

# **Growing Whiskers & Tattooing Skin: Experiences and Realizations of Aging as Queer Extranthropes**

*Page Shepard 11/08/2021*

“Extranthrope” isn’t a word that any of us typically apply to ourselves, but it’s a fairly accurate one, existing to refer to an individual in a system who is entirely nonhuman. We’re in the unique scenario where we’ve been nonhuman our entire lives, before we ever realized there were labels we could utilize to easier translate our experiences and before we’d ever met anyone else in similar situations.

Growing older, for us, is more complicated than it might otherwise be because of our dual nature. Existing both in the nonphysical mindscape, as ourselves, and in the “outer world” in a human body has had an interesting affect of changes both internal and external slowly occurring as we grow older.

Laugh lines appearing on the human face, while a new set of horns starts to show and spiral on a dragon’s head. Tattoos slowly crowding around our body’s skin, while whiskers grow in so slowly as to be unnoticed until one day when they’re seen in the reflection of a pool. It’s an existence flavored by two separate, but distinct and unstoppable changes and appearances.

Growing up in the human body as a child going through growth spurts and suffering through hormones largely isn’t the type of growth we’re referencing in this piece, albeit it is relevant to mention. Though those specific changes have strongly affected each of us in different ways, they’ve largely been traumatic and disjointed, like looking into a fun-house mirror and being told that that’s the real you. The literal act of going through teendom, and then into adulthood, was a time marked by a relationship with our body molded from pain, suffering, and dysphoria. Nothing was gained from this period, so I do not refer to these emotions and experiences as growing pains: rather, the growing pains our body has experienced has been the sting of a tattoo needle, the snip of scissors against hair, and the aching of arms covered in muscles and burns alike. It is not puberty that made our body “ours,” but rather, it was the queer-nonhuman

reclamation of it in our adulthood that has softened it into being a home, rather than a prison.

I say queer-nonhuman only for the fact that I know simply saying “queer” would spark fury and cause confusion, though I do believe our identities on their deepest levels to fit into it; our genders, sexualities, and species identity are so far removed from the “normal” and the “standard” within the United States as to not only have long-reaching ill effects on us because of the society around us, but also to have the secondary effect of sequestering us off into otherwise untouchable and unknowable cultures, communities, and experiences. The longer we live, the more we realize exactly how interconnected and intertwined everything is about how we understand ourselves and how that affects the way we interact with others.

Noel’s species is “dragon,” Noel’s sex and gender is “intersex female-presenting dragon,” Noel presents to her friends, lovers, coworkers, and acquaintances both digitally and in real life as “a dragon,” and surely it would not be unreasonable to view her sense of self as the form of queer “which actively disrupts normativity, transgresses the boundaries of propriety, and interferes with the status quo in closed social and sexual systems” (pg. 159 of “The Werewolf as Queer, the Queer as Werewolf, and Queer Werewolves” by Phillip A. Bernhardt-House from *Queering the Non Human*). And much in the same way her identities, affected by her nonhumanity as they uniquely are, are queer, then so isn’t all of ours?

And surely this multi-level existence is nothing if not a disruption of normalcy, if by mere virtue of it happening offstage it inadvertently morally enrages and entrenches entire battalions of “sys-medicalists” and “system exclusionists.” It sometimes feels as though our fight for personhood in the eyes of others is a never-ending battle that drags on every step of the way: from the arguments of pronouns and not passing and the impossibility of nonbinary gender identities from sysmeds, to the casual biphobia rampant in many spaces, to the anti-kink rhetoric sweeping the internet and younger LGBT spaces, from the plural communities hungry for blood, to the social systems in our everyday life and society which enable us to be fired or Baker Acted just by virtue of existing as multiple nonhumans in a human body. The list goes on and on. A part of me wonders that if the world hadn’t been so intent on ripping the metaphorical meat from

our bones to downplay us into a more standard existence, then if we might have not had such a difficult adolescence: but at the same time, these attitudes have only slightly shifted into adulthood, so such a theoretical past is likely impossible to imagine while still retaining the possibility of having grown into some semblance of the “myself” or “ourselves” we know now. It’s not inaccurate to say we were baptized in trauma, like so many others of our in-between generations segment.

While we were forced to grow up quickly as children in the sinking state filled with the corpses of the people who cared about it most, trampled underfoot by snapshot-seeking tourists and snowbirds drunk off 3pm unlimited margarita beach deals, we hadn’t yet become ourselves. We hadn’t settled into our skin, with sets of scales to match. At that point, we were just desperately holding on and being tossed from event to horrifying event, one after another.

