



MASC

MANDATE

CLAIRE JENSEN



Photo by Zoe Strothkamp

Masculinity is something to hold, to caress, and to care for ever so gently lest you let it take control over you and become that which you learned to fear. I grew into my masculinity gently at first then at full force, never stopping to take time to take pleasure in who I was becoming. From the multitude of masculinities around me, I absorbed the parts I thought I didn't have: a hard exterior, a tendency to hide what I was feeling, the ability to ignore my needs in favor of others', and rejected the parts of myself which I thought I did not need anymore: a soft and gentle attitude toward myself, time for inner reflection, and a release of that which I had bottled up for years, in desperation to achieve the masculinity I thought I lacked.

After a few years of pretending, I am slowly learning that there is no ultimate masculinity that I must strive to recreate. My masculinity is

my own, no matter how many times I am misgendered, no matter how many people I scare in the women's restroom, and no matter how many times I am told that I'm losing touch with who I'm supposed to be.

In this project, I showcase the pleasure that masculine, androgynous, and genderqueer women, nonbinary, and transmasculine people experience simply from being themselves. I take inspiration from the first presentation of self-defined masculinity that I saw: *Original Plumbing*. I draw from the raw and exposing interrogative style of *The Aggressives* and present *Masc Mandate*.

Please remove your mask and enjoy.

Love,

sydney



she/her | *Black, queer, guitar player, writer* | *computer science, English, philosophy* | '25

How does being in an institution like Amherst College affect your ability to experience pleasure?

I'm interested in how you think your masculinity interacts with your emotions. Do you think one shapes the other? What has your journey with emotions been?

I kind of viewed any emotions that would be difficult or painful or something bothering me as being just distractions or generally unhelpful. I didn't really see why I would be indulging them if they weren't helping me do something. So very much it's like sweeping them to the side. I will say that I think that maybe while it wasn't the root, leaning into masculinity definitely amplified that; I think partially because I was like: [...] "I would be kind of silly for being as masculine as I am, or as androgynous as I am and then being upset over something in a way that I felt would be more feminine." Almost like if someone said something that was really upsetting or did something to upset me, my letting them know that that upset me would be the worst thing ever because it would be showing weakness or something like that. Letting people know that I'm not actually as strong or as tough as my exterior is.

It kind of felt like just me for a really long time. And it was very isolating. [...] It's weird because people on campus, I think, are generally receptive to people who are more masc-leaning. And while I do feel like that reception is there, it sometimes doesn't feel genuine. It sometimes feels like it's not genuine interest and friendship but something else. The word in my mind is fetishization. [...] It's uncomfortable. It feels like a detachment from personhood. [...] And I don't think Amherst does a great job of telling people how to manage that, specifically because it's such a PWI in Western Mass.

Is there anything else you want to share that hasn't been touched on?

I feel like there's a particular experience of more masc Black people - especially for people who are AFAB - that is so different than a lot of other groups just because of the hyper-masculinization of Black women. Which has, you know, just rolling impact for so long. It's also contributed to my feeling removed from femininity. [...] And internalizing that, okay, maybe there's something different. Like there's Black girls and there's *girls*.





ayo.

they/them | Black, Nigerian, queer, nonbinary/agender, sometimes lesbian, farmer, tarot reader, artist, spiritual being | interdisciplinary | '24

How do some of your identities connect to the way that you express yourself?

I just like having the freedom to be a different person in every moment and so I think partially, I want to reject labels or reject not even labels but other people's projections of labels onto me. So, in order to reject those labels I don't really stay with a particular look for too long so that I'm not associated with a specific identity.

How do some of these labels and identities you described help you express yourself and limit you?

I feel like it liberates me in the sense that I can do whatever every day but it also limits me in the same way that I feel like I need to keep changing. Part of that is just being able to mix and match like niggas don't know how to mix and match. It's actually foundational basic mathematics with clothes you know but niggas don't know how to do that. Yeah so it liberates me because I get to change but it also limits me because I feel like I have to keep changing.

