeg hele tiden havde / Ligesom man ikke kan se luften [I often said I wasn't that dysphoric / but it was just the only feeling I had all the time / Like you can't see the air]" (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 42). The air here suddenly appears suffocating, like an inescapable ambiance. The contrast—from minimal feeling to the *only* feeling—produced by the affective delay serves to underscore the intensity harbored in this state of numbness.¹³ As if frozen in time and space, the poem lends us a snapshot of the collision between the void of unfeeling and the sense of complete absorption leaving it unresolved. But "the air" is important here. Rather than placing the dysphoria solely within the suffering trans subject, here it is mirrored by an outside force. The subjective experiences of dysphoria are, as Kadji Amin argues, deeply interwoven with external factors—access to health care, cultural discourse, social position. Once gender dysphoria becomes expected and required of trans people—as the ultimate "proof" of our transness—it is inserted in the perpetuating circuits of negative trans affect forming a seemingly inescapable loop of trans misery (Amin, 2022). In this way, trans people are—through socially identifying as such—"onto-etio-logically soldered to negative affect." (Amin, 2022, p. 33). It is this very co-constitution with misery that Holmegaard's narrative pushes back against.

This is no small thing to be up against. Another way of conceptualizing the current impasse in the contemporary configuration of trans possibility and livability also latches on to the evocative poetic imagery of air. In *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (2021), abolitionist trans and queer theorist Eric A. Stanley suggests thinking about the structuring conditions of trans/queer existence in the present moment—one they describe as deeply marked by the interlacings of gendered and racialized violence and its stratification—through the vocabulary of atmospheres. Following Franz Fanon, Stanley provides a way of thinking anti-trans/queer violence as an enveloping totality:

For Fanon, atmospheres summon the plastic totality of colonization. Rather than an event, or an era of imperial expansion that has a beginning and end, for him, and for us now, atmospheres describe not simply the assemblages of gendered and racialized force and their contestation but the thick hang of fog that allows us to know little else. (p. 16)

Holmegaard's subtle and intimate poetry and Stanley's sweeping analysis of modernity might at first glance have little in common, yet Holmegaard's text also grapples with the atmospheric, enveloping background hum of violence, albeit in a considerably less forceful register than Stanley's horrifying archive of trans/queer death demands. Holmegaard's narrator breathes the same air.

Skifter trøje / til en der er alt for stram / og tager ud for at mødes med en / jeg lige har mødt

Og så er det, som når nogen taber et glas / eller kaster det? / At blive trukket tilbage / hårdt og pludseligt som med et reb

Jeg når ikke at forstå / om det er mig eller den, jeg er på baren med / de taler om / spørger til

*de griner / de taler norsk / vi kender dem
ikke*

*de har væddet, siger de / vi har en
konkurrans*

*[Change / into a sweater that is way too tight
/ and go out to meet someone / I just met*

*And then it's as if someone drops a glass /
or throws it? / Being pulled back / hard and
suddenly like with a rope*

*I don't have time to understand / if it is me or
the one I'm at the bar with / they are talking
about / asking about*

*they are laughing / they are speaking Norwe-
gian / we don't know them*

*they have a bet going, they say / vi har en
konkurrans [we have a competition]]*

(Holmegaard, 2023, p. 28)

As if performing an optical illusion in the form of a poetic narrative, *Havet i munden* may overall read as a narrative of trans pleasure. Yet, the downplaying of pain and difficulty is not, as I have argued, a way of sidestepping dysphoria, transphobia, and other sources of trans misery—they are after all right there in the text. Rather, the narrator's stated desire—in all its ambivalence—of narrating pleasure rather than hurt works as a tentative way of confronting the long-standing co-constitution with misery; not looking away from difficulty and *simultaneously* allowing for different trans narratives to emerge.

Tuning in

Tuning in and being present in the plethora of affective and sensory impressions coagulating in a singular experience of trans embodiment is at the heart of *Havet i munden*. In the following, I will illustrate how the poetic space created by Holmegaard

carefully and attentively carves out space for trans existence in the world, a place to be present, through a poetics resonant with the method of affective attunement described by Hil Malatino as “a heightened, though not necessarily conscious, awareness to the affective dimensions of trans living” (Malatino, 2022, p. 4). Malatino's theoretical account is directed specifically at making space for negative trans affect and intentionally naming and categorizing a selection of affects found to pertain especially to the specificity of trans experience—numbness, disorientation, envy, rage, burn-out—as *trans* affects, and part of a trans affective commons. Holmegaard's poetics, in contrast, is oriented primarily toward pleasurable sensation, shifting between the trans-specificity of sensations emerging from a subjective experience of taking testosterone and sensations available to trans and non-trans individuals alike—the feeling of water and wind on skin, touching and being touched. As opposed to classifying encountered affects as trans, Holmegaard's poetry rather shies away from deliberately naming experience as necessarily trans at all, leaving it up to the reader to decipher (or not). For example, placed in the long poem “No face, no match”, amid what resembles an uninterrupted stream of thought ranging meditations on prisons, tenderness, belonging, and the function of writing, there is also this: Det er morgen nu, / jeg sidder ved skrivebordet og har glemt at tage en trøje på. / Det er rigtigt, jeg har glemt det [It is morning now / I am sitting at my desk, I forgot to put a shirt on. / It's true, I forgot] (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 48). This at first glance perhaps trivial and inconspicuous-seeming scene hides powerful trans affects in plain sight. The new and downy transmasculine experience of entering the longed-for, luxurious realm only afforded those with breastless torsos—actually *forgetting* to cover one's upper body—even takes the narrator by surprise. The quiet onset of extraordinary glee following the moment of noticing is evidenced by the repetition of “It's true, . . .” It's almost as if the narrator is having one of those moments where you have to pinch yourself in the arm to know what you experience is real: “It's true, . . .”. The narrator insists on sitting with it, on taking it in, on being present.

