

Hello,

My name is Heidi J. Loos and I am a queer feminist writer and activist from the Yukon Territories. I am a recent graduate from the University of British Columbia, and have a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. My previous publications include "No Penis, No Story: An Analysis of Gender Discrimination in Creative Writing and Literary Authorship" Ignite: WAGS Undergraduate Journal Vol. 3, No 1 (2011), "Me and My Zaza" Think Equity Vol. 6 Issue 2 April 2010, as well as several freelance articles I wrote for the Yukon News (2009). The piece I am submitting today is a creative non-fiction piece I wrote while at UBC about a fellow UBC student, a young Asian Canadian Trans Woman. I think this piece would be an excellent addition to Ricepaper. (It is 1, 918 words.)

Thank-you for your consideration!

Cheers,

Heidi J. Loos

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Jobless.

After an extremely pleasant and high energy interview with a local Starbucks manager, Aria sat sipping her luke-warm medium roast coffee. Starbucks gives out free coffees with every interview, but Aria had been so busy answering all the questions promptly and eloquently she hadn't got a chance to drink hers yet. As she sipped her coffee and stared out the window she overheard the manager talking to the one of the other Starbucks employees.

“Oh my god, did you see her”—

“Shhh! She's still here!”

Aria heard the manager take a few steps towards her and inhale one quick sharp breath. Then she saw the manager's reflection in the window looking right at her, eyes wide and cheeks flushed.

“I'll be in the back...” The manager muttered to her fellow employee.

Aria pushes her thick-rimmed glasses up her nose then covers her mouth with the back of her hand and coughs quietly.

“Heh-hem, excuse me, it's kind of embarrassing, I think I didn't shave very well that morning, and might have had a few straggly hairs on my neck.”

Starbucks advertises as an equal opportunity employer, so of course Aria's friends told her she *had* to complain to human resources. It took some convincing but Aria decided she would write a letter, and then when that didn't work, she made a call. Everyone she talked to

was “so sorry” for her, and so sorry that this incident happened. But, when it came down to it, the Starbucks manager said it was simply a misunderstanding. It was her voice against Aria’s, a cisgender woman in a position of power against a transgender woman of colour. Who would ever believe Aria?

Aria shrugs, “According to the Canadian Human Rights code I’m not even human because trans people and gender expression aren’t included in the human rights code,” she explains.

When the Starbucks manager was questioned about her words and actions of that day, the manager said she had simply been joking with her fellow Starbucks employee and doing impressions of yet another Starbucks employee who was working at the time, or something, or something.

“My mom was like, if you’re going to be a girl, you at least have to be elegant.”

Excitement tickles the corners of Aria Cheng’s lips as she remembers and retells her mother’s comment. She smiles. Her eyebrows climb half a centimetre above her rectangular thick black glasses. She shakes her head at the words, but it doesn’t mask the fondness in her voice.

“I was like, how many girls are elegant these days?” Aria laughs. “You don’t have to be elegant to be a girl! *Mom*, you’re not even elegant!”

Aria cherishes this memory, this moment of acceptance, but Aria's parents are still trying to convince Aria she doesn't have to go through with this. She could still be *Angus*. Jobs would be a lot easier to get if she would just be Angus. Aria's not allowed to attend some family gatherings, holidays, and birthday parties unless she pretends to be Angus. Unless she conforms, hides her true identity, and carves on a masculine face. Last year's Christmas dinner at Aria's brother's place, Aria went as her previous identity, she went as "he," she went as *Angus*. Aria's five year old nephew asked his mom why Auntie Aria looked like a boy. Everyone got all hush hush, ignore the comment, change the subject, quick! Now neither Aria nor Angus gets invitations to family dinners. But, Aria never liked the name Angus anyway even before she knew she knew she was trans.

"I'm not the stereotypical hyper-feminine trans woman" Aria says.

Aria leans back on the green leather couch in UBC's Womyn's Centre. Her purple hoodie is unzipped to reveal a fitted grey tanktop. Her blue-jeaned legs are crossed. Whenever Aria feels uncomfortable in "women's only spaces" or when ladies ogle her suspiciously in the girl's washroom, she tries to show off the most common indicator of her being a girl.

"The best way to avoid suspicion or reduce it anyway...unzip the jacket, I have boobs!" Aria gestures enthusiastically to her breasts.

When her medication first started to kick in, Aria could hardly contain herself. She self-medicated first, ordering all the necessary hormones from off the internet. But Aria did her research well; the drugs and dosages she obtained online were almost identical to those prescribed to her a few months later upon her official diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder. Chest pains induced euphoric squeals of ooh's, and yaaay's, and for the first couple of months

Aria weighed and measured herself every single day. She is still tracking the transformations and changes on her body and on her face like a map; a delicate and beautiful map that will take her to her rightful place, to a body where she belongs.

Unfortunately, not everyone is as thrilled as Aria about her changing body. The norm for Aria Cheng when she walks into a room is a dozen pairs of eyeballs shooting ice-rays at her, piercing her skin at every angle, a gasp or a sniff, a unified sigh, or everyone just holds their breath and stares. They forget how to breathe, how to be polite, how to interact with a person as a person regardless of their “confusing gender.” Confusing, because most of the time Aria still doesn’t “pass.” She doesn’t “go stealth.”