In what ways does like being outside and being creative outside let you express yourself and/or decompress?

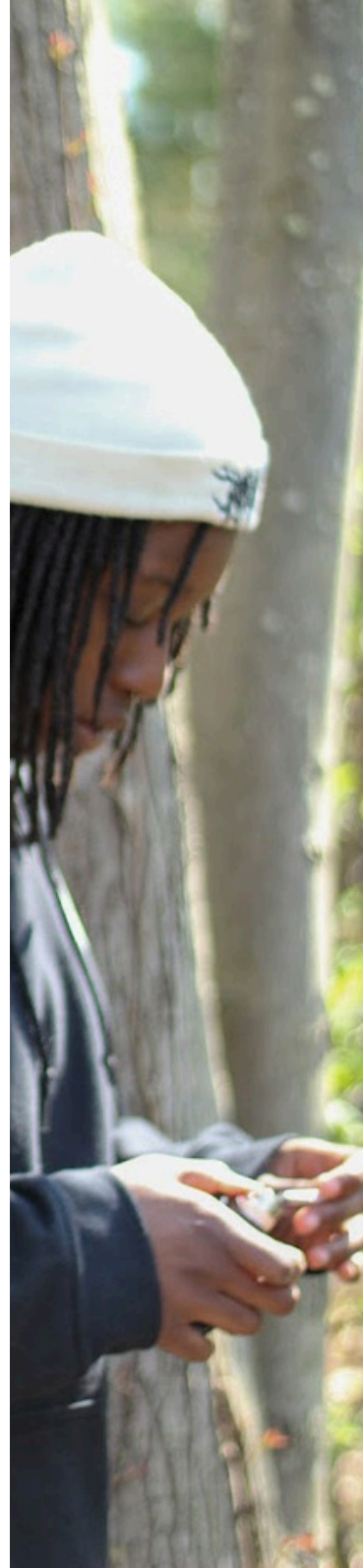
I'm a human being so I'm part of nature and so being outside just reminds me that I am of the Earth like *I'm of the Earth, bro*. I'm fully made of this shit so that's how and it helps me decompress in a way that it reminds me that there's something bigger than myself.

Do you feel more masculine or more feminine when you're outside or can you let go of gender?

Oh yeah I'm definitely a genderless ass bitch in the woods. Farming helps me connect with my masculinity but it also helps me with my femininity, thinking about cultivating a life- it's like a plant life. I think being outside brings both of those things together.

What would your younger self think if they met you now?

Bro if I could meet my younger self I think we would both cry it would just be like: "Wow you did it!" I had all those emotions I had all these visions for who I could be and then I became that and I'm still becoming. I'm fully a baby so I'm actually only gonna get cooler from now on.



JESSYE



#34

she/her | stud, lacrosse goalie, guitar
player | prospective econ | '26

In what ways does lacrosse let you express yourself and/or decompress?

Lacrosse is my biggest stressor, my biggest stress relief at the same time. My mood will sometimes depend on the day. Like if I don't play well, I won't be in the best mood. But if I play well, I'm on cloud nine; that's really important to me. And then, I don't know, there's something inherently masculine about being a goalie. My helmet, my gloves, everything. The way that you play the position; being a lacrosse goalie for women [...] looks almost exactly the same as if you're on the men's side. We wear the same exact equipment, everything.

You said that femininity can be uncomfortable. Can you describe that feeling and why or in what circumstances do you encounter that?

I'm very ingrained in my identity - like as a stud, as a masc lesbian - that sometimes when I dress more feminine or present that way, I feel like it goes against so much of what I built for so long. And, you know, what I built for me personally, but what others have built before me and the other studs, who are older have built before me so that I can go outside and dress the way I do and present the way that I do while being safe. And sometimes when I feel I'm going towards the more feminine side, I feel like I'm betraying them in some way. I feel like I'm reverting back to when I was in the closet and really trying to hide who I was.

