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McKenzie Wark

Editorial— “trans | femme | aesthetics”

I had to get my transsexual ass off social media today. The clash of reciprocally negating arguments never moves forward. There is no “debate.” There’s certainly no “debate” between transphobia and, let’s call it, transphilia. Since we are more tolerated or accepted than loved by the cis world, transphilia is pretty much restricted to other trans people. And since we can have a hard time loving ourselves, we can have a hard time loving each other.

Nothing ever comes of “debate” with those who think we aren’t people. Nothing except a hardening of identities on both “sides,” premised entirely on opposition to being negated by the other. Worse, the politics of a reactive transphilia then yokes “us” together as trans people so that our differences among ourselves are suppressed in the name of opposition to a common enemy, and so only the dominant forms of trans-ness end up being acknowledged.

Bourgeois culture loves a clash of representatives. And it loves to present the “sides” to the “debate” as equivalent. It’s always about representatives speaking for others, in “debate” with other representatives, speaking for the other to those others. Those of us merely represented become a market segment. Entire platforms are now designed to monetize this.

Writers often have little choice but to buy into this whole charade. But even “our” champions, the standard-bearers of transphilia, are bound by the same information economy. One that continually slips out of our attention *as* an information economy, run for the profit and glory of the class that owns it. The spectacle of “debate” distracts us from who owns the arena.

Culture moves when it takes a diagonal out and away from all that. The interesting stuff is always that which subtly refuses to be corralled into the confines of a hollowed-out identity, given meaning only by its other. That which leaks out, ducks the fence, finds the unbounded space: that’s where trans lives really can become possible. But you can get lost out there. You can get scared; you can retreat back into the bounds and binds of identity—and police it. You can give into that inner cop, as if you alone represented the order of being that is good for us.

Those who make it possible to really live as a trans woman are rarely those who are our representatives to the other, and still less those who appoint themselves among us as the police of our supposed collective identity. Those who make it possible are artists. Not fine artists necessarily, nor writers of “fine writing.” They might work in minor, vernacular forms. They might just be artists of trans life itself. They might be undetectable outside of our little covens of care.[1] They make up stories or images or gestures that elude the limits of what they, and we, were handed. Making it up as they go.

When *e-flux journal* asked me to guest-edit an issue, what

I thought I could contribute would be to commission some writing on trans | fem | aesthetics. We need a politics, of course. Perhaps we even need champions of "debate." I just feel like it's not enough. We need our own art, and our own places to write about how we think and feel about our own art. Places to be relaxed about that "we," and easy about how expansive our "place" can be. I wanted to make a contribution to finding the routes out, both of the space into which transphobia constrains us, and also out of the spaces of transphilia in which sometimes we even constrain ourselves.

I wanted to be open to different ways of experiencing and reflecting on trans life, along the feminine end of the spectrum. Big love for our trans brothers and others! Those are not my lives, and the aesthetics of trans masculinity or of nonbinary life are not things I know at all well. So, the ambit of this issue was both broad in thinking about what trans could mean, or what fem could be, but also particular in imagining that trans | fem is already a big, open space where a lot escapes our habits already.

So here's what we have for you: Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky gives us ways of thinking about where the term "fem" or "femme" came from in the first place, looking at the North American experience, and focusing on black and working-class queer cultures. Sultana Isham listens for echoes of a much older black trans | fem experience (which doubtless had other words for itself), and that left its trace, as is so often the case, when the police arrived.

Gender is not necessarily a universal category, other than to the extent that a certain model of it was imposed on much of the world by colonization. Kira Xonorika takes us through the legacy of colonial gender in Paraguay, and shows us some artists—one of the street, some of the gallery—who turn it aside to make trans experience matter otherwise. In Riksa Afiaty's interview with Tamarra, we touch on the complexities of gender in various parts of Indonesia, and aesthetic traditions in which other genders resonate in other ways.

Trans artists and writers can bring a distinctive approach to appropriating and reworking gendered material, as Tamarra does in the Indonesian context, or as Isabel Sandoval does as a filmmaker working between the Philippines and the United States. Jules Gill-Peterson offers a personal reflection on working with feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray and learning from her in ways unexpected. Emily Alison Zhou reads the digital poetics of Allison Parrish as opening a space for trans | fem creation that does not center the gendered body or the experience of the writer but moves instead within the interior states of machines.

Although the feeling is not unique to us, there's a common trans | fem tendency to dissociate. To be, or to prefer to be, not here—to be away from our bodies, away from this world. Maxi Wallenhorst writes of an aesthetics of dissociation which connects the experiential side of displacement out of the body with an alienation from the social relation in whatever era of commodified life this is.

Eva Hayward looks at the work of the painter Erica Rutherford for a visual aesthetics of inventing rather than representing the trans | fem body. Painting opens a space beyond the conflation of the photographic with the real, one particularly germane to trans women, given how we are obliged to present our bodies and ourselves as fully "realized" in the medium of photography, as if it was an index of being.

Finally, Luce deLire channels the somewhat terrifying energy of Comrade Josephine, whose Pink Totalit *e* rianism is an intentionally literal inhabiting of the Canceling Angel that stalks the all-too-vivid dreams-slash-nightmares of transphobes, who think we're out to put them in gender reeducation camps. Comrade Josephine returns us to the bunker of transphilia as the base from which to counterattack.

One of the reasons I was so happy to work with *e-flux journal* is that it has already been a place where trans writing and trans aesthetics have been able to mount their escapes. There's plenty here already to work with or differ from. It's one of the places Paul Preciado's book *Testo Junkie* was first introduced to the Anglophone reader.[2] It's where Suely Rolnik included trans existence in the insurrection against the pimping of life.[3] And where Greg Youmans centered trans work in documenting Bay Area queer film and video.[4] There are even texts on a topic our contributors did not explore so much: the trans-ness internal to the long history of Western culture itself.[5]

Kira Xonorika's contribution in this issue can connect to past contributions to the journal from Pilar Villela Mascaró on gender and colonialism, Ana Hoffner ex-Prvulovic on heteronormativity and orientalism, and Paul B. Preciado on mapping new practices of political subjectivation, gendered or otherwise.[6] Isabel Sandoval's firsthand account as a trans artist is a companion to that of Ariel Goldberg.[7] Critical appreciation of particular trans artists—Zhou of Parrish, Hayward of Rutherford, me on Shola von Reinhold—join pieces on Jessie Rovinelli and Juliana Huxtable.[8] Eva Hayward's work connects to Rebekah Sheldon on queer and trans being beyond the human and Irmgard Emmelhainz on gender and the conceit of the masculinity of rational consciousness.[9] And finally, *e-flux journal* is also where I first "came out" as writing from a trans aesthetic perspective, with a reading of Kathy Acker.[10]

Forgive me for flipping into study guide mode! In sum, there are plenty of resources not only in this issue but back through the *e-flux journal* archive to get out of the standstill dialectic of transphobia and transphilia. Trans people have always been artists of what Shola von

Reinhold calls the "Escape." There's not much one can say or do about trans shit that is without precedent. We're always here, in one guise or another, sometimes visible, sometimes not. Sometimes trying to be legible to each other but not the world.

Perhaps the project is to make our knowledge and our art both cumulative and reflexive: to not only document and archive it, but also to help it build on its own critical and creative engagements; to encourage its various distinctive lines of flight to encounter and entangle with each other. Aesthetics alone won't save us, but perhaps it can make enduring seem worthwhile. Perhaps it can enrich the habit, among ourselves, of other kinds of love.

—Brooklyn, March 31, 2021

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Isabel Sandoval

Seeing as the Other

Klute and Señorita

It's odd to think of a 1970s American paranoia thriller triggering the gender transition and filmmaking journey of a bookish gay kid from a third-world country who came of age in the post-Marcos era. But that's how it happened for me. It didn't happen in the Philippines, where I grew up and got a bachelor's degree in psychology, but a few years after moving to New York City for graduate school. I spent my early teens imagining films and daydreaming plots and characters, but wasn't convinced that filmmaking was a secure career. It was a calling, but not quite a profession. I did take a few film electives at NYU (where I studied business, not film) and enrolled in a summer course that took me to the Cannes Film Festival. For the most part, I was beside myself for having made it at twenty-three years old to New York, the city where movies that mattered were being made. As the mecca of American independent cinema, New York was always my intended destination, and I got high off its energy. Catching an arthouse film at Angelika Film Center or IFC Center between classes made for a productive day. *Last Year at Marienbad*, Ingmar Bergman, Pedro Almodóvar, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*—all these names rolled off my tongue.

Mirrors and reflections are a visual motif in Lingua Franca (2020).

In 2008, I came across Bree Daniels, the character played by Jane Fonda in Alan J. Pakula's 1971 neo-noir crime thriller *Klute*, and Bree became a muse and a template. I was captivated by the steely intelligence, the sexual confidence, the lacerating self-awareness, self-possession, and vulnerability masquerading as cynicism—all while wrestling a Pandora's box of demons. Above all, what spoke to me about Bree was her ambivalence—the primordial clash between warring Freudian impulses of self-destruction and preservation, chaos and order.

Bree became my muse for developing female characters that were hard to pin down, or fueled by internal contradictions they can't fully register or control. This ambivalence would become a defining trait of the

Olivia navigates a storm of emotions as she slowdances with Alex. Film still from the movie Lingua Franca (2020).

protagonists of my films, all of whom—perhaps unintentionally—are women. I now believe that art is a product of subterranean forces, like unconscious desires or unresolved personal issues and conflicts, finding outward expression. Torn women, women psychologically split in half, have somehow become my avatars.

In *Klute*, Bree's currency was power: sexual power—as taboo, clandestine and fleeting—over her johns. Power, or at least a certain degree of control, can often rebalance the scales. I felt this in school, for instance, when dominating my peers academically. Around the same time, I noticed how the oversexualization of trans women in Filipino culture stripped them of any agency or power. For a long time, I didn't consider that I may be trans, since transitioning would mean relinquishing any power or pride I already had. I clearly saw a direct correlation between the extent of one's M to F gender transition and the diminution of one's social status and power. I now realize that I ended up writing my first feature film, *Señorita*, with this in mind.

I wrote the lead character of *Señorita*, Donna, as, first of all, a sex worker. I wanted her to leverage her body—for which Catholic society outcasts her—for economic power, however meager, in order to thrive in a capitalist setting. But I went further, writing Donna as a political double agent using the money of her morally corrupt VIP client against his own interests. Not only does Donna regain a modicum of power; she also pulls one over on society and the powers that be, going behind their backs. It's tempting to dismiss someone like Donna, yet, ironically, she and I both draw our power through subterfuge. This notion of deception informs my perspective as a trans filmmaker in the US, where at every given opportunity I'm made to grapple with how marginalized I am. As Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War:* "All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive."[1]

Jane Fonda demolished the cinematic trope of the "hooker with a heart of gold" when she played Bree Daniels in *Klute*. Released in 1971, the film's female character seemed shockingly modern and complex compared to how popular Filipino films in the 1990s and 2000s portrayed women—especially trans women, in whatever negligible screen time they got. This led me to read more about Fonda, her career, and her political trajectory since the late 1960s and early '70s. I've always identified with women, particularly those who challenge patriarchal notions of gender roles or conventional femininity—even more so in a neurotically Catholic country like the Philippines, with its celebrated passivity and "nice-ness." My identification with the Bree/Jane persona—one is inseparable from the other in my mind—became profound and personal as I gravitated toward a more anarchic expression of femininity.

Nostalgia. Olga fondly recalls her past life to Olivia. Film still from the movie Lingua Franca (2020).

The sense of self-recognition in Bree reminded me of an Audre Lorde interview by Adrienne Rich. Lorde says the first reason for her own writing was a need to say things she couldn't say otherwise, and that she couldn't find other poems saying.[2] One such poem did exist for me in cinema, and that was Bree/Jane. She was my thought finding an articulation—not merely of the characters I wanted to write, but an articulation of the kind of woman I myself could be. More than that, she made me want to be an actress and play her in a film that I would write and direct myself.

Around the same time, I was browsing YouTube channels where trans people documented their transition at different stages of hormone replacement therapy (HRT), encompassing a diverse swath of races, professions, and personality types. I found myself grappling with the same questions on gender identity they were living out in a public forum. There seemed to be only one way to be a trans woman in the Philippines, at least according to local media: a kind of hyperfeminized, scatterbrained, boy-chasing Barbie-wannabe, a caricature of femininity. By contrast, the people I was watching showed that there's no single way to express and embody the gender you transition to. I can be a woman of my own design and creation. My "eureka" moment was realizing that I wasn't transitioning to become a woman, but to becoming more fully myself, and I happen to be a woman. It was then that I gave myself permission to transition.

I wanted to test the waters first. I had never cross-dressed before, save for one Halloween or two. It was the nudge I needed to finally dip my toes into filmmaking. *Señorita* transposed Bree Daniels from 1971 to 2008, and from New York to Cebu in the Philippines. It's the lead-up to a fraught mayoral election in Cebu. As the protagonist of *Señorita*, Donna is, like Bree, an escort. Unlike Bree, she is trying to quit and start a new life. And unlike Bree, she is a trans woman. *Señorita* is more noirish and overtly political than *Klute*. Donna realizes that the corrupt town mayor who seeks reelection in her hometown is a crony of her affluent VIP client in the big city.

Bristling at her past catching up to her, Donna decides to resume her arrangement with this client (using her professional name, Sofia) and secretly funnels her fees to the campaign of the mayor's underdog opponent. Donna/Sofia plays with power. The stakes are higher, more operatic. The danger she courts is more systematically menacing. She's up against an entire political party/infrastructure/mafia, while Bree's conflicts were more interior and private. *Señorita* is a mangled, Fauvist impression of *Klute*, rough-edged and mannered in the shadows of *Klute*'s sleekness and clinicality. One would be hard-pressed to say that one influenced the other, since they don't share much more than the haunted id driving them.

I played Donna/Sofia, on top of my off-screen duties as writer and director. I slipped into her skin, and into her Dr.

Jekyll and Ms. Hyde bifurcation as she navigated two incongruous realities. As much of a performance as it was—I spent two hours on makeup every morning to look like my character—it felt nothing like a lie. And yet, my third film, *Lingua Franca* (2019), honors *Klute* more maturely and profoundly than *Señorita* does. *Señorita*'s conflicts are directed outward, while *Lingua Franca*'s are internal. The premise of *Lingua Franca* is deceptive: though on paper it seems like a textbook social-realist drama—urgent, likely didactic, performatively indignant—it is actually a delicate, quiet, and impressionistic film, embodied by its protagonist Olivia's sensual fantasy scene, where we inhabit the character and experience her emotional state immediately and intimately. Bree's sharp intelligence and sense of power in the scenes with her therapist were the most eye-opening to me. Her cold, unforgiving self-awareness and her clarity, her baser impulses, made a woman whose profession ostensibly makes her an object (of her johns' sexual desires and of derision by society in general) emerge as an active subject—an agent. The power of Fonda's performance, as well as Pakula's direction and Gordon Willis's salacious lensing, blew through the second-class-citizen status of Bree's character and made her a flesh-and-blood force you can't look away from. With none of this agency apparent in Philippine films and media featuring trans characters, *Klute* gave me a blueprint for making a film (and writing a character) as an antidote.

Power in "Otherness"

I found my power in being an individual, and even reveling in being the "other." To some degree, I may have romanticized the status of being a keeper of arcane, secret knowledge indecipherable to the masses: a privilege rather than a deficiency. Behind the scenes, I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist. I didn't want to be patronized or coddled, or have my work as a "minority" filmmaker handled with kid gloves. Sentimentality is a crutch many filmmakers use to elicit empathy: easily likable characters, textbook "heroes" who are morally upright yet uncomplicated make it easy for audiences to connect with your work, especially when you're regarded as the "other." That all felt like a compromise to me.

I never thought being the "other" was a bad thing. On the contrary, where people tended to see subjugation and marginalization, I reveled in the potential for subterfuge. A film artist needs seductive powers—the sense of elusiveness and unknowability that comes with genuinely being an individual. To know me—and my characters—is to play with a matryoshka without a guarantee that you'll get through every layer of my protagonists by the end of the story. My women characters tend to be an acquired taste for that reason. They're not begging for love or sympathy. They can seem remote. The aura of mystery is their protective shield against emotional vulnerability and physical danger. By that standard, you might say I'm a coquette or a tease.

Sisterly ardor. Two Filipina transwomen get spiritual. Film still from the movie Lingua Franca (2020).

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera writes, "Flirtation is a promise of sexual intercourse without a guarantee."[3] One vital epiphany I had while making *Lingua Franca* was that art, and therefore cinema, regardless of message or aesthetics, is erotic desire sublimated. We judge a film the way we judge sex, by how it navigates the escalation from tension (conflict) and buildup to release (climax). One could call my approach with *Lingua Franca* "edging." I steer the audience to a proverbial resolution and then let go.

The lack of clear and easy resolution can be polarizing; it can be the equivalent of cinematic blue-balling. But I'm merely shifting gears from a male orgasm to a fundamentally female one. The film's climax—the morning-after scene in the motel room—isn't linear or concentrated or external, but diffuse and subterranean. It doesn't facilitate emotional catharsis in the expected or "satisfying" way, which makes it work for viewers who relish the challenge of the seeming inconclusiveness. By retaining a certain enigmatic "not-giving-it-all-up" to the audience, I leave them wanting more and hold power over them. For Donna in *Señorita* and Olivia in *Lingua Franca,* when their respective narratives conclude, their trajectories remain uncertain and their fates haunt and linger in the minds of the viewers that connected with them.

In an early draft of my new feature *Tropical Gothic* —where a native Filipina priestess psychologically manipulates a Spanish colonizer to avenge her dispossession—she bristles as a Spanish historian orders her to name objects by their native terms, which he will then translate into Spanish. The less of me the audience has figured out, the more power I have over them. But more recently, having released *Lingua Franca* internationally and somehow proven myself, I feel less of a need to be strident and confrontational, especially when it

A room of her own. Olivia performs her intimate rituals behind closed doors. Film still from the movie Lingua Franca (2020).

becomes performative. Come to think of it, there is nothing wrong with taking a more straightforward route to eliciting empathy for my characters and allowing a natural charisma or likability to emerge.

Another new feature script I'm working on is a present-day romance set in Los Angeles between two college-educated immigrants of color who resort to the gig economy during a recession. It feels very Ken Loach in its unsparing honesty about the economic anxieties of the working class. The female lead is trans, a matter that barely comes up in the film even as a plot point (as in *Lingua Franca*). She's plucky, genial, and less guarded than my former heroines, recalling female leads in quintessential James L. Brooks films. Compared to my previous work, the trans woman as Everywoman feels genuinely radical.

I'm curious to see how fully and deeply I can imbue my "other" lead with an Everywoman relatability that she can ultimately use to overtake and embody the worldview of the "self" in a predominantly cis, white, male world. It's a pivot for me from a demonstrative "othering" of myself to having my "otherness" replace the norm to become the "self." Think of how mainstream culture has looked past the color of Toni Morrison's or James Baldwin's skin to find a moral compass for America in their words.

Trans Fem Aesthetics

I don't consider trans fem aesthetics to be heterogeneous or monolithic. As a sensibility, I consider it nascent and recent. At this point, an overwhelming majority of cinema about the trans experience and featuring trans characters is made by cisgender filmmakers who tend to be male. The fixation on the gender transition process in most of these films betrays cis directors' superficial insight into what it means to be trans and the leery exoticizing and sensationalizing of the trans body undergoing physical transformation.

I regard the more immediate priority of trans film artists to be to correct cis interpretations of the trans experience. I do this in *Lingua Franca* by first shifting the focus from gender transition to life post-transition. The mundanity of the morning rituals of Olivia—an undocumented Filipina trans caregiver—can come across as radical during a fraught time like that of the Trump administration. Secondly, the premise of *Lingua Franca* could be your textbook social-issue drama where the trans woman is subjected to physical violence—a common trope seen in another recent drama about a trans woman of color made by a cis director. I don't resort to physical violence in the film. The violence is emotional and psychological, the kind experienced not exclusively by trans women, but also in all relationships in which there is a power difference. And there's a lot of it between Olivia and Alex, the cis man who takes an interest in her: race, gender, citizenship status.

Olivia goes out on an errand in Brighton Beach. Film still from the movie Lingua Franca (2020).

Beyond that, I can only be faithful to the idea of a trans fem aesthetic in my own work by keeping it authentic. That is, by refusing to submit to external pressures or interests that might either dilute its specificity or compromise its rawness. I'm keenly aware that I'm not making art in a vacuum. Its creation is shaped and influenced by economic and logistical factors, among others. Pragmatism dictates that I can only have a financially sustainable career as a feature filmmaker if my work appeals to a certain audience size. The bigger my production budget for a given project, the bigger the commercial appeal needs to be. I attempted to strike a precarious balance with *Lingua Franca*, and I'd like to think I was successful. Its admittedly arthouse sensibility is distinct enough for international critics and audiences to identify me as some kind of auteur, which brought validation by the Venice International Film Festival, Cahiers Du Cinema, the Criterion Collection, and Ava DuVernay, among others.

The film is also accessible enough to engage a general audience, albeit a more adventurous and discerning one. It resonated with industry gatekeepers enough for me to be represented by a reputable Hollywood talent agency and for the first TV series I pitched to be acquired for development by a major cable channel. *Lingua Franca* set me up in my career to continue making work that I'm passionate about and be fairly compensated. Authenticity in content—my thematic interests—will continue to be a priority. Jean Cocteau said that directors make the same movie over and over again. They're inevitably drawn to the same themes, dilemmas, and unresolved conflicts. It's only the style, the form that changes. This is very true in my own work, where I gravitate toward morally complicated women with secrets, and who find themselves making important personal choices in a fraught sociopolitical milieu.

Looking out the car window, Olivia ponders an uncertain future. Film still from the movie Lingua Franca (2020).

There is power in secrets, in being the keeper of a knowledge that others don't have. I can't say that my predilection for secrets is characteristically trans, but it is most certainly my thing (and if there's one genre

custom-made for me, it would be noir). In *Señorita*, there are two key secrets: Donna's double life as escort Sofia, and her scheme to get an underdog elected in her adopted town. In my second feature, *Apparition* (which doesn't have trans characters and is set in a monastery), a cloistered nun secretly attends political rallies during the Marcos era. In *Lingua Franca*, Olivia conceals being both undocumented and trans from Alex, which he discovers on separate occasions.

The moment a secret is revealed, the transitory power it once afforded its holder dissipates, and nominal power dynamics—determined by race, gender, and citizenship status—are restored, which, in *Lingua Franca*, easily favor Alex. Olivia's motivations for nondisclosure are reasonable—self-preservation and physical safety—and more morally defensible than Donna in *Señorita*, who is not above relishing the sadistic delight of bamboozling the politically powerful.