In an earlier work, *LOOK* (2020), Luka Holmegaard writes about a differently difficult time:

The feeling of being far away from my own surface, of not being able to notice anything, just looking at the world and instantly forgetting it again, that is what the stress illness consists of. [...] The trouble is everything to do with the surface. No impressions can adhere, no expressions are coming out right. I cannot 1: make myself comprehensible. 2: feel anything. The boundary between myself and the world has gotten infected. (Holmegaard, 2020, p. 38, my translation)

Even though the passage does not revolve around trans experience but a work-related burnout,¹⁴ there is a trans-specificity to be found in this state of disconnect from the world at large. “[A]s trans subjects in this transphobic world, we are encouraged and forced into a position of not being present. We are dissociated from our bodies, our loved ones, and our general environment,” attests trans scholar Atalia Israeli-Nevo (2017, p. 38). Seen in this context, Holmegaard’s restrained, hyper-present writing that insists on being to the point about felt bodily sensations can be read as a strategy for connecting, holding on, staying with the body’s surroundings, attuned and in the moment: textually weaving trans existence into the world, into existence. Despite their different approaches and orientations towards ‘opposing’ affective ends, both Malatino’s and Holmegaard’s attunement efforts are ultimately intent on providing more richness and complexity to trans narratives, countering the abounding representational violence, and making more room for trans people to simply ‘be’ in the world.

As opposed to the hyper-polarized affective sphere of trans representation in the contemporary discursive field sketched out above, where trans lives are made to be either traumatized and suffering or euphorically triumphant after finally eclipsing such heavy turbulence, Holmegaard’s subtle poetic approach clearly troubles this polarization of trans affect, as already evidenced in its zigzagging and fluctuating movements through

painful emotions and their relief in pleasure, effectively collapsing their distinction. In *Havet i munden*, there are glimpses of affective states where there is essentially no clear distinction to be made between the painful and the pleasurable, but rather, simply, sensations to be felt. Indeed, *Havet i munden* pushes the boundaries of the very notion of ‘trans affect’ by imagining a (queer) horizon of trans existence—impossibly—freed from the narrative constraints pertaining to the very category of ‘trans’.¹⁵ To further illustrate this, I turn to the poetic image giving the book its title, *Havet i munden*, or, *the ocean in your mouth*.

This titular image summons multiple contrasts: at once elusive, yet irreducibly tangible, it titillates and overwhelms at the same time. The point of contact between the wet fleshiness of an intimate inner world and the vast seemingly boundless exterior comes to the fore. In an almost surprising twist in this poetic image, the mouth and the ocean switch positions so that the ocean turns small and interior, the mouth assuming the position of the absorbing exterior—how huge it must become to be able to hold within it the entire ocean! Immense pathos is conjured as the weighty aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime—think of painters like Monet attempting to capture the fleeting splendor of the ocean on canvas—through the Western philosophical canon. Through the poetic image of the ocean, Holmegaard latches on to the power lent by this tradition in order to illuminate a different fleeting splendor: that of the trans body in transition. And then, for another twist, about half-way into the book, we encounter the image again:

Fylder munden med vand fra et glas / Vipper hovedet frem og tilbage

Det føles virkelig som havet / i munden

Samme kølige tyngde / som at røre ved en bevægelse

[Fill the mouth with water from a glass / Tilt the head back and forth

It really feels like the ocean / in your mouth

*Same cool heaviness / like touching a
movement] (Holmegaard, 2023, p. 43, my
translation)*

So grand and awe-inspiring at first, this image of the all-consuming ocean, tamed, mastered, and consumed by a human mouth. And how in fact small and silly it turns out, this act of tilting one's head back and forth with one's mouth filled with water. Through this intimately embodied perspective there is a gesture toward something boundless entirely. Then, however, we are lead right back down to earth again. A place that also exists.

