Becoming a Black Man

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Louis Mitchell expected a lot of change when he began taking injections of hormones eight years ago to transition from a female body to a male one. He anticipated that he’d grow a beard, which he eventually did and enjoys now. He knew his voice would deepen and that his relationship with his partner, family and friends would change in subtle and, he hoped, good ways, all of which happened.

What he had not counted on was changing the way he drove.

Within months of starting male hormones, I got pulled over 300 percent more than I had in the previous 23 years of driving, almost immediately. It was astounding, says Mitchell, who is Black and transitioned while living in the San Francisco area and now resides in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Targeted for driving while Black was not new to Mitchell, who is 46 years old. For example, a few years before transitioning, he had been questioned by a cop for simply sitting in his own car late at night. But he didn’t really sweat me too much once he came up to the car and divined that I was female, Mitchell recalls.

Now in a Black male body, however, Mitchell has been pulled aside for small infractions. When he and his wife moved from California to the East Coast, Mitchell refused to let her drive on the cross-country trip. She drives too fast he says, chuckling and adding, I didn’t want to get pulled over. It took me a little bit longer [to drive cross country] cause I had to drive like a Black man. I can’t be going 90 miles an hour down the highway. If I’m going 56, I need to be concerned.

As more people of color transition, Mitchell’s experience is becoming an increasingly common one.

The transgender community has experienced a boom in visibility in the last decade. Some of this has come about through popular culture, including the acclaimed 1999 film Boys Don’t Cry and more recently with Mike Penner, the Los Angeles Times sports columnist who came out as transgender and is now known as Christine. In recent years, there’s also been a growing number of memoirs, including The Testosterone Files by the Chicano and American-Indian poet Max Valerio, as well as more academic books on the subject, like The Transgender Studies Reader.

Just as key has been the work of transgender people themselves, who have transitioned due to the more widespread availability of hormones and surgeries. Rather than passing as heterosexual, an increasing number of them in the last decade have identified as trans and begun support, advocacy and legal-rights groups. The widespread use of the Internet and the new online social networks are also helping to break the isolation that trans people often feel in their own communities.

In Asia, Latin America and Africa, the place of transgender people is likewise changing. While trans women in many cultures have been marginally accepted, they have been largely confined to traditionally feminine roles as caretakers -- a situation that is changing now in places like Ixhuatan, Mexico, where Amaranta Gomex, a muxe, or trans woman, ran for political office in 2003. In some countries, trans activists are going to court and winning key changes in public policies. In Brazil, a court ruled in August 2007 that sexual-reassignment surgery is covered by the constitution as a medical right.

While it’s extremely difficult to say how many people identify as transgender, the National Center for Transgender Equality has estimated that about three million people are transgender today in the United States. It’s hard to say how many of those are people of color, but one online group for Black trans people called Transsistahs-Transbrothas has about 300 members, and another group specifically for Latino trans men has 98 members.

In the last four years, there’s also been an increase in the number of people seeking top surgeries, or removal of their breasts, according to Michael Brownstein, a well-known doctor specializing in gender surgeries in San Francisco. He does about four to six top surgeries a week, and he notes that while 30 years
ago, trans people would come to his office alone, they are now arriving with partners, siblings and friends for moral support.

These social and political changes have ushered in a time when it is increasingly acceptable for men and women to alter their physical bodies to match their gender identity. Left largely unexamined, however, has been the issue of racism and how trans men and women experience it. Trans people of color are finding that they have an extremely different relationship to gender transition than white people. London Dexter Ward, an LAPD cop who transitioned in 2004, sums it up this way: a white person who transitions to a male body just became a man. By contrast, he says, “I became a Black man. I became the enemy.

In short, people of color know that racism works differently for men and women, and transgender people like Mitchell and Ward are getting to experience this from both sides of the gender equation.

Louis Mitchell is the type of man who immediately puts people at ease as he advises them about how cheap the housing is in Massachusetts. He calls himself a big Black man (he’s 5 feet 9 inches tall and 250 pounds). In 2006, after much soul searching, he began attending divinity school. Talking to Mitchell, it’s easy to imagine him in a pulpit. He is simultaneously warmhearted and sure of himself. He could sell a two-bedroom condo as easily as convincing a congregation to be honest with God.

Growing up in West Covina in Southern California, Mitchell attended church with his mother and devoured history books. At the age of 3 or 4, he knew that he was a boy, regardless of having been born into a girl’s body. He also believed that God created miracles. So he prayed that he would grow into a boy’s body when he reached puberty. That didn’t happen, much to his surprise.

Near the end of 1970, when Mitchell was 18 years old, he hitchhiked with a friend to Corpus Christi, Texas, where the legal drinking age was lower than in California. There, he met drag queens, and he felt hopeful for the first time. If the queens could be women, his thinking went, then there might be options for him to live as a man.