I'm probably more of a Donna than Olivia in navigating the US film industry in my career post– *Lingua Franca*. I fashion myself as an illusionist with an assortment of tricks up my sleeve—an idea, a certain stylistic flourish, an unexpected revelation about a character—to keep things unpredictable and surprising. That means I won't be making another film similar to *Lingua Franca* in temperament or narrative, at least not anytime soon. The projects I'm developing are either more stylistically exuberant or extremely austere, which keeps Isabel-Sandoval-the-filmmaker in constant flux.

I never wanted to be defined or encapsulated by one particular facet or aspect of myself. My choices in fictional characters or career moves are fueled by a personal crusade against being seen and treated as primarily or exclusively one thing—trans, Filipino, person of color, or a woman—and in favor of being seen fully as myself. In that light, it might be instructive to say that my trans fem aesthetics is influenced by my rebellion against what I consider to be the restrictive nature of the idea.

My mandate now becomes to seduce a wider and broader audience and get them to emotionally connect with my work. That means adopting a more accessible yet striking filmmaking grammar and aesthetic sensibility. That's the defining feature of director Jordan Peele and his commentary on race: sly, subversive politics slipped into pop-culture confection. That is how I plan on centering my perspective as the "other" and making it not only legitimate, but essential: my own contribution to an ongoing cultural revolution.

X

Isabel Sandoval is a trans Filipina auteur based in the United States. The Museum of Modern Art has recognized Sandoval as "a rarity among the young generation of Filipino filmmakers." Sandoval has made three dramatic features, including Sandoval's latest, the Brooklyn-set immigration drama *Lingua Franca*, which she wrote, directed, produced, edited, and starred in. In 2019, Sandoval became the first transgender director to compete at the Venice International Film Festival in 76 years. Sandoval recently directed the 21st entry in the acclaimed MIU MIU Women's Tales, *Shangri-La*, which previously commissioned Agnes Varda, Lucrecia Martel, Ava DuVernay, Miranda July, and Lynne Ramsay. Sandoval is currently in development on her fourth and most ambitious feature, *Tropical Gothic*, which won the VFF Talent Highlight Award at the 2021 Berlinale Co-Production Market. Her first two features, *Señorita* and *Apparition*, will debut on streaming on the Criterion Channel in April 2021.

1
Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Ixia Press, 2019), 31.

2
Adrienne Rich, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," *Signs* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1981).

3
Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Harper Perennial, 2009), 142.

Jules Gill-Peterson

The Miseducation of a French Feminist

It's the same old story of feminism. In the beginning, woman was a monolith. Then feminists of a certain element invented a new language, with its own *écriture féminine*, to undo the patriarchal order of things and forge a new world.[1] Except, it turned out they'd risked it all on some essentializing scheme. A new feminine mystique that made woman back into nature again. Then, in 1990, Judith Butler broke us of woman and into gender. Right?

I never know what people mean when they say *trans* feminism. It could be the other side of the problem of not knowing, either, when they say trans- *exclusionary* feminism and mean it.

When I say those words, do I mean me?

What makes feminism trans if not the bastard daughter of two infamously anti-trans feminists? Chère Liz, chère Luce, my adolescent loves. I have no childish wish to kill them and take their place. This isn't an oedipal tale. But neither is it an anti-Oedipus. I want trans feminism to mean something, to be more than trans-inclusive regular feminism. More than what we thought didn't happen in the 1970s, when trans and feminism supposedly had their falling out. A trans feminism through a new relation to language, one which could provision for me, and girls like me, to finally speak. To invent a relation to what language has not already ordered. To speak, or at least to write, to my once feminist mothers not as a child, but as another. Another woman. Which always means another kind of woman.

***

I was twenty-two and I took a course on Luce Irigaray, taught by my professor Liz. She trained me in everything I know about those big names Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Nietzsche, along the way to a deep apprenticeship in what Americans call "French feminism." I never identified much with that moniker, being myself not-American. I had read *those* big names, like Wittig, Kristeva, and Cixous in French during my strangely provincial education in Canada, all with some fascination. Irigaray I knew only by reputation for being an essentialist. Apparently, she really believed women were one way and men were another and that was bad because it put a limit on what women were allowed to be, even if she critiqued men's monopoly on domination. But Liz took us queer children of *Gender Trouble* and made us into partisans of French sexual difference in less than a semester.

I wrote her a seminar paper on the figure of "the child": how to think "it" differently, without conscripting the existence of children to the reproduction of the social. That was all a high theory way to say that children, as images or a set of ideas, serve the purpose of making the future the same as the past. The child is used to literalize the idea of reproduction at the scale of the entire world, so that things like the Family, the Nation, the Race, and the

Economy don't fall apart or even change too much. It's why we spend so much anxious time trying to make children all the things we're told are actually natural and inborn. It's one of the most ridiculous paradoxes you can find in everyday life.

Look at children's sexuality, for instance, which has to form and grow even as kids are supposed to be asexual, which means that our culture is structurally pedophilic, taking an erotic interest in children's purity. It also means that children's sexuality is so fragile that a gay character on a cartoon, or too much sex education, might ruin the institution of marriage and even the institution of heterosexuality itself. It's why there's a whole subreddit now populated by teenaged boys convinced that their lives have been ruined by their addiction to porn and that, if only they stop masturbating, they'll become powerful and desired supermen.

This paradox goes for bodies and gender too, which are supposed to be derived out of genetics and brains formed by infancy and yet are so precarious that it's okay for people to openly hate and try to kill queer and trans kids to purify the population of its deviants. It's also a paradox of race, in one of the worst versions of all, which isn't even supposed to be biological but nevertheless guarantees that the spoils of white supremacy and empire won't be threatened because a twelve-year-old Black boy can be shot on camera and half the country *likes watching it*.[2]

The point is, no one has to admit any of these secret truths. They're open secrets. That idea, that figure of "the child"— *won't somebody please think of the children !*, screams Maude Flanders—guarantees that all this gross violence needed to maintain the status quo can pass itself off as innocent. As innocent as the cherubic white child who must be protected from the terrible sins of the world. It's just, she's actually not a real child, *she's* the alibi for those sins.

My question in grad school was, could a child become otherwise? What would become of its "parents," of putative mothers and fathers and queer others, if they met not as equals (as in, the same), but as happily different from one another? For me, that was a way of imagining children free from having to serve this violent and conservative function for a world that they didn't create but were thrown into and openly abused by. I wonder why that project appealed to me so much. I still have the seminar paper I wrote that semester, dusted with Liz's penciled-in notes. I had forgotten how nice my professors were to me in grad school, smiling upon my overly ambitious essays. In her comments, Liz gently observed of my reading of Irigaray that "I think you may be a little harsh about her 'humanism.'" It was true. I was young and eager and trying to think my way out of a dreadful life as what I was sure was not-quite-human. That such a serious feminist philosopher thought me a good student was more satisfaction than I thought I deserved.

Liz told us that Irigaray, then in her eighties, still held a yearly seminar in the UK, convening graduate students from around the world to train them and keep her philosophical project growing. She suggested that I and a few others from the class apply. I had no real philosophical aspirations but I fantasized that it was something like the chance of a lifetime. I landed in Bristol later that summer with my paper on the child in hand.

Irigaray was nothing like I expected. She was petite and elderly and very annoyed at speaking slowly in English, but also animated by a streak of energy that took everyone aback in her penchant for telling bawdy jokes and giggling like a schoolgirl. I was mesmerized by her presence after having spent months reading decades of her writings on sexual difference. I was most taken by her ethics, through which she had composed stunning tributes to being a lover and encountering the beloved as irreducibly different, never trying to possess what lies outside of your immediate world. In her exquisite formulation of "I love *to* you" (*j'aime à toi*), I felt a pathway to another world, though I was too young and too untransitioned to know what it could possibly be.[3]

It was uncanny, the way she clearly saw me without ever daring to overstep the interval between us. Here's the riddle: because I was a boy—I guess—and because she was notoriously hetero—I guess—I was often invited to sit next to her at the dinners that followed the seminar each day. There was Luce, holding court with the single glass of wine she consumed daily, eager to gossip, tell stories, and flirtatiously get on. Because I spoke French and she frequently felt tired from a day in English, I was gifted an intimacy of fluency, a language shared between us. It made me feel special.

I asked her one night what each of my then favorite white philosophers had been like.

Derrida?

He was the nicest person you could ever meet, with such a heart.

Foucault?

An interesting fellow, but of course his entire philosophical project was irredeemably masculine.

Deleuze?

He was onto something about difference, perhaps. He lived a life of great suffering.

I knew not to ask about Lacan—besides, I didn't like him either. She paused almost solemnly for a moment, sipping her wine before a smile lit up her face.

The thing is, it is I who outlived all these men!

The thing is, it's true that she was the last of a generation of postwar continental thinkers. The feminist philosopher who outlived all the men who were celebrated far more than she. Men who, from the moment Lacan fired her for her brilliant critique of his work, kept her in exile, without a professorship. I had never met someone who despite it all incarnated her life's work, somehow free of resentment. She rose every morning to find a beautiful tree in front of which she could practice yoga. She would find time every day in Bristol to visit a park to share some sort of invisible communication with mischievous squirrels. She had only recently given up her practice as a psychoanalyst after decades spent in deep relation.

S and I asked her one day during a break in the seminar about trans people. She walked with us slowly in the courtyard of the old university building, sipping her coffee, and shared that she had seen a number of trans women in her psychoanalysis practice over the years. And that she regretted how psychoanalysis was often used to disallow trans identity through analytic sleights of hand and the disavowal of the power wielded by the analyst. This failure in the analyst's duty to the other, she told us, was yet another masculinist negation of difference. She felt her trans analysands should be encouraged to become as they would come to know themselves to be. Transness was in no way incongruent with a project of sexual difference. Quite the contrary.

"I never meant that there can only be two sexes," she offered, turning to look at us with what I had to interpret as feeling. "I would be unhappy if those who have read my work use it for such ends. We can say that there may be 'at least two' sexes. My point is that we have only a single sex at this time."

Was a missive on trans feminism thus delivered in that June courtyard in Bristol? At least that's how I remember it. But I felt certain that no one back in the United States would believe me if I told them. *Irigaray is not an essentialist—she recognizes trans people as part of her feminism and said there can even be more than two sexes!*

But it was also true that I didn't understand what it was that I wanted to bring back with me from the seminar. Me, who had broached transness as innocently as I could, as if it were an important but abstract philosophical question. Me, who started having nightmares every night during the seminar. One night, Luce appeared in a dream, admonishing me for my endless failures. I reached my hands out towards her, but before I could touch her I realized that I had no body. I looked down from my hands and saw nothing. Air where I should have occupied space. A feeling of pure terror gripped me and I awoke into my body, drenched in a sweat.

The next morning, I told her I was having terrible nightmares. She asked if I was suffering from any neuroses. I said that I had been having great difficulty with anxiety and depression my whole life, but lately it was so bad that I was taking medication for the first time. She nodded and said that she could sense as much in my energy. I asked if I could tell her my dream because she had appeared in it, but she refused. She could not interpret my dreams for me, she said, because that would teach me nothing. Instead, I first had to cultivate a relation to the terrifying difference manifest as her in my nightmares, to walk a path that would lead me to the interpretive resources to make meaning of it. She pointed to a window, which opened out onto the university campus filled with ancient trees. Find a tree, she told me, and sit before it every day, for as long as you must until you begin to cultivate a spiritual relationship between your pain and the tree's energy. That is how you will start to heal yourself.

At the time I dismissed this as outlandish, except part of me knew she was right and also immensely generous to offer such a vision of my becoming. Better than any queer person rehearsing a generic discourse of boundaries, Irigaray practiced an entirely non-possessive relation to us as students. She gently cultivated our autonomy and subjectivity by giving back to us, with love, the interior space that we so often give up willingly in the hope that power will govern us from the inside out and relieve us of the burden of being ourselves. It's really hard, to let go of the relief of self-negation, the sigh of letting your body be invaded by someone else's designs. It takes a true feminist to resist the invitation every single time.

Many are not strong enough.

When I pressed her another day to give me something more of guidance, she added that her impression of my trouble was that I had no relationship to sexual difference to speak of. A crushing thought for a student at a seminar on, well. *Vous êtes, culturellement,* she said matter-of-factly over lunch before giggling to soften the blow, *complètement homosexuel*.

The thing is, she was strangely right. I was plagued by a problem of homosexuality in a cultural, not ontological, sense. A problem of sameness that I already felt with my boyfriend at the time, who I couldn't compute as the same as, or even alike, to me, and who I feared coupling with. When I got home from Bristol he had a surprise waiting for me. He had had our apartment painted a beautiful shade of blue while I was away. The generosity of it made my stomach drop so hard I could have almost discovered then that the problem was inside me and not our home. No wonder I couldn't even sit down in front of a tree.

Years later, I walked through some woods near my house for the first spring since beginning my transition. I stopped in front of a tree and spoke with it for some time. The tree mostly listened, but had it chosen to speak, I wonder if it would have spoken with Luce's voice.

But that spring was many years away still. I remained stateside, troubled as ever by nightmares. For the next year, Luce and I wrote each other letters between Brooklyn and Paris. The great irony was that in mine, describing my dissertation, I was charging queer studies with the fantasy that the queer child could birth himself, that this child needed no mother. She kept directing me elsewhere, until our letters dropped off, as any long and difficult conversation inevitably does.

I should like to finish our correspondence now with a letter unfaithfully translated by me.

***

Chère Luce,

I know it has been many years, so I hope first that this letter finds you. I had to write to you one more time. Something has happened. I am beginning to feel what it is like to know without seeing. I am not sure how to express a certain gratitude, but if you will let me try …

I wonder if you even remember me. And if you could meet me today, if you would understand how I became out of that miserable boy you met in Bristol and Warwick and in our letters. I found the letters recently, tucked away in a box, and they made me cry, at first. I wrote you in a way I would call relentless, shamelessly trying to outthink the false and unsolvable problems you kept gently asking me to set aside for what was missing from and unthought in their premises. All that time, all those words, to try to make something of a queer child desperate for a mother instead of having to birth himself. The unconscious of my text was so morbidly visible. And yet you never once got mad at me for not learning right away, not opening myself up to a different possibility that echoed in your words. You whispered that the endless collection of mothers in my life was still not giving birth to me and so perhaps I had miseducated myself on the most basic question of my life and my thinking. I blush in shame at what a bad student I was, but I know you would never wish shame upon me.

You once described metaphysics as a leap of abstraction out of the immediacy of life.

I feel deep kinship with trees now, I want you to know. I feel connected to the natural world that I had long felt estranged from. I believe in spirit and energy because I have felt them to be real, not as resources or supplements to my ailments, but as shared parts of me, fibers that can extend from the forest into my flesh when I am weak or dreamy. I am less afraid of water. I still have trouble breathing the air and approaching fire, but I am no longer afraid to keep trying.

I suppose I thought that to become a girl was to necessarily be reborn, to claim a mother who could give me myself anew. I feel another blush of shame that I came to you with that wish. But I think now, maybe, that the lesson was simply to find within myself the confidence to approach you as another. As a woman, too. And that doing so is to say also that I love you for what I can never know why, or even if, you gave me intentionally. But I do not need that kind of interior truth from you to live well because being in relation to you, our interval I mean, outlasted even the words exchanged between us. They stoked a living fire that has kept me more alive than I had ever thought myself deserving.

And so, I write to you, one last time in that spirit, even if you will never read these words.

Je vous prie de croire,

Jules

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This is an unfairly clean story, a fabulated letter, because it's obvious to me that my miseducation as a French feminist still doesn't work on the axis of race. Irigaray isn't known for thoughtfully and expansively acknowledging Western Europe's colonial relation to the rest of the world. Her penchant for yoga is maybe as naive as the embarrassing book she wrote about the meeting of "East and West." It could be worse, sure. A few years ago, I was at a conference where Julia Kristeva spoke and I was horrified to learn that she had taken a state-funded position in France to "reeducate" Muslim immigrants so that their psyches would become "individuated" and "European" instead of "collective." In the Q and A after her presentation, Black and brown women scholars lined up to admonish her naked racism, which she returned with nothing but scowls.

This story isn't that. But I still blush brown in embarrassment at my love for Luce, who surely never saw my skin.

As unlikely as my miseducation in French feminism may have been, I can't help thinking about how much more unlikely *English* feminism would be anyways. I may have spent a year presenting myself as a child to Irigaray in my letters, much as I presented my neutered work on "the child," but she wisely kept rejecting that premise with love and encouraged me instead towards sexual difference. My letters with Irigaray are about a deferred transformation built of what we shared, another way of saying the word "interval." The letters were a mode of relation and now I am not a child of her feminism as I had hoped to be, or even a trans child of French feminism, but a trans woman. Like her in one way, but also irreducibly not, in my difference, including my brownness.

Love without possession is feminist. A trans woman writing to her teacher, years later, is a voice speaking a certain feminism.

Irigaray did not intrude into my interiority. She never wrote me a letter that said, "I think you are a woman." Nor would she have dared write me to say that I could not be one. She generously offered me visions for my own becoming through which I might find the answers to my torments, intellectual and personal. She made real for me an autonomy and a legitimation in my search for a livable self, and now it's the subjecthood with which I write these words, full of femme feeling. Irigaray's unlikely trans feminism has worked well in that way, regardless of anything she's ever written, or said, that is radically insufficient on other grounds. Here I am, a brown woman to her because I present myself as one and it's not her desire to decide on my sexual difference or my subjectivity. French feminism of a surprising sort.

But that rich Scottish woman, the author? That bitch is living in my head, rent free.

Trans-exclusionary radical feminism is almost entirely about breaching the interval. It has nothing in the way of respect for the other or a love of wisdom and surprise. The TERFs who serve in *her* army of today's English feminism relentlessly harass and hound trans women out of a wish to see them eradicated from the face of the earth. And all the while they merrily claim innocence and victimhood for themselves under the immunity of white women. Now a TERF lives inside my head, trying to undo me from within.

No matter, she won't hear what I'm saying anyways. There is no ethical project that can coerce someone's listening.

Irigaray doesn't live in my head. Truth be told, that's why I don't know anything of her these days. We lost touch after I sent a letter, and then another, that never received a reply. Maybe she moved. I know I did. But I still lay awake at night sometimes, wondering if she might visit me again in a dream. I'd like to see in her eyes the feeling of recognition without sameness.

X

1
The term *écriture féminine* is from Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93.

2
For extended accounts of how "the child" does all this sexual, racial, and gender work, there are books you should read, like Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child* (Duke University Press, 2009) and Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence* (NYU Press, 2012). I also wrote a book about this in the case of trans kids, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

3
Luce Irigaray, *J'aime à toi* (Editions Grasset, 1992).

Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky

Our Own Words: Fem & Trans, Past & Future

Words for different flavors of trans people come and go, gathering different assortments of us together and drawing different lines between us. Sometimes the words have crisp edges of meaning; sometimes they're blurred or shapeless. They fall in and out of fashion and sometimes reappear for another moment in the spotlight, with or without the tingle of nostalgia. Lately, "fem" is having a moment—sometimes as an umbrella term ("trans fems"), sometimes as a subcategory or add-on ("women and fems"), but almost always with a certain vagueness to it.

"Fem" matters because it comes from specific queer contexts and lineages that have a politics woven into their aesthetics. "Fem" matters right now because for cis gay, lesbian, and bisexual folks, that politics has largely been replaced by a version of queerness that retains only the label, substituting aesthetic markers for any actual pursuit of liberation. This depoliticizing move is rapidly expanding into many trans spaces. The stakes are high because the particular politics that "fem" named in its original contexts, and for trans women since then, is something we need right now.

North American queer and trans folks—especially white ones—who came up in the 1990s and early 2000s couldn't help but encounter "fem" as part of a queer history of building our lives on our own terms. There was little possibility to be anything but actively in opposition to the straight and cis society around us. Since then a cis gay, lesbian, and bisexual conservatism has replaced liberation organizing with efforts towards assimilation through marriage and the military. The histories and the words that carry them have been drained of much of their meaning.

These days, "fem" has come to be used as a synonym for conventional femininity, and "queer" has come to mean "lesbian, gay, and bisexual" in a spicier tone of voice.[1] This draining of political meaning from words we've called home has affected trans worlds less deeply than cis ones up to this point, but it is underway among us as well. The genealogy of "fem" as a trans word traces one strand of what that process aims to erase: an understanding of ourselves as directly dependent on each other to survive and flourish, as living and thriving through relation, solidarity, and endless variety and variation. "Fem" has named an aesthetic that makes that politics visible and recognizable, on our bodies and beyond them. It still can: if we pay attention to its roots, and cultivate what grows from them.

What Is This Thing Called "Fem"?

Words have meanings, and histories, and that's why they matter. The words that trans people use about ourselves condense our understandings of the worlds we live in: we create and adapt them to do particular things. I want us to

Kama La Mackerel, Femme in Public, From Thick Skin to Femme Armour. Photo: Võ Thiên Việt.

take the "fem" in "trans fem," in this journal issue's title "trans | fem | aesthetics," seriously. To allow it all the layers of its histories. To know how and why it is a trans word, and to use it with its full weight. To not let it be diluted or defanged.

"Fem" comes to us from two worlds: the bars and the ballrooms.[2] Two worlds of working-class queers, outside the spaces made by and for the respectable people who used words for themselves like "invert," "urning," "homosexual," "homophile," "sapphic," and, later, "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual." Two worlds with their own ways of talking, their own words and meanings. Very different worlds, yet sharing a specific relationship to the categories that straights and respectable homosexuals live in and through, especially gender. Both built their own systems, their own categories, rejecting the idea that gender is internal, individual, an expression of an essence. The words used in both—"fem," "butch"—trace that shared view of the world by naming positions that are not "woman" and "man," not "feminine" and "masculine," but specific other ways of being. Ways of being visibly queer. Ways of being recognizable to one another as people who will throw down for family, and whose safety depends on our siblings doing the same for us.

In the multiracial bar-dyke world of North America from World War I to the early 1970s, and then again in the early years of the butch/fem revival that began in the late 1980s, fem was not the opposite of butch.[3] Like butch, fem was the opposite of normative femininity and conventional womanhood.[4] Being a fem dyke meant being visible, standing out against the background of femininity and womanhood. It meant making yourself recognizable, so that if you need help, your people will know you, so that if they need help, they know you'll have their backs. Fem style marks its bearer as noticeably identified with other queers.

On the other side of the line, being a "conventionally feminine" lesbian is blending in, going unnoticed. It means having enough money (and whiteness) that you don't need other queers to have your back to survive. It means stepping out of the relationships of material care and mutual aid that come from being recognizably in the same boat, opting in and out of social cliques and community institutions as a separated individual. It means holding your identity within yourself, unnoticeable and internal,

however much you call it your essential truth.

The one you notice in the picture—that's the fem. She declines to do the little things that make a woman take up less space: suck in her belly, cross her legs, close her mouth, shave her armpits, keep her hands at her sides, eat less than her fill. Her style has something to do with sex workers—she might be one; if not, they drink together. It has something to do with cinematic divas—their implausibility, their excess. It has something to do with drag—at a minimum, the sex work and the movie stars. In any case, her style is no way for a proper woman to look, but it is adjustable for safety as needed. You notice her because she's not a proper woman: she's a fem.