Do you think being a lacrosse goalie was an outlet for you or a way for you to tap into your identity on the field and explore?

I think that being a goalie is very isolating. It is very different from being [in an] on-the-field position. You're not really doing the same things. You're in your crease, right? No one else can really go in it besides your defender. [...] It is very isolating. And I think that maybe I chose to be lacrosse goalie because I didn't really get along with the really girly people and the really white girls who were on my team. So I think that's maybe why subconsciously I chose it.

What does it mean to you to be a stud?

I think it's like it's more of an outward presentation of your sexuality. I think it's really the ultimate form of pride in some kind of way, because it's like, [...] you obviously like women. And, you know, for people who like aren't like that, it is kind of easier to hide behind femininity.



Leydn



*they/them | queer, mixed, writer, spiritual,
creative | English | '25*

Describe your style for me. How do you express yourself through clothing, hair, makeup, and body art?

When I lost my hair [...] I realized it allowed me to see a very bare version of myself and choose a new direction so then I leaned more into an androgynous side.

How did cancer in particular and losing your hair contribute to your sense of style?



Any person that shaves their head- it's a pretty badass thing. Any woman that shaves her head it's a very liberating feeling to just touch your very bare head. But since that that wasn't a choice for me, I was kind of preparing for a while thinking that I would lose my hair. And then when that

happened, it definitely felt super liberating, but it wasn't like a normal shaved head- there were just patches of hair. So, it definitely was harder to embrace the notion that it is very liberating because [...] when people like see a bald head on a woman, [...] their first thought is *sickness*. I was always afraid that [...] I was going to be perceived as weak or helpless and I hated that idea so I would always cover my head.

How do spirituality and yoga help you decompress?

It's just bringing me back to the present moment being like: "You know, this is where I'm at right now and this feels comfortable. [...] For now, this is how I want to choose to express myself." And knowing that those identities are not fixed and that in a couple months they they may change completely but all the yoga, going outside, being with friends- it just reminds you of being present in your identities now. Because you can change them whenever and you don't know where you'll be in a few years or a couple months. Just leaning in to that reminds me to lean in to those identities no matter, to not feel restricted by anything right now.

Describe your masculinity; how do femininity and masculinity interact in your life?

In college I was able to [...] move through all these different identities of being feminine, being masculine, being androgynous. I could really solidify those identities when I went home because [...] this is my childhood home. I look in my closet at all my high school prom dresses and stuff like that. [...] Yeah, sure, parts of me are mirrored in my room and that history is still a part of myself but I'm standing here with this new identity.

K

A

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What are things that you perceive yourself as being components your identity that other people might get wrong?

I definitely see that with my family. I've always dressed kind of masc and, if anything, when I transitioned I got comfortable being feminine so even though I felt more masculine; I got top surgery, I've been on [testosterone] for about two years, I enjoy doing more feminine things. I'll wear a dress sometimes and things like that. But I noticed that my family- they don't know how to act when I dress feminine now so it's really weird. Like, this is how you always perceived me but now that I'm actually *being* that way it's a little weird.

In what ways do [your hobbies] let you express yourself and/or decompress?

I was always into art but I never really showed it to anyone and I always kept it to myself growing up because it felt really personal. So now that i'm older, being able to share my art with other people feels like I'm sharing parts of myself and I'm more able to express myself, even if I'm not directly putting things into it that are emotional.

How has your transition affected your ability to share art and share pieces of yourself through art?

I feel like I'm just overall more open; [...] since I'm more comfortable with

myself, I'm more comfortable sharing myself to other people and that comes through my art a lot.

How do you find pleasure in your life in general, and specifically, how do you find pleasure in your masculinity?

I try to live in the moment. [...] If I have something that I'm stressed about or working on- if I'm not doing it right now I try not to think about it. Like, if I'm



playing my video games, I'm playing my video games. And then with my masculinity, I feel like it's the same thing- just leaning into whatever I want. So, if I want to lean into the really hyper-masculine, I do that one day but I don't feel pressured to do that every day it's just kind of how I feel.