The act of making this body “ours” was, at first, a grueling one. We weren’t sure how to do, laden with our baggage both literal and metaphorical: how do you start to recognize yourself out of the stranger in the mirror? It’s not a simple question to answer.

The initial answer ended up being the small things: clothing. Jewelry. Shoes. Slowly replacing our wardrobe, filled with clothing that we didn’t love at best and hated at worst, was the first step. Or rather, realizing that wearing clothing we enjoyed both being in and being seen in was something we could do, was the first step. Colorful button-ups, warm jeans, so many baseball hats. A theta-delta necklace, a wolf ring.

From there, it become tiny actions. The ability to pick up and read a newspaper, and then to have a favorite newspaper. Figuring out the kind of coffee we each liked, or the kind of tea we liked. Picking out the comfiest spot on the couch at open-mic nights, perched next to and laughing alongside two strangers. Noel’s midnight beach bike rides; Drago’s after-party walks; Wyvern’s occasional class peek-in; my bonfires.

It continued into having friends who would recognize us not for who they thought we were, but who we actually were, plurality and nonhumanity and queerness all in one. Each recognizing and acknowledging us as a collection of individuals, rather

than as someone they could pretend was a “normal” “singlet.” Of being not only accepted, but well-liked and well-loved for our differences and quirks.

And then it turned into more literally making our body ours: first, with a haircut. With painted (or not) nails, with a binder, with our permanent “fox socks” of leg hair. And then with tattoos and planned tattoos, of literally marking the body as our own, as an extension of something far greater than it first appeared. Over time, we grew more and more familiar, and more and more fond of these intentional choices and the appearance we found more fitting to each person.

It’s culminated in the realizations of who we each, individually, want to be—sometimes with the added bonus of *why* we want to be, though we’ve also realized that that’s not always necessary, either. And the beauty of the human body we all share is that we can use it as a collaborative canvas, shaping it into something that’s representative of all of us and of the history we’ve carved out for ourselves in the eroding cliffside of humanity that we’re a part of. In aging, we’re just seeing more and more become added to it over time, based largely on the choices we make.

Within the mindscape, we’re separate. We can look each other in the eyes, and argue, and laugh, and chat in equal measure. And there, too, we age and our bodies change. Noel’s been teasing my new whiskers, claiming that I’m finally growing that “beard” I’ve always wanted the body to have—and Drago’s been, in turn, poking fun at the accumulation of scars she’s gotten over the years, announcing that she “looks like some drunk asshole tried to play tic-tac-toe on her scales while she was still moving.” I’ve told Drago that those are bold words coming from someone who’s beauty sleep consists of 23 out of 24 hours a day.

In some ways it’s strange, but in so many more it’s oddly comforting. It’s another reminder that we’re here, alive, still changing and growing even as adults. When we were younger, it was hard to conceptualize such happening as adulthood seemed, to us, a static state of being. Our trauma also made us doubt we would ever even reach it, either mentally or physically. But adulthood isn’t some sort of single point where you just “stop.” It’s a place where you become (depending on your situation) less bound by the shackles that previously held you back from realizing more about the world around you, and from having larger sets of experiences. It’s a no-holds-barred sense of freedom,

where you can step outside of boundaries you didn't even realize existed until you took your blinders off and looked around you.

We've seen some adult nonhumans stagnate, wallowing in simultaneously their own bitterness and self-reinforced sense of superiority. It's not the norm by any means, but it certainly can't be denied, either: people who bemoan how much better it was in their day, and how people have lost the true meaning of therianthropy/otherkinity/etc., and how lonely they are because no one will listen to them gatekeep and berate others younger than them. Looking at those people, we struggle to understand how they ended up that way. One of the realizations of traversing through adulthood is the knowledge and understanding that people aren't angry and static like that because they "grew into it," nor because becoming a crotchety, bitter person is some sort of magical side-effect of living a long life—one way or another, people who have attitudes like that are laying and complaining in a grave of their own making. Choices in life may not always be our own to make, but we are always free to decide who we are in life in the ways that count. If someone stops changing and growing as a person, then that's an active personal choice—not reflective of a process within adulthood.

Life in this human body is too short for us to ever justify to ourselves behavior and perspectives where we simply stop taking in new information, new experiences, and re-discovering, re-defining, and re-perfecting ourselves. We don't ever want to stop changing, both physically and in the mindscape. We don't want to become trapped in an angry, miserable whirlpool of our own creation, too stuck up our own asses to look outside and enjoy what the world has to offer, or to fight for what we want to change. We have a finite number of birthdays, of first winter snows, and of days spent lounging around bantering with friends and partners left. We have to make them count for something, even if only to ourselves. After all, we're the most important people in our lives.