The black and latinx[5] world of balls and houses, as it has existed in North America from the nineteenth century (at the latest) through the current period that began in the late 1960s, isn't mine.[6] I'll say a few words here to explain what I see flowing from the ballroom world into other trans uses of fem, and return to it here and there, within my limits of understanding (mostly gained by the usual queer methods of gossiping, eavesdropping, and ordering another drink). But I won't claim to have the grounding to give a fully elaborated account.

In the ballroom world, Femme Queen is one position among many, one place to stand as a performer and as a person in the world. It has its own iconography, its own choreography, and "realness" is simply one skill cultivated among many. What matters most is relations: being a child of a house, a mother, a father (or a free agent among the houses); being acknowledged as a legend, an icon.

Femme Queen is a position that exists through its relations with other categories: Butch Queen, Woman, Butch, and others. But the defining contrast for Femme Queen, as I see it, is not with any of these categories. It is with a life lived stealth—blending in, walking away, and losing relation. An absence of connection to a house and its other children, to the constellation of houses as they come together in the ballrooms. Choosing to present yourself to the world as natural rather than as real. Attempting to dissolve into normative femininity and womanhood.

These two worlds—the bars and the ballrooms—came together in certain ways as the fem/butch revival and the ballroom world's new visibility (after *Vogue* and *Paris Is Burning*) gradually rubbed up against each other. The phrase "hard femme" came out of that process in the 2000s, to name a specifically black and latina gendering at home in black queer nightlife spaces where ballroom children also set the tone (GHE20G0TH1K being an eventually high-profile example). In the often whiter and more overtly politicized spaces of the fem revival—where some younger white women simply used the word "fem" as a spicier label for their conventionally feminine "lipstick lesbian" mode—the torchbearers deliberately created gender-expansive and multiracial spaces, including folks from the ballroom world at times. Two key projects of that kind, the New York City–based Heels on Wheels collective and the Bay Area's Femme Sharks, made explicit in their performances, manifestos, and interventions that they chose fem because it meant visible difference: in gender, in ability, in size, in race.[7]

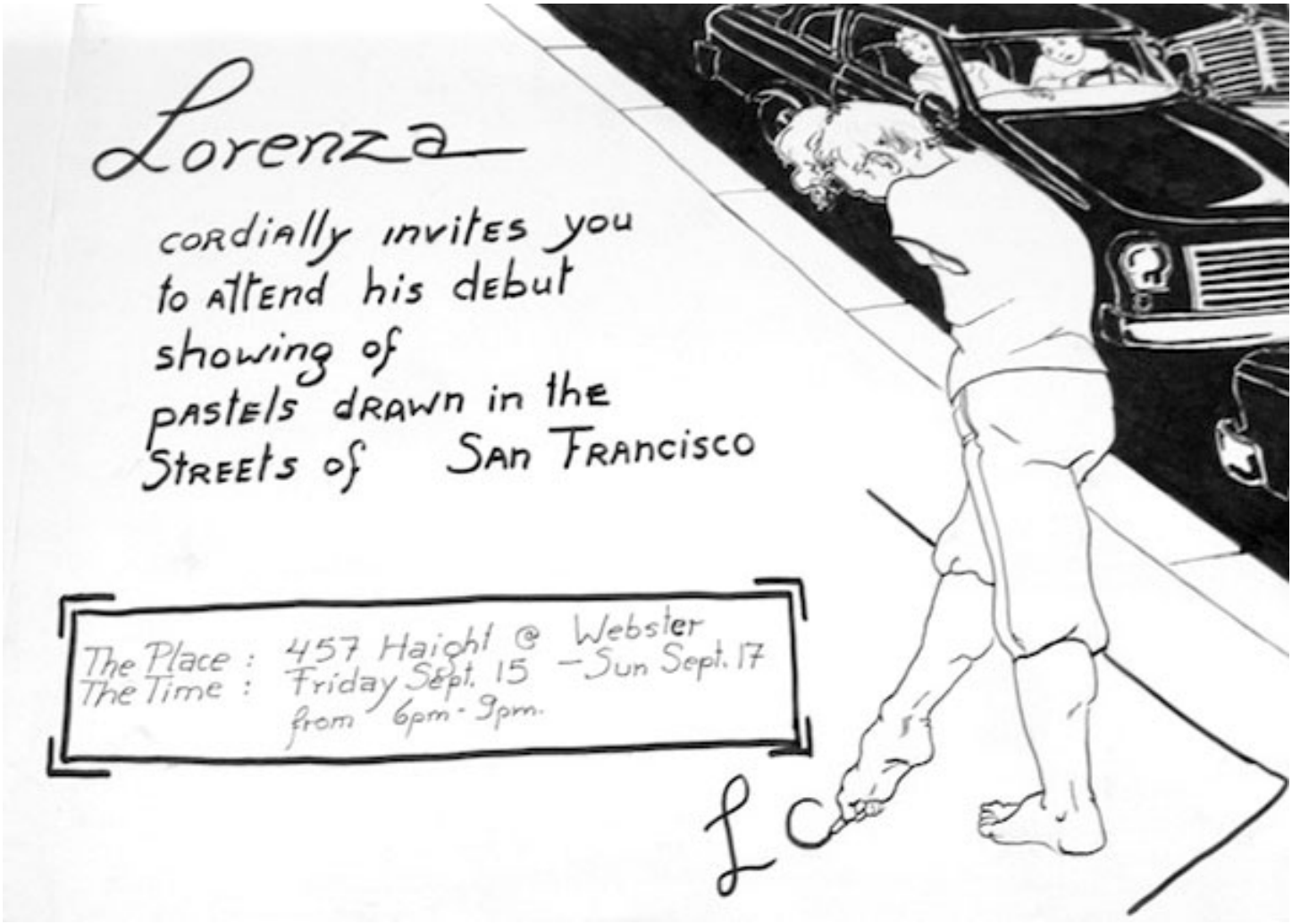
In the bars and the ballrooms, it's not just that fem dykes and Femme Queens hold a space separate from normative femininity and the womanhood it defines. Each world is based on an understanding that gender is something that happens between people, in relation, so the genderings that we use in our queer cultures depend on the ways that we cocreate each other. Fem, like any other queer gendering, is about identifying *with*, not *as*. Identifying with not only those who wear the same label, but with the landscape that gives that label meaning: a fem among fems, alongside other dykes (whether butch, kiki, stud, etc.); a Femme Queen among Femme Queens, within houses or as a free agent between them (alongside Butch Queens, Women, etc.). Those are the webs of relation that make us noticeable, that mean we can recognize each other. And we need to recognize each other because we rely on each other.[8]

trans | *aesthetics*

These two worlds, the bars and the ballrooms, connect directly to trans worlds, and in particular the worlds made by trans people in motion away from manhood.[9] In the ballroom world, that means most (if not all) Femme Queens; in the bars, that has meant (in different times and places) both those acknowledged as dykes and others present as fellow sex workers or as drag performers. But even beyond those directly involved in these subcultural spaces, many trans people in motion away from manhood have understood fem as a key reference point for understanding the practice of our lives. For as long as there has been an organized trans liberation movement in North America, fem has been used to define a set of trans aesthetic and political approaches that resonate with the word's history in the ballrooms and bars.

That resonance is built on the concrete reality that the worlds we have made for ourselves have been structured by the same divide that gives fem its meaning. Some have complied with doctors' orders and set their sights on normative femininity and womanhood, aiming to disappear as trans people and hoping a community of shared experience would not be necessary to their survival. Others—following the path of fem, not femininity—insist on remaining recognizable to each other and ourselves, rejecting cis aesthetics in and on our bodies, and relying on each other to survive and thrive.

In the first generation of specifically trans organizations in North America, just after the wave of queer uprisings that



Publicity flier by Lorenza Böttner, with an image of the artist at work.

crested at the Stonewall in 1969, the Radicalqueens were the most explicit about this approach. In 1973, their *Manifesto #2* declared: "We do not accept the traditional role of women as any alternative to the oppressor role of the male." The term they used to mark the role they did embrace (in *Manifesto #1*, earlier the same year), was "femme-identified."[10] They were not outliers. Even the names of the three organizations who drafted the 1970 "Transvestite and Transsexual Liberation" statement make that clear: Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), The Transvestite-Transsexual Action Organization (TAO), and Fems Against Sexism.[11] The first two names, like the title of the declaration, announce a specific rejection of the basis of a stealth approach, committing to mutual support rather than endorsing a division between those who do and don't pursue medical transition, those who do and don't identify with the category of woman, those who do and don't get read as cis by a hostile world. That same division is enshrined in all the variations of terminology that have recreated the "transvestite"/"transsexual" split during the past fifty years; rejecting it is the basis of any meaningful trans organizing. In the words of the "Transvestite and Transsexual Liberation" statement: "Trans Lib includes transvestites, transsexuals and hermaphrodites of any sexual manifestation and of all sexes." And the name of Fems Against Sexism makes explicit where that position of trans unity against normative visions of gender sees itself reflected: in fem.

In the next great upsurge of organizing and cultural work by and for North American trans people, in the 1990s, that approach got even louder. In the new wave of direct action, agitation, and organizing, the "menace" in Transsexual Menace (the most visible trans organization of the period) was the threat of noticeability, of refusing to be stealth, of rejecting the aspiration to model ourselves on cis bodies and lives.[12] Trans cultural workers showed what that meant in practice, modeling a trans-centered aesthetic of recognizability as a practice of mutual support and solidarity, both in spaces that could be called home (however temporarily and tenuously) and in actively hostile environments.

The examples that follow are glimpses of common practices and understandings, made visible by cultural workers and organizers who made them explicit in their work, and whose work has survived or left traces still legible after three decades.

The first issue of g *endertrash* (dated April–May 1993)[13] begins with a piece called "welcome," in which editor Xanthra Phillippa declares

> our [...]
> need to be valid on our own terms
> to express ourselves in our own languages
> phrases
> words
> ways
> to feel strong being ourselves
> to be heard by ourselves
> for community
> to be who we are
> to control our own futures
> our own lives
> our own bodies
> to develop our own gender culture [...]
>
> to explore our [...]
> bodies
> free from gender expressive controls
> limits

This emphasis on refusing cis models for life, language, and embodiment permeates every issue of *gendertrash,* as it looked towards

> a world that is not owned by one
> a few
> a world that is shared by all of us
> a world of our own

—and modeled what that world could look like in its pages.

Elsewhere in the first issue, Phillippa made it clear that she and her coconspirators did not see blending into normative womanhood as a desirable goal. "Passing," she wrote, "is something you do to protect yourself when: / >> the genetics are coming to kill you / because you are gender described / [...] In fact, passing is a nightmare." The distinctive terminology she uses here and elsewhere was part of an effort to "develop our own language & impose it on this gender suppressive society" rather than submerge an autonomous, recognizable trans culture. She proposed using " **in the pit** (instead of **coming out of the closet** for lesbians and gays)," " **metamorphosis** (instead of the clinical term **transition**)," and " **in/into the woodwork**" for "how some of us, usually anonymously, try & fit into this genetic mainstream society."

The phrase "in the woodwork" has no opposite in Phillippa's list of "TS Words & Phrases." In a language that is for us and by us, living a life that is not "anonymous" or hidden—a life that is based on being recognizable, being known to each other—is simply living. Like the earlier wave of trans organizers, Phillippa looked back to fem/butch bar culture as a precedent for this way of moving through the world. Being herself a "TS Butch" (as she wrote in *gendertrash* #3), she made that connection visible by defining a difference between "transsexual lesbians" and "transsexual dykes," using the overall term for the working-class queer rejection of normative womanhood, "dyke," rather than the subcategory "fem." In her glossary, "transsexual lesbians" are those who are primarily attracted to cis women, while "transsexual dykes" are primarily attracted to other trans women. Neither position is presented as an exclusive desire; the distinction is whether someone's main sexual mode draws them closer to or further from a life in the woodwork.[14] What matters is living "on our own terms" rather than through cis standards and approaches, so that we can "feel strong being ourselves" and "control our own futures."

A few months after *gendertrash* debuted, and on the other side of the continent, the same vision took the stage in a very different context, in front of a cis audience. When Susan Stryker first showed the world her (now acclaimed) praise-song to transgender rage, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix," the piece was not an essay. Although it was presented at an academic conference, it was a performance text, in which she aimed "to perform self-consciously a queer gender rather than simply talk about it" and "express a transgender aesthetic" with both her words and her physical presence. As she describes it:

> I stood at the podium wearing genderfuck drag—combat boots, threadbare Levi 501s over a black lace body suit, a shredded Transgender Nation T-shirt with the neck and sleeves cut out, a pink triangle, quartz crystal pendant, grunge metal jewelry, and a six-inch long marlin hook dangling around my neck on a length of heavy stainless steel chain. I decorated the set by draping my black leather biker jacket over my chair at the panelists' table. The jacket had handcuffs on the left shoulder, rainbow freedom rings on the right side lacings, and Queer Nation-style stickers reading SEX CHANGE, DYKE, and FUCK YOUR TRANSPHOBIA plastered on the back.[15]

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welcome (continued)

a world of our own choosing
guiding
caressing
loving
touching
tasting
feeling
sensing
experiencing
where we can grow without boundaries
flourish without isolation
spread like fireweed
burn like wild fires without restrictions
fly with our powerful wings
swim using our strong, sleek fins
move
glide freely
swarm
flock
herd
scream
shout
yell
fall
roll
crawl
ooze
slip
slide
play
where we are not victims or victimized any longer
a brand new world untouched by the Patriarchy & its horrors
a whole new beautiful world for us to explore
roam through
make love to
a world that is not owned by one
a few
a world that is shared by all of us
a world of our own

gender queers
please feel welcomed

Xanthra Phillippa

gendertrashgendertrashgendertrashgendertrashgendertrashgendertrashgendertrashgendertrashgendertrashgendertrash

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Poem by Xanthra Phillippa in the first issue of Gendertrash from Hell (1993). See →.

This is not how normative femininity shows up for a panel. It's not the womanhood that the doctors whose gatekeeping Stryker survived intended for her to enact. It's not simply out of line with academic norms; it's so excessive that it doesn't even acknowledge the boundaries it's crossed in its "disidentification with compulsorily assigned subject positions." It insists on offering a different possibility to the world, on letting others know that even after going through a medical process explicitly designed to normalize trans bodies, "we transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be." The "we" is a broad one, but also precise: we who offer ourselves as visible to each other.

Stryker's embrace of the monstrousness ascribed to the bodies of trans women who refuse normative femininity rhymes with the work of Lorenza Böttner, whose visual art and performances placed her armless trans body in a lineage of "freaks" and supposedly unnatural or broken embodiments.[16] As she moved among disciplines and genres (and invented new ones) from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Böttner refused to normalize herself in terms of gender or ability. She declined to use prosthetic arms of any sort and placed her painting and drawing techniques using her feet and mouth at the center of the "danced painting" form that she developed for performances in public spaces and depicted on publicity cards for her shows.

Similarly, she portrayed herself in a wide range of genderings in all the media she worked in, maintaining her recognizability as trans even in static gallery presentations of her visual work. And she used that refusal of cis and ableist standards as an explicit theme. In performances during the 1980s, she appeared as the Venus de Milo on a mobile pedestal, presenting her doubly deviant body as the image of classical beauty, and then descended to dance, asking the audience: "What would you think if art came to life?" Rather than allowing herself to be absorbed, in the audience's eyes, into the normative beauty of the statue's silent marble, she brought the everydayness of her particular body into direct relation with the audience as a speaking, moving person acting on her own terms.[17]

Böttner's refusal to put either the trans or the disablized aspects of her body into the woodwork, and her insistence on making both fully present and recognizable throughout her work, is itself an analysis of the interwoven nature of the eugenic project that targets both ways of being. Her armlessness, though the result of an accident, placed her in a category of eugenic inferiors who should not be permitted to have children, according to the scientific, scholarly, and policy consensus promoted throughout Europe, North America, and the colonized world. Her trans life, despite the ostentatiously socially constructed nature of all the world's varied gender systems (including the Christian Roman one that colonialism has made dominant worldwide), also made her a target for eugenic suppression of reproduction. Her 1980 self-portrait as a mother feeding her child is a subtle but forceful condensation of resistance to both of these faces of eugenics.

Böttner's pastel self-portrait echoes classical Madonna-and-child compositions: she is nude, cradling the infant in a white cloth, looking past it towards the viewer as her loose hair falls around her shoulders. But it insists on the specificity of all the elements that the eugenic imaginary would use to justify her sterilization or loss of parental rights: the baby is held in the crook of her knee and its bottle between her shoulder and ear; her strong jaw, flat chest, and armless shoulder sit at the center of the image. Whatever the piece says about Böttner's personal relationship to motherhood (no source I've found gives any indication), it is an uncompromising rejection of the eugenic ideology that has determined the structural and institutional place of trans and disablized lives for more than a century. More than that, it poses itself against both the disablized and the trans responses to that ideology that seek safety in blending in, in becoming unnoticeable, in aspiring to the coerced norm.[18]

Just over twenty years later, Mirha-Soliel Ross (the other editor/publisher/writer behind *gendertrash*) began her nine-month performance, *The Pregnancy Project*. Between May 2001 and February 2002, she only appeared in public pregnant (at times with a stroller), documenting the piece in two films, *Allo! Performance* and *Lullaby*. Her aim, as publicity for *Allo! Performance* put it, was "to explore transsexual women's relationship to the personal and institutional aspects of motherhood and to arouse community discussion around the ethical and political implications of controversial reproductive technologies and prospects."[19]

Lying behind that, as it was for Böttner's self-portrait, is the eugenic context of trans life. For Ross, that is amplified by her family's history as survivors of attempted genocides and longstanding eugenic extermination projects, both in her Métis (indigenous peoples now mainly living under Canadian rule) lineage and her Bnei Anusim (forced Christian convert) Jewish lineage. As she puts it: "At the end of the video I fall in the water, I collapse, I fail in the water, to be a woman who can reproduce, can reproduce either Jewishness or Aboriginalness, on foreign territory."[20]

Ross's answer to eugenic targeting and to the natalist imperatives of genocide survivor communities is not to evade complex questions by disappearing her trans life. Instead, she heads directly for their hardest parts, making herself fully visible through her public performance of trans pregnancy and, through the conversation with her mother that provides the soundtrack for *Allo! Performance*, actively drawing out the entanglements with class, family history, and lineage that could have remained hidden. In discussing the film, Ross made it clear that its

Lorenza Böttner, untitled, 1985. Pastel on paper. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

visual style was intended to tie it to feminist critiques of normative womanhood and femininity as concentrated in the institution of motherhood, through both an overall visual "reference to documentation of early feminist performance art" and a specific allusion to Shulamith Firestone in her outfit.[21]

Mirha-Soliel Ross brought a similarly layered understanding of what developing trans culture "on our own terms" would mean to another collaboration with Xanthra Phillippa, beginning in 1997. The festival of trans film and performance they founded, Counting Past Two, deliberately aimed to break the tendency to present trans work that "comes from a very narrow scope in terms of diversity" and to show work that is not "necessarily about transsexual/transgender issues … [but] that's made by transsexual artists." The festival's commitment "to look at other things that make people marginalized" beyond being trans explicitly guided its aesthetic vision.[22] Ross and Phillippa encouraged those without the resources (or the desire) for "fancy editing" (for instance) to make work so that it could be placed alongside that of established cultural workers like Aiyanna Maracle, whose self-description as "a Mohawk transformed woman who loves women" marked a refusal to be absorbed into either the dominant colonial culture or the terminology of its trans subculture. One of many ways to understand the name "Counting Past Two" is as a way of highlighting the interweavings the festival encouraged, all of which strengthened the trans aesthetic it cultivated.[23]

This constellation of trans women's cultural work is brought together by a liberationist aesthetic of recognizability as solidarity. Some of its creators follow Radicalqueens in explicitly tying that back to "fem" and its bar and ballroom origins; others do not. But the trans worlds that all of them address and call into being are defined not by an internal, inherent identity but by a shared way of being in the world on our own terms: the approach that "fem" names. These particular trans permutations of the fem approach are themselves traceable because their status as art, as publications, has preserved them, so that they could be unearthed by the excavations of our history over the past decade. There are many more examples from more everyday contexts that go unrecorded. The trans dyke who joins a drag king troupe and sings Johnny Cash numbers in the original key because she can. The thirty- and forty-year-old trans

Lorenza Böttner, untitled, 1985. Pastel on paper. Private collection. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

women who notice a freshly hatched sister arrive at a theater project's launch party and chuckle together about how their stubble is modeling resistance to online tutorials on how to be stealth. The sex workers who recreated the "transsexual dykes"/"transsexual lesbians" (and "transexual fags"/"transsexual gays") distinction as they invented "t4t" to tag their off-the-job hookup ads on Craigslist. The thrift-store and clothing-swap aficionados who scoop up garments designed in ways that make them unfit for the actual bodies of almost all the cis women they are supposedly made for.

All these ways (and more) of celebrating the specific recognizability of our own voices, our own faces, our own language, our own bodies are enactments of the trans aesthetic that rejects living stealth, refuses to embrace cis standards of how to be a body in the world, declines to blend into normative womanhood and femininity, and insists that our survival depends on mutual support and solidarity. Declarations that our style is our armor because it signals solidarity offered and desired. Elements of a way of being that we have named over and over as "fem."

A Restricted Country

The gaps in the histories I've been weaving together, of lineages of fem united by a shared vision of gendering as a collective process of refusing to live in the woodwork, are not accidental, or the simple result of the passage of time. Fem as a way of being in the world has been deliberately attacked over and over again, in each case by people

claiming to be the better, truer, purer fighters for freedom. These attacks have targeted fems and other working-class bar dykes, Femme Queens and other ballroom children, trans women and other trans and nonbinary people—often all at once.

In the 1970s, a faction calling itself "radical feminist" became dominant in the (largely white) North American lesbian feminist world, reshaping that world around biological essentialism.[24] The purge of trans women from lesbian feminist spaces under this new orthodoxy was inextricable from the purge of fems and butches, and the purge of sex workers and leatherdykes. Longtime trans leaders in lesbian institutions like Beth Elliott (of the Daughters of Bilitis) and Sandy Stone (of Olivia Records) were pushed out, along with working-class cis fems like Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, and Minnie Bruce Pratt.[25] They were all condemned for living outside the bounds of "true and natural" womanhood.[26] The consequences of the purge did differ. Only a few of the expelled trans women were able to maintain substantial connections to lesbian and feminist spaces during the 1980s and '90s.[27] The targeted cis women, on the other hand, retained more access, which many of them used over the next few decades to recapture space for all those targeted by the purges, including both fem/butch dykes and trans women.[28] Their solidarity was part of what made possible the slow (and still incomplete) shift we've seen since the 1990s in feminist movements and lesbian spaces towards support for trans women and sex workers.