At the time, a Black transsexual woman had already been the first person to undergo sex reassignment surgery at John Hopkins University, according to Joanne Meyerowitz’s classic book How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States. Avon Wilson’s transition in 1966 at John Hopkins marked a turning point for the transsexual community. It was the first time a medical clinic in the United States performed the surgery, and so while it remained rare to be approved for surgery, it was at least a possibility. However, Mitchell went on to identify as a butch, even though he felt that he was masquerading as a lesbian.

Then, 15 years ago, a friend of his began the process of transitioning to a male body. That lit a fire that I couldn’t put out, he says now. He met a few Black trans men at a conference but took many years to think about his own transition. He considered the consequences of transitioning, including the impact on his mother, who he’s very attached to, and the loss for him of his lesbian community. He didn’t think too much about racism. Mitchell already had a goatee without taking hormones and was used to being followed in stores. He had grown accustomed to women clutching their purses at the sight of him. So he was somewhat surprised about the changes that came after he began taking injections of the hormone testosterone -- the degree to which he became a target and also the emotional changes he felt as a Black man.

Before transitioning, Mitchell recalls being cavalier and reckless about what he did in public and about his interactions with police officers. I didn’t think about it so much, he says about cops. At some point they would find out I was female and that would diffuse the situation. Now, Mitchell finds that he doesn’t engage in small transgressions like jaywalking or spitting on the sidewalk. I never know if they’re just waiting for something to happen to roll up, and I do not want find myself in custody. That would be just precarious and dangerous in so many ways.

When living in San Francisco, he moved out of the historical gay neighborhood of the Castro because he got tired of being followed in stores. During the cross-country trip with his wife Krysia, he refrained from being affectionate with her in public. He didn’t want to run the risk of drawing attention to himself as a
Black man and her as a mixed-race Latina who at times is perceived as white.

More than a trans man, I’m a Black man, Mitchell says. I’d be in intensive care by the time they realized I was a trans man.

Prado Gomez, a 33-year-old Chicano who transitioned in 2001, describes the situation with racism and violence as a trade off. I’ll be able to walk down the street and not be raped, unless they know my status as a trans man, he says. But there’s a different kind of threat from men. Before transitioning, Gomez was used to being pulled over in the car with his brothers by cops in San Francisco. Cops called me an asshole until they saw the F on my license, he recalls, and small verbal fights on the street back then did not escalate. Gomez says that a guy would call him a bitch and leave it at that. Now, Gomez knows he has to be more careful. A small exchange of words could lead to more violence.

London Dexter Ward has also seen his life change because of the ways that racism is gendered. I do a lot of shopping online now, says Ward, who got tired of being followed in book and clothing stores.

A 44-year-old police officer, Ward began hormone treatments in 2004 and transitioned while working for the LAPD, where he’s now an instructor at the police academy. The transition on the job was no small feat, since it meant moving to the men’s locker room and showers. But Ward’s coworkers and supervisors, like his family, accepted him.

In typical men’s locker-room humor, his sergeant created a penalty jar where the cops had to deposit a quarter if they referred to Ward by a female pronoun. Ward, like Mitchell and Gomez, felt that he had planned for just about every change that would come with transitioning. What I did not prepare for was being a Black man, he says.

He finds that people now look at him with fear in bars and restaurants where he once used to go for a good time. When people are afraid of you, you stop wanting to hang out in those places, Ward says.

Experiencing racism as a Black man, though, doesn’t necessarily give Mitchell and Ward a bond with their peers, who grew up in Black male bodies, experiencing racism as Black boys and then men. It’s a matter of living for them, at this point, Mitchell says. It’s no longer some strange thing that they notice. It just is. It’s like gravity. I am a Black man, and therefore if something is stolen while I am in the neighborhood, then I am a suspect.

The racism that Black trans men experience is only part of the story, of course. Mitchell says his manhood is not about the racism he encounters. It is more about integrity and a sense of being the truest person I can be, he says, adding that his gender transition has been about having my insides and my outsides match finally. Rather than see himself as joining a group of men who are perpetual targets, he feels he’s joined a community of men that are strong but not ashamed of their tenderness. Mitchell also finds that he’s in a unique position now to mentor young Black men. As someone who came of age in the lesbian community and has feminist politics, Mitchell jokes with Black boys who talk about fags and refer to women as bitches. He pulls the teenagers aside and uses a bit of reverse psychology, telling them that it’s okay if they’re gay. When the teens protest that they’re not, Mitchell says, you have no respect for women, and you’re fixated on gay men. What am I supposed to think?