What would your younger self think if they met you now?

Oh, they would think I'm so cool. I still look at myself in the mirror every day and I'm like, "Damn this is never how I thought I was gonna look," and it's just awesome.

TAYLOR

Johnson
BUILT



What are some limitations to expressing yourself?

I think I always felt so masculine when I tried to dress feminine. And then now that I am leaning into presenting more masculine, I think now I feel like I look feminine sometimes. [...] And then I think also people's perception of me and people being very vocal, especially because this is such a recent change. Just about how I look and like pronouns - that's been really annoying. And I think on days when I'm more self conscious, it really, really just gets

I didn't really feel a connection to womanhood in general, but especially to Western womanhood. I was like: "This is not how I was raised and are not my values and I don't want to ascribe to it." [...] Native men have long hair and wear earrings and stuff. And I think sometimes I've wanted to lean in that direction. [...] I guess I'm scared to lean into Indigenous masculinity because it's perceived as femininity.

How do femininity and masculinity interact in your life?

I guess masculinity- the way that I move through the world, how the world moves around me in response, is a lot of it.



to me more when people are commenting, they're not complimenting me or insulting me. They just are analyzing me in real time in front of me and letting me know in a way that's making me hyper-aware of my existence and how the world moves around me.

Are there any other ways that being Indigenous has shaped your masculinity?

Thinking about what it means to be a woman - a Yup'ik woman - versus a woman in Western or American culture is very different. A few years ago when I started thinking about my gender identity,

I think I have more confidence now. I think the world treats me differently because of that. I actually wrote something about this:

I've been giving without expecting anything in return and it feels really good. I used to think about everything so transactionally and it tarnished everything I gave and received. Not to attribute everything to being masc, but I feel like I had more of a sense of entitlement when I was femme. I think it's like: "If I'm getting nothing, then what am I giving you this performance for?" So, that feels right. So now I'm not taxing myself in anticipation of other people's payments.

BEA



they/them | Black, Nigerian,
New Yorker, second-gen
immigrant, queer | English |
'26E

When did you start playing music and what was your journey to finding pleasure within music?

Okay, I started playing piano when I was like five. [...] for most of my life, it wasn't something that I was aware that you could use to create. [...] And then senior year of high school, I had always wanted to learn a second instrument and I was like I thought it was going to be saxophone. It ended up being guitar. And it was because my friends taught me how to play guitar. [...] I didn't know anything about theory, I was just used to doing what was put in front of me with guitar. 'Cause I didn't learn by sheet music. I had to learn by ear and by watching people play. And then in doing that, I feel like I'm more creative on guitar because I have to come up with things. And then this semester, I always say that if I combine my guitar creativity with my piano skill, I can like actually be accomplished... Not accomplished, but somewhat decent. But, this semester I started taking lessons and jazz piano is just so much fun because finally I'm able to- I think end of high school is when I started being like, "Oh, I can use music to create," once I was playing with my friends.

Can you describe your sense of your own masculinity and how do femininity and masculinity interact in your life?