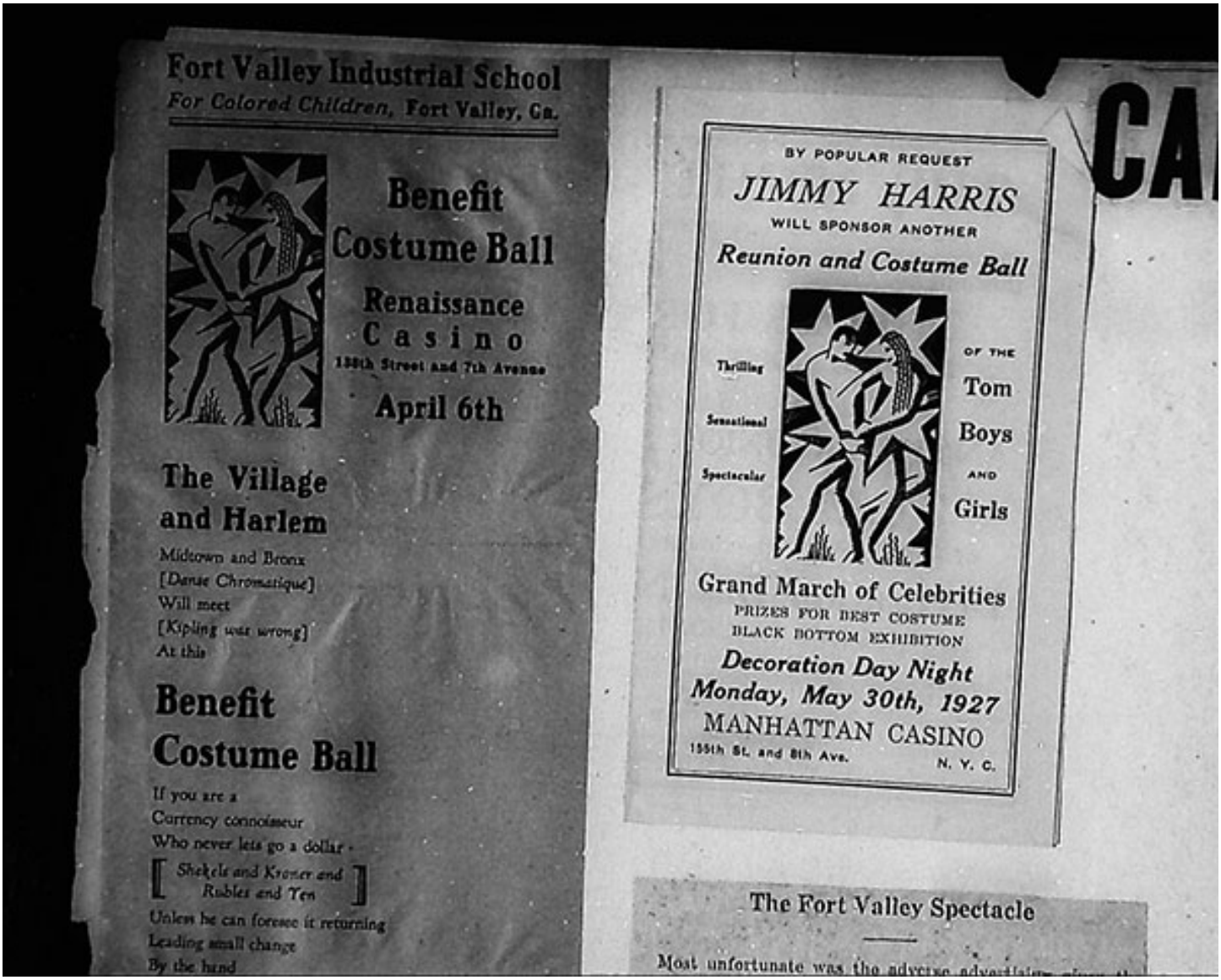
Successive waves of respectability politics have played the same role in relation to Femme Queens throughout the past century. Even when other forms of black and latinx queer life in the US have gone comparatively uncontested, the inherent visibility of ballroom culture and its strong appeal to people outside its houses have made it a favored target for many black liberals and radicals. To give an early example: after a benefit ball at Harlem's Renaissance Casino in the late 1920s, supporting the Fort Valley Industrial School for Colored Children, an editorial in a black newspaper attacked the "disgraceful antics of the nude women and female men" who attended "by the scores." The writer was very explicit: the school's task of racial uplift, "the making of manly men and womanly women," was undermined by an event where "colored graduates of northern Universities" could mingle with the "abnormal" rather than "lift … their race in the respect and confidence of the Caucasian world."[29]

This attitude, essentially unchanged, can be seen down to today, when ballroom children are visible in popular culture (through cis-led shows like *Pose*, for instance) but find minimal material support for their needs from the NGO sector and other respectable progressive institutions. These organizations are happy to use the images of murdered Femme Queens like Venus Xtravaganza or her younger sister Layleen Cubilette-Polanco Xtravaganza in their fundraising and media materials—but only because in death they are no longer unnaturally, criminally bad for the image of the race, of the movement. Their images, unlike their living presence, can be used to justify collaboration with the very institutions that killed them.[30]

During the current "tipping point" era, we've seen a new trans liberalism emerge into the role modeled by these earlier attacks, presenting itself as the new, improved path forward to freedom. It's rather novel: almost no trans people have felt secure enough in their money (and whiteness) to embrace liberalism before! Until recently, even the most active advocates for a stealth life have acknowledged that theirs is an approach that can only work for isolated individuals, and that any collective liberation for trans people can only come through societal transformation. The new trans liberalism, however, promises freedom through conformity. It embraces the quest to blend into the cis world, retaining nothing but the word "trans" as the label for an internal, essentialized, individualized identity—ideally expressed while looking as indistinguishable from cis femininity as possible. The dream it offers is of an unnoticeable life, in which being trans is a private matter, allowing you to opt in or out of trans social circles, organizations, and institutions at will, with no lasting obligations to those you meet there.

In its most obvious forms, this new trans liberalism advocates, quite literally, for the building of new "gender-responsive" prisons to cage us correctly, rather than for our freedom.[31] This, like the divisions it encourages between woman-identified and nonbinary folks, between those who do and don't want to use medical paths for metamorphosis, between those with and without access to the resources (monetary and social) necessary to access quality healthcare, is easy to see and to oppose. Less so are the more pervasive and subtle versions of the same principle, the ones more directly if less ostentatiously rooted in the eugenic imaginary that the trans practices of the "fem" approach I've been describing oppose.

The eugenic vision of the invisible transsexual sits at the heart of the new trans liberalism. At heart, this liberal project believes that the solution to being treated as deviant bodies is not to change the society that treats us that way, but to "correct" our bodies and lives away from deviance. The eugenic vision manifests itself in myriad ways: some ostentatiously aesthetic, some overtly political, and all (like the fem approach it opposes) with implications showing how these categories intertwine. It pushes for "reformed" gatekeeping over the gender markers on state identification, rather than removing markers and ending the gatekeeping. It tells us to embrace hatred of our bodies—whether due to gender, size, or white-supremacist beauty standards—as a marker of achieving normative womanhood, rather than participate in struggles against a misogynist society. It encourages us to spend money on learning to restrict ourselves to a stereotyped "female" vocal pitch, both



Advertisements for Harlem balls and headline of article attacking the balls. Clippings in Carl Van Vechten scrapbook #10, Beineke Library, Yale University. Photo by the author.

ignoring the actual variety of women's vocal ranges and constricting our own expressive voices. And perhaps most egregiously, it has worked to dismantle decades of successful work addressing kids' gender expression.

We all know that not all trans adults dissented from their assigned genders as children. And we all know that not all children who do will become trans adults. This matters even more in practical terms than it does as one of many demonstrations that being trans is not an inborn essence; it shows that caring for trans people of all ages means prying schools and families and neighborhoods open to welcoming the full range of possibilities for being in the world, for every kid.

In the late 1990s, this understanding guided the creation of trans-affirmative clinics for kids, based on a feminist and queer approach that treated hatred of trans folks as the problem to be solved, not our bodies and minds. The first such clinic grew out of a Washington, DC, support group cofounded by Catherine Tuerk, a nurse whose child survived a "reparative therapy" clinic.[32] These trans-affirmative clinics focused on defusing parents' toxic responses to kids who rejected their gender assignments, on dealing with the stigma and anxiety that a trans-hating society causes, and on supporting kids and parents in navigating and changing hostile institutions. They aimed at reducing kids' pain and distress by any effective means (including access to the full range of medical approaches when that was part of a specific kid's desires), while recognizing that no change to an individual trans person can eliminate pain, distress, and exposure to harm without structural social transformation. They were better at reducing that pain and distress than anyone else,

and they (along with the 1990s wave of trans liberation organizing) pushed the previously dominant "reparative therapy" model into disrepute in only a few years.[33]

This mode of clinic has been actively marginalized over the past decade. It has been replaced, with the vocal support of many trans people, by gatekeeping institutions that exist to determine whether kids have the trans essence required to be worthy of the limited range of medical support these clinics provide. Kids are constantly scrutinized and assessed for what underwear they choose for a day when they have an appointment, for their adherence to stereotyped recreation preferences, for the haircuts they want, any of which can get them declared to be deluded about what they want, "externally motivated," or just too gay to be trans.[34] If they make it through this gauntlet, the doctors' goal for them is "a much more 'normal' and satisfactory appearance," rather than a life with less pain and distress.[35]

The doctors who run these new clinics refer patients back and forth to the "reparative therapy" quacks, based on whether they think a child should be normalized into the gender the kid was assigned or into the single alternative option they allow.[36] And, building on their eugenic consensus, the trans clinic and reparative therapy doctors coauthor medical papers on supposed biological markers for inherent, genetic trans essences, and textbook chapters establishing "standards of care."[37] These clinics, the most blatant incarnation of a eugenic approach to kids and gender, are what the new trans liberalism hails as a giant step forward.[38]

The new trans liberalism presents itself as an improved, "pragmatic" continuation of earlier trans organizing and cultural work. But, just like the essentialist lesbian feminism that claimed to transcend the fem/butch bar dyke world, and the respectable reformers who wanted to "uplift" ballroom life out of existence, it undermines and destroys what came before, and replaces it with precisely what that earlier work rejected. Its vision of living stealth in all but name, of "trans" as an individualized, internal, innate quality, is a refusal of the recognizability that enables mutual support, and of the interdependence that makes solidarity possible.

My Body Knows the Taste of Freedom Now[39]

So where is the fem lineage of trans life on our own terms right now? Where is a trans | fem | aesthetics that is built on this history, in which fem carries the meanings that have given it beauty and power for us?

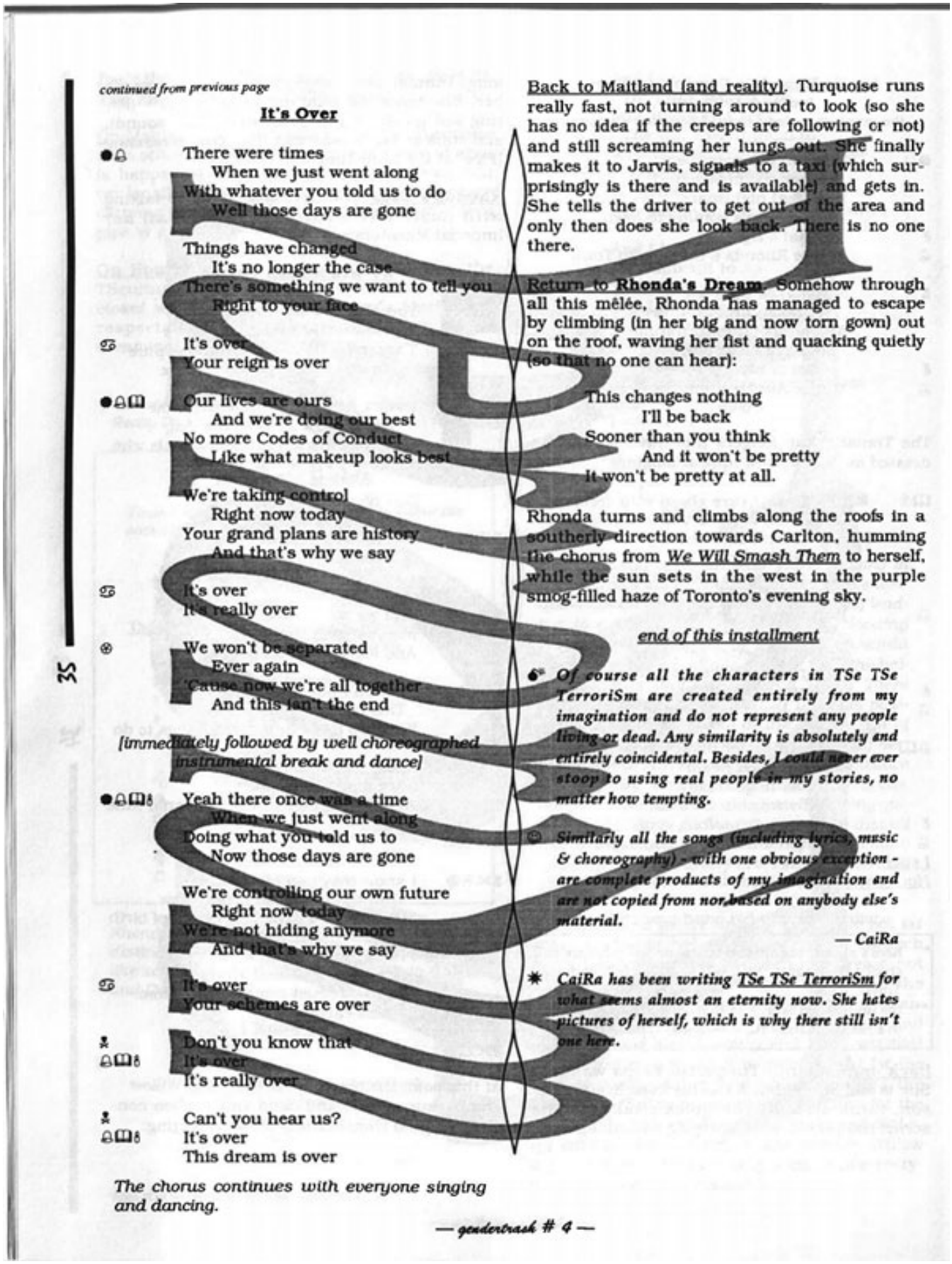
As always, fem is most tangible in the inconvenient places, with the inconvenient people. Held by projects and people that the spotlight may occasionally touch, but who rarely hold the economic and social capital that it prefers to linger on. Projects and people that don't do "trans" in isolation, but always connect it to other axes of power, other sites of resistance, other ways of being in the world. Projects and people that not only reject the dream of blending in, the lure of life in the woodwork, but also the double-edged fantasy of visibility, the trap of representation as an aim in itself.

Here are a few examples of current trans women cultural workers who take this approach, chosen mainly because I happen to enjoy their work and find it powerful. They're weighted towards the urban spaces of the so-called Northeast, because that's where I've lived. There are similar projects and people across the continent, and beyond its boundaries, and myriad everyday practices that embody the same way of being.

The cycle of writing and (anti-)publishing projects that Jamie Berrout has anchored or been involved in over the past five years have probably made available writing by more trans women of color than all other North American publishers combined (and possibly all other publishers worldwide)—and have certainly paid more trans women of color for their work.[40] Berrout and her collaborators have shown what can come from an active decision to do literary work on our own terms. They make work that both takes beautiful physical form and is freely available for digital distribution, to ensure that it can reach everyone they write from, and for. The anti-capitalist vision behind these projects is explicit, as is their goal of aiding collective liberation from white supremacy within trans spaces and beyond them. The two together feed a critique of publishing as an industry (including at the "artisanal" scale), and a call for a transformed relationship of writers and readers to cultural production.

Kama La Mackerel, as host of the long-running GENDERB(L)ENDER cabaret, and a convener of community-based mentorship and performance programs, has cultivated a range of spaces for trans and queer cultural workers of color in tio'tia:ke/Montréal and beyond. Their own performance and visual art explores ways of healing from colonial pasts and ancestral losses, embodying an "i" that "refuses to be restricted by singularity,"[41] and above all, affirming trans, black, migrant life. Much of that work is rooted in extended multidisciplinary research projects like *From Thick Skin to Femme Armour*. Kama La Mackerel's first book (and the performance piece that shares its title and uses its text), *Zom-Fam*, takes its name from the language and gendering specific to their birthplace, Mauritius. Like much of their work, it dances in the spaces that connect and separate their specific lineage to other trans and queer histories and contexts.

Trans embodiments on our own terms find encouragement to resist the borders of nation-states and the colonial histories behind them on the dancefloors that DJ Precolumbian creates. Her work aims to extend the role



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It's Over

There were times
When we just went along
With whatever you told us to do
Well those days are gone

Things have changed
It's no longer the case
There's something we want to tell you
Right to your face

It's over
Your reign is over

Our lives are ours
And we're doing our best
No more Codes of Conduct
Like what makeup looks best

We're taking control
Right now today
Your grand plans are history
And that's why we say

It's over
It's really over

We won't be separated
Ever again
'Cause now we're all together
And this isn't the end

[immediately followed by well choreographed instrumental break and dance]

Yeah there once was a time
When we just went along
Doing what you told us to
Now those days are gone

We're controlling our own future
Right now today
We're not hiding anymore
And that's why we say

It's over
Your schemes are over

Don't you know that
It's over
It's really over

Can't you hear us?
It's over
This dream is over

The chorus continues with everyone singing and dancing.

Back to Maitland (and reality). Turquoise runs really fast, not turning around to look (so she has no idea if the creeps are following or not) and still screaming her lungs out. She finally makes it to Jarvis, signals to a taxi (which surprisingly is there and is available) and gets in. She tells the driver to get out of the area and only then does she look back. There is no one there.

Return to **Rhonda's Dream**. Somehow through all this mêlée, Rhonda has managed to escape by climbing (in her big and now torn gown) out on the roof, waving her fist and quacking quietly (so that no one can hear):

This changes nothing
I'll be back
Sooner than you think
And it won't be pretty
It won't be pretty at all.

Rhonda turns and climbs along the roofs in a southerly direction towards Carlton, humming the chorus from *We Will Smash Them* to herself, while the sun sets in the west in the purple smog-filled haze of Toronto's evening sky.

end of this installment

Of course all the characters in TSe TSe TerroriSm are created entirely from my imagination and do not represent any people living or dead. Any similarity is absolutely and entirely coincidental. Besides, I could never ever stoop to using real people in my stories, no matter how tempting.

Similarly all the songs (including lyrics, music & choreography) - with one obvious exception - are complete products of my imagination and are not copied from nor based on anybody else's material.

— CaiRa

CaiRa has been writing TSe TSe TerroriSm for what seems almost an eternity now. She hates pictures of herself, which is why there still isn't one here.

35

— gendertrash # 4 —

Last installment of CaiRa's serial TSe TSe TerroriSm in the fourth issue of Gendertrash from Hell (1995). Photo by the author. See →.

Kama La Mackerel, For my Sisters, From Thick Skin to Femme Armour, 2017. Installation view at McGill University. Photo: Võ Thiên Việt.

of the DJ to deliberately use the party space as a site of collective healing, in opposition to "the enormous falsehood of safety, of refuge, of sanctuary the homes of empire offer."[42] Precolumbian's music, whether at a club, a house party, or her Radio Estregeno show, is both an invitation to and an assertion of a trans aesthetic that can't exist in isolation.

Similarly, Elysia Crampton Chuquimia's music has evolved to weave more and more elements of her Aymara lineage, sonically, politically, and philosophically, into her compositions and mixes. Her work moves between geographies, anchoring projects in the Shenandoahs as well as the Andes, and between times, looking to eighteenth-century Aymara revolutionary Bartolina Sisa alongside twenty-first-century US abolitionist feminism. Like DJ Sprinkles / Terre Thaemlitz and other earlier trans dancefloor radicals, Crampton Chuquimia and DJ Precolumbian do not separate their cultural work from the organizing and mutual support that sustain us in a world that does not want us to survive—and that works a lot harder to eliminate some of us than others.

The history of black trans women surviving and finding joy despite state and social violence has been at the heart of Tourmaline's film work. Her *Happy Birthday, Marsha* (with Sasha Wortzel, 2018), *The Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones* (2017), *The Personal Things* (2016), and *Salacia* (2019) invoke the full four hundred years of black life in North America, and the presence of that entire history as a past that remains tangible and live. *Salacia*'s portrait of Mary Jones—black trans sex worker and media sensation of 1830s and '40s New York City—for instance, insists on the everydayness of Jones's life, rejecting the sensationalizing depictions that circulated in her lifetime and reappear in current academic and popular references to her story. Tourmaline's films evade the formal demands placed on "proper" narrative film, never allowing naturalism to get in the way of the real.

All these cultural workers take different paths, in the form and the content of their work as much as in the varied media they focus on. What they share is the fem in trans | fem | aesthetics: living through recognizability and relation, through mutual dependence and solidarity, through identifying with, not as. Each model's cultural work addresses our varied lives using our own terms, in relation to the cultural workers and organizers who've come before us.

Trans worlds can only exist through affinity and active affiliation, so it is easy for us to become disconnected from even the histories of the words we use about ourselves. What we lose when that happens is the ability to cultivate lives that learn from each other, that aren't imprisoned within a fantasy that perfection comes from newness and lack of roots. That is the fantasy that leads to reproducing boundary-policing battles from decades past, to embracing eugenicist gatekeepers as allies and saviors, to "gender-responsive" prison cells. We know our lives depend on each other; that we can only flourish in and through relation, in each moment and across time. "Fem" has been a word that helps us to hold that knowledge—and if we use it thoughtfully, it can continue to be.

X

Much of this piece comes out of innumerable conversations over the past twenty-five years with friends, comrades, lovers, and acquaintances; thanks go to all of them, and in particular Alexis Dinno, Sahar Sadjadi, Bryn Kelly zts"l, Emma Deboncoeur zts"l, Erin Houdini, Lenny O, Malcolm Rehberger, Margaux Kay, Milo, Roo Khan, Aleza Summit, Nina Callaway, and Trish Salah. Malcolm and Milo gave invaluable advice, suggestions, and challenges during the writing process; their fingerprints are on these pages along with mine (though they shouldn't be blamed for my words). We cannot live without our lives, or without each other.

Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky is a cultural worker and organizer based at Brooklyn's Glitter House. Third-generation radical; second-generation dyke; just another diesel fem diasporist gendertreyf mischling who identifies with, not as. Never learned how to make art for art's sake; rarely likes working alone. Writing on trans and queer politics & culture has appeared through Visual AIDS, HowlRound, Eyshet Chayil, and in the Lammy-winning anthology *Glitter and Grit*. Current projects include: Real Life Experience, recovering trans women's political and cultural writings 1974–2000; Critical Reperformance, re-bodying classic and neglected performance scores as an analytic practice and to keep them a living repertoire; and Koyt Far Dayn Fardakht, a yiddish anarchist punk band. Founding member of Survived & Punished NY (abolitionist organizing to free criminalized survivors of gendered violence), and other organizing projects. Much more at **https://meansof.org**.