Conclusion

Luka Holmegaard's poetry collection *Havet i munden* emerges from within the narrative terms set by a cultural moment of—for better and for worse—increased trans visibility. High strung political debates over basic trans rights are commonplace in many national contexts; institutionalized cis-centrism, intense social stigmatization and the dissociating effects of gender dysphoria together form a pervasive association of transness with negative affect. In this context, accounts of 'trans joy,' in all their sincerity, wind up bound in the polarizing affective discourses on transness limiting trans imaginability beyond the existing trajectories. The affective constraints on trans self-narration are powerful.

As I have demonstrated throughout this article, Holmegaard's poetic account of a trans

masculine experience of taking testosterone, bathing, and hanging out in everyday scenarios shifts the gears on the established affective narratives on transness. In focusing on subtle bodily delights, crosscutting pleasure and pain, and presenting poetic images both grand and quotidian, it offers new vocabularies for narrating trans experience—but also rails against the limitations of 'trans,' in instances of (impossibly) dreaming of leaving behind the constraints of marked identity altogether. As such, it puts forth a vision of transness, ever so indistinctly defined, yet, as something other than what the seemingly inescapable ambiance of trans misery has to offer. Following this lead, what might this sort of ambivalently affirmative stance have to offer a trans political imaginary? Perhaps we may further elaborate the multiple ways in which trans life animates our common world—both within and beyond trans(-for-trans) relationality: fostering openness for change; a slow staying with sensations; affective attunement; and more.

Havet i munden is not invested in furthering a linear progress narrative of trans experience. Nor does it subscribe to a sensationally triumphant account of trans pleasure as a way of dispelling subjective experiences of distress. Rather, in insisting on slowing things down and staying with the existing, sometimes elusive, sometimes contradictory, affects circulating around trans experience, it offers a glimpse into what actual trans life—in one of its richly varied iterations—might look and feel like. And that, in and of itself, is an infinitely valuable contribution in a current state of politically charged and intensely polarized trans discourses.

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Notes

- ¹ English translations of parts I and III generously provided by the author. Unless indicated otherwise, this is the translation I use throughout the article.
- ² On queer reading methods and the 'descriptive' mode, see: Jenny Björklund and Ann-Sofie Lönngrén, "Now You See It, Now You Don't: Queer Reading Strategies, Swedish Literature, and Historical (In)visibility" in *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 92, nr. 2, summer 2020.
- ³ Tellingly, the above quoted passage is highlighted in a cis-gendered critic's reception of the work as 'non-inclusive', as he was obliged to seek out information outside of the book (Bakkendrup 2023).
- ⁴ For more on the concept of t4t, see the special issue of *TSQ* edited by Cameron Awkward-Rich and Hil Malatino *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9 (1), February 1, 2022.
- ⁵ For more on the literary strategies of new Danish trans literature, see Mons Bissenbakker: "Transkønnethed som tema og æstetisk form" i Camilla Schwartz, Anne-Marie Mai, Karen Hvidtfeldt og Anne Scott Sørensen (red.): *Queering Nordisk Kvindelitteraturhistorie*, Syddansk Universitetsforlag 2024. (Forthcoming)
- ⁶ An in-depth consideration of this state-of-the-field discussion lies outside the scope of this article, but will be unfolded elsewhere in my forthcoming PhD dissertation on contemporary trans-queer cultural production. (See Amin, 2023; Aizura et al., 2020 and Chu and Drager, 2019).
- ⁷ See for instance the editors' introductory discussions on the role of trans and genderqueer poetics in *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (Tolbert and Peterson, 2013).
- ⁸ This affective polarization is an intensifying engine in the ongoing gendered "culture wars" most vividly present in a U.S. public sphere. Yet the tendency can also be seen in Danish media. For an example of a fear driven opinion of trans people being represented as too happy, thus influencing potential trans youth, see Toft, 2023. For the organization LGBT+ Denmark's response to the opinion piece, see: LGBT+ Danmark, 2023.
- ⁹ I echo Jennifer Doyle in an effort to not reduce an array of complex emotional states by assigning them the 'simpler' label of 'negative' affect—since Holmegaard's writing precisely works to evade such simplifications. See Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me*, 2013.
- ¹⁰ Also featuring a Danish translation of Susan Stryker's canonical essay on transgender rage, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix" (1994) a lucid auto-poetic account of the specificities of the rage stemming from encounters with the Danish gender clinic, see Gry Stokkendal Dalgas, *At performe transkønnet vrede*, Forlaget Amulet, 2022. On the emergence and implications

of 'well-meaning concern' in Danish trans discourse, see Mons Bissenbakker and Tobias Raun, "Transbekymringens cisnormative økonomi. Nye grænser for køn i diskurser om behandling af trans børn", *Lambda Nordica* 1/2023.

¹¹ For a conceptualization of this trap of representational restrictions and the politics of contemporary trans visibility, see *Tourmaline et al.*, 2017.

¹² See Friborg, 2023.

¹³ On queer delays in trans temporalities, see Israeli-Nevo, 2017.

¹⁴ Burnout in fact is one of the "side affects" explored and explicitly analyzed within a trans affective framework in Malatino, 2022.

¹⁵ For a conceptualization of queerness as an ever-unattainable horizon, see Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Duke University Press, 2009.