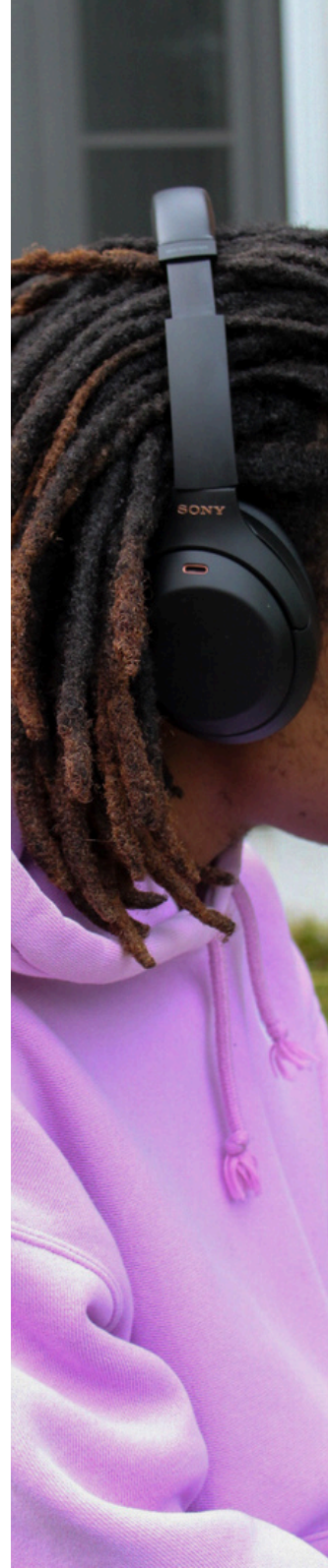
The thing is, I don't really perceive myself as a masc person. I think of myself as just being Bea. [...] I feel like that's something that people see for me, but I don't see for myself. I have my own style. [...] Especially being nonbinary, *gender's stupid*, it's just who Bea is. [...] I guess if you were to look at me, you'd put me into that label. And I see that. I think masculinity is a broad concept. [...] For me, I see myself as just being myself.

How do you find pleasure in your masculinity?

I like confusing people. When I was a kid, even now, [...] people never knew what gender I was. People look at you, and then they take the double take, and they're like, "What are you?"

Where do you find barriers to experiencing pleasure?

Sometimes it's funny when people can't figure out who you are. But sometimes it's scary, because someone might see you and attack you because they can't put you into whatever category they want to put you into. Sometimes when I go out at home, I feel like I have to dress extra feminine or, make sure people can tell if I'm a boy or a girl so that I won't get unnecessary attention.



SPENCER



Spencer Williams' story is not one of sadness or pity. Rather, it is one of finding moments of joy during immense pain, being a strong advocate for oneself and those he loved, and holding masculinity so, so gently.

For the last two years of his life, Spencer lived with a grade 3 anaplastic ependymoma - one of the deadliest forms of brain cancer. His initial diagnosis came after weeks of experiencing gut-wrenching symptoms and being treated with apathy by those who were meant to support him. Despite a lack of care and trust in his symptoms, Spencer advocated for

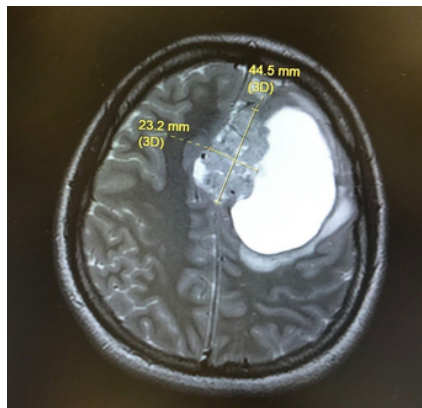
“DURING A BURIAL IS WHEN THE FLOWERS COME.”

himself as he was shrugged off and assumed to not speak English and be mentally slow because he was Asian. He endured trial treatments and called for education and donations to brain cancer research for other ependymoma patients.

Spencer's soft and strong sense of masculinity permeated boundaries and let him create his own experience out of his queer and trans identities. He was excited to return to Amherst during his second year to study transgender history and culture and contextualize his identities in those of his predecessors.

I'm not sure that he ever realized this but Spencer helped me become more comfortable with my own masculinity. I

grew into my own masculinity drawing inspiration from masculine people in my life (men) from whom I learned that it was necessary to present a hard exterior to hide



Spencer's first brain tumor.
Photo from Spencer Williams.

a presumably soft interior. Through his writing and outward self-expression, Spencer taught me the importance of holding my masculinity close to my heart and that, no matter how much pain I might be in, there is still opportunity to display emotional vulnerability and share with everyone the joys of life no matter how small they seem.



Spencer and a friend on Halloween.
Photo from Spencer Williams.



For mascs near and far, made by Claire Jensen
Photo by Sofia Hincapie-Rodrigo