1
For a powerful articulation of the political project "queer" was cultivated within, and an equally powerful critique of how queer political practice has often fallen short, see Cathy Cohen's classic "Bulldaggers, Punks, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997) https://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/LISCenter/2019%20Inequality%20by%20the%20Numbers/Instructor%20Readings/Strolovitch-1.pdf .

2
I use the spelling "fem" as the general term and for the dyke world, following Joan Nestle's account of bar dyke usage, where the frenchified spelling was considered pretentious. I use "femme" when I'm talking about the ballroom world, which consistently prefers it.

3
The classics on fem/butch: *The P ersistent Desire: A Femme/Butch Reader* , ed. Joan Nestle (anthology); *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis (oral history—excerpt at https://fashpow2015.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/weregoingtobelegends-bootsofleatherslippersofgold.pdf); *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg (fiction—available at http://www.lesliefeinberg.net/download/661), *A Restricted Country* by Joan Nestle (fiction and biomythography).

4
This is explicit throughout the writing on dyke life that exploded after the fem/butch revival began, much of which had to repeatedly explain why butch and fem were not simply versions of straight gender roles. I'll quote one example of a rhetorical contrast between fem and normative femininity: a *Women's Monthly* blurb from the Alyson Publications ad in the back of my 1996 edition of Pat Califia's *Doc and Fluff.* It reads: "Images of so-called 'lipstick lesbians' have become the darlings of the popular media of late. *The Femme Mystique* brings together a broad range of work in which 'real' lesbians who self-identify as femmes speak for themselves about what it means to be a femme today."

5
I follow the tradition of black radicals (and their comrades) who do not capitalize the names of racial/ethnic/national categories, as a small refusal to give these categories undue power and attribute "objective reality" to them.

6
Some sources by participants: Michael Roberson's work with the Ballroom Freedom School (https://artseverywhere.ca/projects/ballroom-freedom-school/) and else where (for example: https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_roberson_the_enduring_legacy_of_ballroom); Marlon M. Bailey's "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011), "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit," *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 4 (2014), and more; and Jonathan David Jackson's "The Social World of Voguing," *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 12, no. 2 (2002).

7
For Heels on Wheels, see their 2015 anthology, *Glitter and Grit*; for Femme Sharks, see https://brownstargirl.org/femme-shark-manifesto/ . Key to both, and to the fem/butch revival generally, are fat feminist and disability justice organizing—both in explicit opposition to normative (and highly racialized) notions of femininity.

8
The ideas about the importance of relation throughout this piece are tied to indigenous thinking about (right) relation, kin-making, and survivance, which can be found in work by (among many others) Qwo-Li Driskill, Audra Simpson, Kim Tallbear, and Métis In Space.

9
I use this somewhat clunky phrase because we don't have simple, materially grounded language yet to refer to the range of overlapping social positions, lived experiences, and relations to structural power among the people who are the central subjects of this piece. The most common terms all depend (directly or indirectly) on centering the gender a person is assigned at birth by doctors or parents in collaboration with the state ("AMAB," "originally male-assigned," and their synonyms), on collapsing all of us into a binary and normative gender category (whether womanhood—"trans women"—or femininity—"trans femmes" as the phrase is generally used), or on both these moves ("MTF," "women of trans experience," etc.). My phrasing above reflects the concrete and materially meaningful distinction among trans and nonbinary people, as I see it: our direction of motion in relation to the pole of binary gender that holds structural and institutional power. It is parallel to "transmisogyny affected," but focuses on the structural relationship rather than the enforcement mechanism. Practically, from here on, I'll mostly use "trans women" as an umbrella term, in the expansive sense that has emerged over the last ten years, which includes both binary-oriented and nonbinary folks in motion away from manhood, with our wide array of relationships to the category of "woman."

10
The two manifestos, and an essay on Radicalqueens by cofounder Cei Bell, are republished in *Smash the Church, Smash the State: The Early Years of Gay Liberation* , edited by Tommi Avicola Mecca (the other cofounder of Radicalqueens). The manifestos are online at https://www.tampabaydsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Gay-Liberation-Readings.pdf .

11
The Transvestite and Transsexual Liberation statement was reprinted in Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* , and is included in the same online anthology as the Radicalqueens manifestos.

12
Transsexual Menace was a trans counterpart to Queer Nation: a mid-1990s network of several dozen groups across the US that came together as needed for zaps and other (mainly media-oriented) actions targeting anti-trans organizations and events, and at times for other education and agitation work. Its T-shirts and stickers in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* title font were a major part of politicized trans visibility for many years.

13
All four issues of *gendertrash* can be found online (along with other material related to the magazine) at https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/col/d217qp75f .

14
It's important to note that thinking about trans folks who aren't straight is central to any thinking about trans people, not a margins-of-the-margins question. The best demographic information we have on trans people in the US (from the 2015 US Transgender Survey and the 2008–09 National Transgender Discrimination Survey) shows that an overwhelming majority of us are not heterosexual: in the nonexclusive categories used in the USTS, 81 percent of trans women and 98 percent of nonbinary folks. A near-majority of trans women (including folks who are also nonbinary/genderqueer/agender/etc.) consider themselves queer, bisexual, or pansexual; another quarter use gay, lesbian, or same-gender-loving. The surveys' methodology may be shaky—they asked about identity terms, not sexual or romantic partners' genders—but the conclusion is not at all uncertain. Perhaps marking a certain discomfort with its own results, the report does not break down the 11 percent of its respondents who identified themselves as lesbians into its overall categories of trans women, trans men, and nonbinary folks (though the survey data would allow that to be done); its methodology definitively prevents us from distinguishing between trans dykes and trans lesbians.

15
All the text from "My Words ..." is quoted from the version of the text published in Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle's *The Transgender Studies Reader.*

16
This embrace of monstrosity has been a continuing theme in trans fem and trans feminist aesthetics. A key example from midway between Stryker's piece and the present is "the seam of skin and scales" by little light / Elena Rose Vera, available at http://takingsteps.blogspot.com/2007/01/seam-of-skin-and-scales.html and printed in *The Emergence of Trans: Cultures, Politics and Everyday Lives* , ed. Ruth Pearce, Igi Moon, Kat Gupta, and Deborah Lynn Steinberg (Routledge, 2019).

17
This performance description is based on the brochure essay written by Paul Preciado for the 2020 exhibit "Lorenza Böttner: Requiem for the Norm" at the University of Toronto Art Museum, which is available at https://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/wp-

content/uploads/2019/12/Bottner-Brochure-WEB.pdf .

18
I won't try to dig into the interweavings of trans and disability politics beyond Böttner's work, except to point out that what I've been describing all through this piece is the trans approach that's parallel to the disability-justice framework, which has been developed (largely by queer and trans disablized folks) to directly address the shortcomings of the "social model" of disability that has guided advocacy and policy efforts for many years. See, for instance, Eli Clare's writing (including *Exile and Pride* and *Brilliant Imperfection*), the work of Sins Invalid (https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/disability-justice-a-working-draft-by-patty-berne), a nd AJ Withers's *Disability Politics and Theory* .

19
Quoted in a Tumblr post by Morgan Page that includes a link to watch the film, at https://www.tumblr.com/blog/view/odofemi/110667446126 .

20
Quoted in curatorial notes for Tobaron Waxman's "TOPOGRAPHIXX: Trans in the Landscape."

21
Also from Tobaron Waxman's curatorial note. The complicated relationship between Firestone's writing and trans lives and trans feminist analysis is explored a bit here: https://brand-new-life.org/b-n-l/low-tech-grassroots-ectogenesis/ .

22
This commitment is visible more broadly in the Canadian trans world of the 1990s, with Vivian Namaste holding similar space as an organizer, researcher, and writer. See her *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* ; *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism* ; and *C'était du spectacle! L'histoire des artistes transsexuelles à Montréal, 1955–1985.*

23
All these quotations are from a 1999 radio interview with Mirha-Soleil Ross by Nancy Nangeroni, on the *GenderTalk* program, which is available (with a transcript) at https://archive.org/details/gt226 .

24
For excellent contemporaneous critiques and analyses of this essentialism, see the "French Speaking Lesbian Consciousness" section in Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Julia Penelope's *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology* .

25
All of these folks have written on the purges, and the latter three on the "sex wars" that followed them within lesbian feminist spaces. I especially recommend Beth Elliott's memoir, *Mirrors*, which depicts trans women's lives in the pre-purge lesbian feminist movement (though I've heard it may be best to read her forward to the latest edition *after* the rest of the book).

26
The forms of nominal androgyny that embodied this "authentic" womanhood may seem far less transgressive of conventional femininity now than they were at the time—but even then, jewish, black, and latina dykes pointed out how the prescribed norms of behavior and speech reproduced the conflict-avoidant, passive-aggressive style of normative WASP femininity (a tradition that has continued in the NGO sector, where those norms are now marketed and enforced, on trans women in particular, as "Non-Violent Communication").

27
Parts of the leather scene remained comparatively welcoming, though with a great deal of variation.

28
One example: the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which Joan Nestle cofounded in the mid-1970s, has never excluded trans women, though how welcoming it has been in practice has varied through time.

29
Clippings containing an ad for the ball, and the letter attacking it—neither one dated or marked with a source—appear on a page with an ad for a 1927 ball presented by the same promoter, Jimmy Harris, in volume 10 of Carl Van Vechten's as-yet-unpublished scrapbooks of queer and trans material (held at Yale's Beineke Library).

30
As it has been by NGOs and elected officials invoking Layleen's name as they advocate for jail expansion rather than an actual plan to close the Rikers Island jail that killed her. Similarly if more subtly, the provisions of reform efforts like the HALT Solitary legislation passed in 2021 (which does make some meaningful changes to New York State's carceral system) would not in fact have prevented the torture through isolation that led to Layleen's death. All this stands in contrast to grassroots groups led by and made up of trans folks of color, who have been heavily engaged in abolitionist work (many of them with direct ties to the ballroom world). Some NYC examples are the F2L Network (file:///C:/Users/mandr/Downloads/%E2%86%92) and GLITS (https://www.glitsinc.org/).

31
For a detailed analysis of this tendency, focused on New York City and State, see Survived & Punished NY's report, "Preserving Punishment Power" https://www.survivedandpunishedny.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SP-Preserving-Punishment-Power-report.pdf .

32
See Edgardo Menvielle and Catherine Tuerk, "A Support Group for Parents of Gender Non-Conforming Boys," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 41, no. 8 (2002).

33
For more on trans-affirmative clinics, see Patricia Leigh Brown, "Supporting Boys or Girls When the Line Isn't Clear," *New York Times* , December 2, 2006 https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/02/us/02child.html ; D. B. Hill et al., "An Affirmative Intervention for Families With Gender Variant Children: Parental Ratings of Child Mental Health and Gender," *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 36, no. 1 (2010); and Edgardo Menvielle, Catherine Tuerk, and Ellen Perrin, "To the Beat of a Different Drummer: The Gender-Variant Child," *Contemporary Pediatrics* 22, no. 2 (2005).

34
See Sahar Sadjadi's "Deep In the Brain: Identity and Authenticity in Pediatric Gender Transition," one of very few publications based on extended on-site observation of clinic practices (both in interactions with children and families and—most importantly—among doctors in private), rather than relying on interviews and other forms of self-representation and publicity. It is available at https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/article/view/3728/430 .

35
Simona Giordano, "Lives in a Chiaroscuro: Should We Suspend the Puberty of Children with Gender Identity Disorder?," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 34, no. 8 (2008).

36
A physician-turned-researcher tells me that until Kenneth Zucker's notorious "reparative therapy" clinic was finally closed down, he supplied so many patients to clinics specializing in puberty blockers that he was considered one of their biggest referrers and practical supporters. None of these clinics reported Zucker's pattern of sexual assault on his patients.

37
Coauthorship is the best sign of doctors' and scientists' own understanding of their affiliations and alliances; it marks an even closer relationship than citation (which Sara Ahmed has pointed to as key to any analysis of intellectual proximity and influence). In trans healthcare, lasting patterns of coauthorship clearly establish that doctors portrayed as representing opposing positions in fact see themselves as part of a shared project. Two of the highest-profile doctors whose work trans liberal authors like Julia Serano contrast (at times by name), Peggy Cohen-Kettenis (an acclaimed "pro-trans" puberty-blocker pioneer and stalwart of the World Professional Association of Transgender Health) and Kenneth Zucker (a notoriously "anti-trans" "reparative therapy" advocate) provide a perfect example. Cohen-Kettenis and Zucker have published together in many different contexts over decades, from authoritative textbook chapters like "Gender Identity Disorder in Children and Adolescents" (*Handbook of Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders* , 2012) to explorations of alleged correlations between trans identity and finger-length ratios (Wallien et al, "2D:4D Finger-Length Ratios in Children and Adults with Gender Identity Disorder," *Hormones and Behavior* 60, no. 3, 2008) and sibling sex ratio (Blanchard et al, "Birth Order and Sibling Sex Ratio in Two Samples of Dutch Gender-Dysphoric Homosexual

Males," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* , no. 25, 1996). The other authors on these and their other papers include both Cohen-Kettnis's colleagues from the "pro-trans" clinics and some of the doctors most notorious for their anti-trans positions, Ray Blanchard and J. Michael Bailey among them.

38
For a brief examination of this history, in the context of the ongoing attacks on support for gender-dissenting kids and the temptation "to take the opposite position of one's enemy," see Sahar Sadjadi's "The Vulnerable Child Protection Act and Transgender Children's Health," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2020).

39
This section's title comes from "Sid's Aria," the turning point of Nomy Lamm's 2000 rock opera, *The Transfused.*

40
These include the fiction anthology *Nameless Woman* (edited by Berrout, Elly Peña, and Venus Selenite in 2016); the double-dozen issues of the Trans Women Writers Booklet Series that Berrout edited and designed (available at https://www.patreon.com/m/RiverFurnace); and the p ublications of the ongoing River Furnace writers collective. Alongside these projects, Berrout has released her own poetry, prose, and essays and her translations of Venezuelan poet Esdras Parra and Argentinian organizer Lohana Berkins. Much of her work can be found at https://www.jamieberrout.com/ .

41
See https://lamackerel.net/artist-statement/ .

42
"Precolumbian Mix," *Mask Magazine* .

Bishakh Som

The Tourist


by
Bishakh Som

Charlotte, Hiromi and I were on holiday in Amavaria, where my parents grew up before they moved abroad to the New Territories and had me. Charlotte made me promise we'd do this; I used to tell her about how my folks would bring me back here every other summer to visit our extended family and I guess she thought my recollections were evocative or something.

We'd go out during the days, sightseeing : The Palace of Songs, The Rhythmic Arts Centre, The Memorial to Queen Tarabai. Places my parents used to take me when I was a kid, places I'd not had much attention for, as a child. Sites I was very happy to revisit. Hiromi would buy little enamel badges at every opportunity, to adorn her denim jacket.

Early evenings, we'd have an aperitif at the corner bar (where the barkeep affectionately dubbed us 'The Trifecta') and dinner afterwards. One night we went to a place that did exquisite savory stuffed pancakes, where my cousins used to go when they were feeling fancy.

A little reluctantly, the girls would follow me as I insisted on a nightcap. We found a barge on the river Minata, done up in pressed tin and velvet curtains, where they served precious cocktails, spirits infused with native herbs and plants, which Hiromi ended up quaffing at a prodigious rate.

One night, we were having digestifs at a watering hole around the corner from the hotel. The DJ was spinning Az'hazi, a blend of electronica and traditional Amavarian folk music. Everyone was dancing fervently.

I broke ranks with myself and got out of my seat. Her name was Parveen and she was a kinnar girl, like me.

We danced until our hips ached, Hiromi and Charlotte, somewhat appalled, went back to the hotel at midnight, Parveen and I stayed up until 3.

Something in me gave way that night. As quickly as I had thrown myself into this holiday, this escape from my work-weeks, I had found myself detached, suddenly, just as fast,

The next morning at the hotel, I told the girls to go home without me — that I was staying. They were taken aback and rightfully annoyed but they let me be.

I went in search of Parveen.

They had attachments, Charlotte and Hiromi. Back in the New Territories, they had families, jobs that they really enjoyed. Me, I was plodding along mindlessly at a design firm, where I'd been for seven years. My folks were gone, my sense of 'home' forever at a distance.

I had tried drawing and painting again but I just kept second-guessing myself. I was spinning my wheels —but worse, I had no destination. And as much as I loved Hiromi and Charlotte, I had always felt a gap between me and girls like them. As close as they were to my heart, they would never be Kinnar.

Parveen had told me the night before that she lived at *Sakhi Bagan*, a compound for kinnar girls in Pukkar district, outside the city center, beyond the suburbs. I packed my rucksack, took a northbound train an hour and a half out and got off at the terminus. I asked the station master for directions to the kinnar compound, a forty minute walk through leafy avenues and then fields of mustard greens. I showed up unannounced.

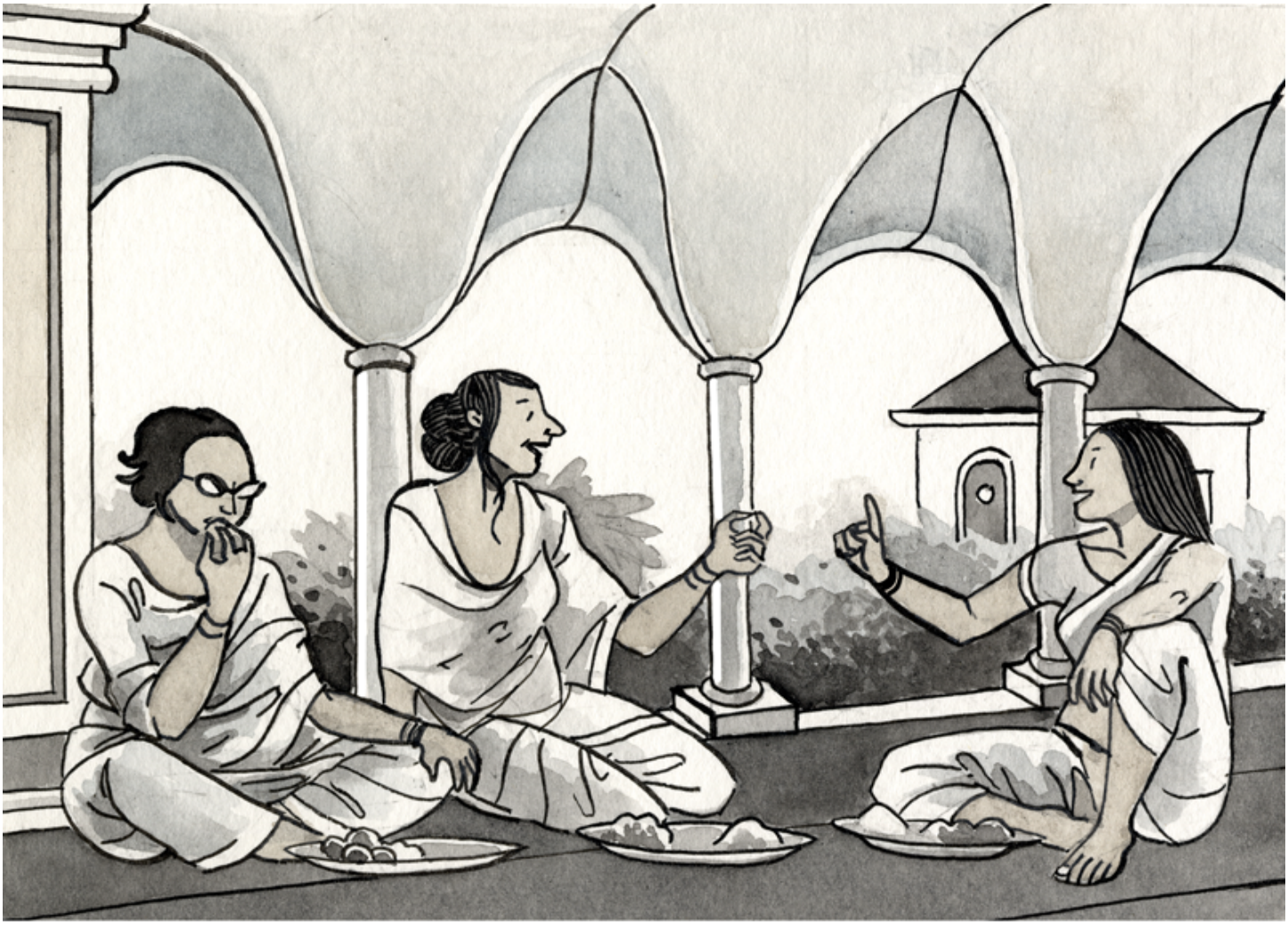
Parveen prevailed upon *Matri-ji*, the elder aunty of the compound, to let me stay. *Matri-ji* was wary to be sure: my Amavarian was rubbish and my manner unrefined. I was still wearing clothes that marked me as an outrider. But Parveen's charms and her belief in me worked wonders: she convinced *Matri-ji* that *Sakhi* Bagan had a duty to take in all Kinnar girls, even ones that came from abroad.

I moved in with Parveen, into her bungalow.

There were kinnar girls from all over Amavaria, some of whom were exiling themselves from their biological families — though most of them came wanting to nurture their true natures, to learn a skill, to live amongst sisters.

There were thirty of us, living in bungalows flanking a three acre garden where we grew winter radish, spinach, ash gourd, okra, bushels of potatoes, the plumpest beets in all of Amavaria.