Johnnie Pratt, a Black trans man who lives in the San Francisco area, also jokes that he now enjoys certain perks. Finally, he is taken seriously by the guys at Home Depot. Before transitioning, he says, They’d be looking at me like, “Shut up girl.” Now they want to talk to me. Trans men of color are finding that some things stay the same on both sides of the gender equation. Cultural expectations, for example, are hard to shake. As is common for Latinas, Gomez has raised his brother’s two children with his partner, Mariah, and is now taking care of his mom, who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease. Gomez sees no contradiction in the fact that as a man, he bathes his 60-year-old mother. I am the only one my mother trusts, he says. She sees here is this man, but she knows this man is her daughter.

The experience with racism is flipped in some ways for Black trans women. Monica Roberts, who is 45 years old, transitioned in 1994. As a Black woman, she is happy to no longer be considered, as she says, a
suspect. Since transitioning, she has not been pulled over for driving while Black, although she quickly adds that it has happened to a friend who is also a Black trans woman. Roberts and her Black trans-women friends have experienced something else since transitioning: We’ve noticed a power shift, she says. Black culture is matriarchal-based most of the leadership in the Black community is made up of very powerful women. There’s a lot of that in my hometown. And so as Roberts transitioned, she has stepped into that role. Roberts grew up in Houston, Texas, and in the Black church. Her mother is a teacher, and she was surrounded by women who were historians and leaders in the community. She understood the influence of Black women. You might have a minister up here pontificating on the pulpit on Sunday, she says, but the real power behind the throne is the women’s auxiliary that’s meeting on Tuesday.

Her father, a local radio commentator, tried to groom Roberts for leadership as his eldest child. Yet, it was only after transitioning that Roberts felt able to take on such a leadership role. Perhaps it was due to the toll that living in the "tranny closet" had taken on her self-esteem. But Roberts also noticed a difference in the responses she received from other people to her leadership as a Black woman. She got positive reactions, she says, because I was basically doing the traditional work of Black women in the community in terms of uplifting the race. In 2005, Roberts and other transsexual and transgender activists started the first conference for Black trans people. It took place in Louisville, Kentucky, where she now lives. She also writes these days for a local LGBT outlet and blogs at transgriot.blogspot.com. In 2006, she became the third Black person to receive the Trinity Award, which recognizes people for their contributions to the transgender community.

Pauline Park also found that transitioning to become a woman of color altered her place in the world. A Korean adoptee who was raised in the Midwest, Park transitioned in 1997 but chose to not physically alter her body. Park is now 46 years old and a founding member of the New York Association for Gender Right Advocacy, which got legislation passed in New York City to protect transgender people from discrimination in housing and employment. In transitioning from living as an Asian man to an Asian woman, Park found that she was finally able to have the joy of actualizing something I’ve always wanted to be. But she also finds that she has gone from invisibility to a visibility that is at times unwelcomed. Being an effeminate Asian male, Park says, tends to “if anything” put you in either invisibility or derision, ridicule [and] harassment. But if you’re perceived to be an Asian woman, what happens is the exact opposite, which is sexual interest and even harassment.

Now Park finds herself at times the target on the subways in New York City, where she lives. Recently, when she got off the No. 7 train in Queens, she realized that she was being followed by a man. She didn’t know if it was because he saw her as an Asian woman or a transgender Asian woman. She ran home and slammed the door shut. I always wear shoes I can run in, Park says. She concedes she knew that Asian women were exoticized, but as one thing reading about something in a book and another to be running down the street.

Listening to Monica Roberts, it’s hard to imagine a time when she wasn’t a leader. She’s adamant that Black trans people need their own spaces. For example, she says, there’s a lot of hostility in the white transgender community toward Christianity, and some of that is justified. But when it comes to Black trans folks, she says, it’s impossible to just walk away from the church. You can’t leave out Christians if you want people of color at a conference, she says. We were all raised in a church. Roberts also highlights another small but important detail of trans life for people of color: There’s a level of animosity between trans women and men in the white community that doesn’t exist to the same degree in the Black community. Some of that is due to the fact that white trans women are often dealing with a loss of power in public life, while white trans men are coming to positions of power and all its ensuing emotions and consequences. It’s different for Black transsexuals, Roberts says.

There’s a lot of information sharing: They [Black trans men] can talk to us about being women, and we can talk to them about DWB. At the end of the day, Roberts also says, People don’t see me as a trans woman. They see me as Black and that’s the thing that people notice. The bottom line is, we’re Black first.

Mitchell concurs. More than I’m a trans man, I’m a Black man, he says. Many of the things that I see in the world and many of the things that I respond to in the world have more to do with how I am treated as a
Black man rather than how I am treated as a trans man."

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