Twenty-four years old, with six years of post secondary education from various colleges and the University of Northern British Columbia in computer science, architectural drafting and urban planning, and Aria Cheng has been unemployed for six months. The fact that the student unemployment rate has sky rocketed in BC and in Canada in the last year isn’t helping her cause, but she has been actively looking for months. Aria never wants to think the worst. She’s an optimist; actually, she refers to herself as an “optimistic realist,” And realistically, after witnessing the same uncomfortable responses and negative reactions from interviewers and store managers and company employers over and over and over again, it has become pretty obvious that no one wants to hire Aria because she is Trans. They’ve all chatted about it, Aria and her trans friends and acquaintances and many of them are facing the same predicament. Every day Aria scrolls down her computer screen searching and responding to various job postings, emailing resumes, printing out resumes, handing out resumes all over Vancouver.

A few weeks ago Aria got a phone call following up from one of her email responses. It was Vera from the Art of Loving, a sex toy store.

“Is Aria there?” Vera asked.

“This is Aria.”

“...*Ohh*...well.. hello...?”

Vera continued with the phone interview, but Aria knew that that wasn't a good 'Ohh'. Aria says she hates her voice, says she cringes when she hears it recorded, which, of course is not an uncommon reaction when a person hears their voice played back to them, they'll squeal and shift uncomfortably in the chairs, gasp, and say “is that really what I sound like?” but their voices don't usually prevent most people from getting hired, from getting jobs. Aria was completely qualified for the position, and the phone interview went great. She was to go into the Art of Loving the following morning for another interview, in person, but in the morning Vera called Aria an hour before the scheduled interview to tell her not to come. “Other issues” had come up and they'd need to reschedule; she assured Aria she would call her back to reschedule. Vera never called back.

Group voice therapy is offered once every couple months sometimes less due to lack of proper funding but, regardless, there's a huge waitlist. So Aria hasn't been able to attend any voice training yet. She practices on her own sometimes, but learning how to speak and announce appropriately as the 'opposite' gender is like trying to tune your grandfather's dusty violin that's been in the closet for years, squeaky, sharp here, flat there. Aria is a female with a male's voice, she says, and on the phone, she knows, it's jarring.

Even in Vancouver's so-called gay districts like Commercial Drive and Davie Street where most of the shops and businesses have welcoming queer friendly rainbow stickers on their doors advertising their LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) support, it's just a marketing strategy. Or perhaps these employers and owners are only considering the L, G, and B in the flag. When a 'T' walks through the door, these employers too, forget how to breathe.

Aria has lots of customer service experience from when she was still presenting as male. Just because she's not Angus anymore doesn't mean she doesn't have the same skills and experience. She worked as an IT support person for four years, and worked retail at American Eagle, and in the food industry via Pita Pit just to name a few. Recently Aria at a barista interview for Blenz but it went just as badly as the Starbucks one.

It was group interview. There were about twenty applicants being interviewed for sixteen barista positions. Aria thought she had a pretty good chance, those were alright odds. The group sat in a circle and Aria did a wonderful job ignoring all the apprehensive glances and blatantly, rude stares she was receiving, as usual. However, the applicants were asked to partner up, interview each other than report back to the group. Unfortunately for Aria, the Japanese man interviewing her didn't speak English very well. Note taking was prohibited but Aria memorized and reported back clearly everything her interviewee had said to her. Next, the Japanese man stood up and introduced Aria.

“This is Aria. *He* is a business student”—

(Which wasn't even true...)

Aria whispered under her breath “She, she, she!”

“He enjoys- uh- *she* enjoys graphic design.”

There was a few uncomfortable leg shifts and a stiff dry stir across the room. Then the awkward silence that clings in the air when no one knows quite what to say next

No surprise, Aria didn't get the job.

According to Aria Cheng, the most common jobs transgendered people have are jobs in which they are not seen or heard, such as dishwashers or cleaners. Aria had a job as a dishwasher awhile back for about three months until she developed allergies to almost every cleaning product in the building. Itchiness, scabby hives, bumpy rashes, or unemployment? What a dilemma... Aria would like a job soon. She does a ton of volunteering, and was recently appointed the co-social president of Pride UBC. Aria surrounds herself with queer friendly and open minded individuals. But, she would like to “pass,” one day, and have people recognize her solely as a woman and not always something different. She would like to use the girl's bathrooms and not have to unzip her hoodie quickly, defensively, showing her lady lumps. In reality, she knows this might never happen, but she's also okay with that. Her final ideal image of herself is vivid in Aria's mind, but she's fine with the notion that she might never reach it. She is comfortable with who she is; she doesn't feel the need to cake on layers of make-up or wear fake eyelashes or put on high heels and a ball gown— she might do it for fun, but she doesn't feel the need to because Aria is comfortable with her own level of femininity. She knows that not all girls are elegant.