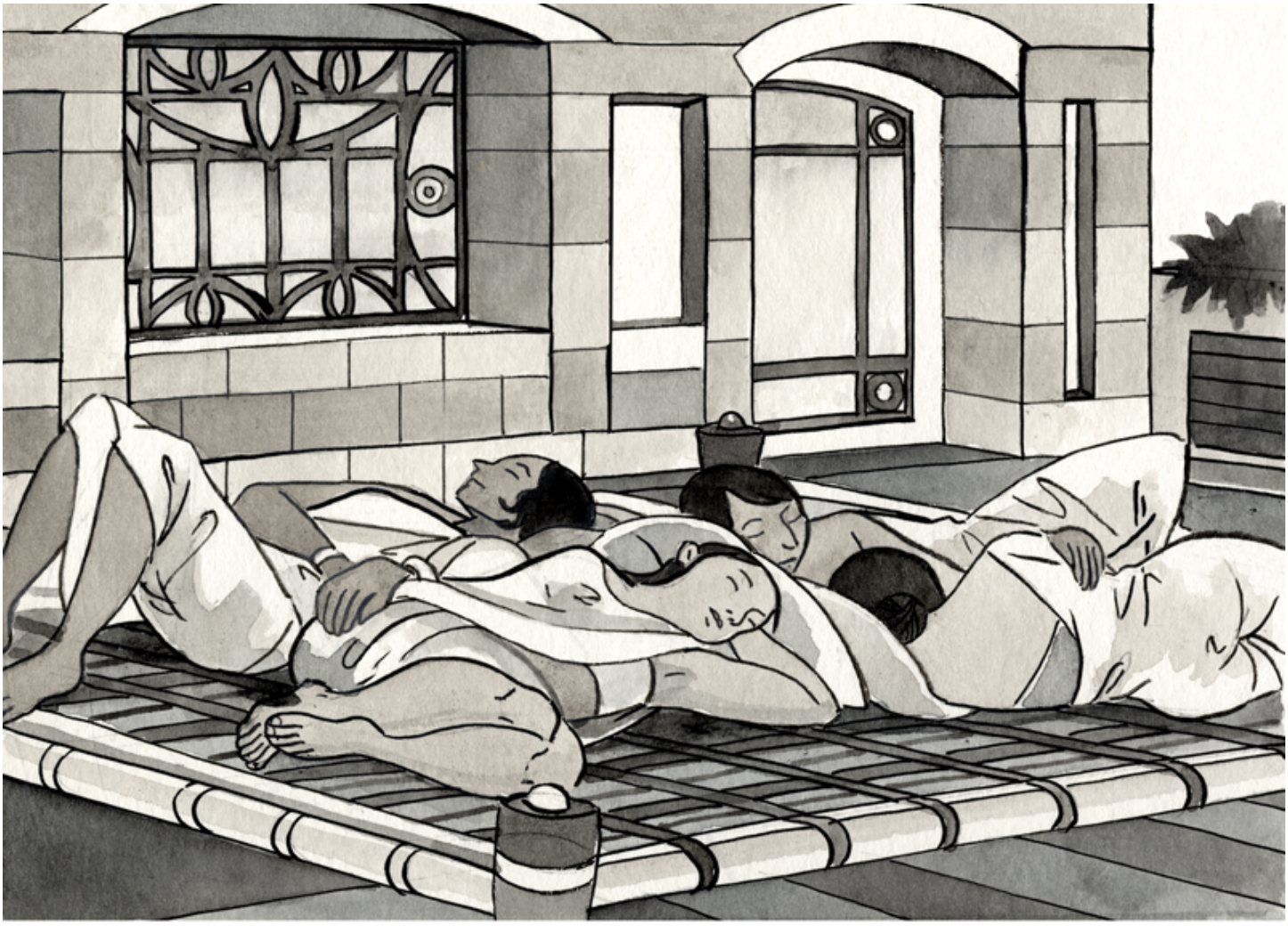
Mornings we would bathe in the brook that ran through the compound, scrubbing our skin with sand.



We'd eat breakfast out on the portico — pooris, dal, spiced spinach and paneer, tea.

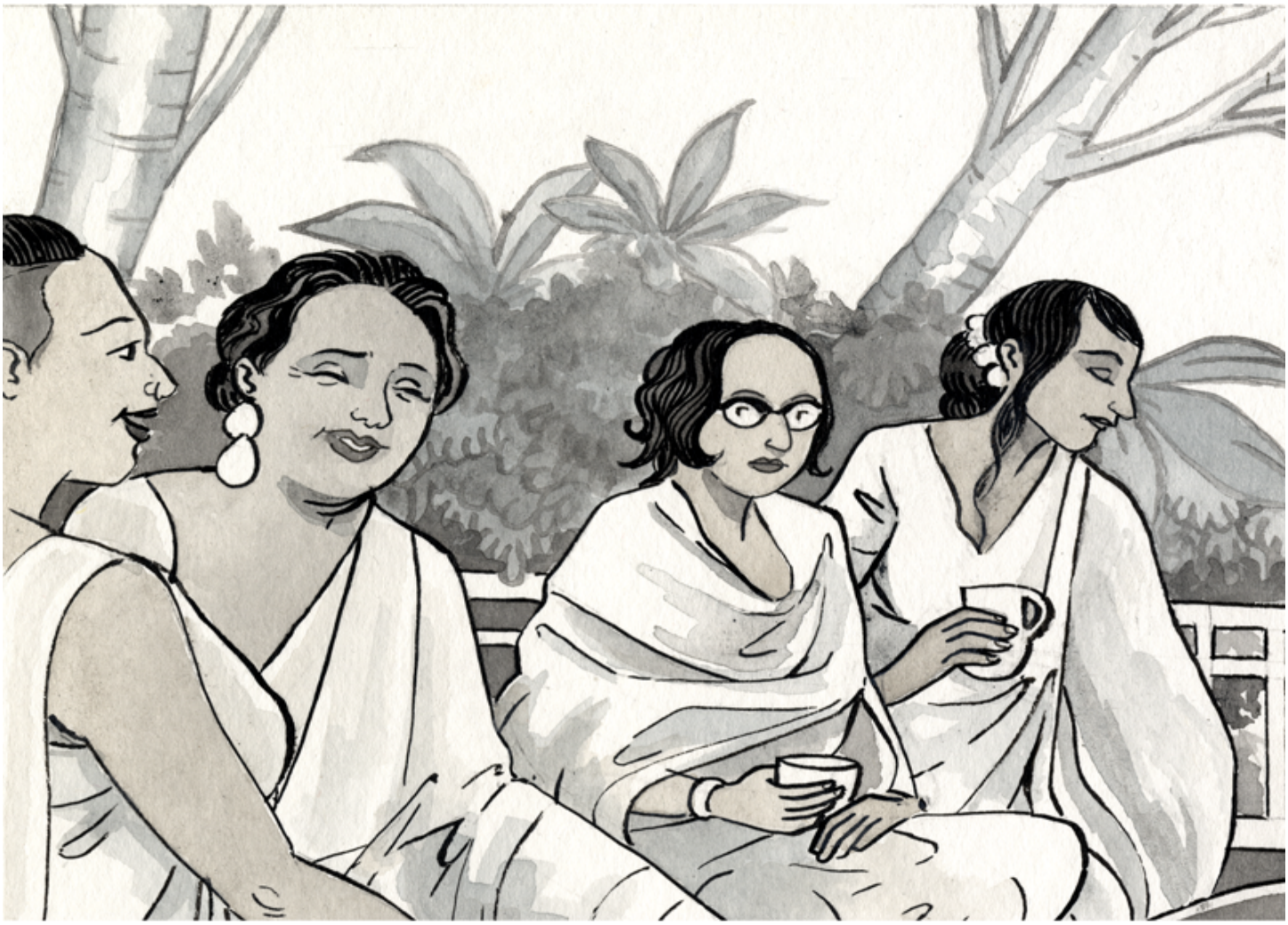
Some girls would spend the day tending to the garden. Some would retreat to the workshops where they made handicrafts — shoulder bags, purses, shawls, jewelry. Parveen had convinced *Matri-ji* to splurge on letting me buy drawing tools: pencils, brushes, ink, paper, cheap watercolor paints. I started painting scenes of Kinnar life — small postcard-sized pieces for which I would fashion thin bamboo frames, painted white.

Other girls brought their own skills to Sakhi Bagan: Aditha the architect was building a hothouse to grow tomatoes and cucumbers and was teaching a small coterie of girls to do design-build. Charu the chef would make and jar chutneys from the hothouse tomatoes, chilies and limes that we grew.



If the afternoons became too hot, as they did in the summer months, we'd gather ourselves in a small sprawl of bodies like a clowder of kittens, on large charpoys in the shade of the verandah, under the creaky ceiling fans.

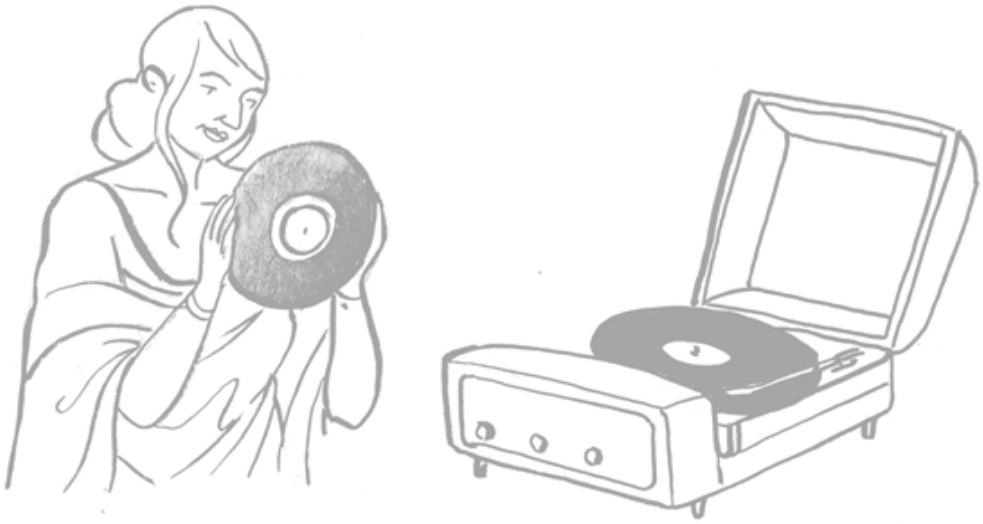
Weekends we'd take our veg to sell at the Pukkar green-market. We also sold our handicrafts — that earned us starred listings in all the travel guides. Charu's chutneys were also wildly popular, especially with fancy chefs and upper-class aunties. My paintings became something of a hit with the tourists, who paid handsomely for such 'authentic' work. I felt like I had to adopt an Amavarian accent when I spoke to them, to reinforce this idea. The other girls did their best not to crack up when I did this.



After we'd packed up at the greenmarket and returned to the compound, *Matri-ji* would encourage us to study the *Dhanvaparas*, ancient Amavarian spiritual texts that guided so many of our kinnar communities. I tried my best. But the other girls just fell into gossiping.

Or, if Charu was in the mood, we'd go over to her bungalow and put the radio on — Sunday afternoons the government station would play devotional music while we nattered away, huddled in Charu's oversized bed.

Some nights Parveen and two other girls would perform songs of longing at small music halls and bars. I was in charge of designing and drawing flyers for these shows. We'd pull in enough of an audience to make a modest sum which we put back into the compound's coffers. Matri-ji was happy for the supplemental income.



Other nights we'd listen to old 78s and read Amavarian love poetry, books we'd borrow from the compound library.

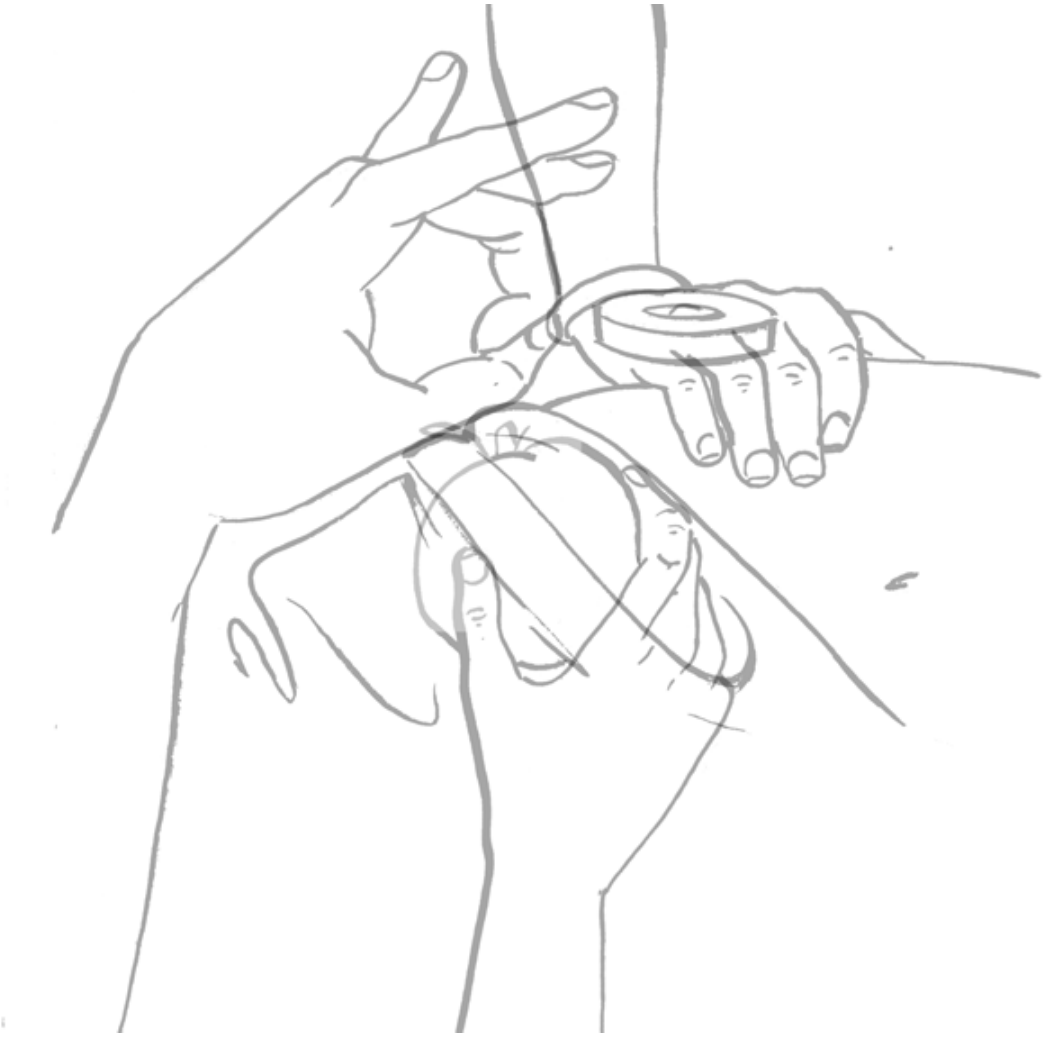
Mātrī-jī died eight months after my arrival.

Parveen, as the eldest of the girls, became the new Matri-ji by default. It fell on her to take charge of managing Sakhi Bagan.

With all her new responsibilities, Parveen was busy all day — applying for grants to keep the compound going, negotiating with government officials who threatened land grabs, speaking at Kinnar council meetings.

I did what I could to help her, even if it meant just being a warm body in bed, when she'd come back to our bungalow in the small hours, exhausted.

The rest of the girls grew to resent my closeness with Parveen. They thought I was trying to act the deputy, as second in command of the compound. I wasn't, of course—I just wanted to belong. But they started to regard me as an interloper. They called me "the tourist."



It became increasingly difficult to work with them. They stopped talking to me in the compound and shunned my attempts to help pack up at the market. I became a pariah. Parveen was too busy with her new duties to defend me at every occasion.

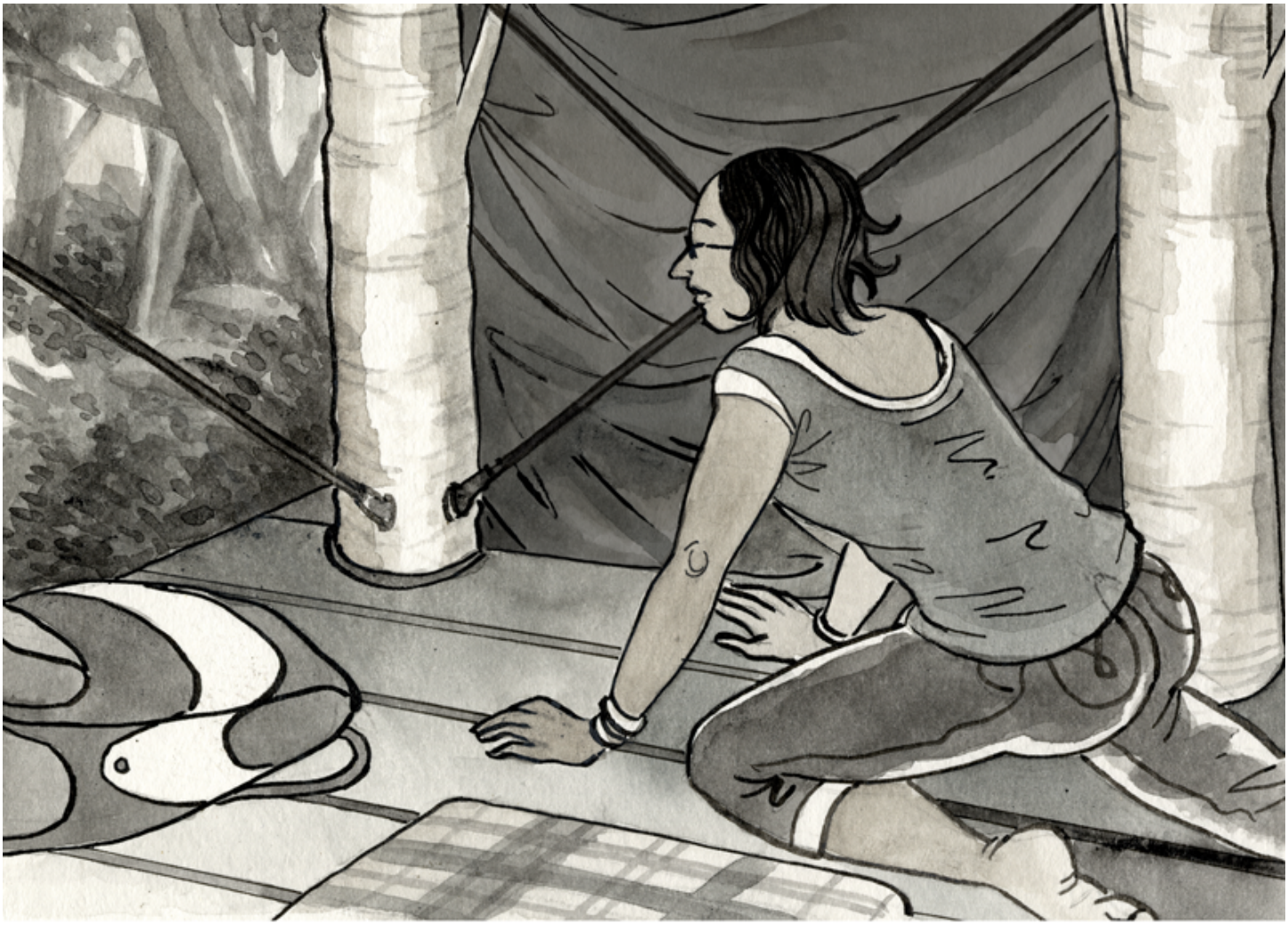
Even Aditha and Charu, who used to huddle with us on hot afternoons, abandoned me.

I grew weary of this kind of treatment. And I knew when I wasn't wanted. I told Parveen I thought maybe the girls were right, maybe I was a tourist. She said of course you're not. But even Parveen's charms and her belief in me couldn't overcome some prejudices.

One morning, before any of the girls were awake, I slipped out of the compound, rucksack on back.


I ambled away, following the sun, into the woods that skirted the boundary of Pukkar district.

I've built a small canopy-covered platform, raised above the dirt and earth, just as Aditha taught us, with tools, fasteners and fabrics that I'd stolen from the workshop.



I'm in a holding pattern, I guess. And this time, without even a provisional destination. The girls used to gossip about a nunnery nearby, where the sisters played at nurturing a rivalry with Sakhi Bagan.

I wonder if they would accept me into their order.

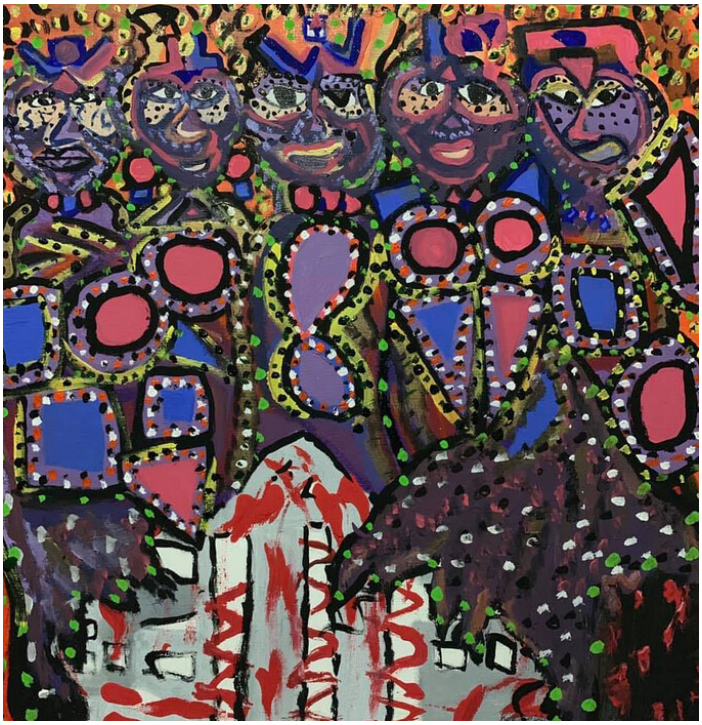
They'd probably see right through me anyway.

I imagine myself at the nunnery gates, pleading with the sisters to elicit some sympathy for my situation. I picture them, unmoved, too focused on their devotion to humor me.

Maybe only one of them, a tall girl with caramel skin will place her hand on my arm in quiet solidarity when I ask her:

X

Bishakh Som's work investigates the intersection between image and text, figure and architecture, architecture and landscape. She released two graphic novels in 2020: *Apsara Engine*, a collection of eight short stories, published by The Feminist Press, and *Spellbound*, a graphic memoir published by Street Noise Books. Her comics work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *We're Still Here* (the first all-trans comics anthology), *Boston Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, and many other places. She received the prestigious Xeric grant in 2003 for her comics collection *Angel*. She lives in Brooklyn.



Kineen Mafa, The Purple Ones, 2020. Arcylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Sultana Isham

Noise Is the Nigga of Sound

> Analogies push the boundaries of knowledge.
> —Stephon Alexander , *The Jazz of Physics*

The recalling of a lost memory shared by a group of people is an extremely powerful act. It forces us to take inventory of the things we trade and replace in pursuit of survival. Memory is wealth and participating in its conservation is a gift. In a speech I gave for a press conference organized by New Orleans activist Mariah Moore in June 2020, I shared the memory of Frances Thompson.[1] She was one of the five Black women and girls who testified before a Congressional committee investigating the Memphis Riots of 1866, during which white mobs massacred and attacked Black residents of that city. At the time it was the anniversary of her testimony and now as I write this, in November, I am reminded of this being the anniversary of her death at only thirty-six years old.

Novelist Alice Walker perfectly exemplified the practice of calling back what has been lost by uncovering the forgotten legacy of author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. I am thankful for Walker reminding us of Hurston, especially as Zora expanded the narrative of womanhood, independence, love, and legitimized our sound(s) and language(s) without permission from the dominant filter. Her work and that of so many others continuously provide inspiration to contribute to the historical trans narrative in the United States, and to embed that particular shared

memory into the collective Black consciousness with an interdisciplinary examination of the gendered, racialized violence towards Black women through sound, sexual assault, religion, biology, and capitalism.

"Blood memories," a term coined by choreographer Alvin Ailey, are the ancestral collection of experiences that link us all. In a 1986 video, during an introduction to his 1960 choreography *Revelations*, he states:

> The first ballets [that I choreographed] were ballets about my Black roots. I lived in Texas ... until I was 12 ... so I have lots of what I call blood memories ... about Texas, blues and spirituals and gospel music, ragtime music ... folk songs, work songs—all that kind of thing that was going on in Texas in the early '30s, the Depression years. And I had very intense feelings about all those things ... all of this is a part of my blood memory ... very intense, very personal [stuff].[2]

This kind of shared experience is cultural and cyclical and not limited by genetic relation. As Ailey illustrated, sound is a vehicle for this collection of memories. Sound carries memories and travels fastest through water. Since humans are mostly water, we are sound. In my own work as a composer, scholar, and ethnomusicologist, I, too, have been hypnotized by the mysterious power of memory and sound. There is an intuitive process in resurrecting old manuscripts of Black composers and Creole folk tunes.[3] Reanimating such works feels like unlocking what psychoanalyst Carl Jung called the "collective unconscious." He believed that we carry our ancestors' memories in our DNA and inherit both their gifts and trauma. When the body experiences trauma, sensory information is converted into a neurochemical track called the taxon system. This part of the brain functions to maximize survival by encoding what is learned from an experience. When someone doesn't survive a trauma, that information is passed on to those who are genetically similar. We assume that our minds exist solely in our physical bodies, but instead, we are linked to a higher order of intelligence all around.

I approach my research with an interdisciplinary psychoanalysis of the racialization and gendering of sound. Much of this conservation is owed to ethnomusicologist Camille Nickerson and to historian D. Antoinette Handy, author of *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras.* Handy illustrated the sexism and racism in elite and pop art and noted how instruments were gendered, as women were restricted mostly to piano and voice. This also translates to how many Black artists are disassociated with the genre they've been lazily assigned to for the purpose of radio.

In my study, I noticed something interesting about the etymology of "genre" and "gender." Both words come from the Latin word " *genus*," translating to "race." It was an enlightening discovery to learn that "race," "gender," "genre," and even "class" all come from the same word in Latin, thereby having the same function.

Since humans are sound, I began to hear speech as melodies, syllables as rhythms, texts as scores, and observed how narratives are genred. In what genre has the Black woman's vast narrative been categorized? "Noise" is often used pejoratively to describe a sound that is unpleasant, dissonant, or of no value. This wasn't always the case. "Noise" was originally used to describe a musical instrument, speech, or sound from any source. It wasn't until the fourteenth century that it became associated with disturbances, rumors, and scandals.[4] When analyzing the historic erasure of gendered, racialized violence towards Black women of all experiences, it is clear that we are genred as noise. Noise is the nigga of sound.

After the US Civil War, the symphony of Black women and girls who spoke out against sexual violence in the post-emancipated South was pivotal. For three days, starting on May 1, 1866, white men terrorized Memphis's Black neighborhoods with looting, arson, murder, and the rape of Black women and children. The Memphis Riots started with police brutality towards Black Union soldiers. These well-orchestrated attacks began during a joyous gathering on South Street, one day after the Black soldiers were released from service and were required to return their army weapons. According to historian Hannah Rosen, white terrorists killed at least forty-eight people and injured eighty.[5] They burned down over ninety homes, twelve schools, and four churches. They robbed at least one hundred people and even threatened to burn down the Freedmen's Bureau and the *Memphis Daily Post* newspaper. They also raped at least five freedwomen. At this time there was no law against raping Black people; racist white beliefs reinforced the idea that it was impossible to rape Black women.

These forces alone make Frances Thompson's testimony of the events crucial; hers was the most prominent voice featured in the US Congressional committee's final report on the Memphis Riots, which was used to help establish US citizenship for Black Americans. One question was constantly posed to Black Americans during the early Reconstruction era days after the Civil War: "Have you been a slave?" The Congressional committee immediately asked this question of everyone who testified after the riots. The practice of permanently defining someone by terms that they grew out of is harmful. Is it any less an attack because of somebody's past? The reduction of a person's narrative to a classification that often precedes their name, i.e., "former slave, ____," is dehumanizing. As Zora Neale Hurston believed, "Freedom is not a commodity that one race could give to another, nor take away."[6] The women responded to the committee with, "I have been but am free now."[7]

This specific inquiry into a person's past, as if what they used to be called is who they *really* are, is a trans narrative as well as historically a Black woman's narrative. Because our genders are sexualized and racialized, both narratives carry the stigma of sex work. Being enslaved as a Black woman was coupled with sexual violence, and this specific inquiry was used to measure one's proximity to "virtuous white womanhood." Black women were often punished for defending themselves then, and we still see this today in legal cases such as Cyntoia Brown's and CeCe McDonald's.

Frances Thompson was twenty-six at the time of the riots. After losing her family in the rebel army, she came to Memphis from Maryland, a newly freedwoman. She was disabled and walked with crutches due to cancer in her foot. She was living with her roommate, Lucy Smith, who also testified in court following the riots. Lucy, then sixteen, was born and raised in Memphis and had been free for four years. At the time of the riots, they lived in South Memphis on Gayoso Street and supported themselves as seamstresses. On Wednesday, May 2, 1866, at around two o'clock in the morning, seven Irishmen, two of whom were police officers, broke into their house while they were sleeping. They told the women to make them something to eat, so Frances and Lucy made strong coffee and biscuits.

The testimonies collected by the Congressional committee show that the sexual attacks did not start with aggression, but rather an assumed dominion over Black women—as if they were somehow indifferent to sex. When the men asked for sex, Frances responded that they were "not that sort of women." Her proclamation of her identity and sovereignty infuriated the intruders. Lucy also denied their advances and rejected the classification they ascribed to her. She testified, "They tried to take advantage of me, I told them that I did not do such things, and would not." The intruder "said he would make me … He drew their pistols and said they would shoot us and fire the house if we did not let them have their way with us."[8]

Over the next four hours these terrorists brutally attacked, raped, and robbed Lucy and Frances. They stole $300 and their clothing and threw their food into the nearby bayou. Frances was raped by four men and beaten by one while Lucy was choked and raped by another. Yet another man then began to rape Lucy but did not because she was so severely injured. "One of them … choked me by the neck … My neck was swollen up next day, and for two weeks I could not talk to anyone," said Lucy. Frances testified that the rapists noticed the quilts they were making for Union soldiers with the colors of the American flag. They also had pictures of Union soldiers in the house. One of them was Thompson's photo of General Joseph Hooker, which sparked more hostility. "They said they would not have hurt us so bad if it had not been for the pictures," Lucy testified.[9]

Hostility towards Union soldiers sparked the riots, and any connection or affinity a victim had for the Union was cited as an excuse to inflict harm and sexual violence on them. Other women who spoke out against sexual violence after the riots, including Ann Freeman, Lucy Tibbs, and Harriet Armour, had connections to Union soldiers. Ann Freeman, who spoke to the Freedman's Bureau, reported that a group of white men broke into her home and shouted that "they were going to kill all the women they caught with soldiers or with soldiers' things."[10] Lucy Tibbs moved to Memphis with her husband and two small children. She was about five months pregnant and lived close to Rayburn Avenue off of South Street where the riots occurred. Her husband worked on a steamboat and was away often. When Lucy Tibbs heard the first shooting on South Street and saw gangs of white men and boys with guns killing Black men and boys, she urged her brother, who had served, to leave town. He tried but was found dead in the bayou behind her house. Later that evening, a crowd of white men broke into her home, robbed her of $300, and one of them raped her. Tibbs knew that this was planned and believed that they knew all about her and her brother, whose money they stole. Harriet Armour was married to a Black Union soldier and lived on South Street around the corner from Tibbs. That same day two armed white men came to Harriet's house. Unlike the other women, Harriet knew one of her attackers: Mr. Dunn, who ran a grocery store on South Street. After learning that her husband was a soldier, they shut the door and both raped her multiple times.

This union of Black women and girls of all experiences testifying in court and declaring their citizenship in a country that had no laws of protection for them is a powerful moment in history. This union was pivotal in the Reconstruction era, and to my mind it was the first time we truly lived in a democracy. Reconstruction established our first antidiscrimination laws and integrated schools almost one hundred years before Ruby Bridges became known as the first Black student to integrate an elementary school in the South.

The Reconstruction era was the first time the narratives of Black women were genred as truth in official political arenas in the US. During this time, citizenship and the definition of rape were redefined to include Black women and girls. With Thompson's testimony being the most prominent in the data collected by the Congressional committee, we owe the establishment of our citizenship as Black Americans to the union of Black matriarchs spearheaded by Frances Thompson.

In 1876, ten years after the riots, Frances Thompson was arrested and fined $50 for "crossdressing," due to the suspicions of an alleged "well-known Memphis physician."[11] The charge was a misdemeanor, but because Thompson's testimony was so prominent in the final report on the Memphis Riots, her arrest was widely reported, most famously in an article in *The Pulaski*

Citizen headlined "A Colored Man Who Has Successfully Passed as a Woman for Twenty-Seven Years."[12] When this story came out, white supremacists launched a smear campaign across the whole country. The papers fabricated stories about Frances's "lewd" sexual conduct, affiliating her with prostitution. White supremacy used what we would now call Thompson's trans womanhood to discredit the Black women's testimony about white violence towards all Black Americans.

It also must be said that Thompson's race was a prominent feature in her public humiliation. The *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* described her as "the thick-lipped, foul-mouthed scamp," "black brute," and "negro scoundrel," making it clear that her race was the main motivation in the reporters' abuse.[13] Her gender was racialized. When white women transgressed gender norms to join the Confederate army, their morality was not comparably questioned. Not to mention that this country was stolen by white men in heels, wigs, and makeup in the first place.

Lucy Smith was also directly villainized by the press because of her sisterhood with Frances Thompson. They dismissed her testimony and invalidated both her "virtue" and her protest of rape by ignorantly insinuating that Lucy was "occupying the same bed with Thompson."[14] The papers didn't mention other names, but all of the Black women's testimony was genred as noise.

Thompson's arrest influenced the presidential campaign of 1876, after which came the compromise of 1877, formally ending federal Reconstruction. The *Memphis Daily Appeal* even nicknamed the Republican Party "The Frances Thompson Radical party," saying:

> Whenever you hear Radicals talking of the persecutions of the Black race in the south, ask them what they think of Frances Thompson and the outrages committed on her ... during the celebrated riots. These pretended outrages in the south are all of a piece with this Frances Thompson affair. It is out of such material that all their blood-and-thunder stories are manufactured.[15]

In addition to the abuse from the press, Frances was subjected to physical and sexual violence by the jail guards. She initially refused a medical examination, but later submitted after threats of force were introduced. Four white doctors declared that Frances was male and "had none of the developments of a woman."[16] Frances was placed on a chain gang for one hundred days because she couldn't pay the fine for her "crime," and was subjected to what *The Appeal* reported as "other acts which we cannot place in print."[17] On leaving jail, she moved to a cabin in North Memphis where freed people later found her alone and very ill. They brought her to a local hospital, where she died of dysentery on November 1, 1876.

I find it interesting that it took four physicians to classify her sex. The coroner's report of Thompson's death agreed with this classification. Why would it require four doctors and a medical examination to come to this resolution if she was not in some way ambiguous? One news report claimed that people knew Frances as a "hermaphrodite," and in one interview she described herself "of double sex" in response to their assessment of her being "unequivocally male."[18]

In defense of her womanhood, Thompson cited social practices and recognition by her community, not her body. In an interview with the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, she said that her imprisonment was unwarranted because she "was regarded always as a woman" and had worn female attire since she was a child. Her statement shows an instance of community respect for trans and intersex people during slavery. This expands the narrative beyond the binary analysis of gendered roles, as gender variant people were not uncommon. The extensive examination of Thompson also displays an example of the history of the medicalization of trans and intersex people in the US.[19] This experience is akin to how Black women were medicalized in the gynecological experiments James Marion Sims conducted on enslaved women without anesthesia.[20]

These events are the bedrock of the violence we see inflicted upon Black women and girls of all experiences today by the health care system, police brutality, pay inequity, murder, sex trafficking, "crimes against nature law," and the ignored epidemic of missing Black women and girls.[21] Such grave malfeasance does not just go away, and the trauma from this history has seethed into our psyche, as Jung discussed in his theories on ancestral memories.[22] It is overwhelmingly clear that white supremacy used transphobia to divide Black people, and we have all suffered the consequences. If we lived in a society or community where trans women and girls are women and girls, who would have the closest proximity to them? Cis women and girls. Historically, Black cis women paid the price first for their proximity to Black trans women. This shows that Black women of all experiences historically have fought patriarchy together. Black women were the first anti-rape activists, and this union of the Black matriarch established citizenship for all Black Americans.

Stories like these also provide historical context to the ongoing witch hunt against Black women who transgress gender expectations, whether they are trans or not. It reared its ugly head again last year, when the forty-fifth US president released a memo on how to spot trans women in homeless shelters.[23] Transmisogyny is misogyny; many women who are not trans have the same features listed in

the memo, and Black women experience homelessness at higher rates. This union of sisterhood looks different today. The challenges that trans women experience are often paired with the conditions of gay or queer men. This is because we don't live in a world that acknowledges gender diversity. Some communities do, but not nearly enough, and children suffer the worst consequences. Because we live in a cis-sexist, heteronormative, ableist, classist, racist, white-supremacist, patriarchal, Christian society, both groups share in the trauma inflicted by femmephobia from the time they are children. Trans women and some gay or queer men have a shared experience of being chastised in specific ways for exerting femininity, thereby creating a shared childhood trauma. Because trans women are not a monolith, this bond varies. Some are in deep community with gay or queer men while others, like myself, are not. Gay men are often the gatekeepers of femininity, as in when they tell women of all experiences what is desirable or attractive to men. This dynamic plays out constantly in media, from fashion to ballroom culture. Gender and sexuality are different, and the constant pairing of these issues in public policy sends a confusing message and fails to acknowledge our concrete gendered experiences. White women can create movements and tell stories and not mention Black women and those of color. Gays and lesbians can do the same and boldly practice transphobia. However, when Black women of trans experience speak, we are expected to fight for everyone. That is a Black woman's narrative.

Being a member of any marginalized group with a legacy that has been erased makes it challenging to question or dislike the pioneers we are "supposed" to revere. I feel this dilemma constantly, being all of the things that I am, as I have never resonated with Marsha P. Johnson as a Black woman. Johnson is often heralded as the anointed one in Black trans rhetoric. Frances Thompson and Marsha P. Johnson were fighting for two different things with two very different groups of people. Marsha fought specifically for gay rights with many white gay men. Frances fought for Black liberation and humanity with other Black women.

Frances lived 150 years ago, and even though the words "transgender" or "transsexual" did not exist, she still used language and maneuvered in a way that I can relate to. Marsha used "he" and "she" pronouns and moved between male and female presentations, using the words "drag queen," "gay," and "transvestite" to describe themself. By definition, a transvestite is a man who has an affinity for wearing female clothing on occasion. None of those words are "woman." In Marsha's time, the medical-industrial complex already used the word "transsexual" to define a female who was assigned male at birth. These distinctions are clear to me and, in my opinion, to blame the times is lazy because all of these words existed, and Marsha chose and moved through the world using other terms. There are some drag queens who legally change their name, get breast implants, or even silicone injections, but still maneuver in a way that is expansive and congruent to the assumption that they intentionally move between the binary. To me, that is a uniquely different genre. I believe we have enough in common to stand together, and I also believe that it is important for gender-nonconforming people to commune with others who intentionally live beyond the binary, sovereign from people of trans experience who don't. I believe their lack of spaces centered for them can create an unnecessary resentment for women of trans experience. Personally, I can only relate so far with someone who is assigned male at birth, uses all pronouns, and moves between male and female presentations. How could Marsha be a leader to a movement and not understand the words they used to describe themself?

I don't think it's incorrect to call Marsha gender-nonconforming (though shortly before her death in 1992, Marsha stated in a video, later featured in the documentary *Pay It No Mind: Marsha P. Johnson*, that they were a boy; she said this while telling a story about feeling confused when a man thought they were a woman.)[24] Marsha's narrative evolved beyond their desires in the 1970s, and this should not be erased. Gender-nonconformity is sacred, and those who are Black have been racialized in ways that make them more vulnerable to violence than those who are not Black. However, being a woman of trans experience is distinct, and adorning oneself in mutable feminine aesthetics does not make a trans woman. This has reduced our being to pure aesthetics with no reverence for the sacrifices and spiritual journey that are coupled in our experiences. Such misnomers continue today with people such as Big Freedia, who has explicitly said multiple times that they are not a trans woman.[25]

Choosing to remember Marsha differently is disrespectful to their legacy. Marsha and Sylvia Rivera, who are often cited as the initiators of the Stonewall Riots, are both documented as saying that they did not throw the first brick (or Molotov cocktail).[26] The mythology and miseducation around these figures has affected how we see trans women and how trans women see themselves. Why create a lie when the truth is so much better? Love Marsha for who they were, not who you want them to be. The ethnocentric retelling of history to fit a desired contemporary narrative comes from a need to display our legacy and existence in a way that can be monetized. This revisionism has also contributed to the confusion about who exactly a trans woman is, which in turn can fuel transphobia. Regardless of Marsha not being the person capitalism wants *him* to be, the machine makes money off of her likeness for pride parades because the most valuable Black person is a dead one. We are not encouraged to remember Frances because she is not profitable, and revering her and her union with other Black women doesn't benefit capitalism. It empowers Black women.

It's impossible to conclude this discourse without mentioning religion. Islam and Christianity have greatly influenced the Black imagination, and have also been used as tools to reinforce heterosexism and patriarchy in the West. For example, Christian ministers who are women or queer are not universally welcomed. In fact, the Church is the most segregated institution, and the female bloodline is excluded from Abrahamic religions. I am not a follower of Christ, but it must be noted that Jesus spoke of gender-variant people in the Bible. In his time, people who were assigned male at birth and had various genital appearances or were castrated were called eunuchs. Theologians debate who exactly eunuchs were, but according to those who wrote the Bible, Jesus was very clear. In Matthew 19:12 he outlines three possibilities: "For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it."[27]

This classification of being born a eunuch, made one by others, or having grown into one is clear. In my personal favorite passage on the subject, Isaiah 56:3–5, Jesus says,

> ... neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus saith the Lord unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off.[28]

Jesus's affirmation is clear. His love for gender-variant people inspired him to expand his own language by creating a name beyond the binary in memory. Some people might be surprised to learn that many, if not most, of the women and elders in my community practice Christianity.

For those who have retained reverence for our indigenous deities like the Orishas, please recognize that you are praying to gender-variant beings. It's peculiar to have an altar for Obatala or Oshunmare while simultaneously questioning the legitimacy of your Black trans family and ancestors. How can someone love Oshun, a deity about whom there are *pitakís* (parables) of giving the girls sex changes, but stutter when it comes to including Black trans women and girls as your sisters, daughters, and mothers? The choice to ignore this noise is not our natural state of being; our ancestors acknowledged at least five genders, as pictured in the image that accompanies this piece. We can use all pronouns to describe the divine, since we are told that we are a reflection of their wonder. How did we go from being healers and advisors in the community to having people question our existence?

The sounds of our experiences connect us, and the shame in our noises divides us. As Alice Walker says, "It's better to be whole than to be 'American.'"[29] Black trans history is your history, and the score of this Black woman's narrative is a symphony of revelations. Our power is historical, and we are not new or exceptional. Although the women whose stories are relayed in this text were silenced, their noise lives inside us, showing that there is no opposite to sound.

The ongoing history of gendered, racialized violence seethes through all dimensions, and as Black women we have to join and dance with the feral power of noise. Shame is what causes us to forget our collective past, and we must explore the noise underneath the silence to remember. I'm blessed to help build that sound path with other BIPOC women and gender-variant people at Alphabet Sound Observatory, an audio engineering library in New Orleans, with my colleague free feral.[30] Our noise is greater than any category can hold. Noise is the source of all sounds, and we will not always understand or like what we hear.

Sometimes that noise can make us upset, but we also know that the dissonance is triggering something inside that we know to be true. Sometimes that noise can save our lives and influence us to be who we were always destined to be. Whether one passes the noise or not, it will always remain, making it that much louder and difficult to ignore. Willful ignorance is violent, and silence is an illusion that will never keep anyone safe. As poet Kineen Mafa writes in the closing lines of "The Channeling of Frances Thompson":

> Hence this great dawn ...
> If anything is gained, then nothing was in vain.
> Perhaps ... The Big Bang shattered something, but it was not us.
> For it is not we who are broken, but the mirror that we see ourselves in.
> We must leave this plane now, but know ...
> We are sovereign, natural, necessary, whole and ever near.
> Remember this my family, my tribe, my people ... my essence, my spirit ... remember this ... always.

X

Sultana Isham is a film composer, violinist, writer, and ethnomusicologist based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Sultana's film-composer credits range from avant-garde, horror, fantasy, and archival. Sultana was a researcher and the composer for the documentary *All Skinfolk Ain' t Kinfolk*, about the historic mayoral race between two Black women in New Orleans directed by Angela Tucker, which

premiered on PBS. She was the additional composer for *Ailey* directed by Jamila Wignot, which debuted at Sundance Festival 2021. As a scholar she has lectured at universities and conferences, sharing her research with a psychoanalysis of sound, lineage, and memory. She is also the cofounder of Alphabet Sound Observatory, an audio engineering library for Black and Indigenous women and gender-variant artists of color. Sultana is a composer fellow with the Sundance Institute and her upcoming film score, "The Neutral Ground," is for a feature film about the removal of confederate monuments, directed by C. J. Hunt. The film will broadcast nationally on the PBS show POV in late 2021.

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Tamarra interviewed by Riksa Afiaty

To Build a Better Workspace for Us

We have known each other a long time, but it was in 2019, when I saw the Ludruk Desa Festival in Jombang, that we reunited and I found out that Tamarra was researching cross-dressing culture. We first met in 2014 in Bandung, Indonesia. At the time, Tamarra was preparing for an event called Bandung New Emergence Volume 5, part of an exhibition at Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, working with fellow artist Mulyana under the name marayana (Tamarra and Mulyana). Our introduction started with a can of beer. Since we live and work in different cities, I can only follow Tamarra's work from afar. Tamarra is a performance artist who works with identity and body. Together with nonbinary friends, Tamarra formed a singing group that goes by the name AMUBA, which Vice Indonesia and Vice Asia covered in 2019.[1] *As Tamarra recalls:*

> *I thought the name had at least two meanings. The first is that the amuba ("amoeba" in English) is a flexible creature. It is unicellular. In human language, "amuba" doesn't have a singular gender. Amuba don't have to choose any gender. An amuba can reproduce itself. Second, the fun part, which is "Amukan Banci." It's hard to translate, but maybe "Shrieking Sissy" would fit best.*

Today we sit down to talk about Tamarra's involvement in non-binary communities and ongoing work on how they live their lives in different cultures and ethnicities in several regions in Indonesia. The journey started in 2016 in Sulawesi, with the Bissu community, and continued with the ludruk art troupe in Jombang and Mojokerto, both located in East Java. Now it's on hiatus due to the pandemic.

The conversation centers on ludruk, a traditional art originating in East Java performed by groups of male and nonbinary actors portraying female characters. Traveling from stage to stage, ludruk troupes bring with them critical social commentary, stories of everyday folk life, and vernacular jokes accompanied by gamelan music.

As a consequence of so-called civilization and modernity, we are now dealing with the erasure of customary cultural and aesthetic forms.

I can see enthusiasm resonating throughout the country and abroad for what Tamarra is doing with the spirit of ludruk: the preservation of value, resistance by existence, and countering the dominant, populist systems of social and cultural order brought by the elite.

—Riksa Afiaty

Riksa Afiaty: We met in Jombang during the Ludruk Festival, and since then I've been following your work on

Tamarra, Emma Frankland, Morgan M. Page, Gein Wong and Travis Alabanza in We Dig at Ovalhouse London, 2019. Photo: Rosie Powell.

transgender women's culture and crossdressing. But first, let's talk more about your research in East Java.

Tamarra: Ludruk is a performing art that functioned as public entertainment in the colonial era. You can find it easily in Indonesia's East Java region, especially Jombang and Mojokerto. Ludruk involves transgender women, who in this context are called various local terms: " *tandak*," " *travesti*," " *siban*," " *banci*," or " *waria*." The term " *waria*" is a combination of the Indonesian words " *wanita*" (woman) and " *pria*" (man).[2]

When did the waria culture emerge? Around 1910, a farmer named Santik began hustling as a *lerok*, a busker who paints his face with makeup. After a while, Santik's creation attracted many people and was well-received by audiences in the market, where he always performed. Santik performed a play, creating a character called Besut through which he narrated a story in *kidungan*, or singsong—at times in rhyme. "Besut" then became "Besutan," which refers to a form centering on a one-man narrator who tells a story that conveys good values or messages of struggle.

Apart from Besutan, Santik created a female figure named Rusmini, who was a symbol of the homeland or motherland. At that time, it was very difficult to find actresses, so men dressed up to play Rusmini.

Santik used his performance not only as entertainment, but also as a medium for resistance to colonialism. Santik was the great-grandson of Mbah Sadran, who fought under the leadership of Pangeran Diponegoro during the Java War (1825–30, against the Dutch Empire).

RA: The historian Benedict Anderson has said that in Indonesia there is a belief that people who can fuse the elements of woman and man are extraordinary humans, who can directly relate to the supernatural world.[3] How do you see this position? Has it evolved? If so, what still remains?

T: I traveled to South Sulawesi to meet other nonbinary people. There I learned that in the past they had a noble position as the mediators between kings and the gods or goddesses. They are still cultural stakeholders, but their roles are more diverse today, ranging from farmers to beauty parlor owners.

You might recall the notion of *bissu*, right? South Sulawesi peoples have five genders: *oroane*, or male; *makkunrai*, or female; *calabai*, or men with feminine gender expression; *calalai*, or women with masculine gender expression; and *bissu*, which is the fifth gender, and which symbolizes the completion of a gendered balance.

I first went there for personal reasons, in 2016. I was so frustrated about my sexual orientation and felt it was so hard to build a relationship with a man. I heard that there were sacred transgender women who were celibate. That was the first reason, actually: I wanted to learn how to be celibate. There is no knowledge about being celibate in Islam, and of course I can't learn from the Catholic institution. I was also curious about how *bissu* live their lives. Then I learned about *La Galigo*.[4] It is a manuscript or book from the ancient Bugis culture that tells the story of the five genders, including the *bissu*.

However, today there are two different versions of *La Galigo*, one of which is the Islamic version. Some of the original version is still stored in Kotabaru, South Sulawesi, while the largest part of the manuscript is in the Netherlands. That version is still being translated into Indonesian and English. It is important to note that some indigenous peoples still practice their ancestral beliefs.

RA: Were you curious to look at the old manuscript in regard to what happened in precolonial times?

T: Yes. We can also see relics in some temples in Java, too, if we want to see the precolonial version of gender, as the complexity of ancient texts makes them hard to read. It's rare to find an educated person who can translate and contextualize them in our present. We can use puppetry (*wayang*) to talk about queerness in Javanese mythology. We can refer to the character of Arjuna, or to Srikandhi's legendary fighting skills. Srikandhi is the reincarnation of Amba, a princess who magically goes through a genital change and is born with a female body.

RA: It reminds me of the epic story *Mahabharata*.[5] In the chapter "Living in Disguise," all the Pandavas are in exile and hiding. Arjuna disguises himself as a woman to teach dance and singing under the name Wijaya or Brihanala. Arjuna's plan is to wear a women's long-sleeved shirt to cover the bowstring scars on his arm. He also wears bracelets, necklaces, and earrings, and has his face made-up as a woman. When Arjuna refuses a woman's advances, he is cursed to be a "sissy." After that, whenever he wants, he can act like a woman.

If we look closely, the depiction of the figure of Arjuna in the Nusantara version of the *Mahabarata* story, especially in *wayang orang* (*wayang* performances played by actors), Arjuna's figure is described as gentle, and having a slender, woman-like, femme aesthetic. The character is sometimes played by a woman.

T: Can you imagine going through kind of transformation back then? Seriously?! There were no razors, so how does he shave? Does he wear a wig, does he wear a headscarf? How does he transform his face into a woman? Can you imagine that kind of transformation taking place through

Photograph series courtesy of Tamarra.

make-up? Maybe he uses magic.

Since I study history, I realized that in the world of academia, a manuscript is not really used as a primary source because it is considered very metaphorical; it talks about things that are considered impossible. Most of these things are occult, mystical, or mythological, and when they are studied in academia, they are alienated from their cultural context. Scholars require evidence-based material, while the manuscript is considered inaccurate or has no logical explanation in terms of the reality that we believe in today.

We can also refer to *Serat Centhini*, the nineteenth-century compilation of Javanese tales in verse.[6] Within it we have Cabolang's story, which narrates a lot of sexual exploration with both the feminine and masculine sides that exist in him. Of course he exchanges these roles subtly through sexual activity either with cis men or cis women.

RA: The colossal work of *Centhini* explains class politics, gender, female behavior, sissy dancers, sexual relations, sexual orientation, and homosexuality. According to Benedict Anderson, the chronicles are considered an example of esoteric knowledge, but they also directly replicate the conditions of Javanese society in the nineteenth century.[7] One character who does just that is Cabolang, who is an amateur artist who also possesses magic knowledge, plays musical instruments and dances, is inviting, and can amaze an audience.

T: A similar role—namely the agent of cultural tradition—is common in the art of certain Indonesian regions today. For instance, you see it in *reog*, which is a dance involving a large tiger mask plumed with peacock feathers and hobbyhorse dancers, commonly believed to have originated in Ponorogo.[8] The *gemblak* is a character played by a younger male dancer, while the *warok* is in charge of leading the show. Their relationship has aspects of artistic mentorship, of father and son, but also a vague romantic/sexual bond. In Jombang and Mojokerto there's ludruk, and you can say that sexual orientation becomes organic when men become waria.

RA: During the Dutch colonial period, there was the "vice scandal" of 1938–39, which was a remarkable mass arrest of homosexuals by special vice squads (*zedenpolitie*).[9] And before that the police targeted immoral acts: prostitution and the trafficking of children and women. This turned out to be about maintaining propriety, about "civilizing" colonial society. Today we still hear about "maintaining public order," also known as the illusion of "peace and order" (*rust en orde* in Dutch).

T: I think it's "natural" that the Dutch negated all of that; the roots of colonialism are Catholic. They brought missionaries, they brought Abrahamic religions, they punished Sodom and Gomorrah.

In Indonesia there has been much discussion of the Criminal Code since 2016, and many have pointed out that it is a legacy of the Dutch colonial era, which introduced "modern" colonial values. To this day, there are several laws that criminalize things that are very private, whether it's sexuality or adult cohabitation (on a consensual basis, without coercion or violence). We bear witness to how Indonesia's neighborhood associations, called Rukun Tetangga, can authorize raids on homes inhabited by couples who don't have marital status. At a higher level of authority, the state can criminalize "strange behavior" in public spaces or make what in modern terms are LGBTQ+ people's lives and actions "immoral" and punish them.

RA: Let's discuss the issue of sexuality during colonial times. It relates to racism, in that there was a colonial authority for the enactment of regulations on sexuality and gender norms.

T: We can trace the gendered repression of Indonesian women to the idea of *pergundikan*, where Dutch men had marriage-like relationships with local women without being legally married. The role of the woman called a "*nyai*" is to work and serve her "master." In addition to satisfying the lust of white men, she has to look after the house: "*dapur*, *sumur*, *kasur*" (kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom).

RA: As with many other folk arts, ludruk empowers proletarian struggle and resistance to authority. Ludruk has powerful tools to influence the masses. Would you like to draw out the ludruk context during Indonesia's 1965 tragedy?

T: During my research into Karya Budaya, a ludruk group founded in Mojokerto in 1962, its founder's son, Abah Edhi, told me that in the sixties ludruk was affiliated with Lekra (Peoples Cultural Institute), an artist organization in the 1950s and 60s that articulated the importance of arts of the people's spirit.[10] Although officially Lekra was not an organization of the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party),

the revolutionary artistry of the reality of the lower classes, particularly that of the peasant, is a potential source of ideological similarity.

At that time, there were ludruk performances that had titles like *Mass Circumcision for Angels* and *The Great Allah Throws Wedding Party for His Children*, which were considered blasphemous. These plays basically aimed to offer a secular view and to counter feudal power. Many Muslims were disturbed by ludruk, so the people involved in it were accused of being communists.

RA: I'll come back to your work on ludruk with the Karya Budaya group. For now, how do you see the life of transgender people in Indonesia today, based on your experience?

T: Overall, the majority of waria work as buskers or as sex workers. If they have enough money or are from a privileged family, they might start a business, usually related to the beauty industry, like a hair salon.

But it is hard for many transgender women to get support from their families. They all struggle in different ways. But those who are accepted by their families have a life that looks much better than that of other transgender people. For example: Oscar Lawalata, a well-known Indonesian designer, recently came out publicly and now wants to be called Asa. Then there are other celebrities like Dena Rachman, who created a shoe brand called Drama, and Kevin Halim—they were both able to study abroad and received full support from their families.

It's really complex, and often those who are in a good position are in the entertainment realm. The singer Lucinta Luna, for example, has appeared in many TV programs. Whether she is aware of it or not, her position boosts the idea that transgender people exist outside of television.

The idea of existence extends to acceptance. We always talk about the acceptance demanded by waria people. Lucinta Luna's success in the realm of entertainment is also a form of acceptance. There are many haters, but that's not the point.

RA: But does Lucinta Luna's acceptance extend to other waria people? In daily life, queer and gender nonconforming people still have to explain themselves. Society tends to bully them when they do wrong, blame their orientation, and question the motivation of their actions. As if they can't possibly be a good person. Society

demonizes them.

T: I also think about the acceptance of our waria friends from our closest circle. I want to go back and ask, what kind acceptance do you mean? Because if you are really not accepted, then, for example, there's no way you can live here in Jogja, there's no way you can stay in Jogja.

What is the scope of acceptance that you want? Well, if you already have that knowledge, you will then automatically strategize about how to achieve the acceptance that matches the scope you want. Not constantly blaming the government, neighbors, or other parties. This is complicated, I mean … sssshh … if the conversation is like this, I can be in a position to defend my friends but also be in a position to dissent from them.

RA: You are an artist and a nonbinary person who is currently studying history, doing research. How do you navigate this?

T: For me, I know very well the extent of my acceptance and the extent of the equality I want. Why did I wait ten years before I went to college? Because I needed a stable income. I realized as an artist who did not have a good income, I could be overloaded, so I waited. Eventually, I decided to pursue my studies because I wanted to be equal to other scholars, to prove that I could enter college and express myself on campus.

If knew that if I wanted to be equal to other people, I had to find the kind of jobs that common people have. In 2013 I applied to Via-Via Restaurant, Tours & Events to become a guide. I have been a server in a coffee shop, and I have also worked at a mini-mart.

Anyway, in the case of waria, it's a complicated. It's different from gay or lesbian people. Some waria friends ran away from home when they were little and spent most of their life on the street. Theirs is the jungle mindset of "survival of the fittest." If you're hungry, you go hunting or working, you go out to have something to eat, then you feel full. Tomorrow you repeat it all again, so it continues. There are no strategies for saving for the future.

Then the biggest burden in my opinion comes from some of the NGOs. Waria people are constantly positioned as puppets, controlled. They are positioned as a minority, powerless, marginal, as the victim. They are lured by materiality. They need to have more support that is mental and spiritual, to have a better life.

"In no time, it will become history"—huh?! My psychologist suddenly texted me, look!

RA: I believe your career as an artist started with the Makcik Project. What was this project, and what was your involvement?

T: The Makcik Project worked with transgender women in Jogyakarta. It was initiated by artists and curators in 2011–13. At that time I was a busker and a sex worker. I learned many things from this project, including how to hang out with people outside my own community. When you break your walls, you will of course encounter many things in this world, like knowledge, relationships, experiences, etc.

My departure from Makcik can also be read very easily. I was one of the waria involved in the Makcik Project, then I chose to become an artist. I began to learn new things, especially related to artmaking. The Makcik Project changed my way of thinking.

Of course, the journey to become an artist has not been as smooth as I imagined. For example, the first time I collaborated with another artist, my name was not mentioned during the exhibition. I was not considered and not recognized at all even though I was there. Things like that then became a whip propelling me forward, and I didn't want to give up.

Financially speaking, busking and sex work are more profitable. The way I live now can be measured against my past when I was a busker. Now I am also more prosperous in the sense of being self-sufficient. That gives me a status beyond being considered a victim, marginalized by the state or society.

RA: But to get to that position, do you feel that you have been privileged?

T: Mine is not a matter of privilege or capital. You can call me shameless yet curious! Hahaha.

RA: So you want all of your friends to have those qualities?

T: Hahaha, not in that way! I mean I know how to make the most out of a situation. For example, when we went on a studio visit during the Makcik Project, my friends just listened. Because I'm shameless, I asked a lot of questions out of curiosity. If I'm really interested in an object or approach, I'll ask and ask, and demand that others teach me.

There was a leap forward in the Makcik Project. I am used to being interviewed in a way where my story is being collected as data or testimony. You can earn some money from this kind of encounter. In Makcik there were no financial transactions like this, so instead my automatically transactional mind looked for other things to get from the project, like skills, knowledge, networking, or whatever. So through Makcik, money turned into other kinds of value.

RA: Let's talk about your practice as an artist, particularly your photo work with the Karya Budaya ludruk group. I am interested in your performance of multiple identities.

T: It's very close to how I perform as a person. Changing from one to the other can't be avoided in the wider community when it comes to survival in Indonesia, and I realize that. For example, when I go to the hospital or when I manage state bureaucracy, I have to perform as Adam.[11]

RA: How about your cross-dressing research?

T: That's all my life. You have to understand that feminine and masculine sides exist in all bodies and that they can be exchanged very subtly. The expression of that mastery is to cross-dress. I articulate all of that in my photos taken in Mojokerto with the members of the Karya Budaya group.

My goal with these photos was to archive ludruk costumes and their history. Each costume has its own history and its own reasons for existing. None of this knowledge had been archived because it belongs to an oral culture, so for me it's very important to document ludruk characters and

Tamarra in We Dig at Ovalhouse London, 2019. Photo: Rosie Powell.

figures.

On the other hand, it is also important for Karya Budaya and for other people to have my work as an archive for future reference. Karya Budaya already has a fairly complete archive of the works I digitized. Other archives, the tangible ones, like awards and notes, have been damaged. The roles performed by each of the ludruk characters are spoken over and over again through verbal communication. I help to document this speech in various forms: notes, videos, movies, photos. As I learned in my historical studies, everything can be considered a text.

In my opinion, these archives are important, not only for me and for the current members of Karya Budaya. I also hope that they demonstrate to other ludruk groups that archives are important, history is important. Ludruk is not only a spectacle but also a medium for recording the sociopolitical development of the surrounding community.

RA: Tell us about your negotiations with the performers in Karya Budaya. You emphasize on the one hand that the photographs are the work of Tamarra the artist, yet on the other they are an archive for Karya Budaya. The way they can use the photographs is different from the way you can use them, right? For example, they can't show them as artworks in an exhibition.

T: Yes, the photographs aren't to be sold or traded; they only function as an archive for Karya Budaya.

RA: How did you make a deal with them?

T: Abah Edi offered me an artist's contract with the group. I was surprised. Perhaps he also felt that my work helped them to recollect or recompose their story. What surprised me the most was when I found out why these characters weren't archived: the idea of archiving simply has no strong presence in their tradition. During my research, I was awakened to how my visual practice could work to

archive traditional art materials that are usually part of an orally disseminated body of knowledge.

RA: The performativity in your work opens up the possibility of staging new iterations of a play, a character, a gender. Why did you decide to perform some of the ludruk figures yourself?

T: First, because I didn't have the budget to pay ludruk performers to play all of the characters themselves. There were also time constraints. And I was thinking of the makeup artists. The one who helped me was Ms. Yeyen, one of the *tandak* (transwomen) in Karya Budaya. She was already overwhelmed enough!

These considerations are why I chose to work with my own body. There was a question I really wanted to pose to the wider community, especially to waria people: Why are you happy to be in just one group, which negates other possibilities? The point is to understand that femininity and masculinity are in everyone's body. That's all. The rest you just perform. This has nothing to do with your sexual orientation, your gender expression, what kind of sexual behavior you engage in; it doesn't have anything to do with all that. This is our problem in society, right? When it comes to talking about LGBTQ+ issues, it's a cliché in my opinion to always talk merely about the crotch.

RA: What's behind your preference for using your own body, not another person's body? I remember a performance where you just repeated "Hello, my name is Tamarra" over and over again for an hour. Was it about reclaiming, or renaming? Is it a matter of reappropriating your trans-body?

T: That was right at the beginning, when I first became a performance artist. Because of various limitations, I concluded, "my body is my stage" rather than being tied to a "stage" or a space.

When I narrate the knowledge I have learned from one of my research subjects, I choose to present my own body, not the body of the person I researched. I can't help but be part of them. I am of the same community.

There are many ways to change one's face in order to perform a different character—through makeup, for example. But I don't want to represent other people in my work. Representing their knowledge is the key.

RA: Is that related to the idea of "staging" in both ludruk and in your everyday life? In both, you are appearing and performing, so it's like ludruk and everyday life mirror each other.

T: The space you're in determines whether your gender expression is accepted. It could be that the people in the ludruk group are accepted on stage, but when they're off stage and mingling with the community, they are not necessarily accepted.

The ludruk players not only perform in their own village; they are also nomadic, traveling to other villages to perform. When the show starts, people come, but only the ones who can accept and be entertained by the ludruk spectacle. Of course, people who are anti- *travesti* or anti-*tandak* will not come.

So you also need to specify a certain scope and stage for gender expression in order to determine what its agency is. With my new short-haired look, my family and friends who expect me to "come back" say that from their normative perspective, they want me to be straight Adam Muloh. They like my new look! My LGBTQ+ friends think this is harassment. They have the impression that Tamarra is a waria who is easygoing, and that I can (dis)assemble myself anytime I want. They think that Tamarra is gay. Even my closest community doesn't understand my sexual orientation or sexual behavior. I'm disappointed that my queer friends still adopt a heterosexual perspective. Why do we have to police each other? For example, if you are transgender, why do you have to groom, wear women's

clothes, wear makeup, and so on?

RA: Why don't you talk about your collaboration with Emma Frankland and the transfeminine artist friends at the *We Dig!* show in London in 2019.[12]

T: It's worth mentioning that before collaborating with Emma, I worked with Ming Wong, an artist who shares my concerns and approaches to performance art. In 2015 Ming Wong, Shahmen Suku, Bradd Edwards, and I performed *Aku Akan Bertahan / I Will Survive*, which was part of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at GOMA in Brisbane.[13] Through my involvement in Ming Wong's project, I saw how Ming tries to represent queer culture in Jogja through references to western films that he re-creates in his work.

When I worked with Emma on *We Dig!* in the UK, I experienced my first welcoming ritual. It was so amusing! Emma asked us to walk on a beach and have a potluck as a ritual for introducing ourselves to Emma's homeland. Then there were months of preparation. We all got per diems once we arrived, so we could easily organize ourselves! Sometimes, when I wanted to, I partied between the venue and the house.

It was facilitated in such a manner that they took care of our mental health. They were always checking on how we were doing, making sure we were comfortable enough to get through the day. There was a sense that they were creating a safe place for us to work together. Sometimes a psychologist arrived, and we had a chance to talk about the work, but nothing was mandatory. You got to decide if wanted to talk or not.

In terms of production, the plan was to dig up the earth under the stage of the Ovalhouse Theater in Brixton with shovels, and at the same time to dig up trans stories from our different perspectives.

RA: Interesting that you highlight the safe space there. I wonder if we could have that situation in our art spaces in Indonesia.

T: It's very important, especially for us. There are many cases of anti-trans violence in film, theater, and art production spaces.

RA: The spaces that are managed by most of these heteros are all about jargon, right? They say "nonhierarchical," they say "inclusive" … blegh.

T: We both know that more than a few of those spaces have seen violent incidents, but they're hidden and forgotten. I've had personal experience with this too. It just comes down being treated fairly, right? I console myself by remembering that my very existence is a "threat" to them, and I just focus on myself.

RA: In the future, would you be able to share or translate your *We Dig!* experience into an organizational philosophy for art spaces here in Indonesia?

T: To build a better workspace for us? Yeah, why not? I am happy to do that.

X

Riksa Afiaty would like to thank Tyson Campbell, Syafiatudina and Sidhi Vhisatya for their clarity that significantly improved the text.

1
See https://video.vice.com/id_id/video/indonesias-first-all-trans-girlband-amuba/5ced2a6fbe407707264b75f2 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-nKrIBlPi8&t=2s&ab_channel=VICEAsia .

2
In the 1960s a popular term referring to transgender people was " *wadam*," which is a combination of " *wanita*" (women) and "Adam." However, religious groups objected to the term because it uses the name of a prophet, Adam. The term was associated with the establishment of an organization called Himpunan Wadam Djakarta (HIWAD). In the Queer Indonesia Archive (QIA), two sources provide different years for when HIWAD was established: *GAYaNUSANTARA* no. 108 (August 2003) gives the year 1969, while Kemala Atmojo's book *Kami Bukan Laki-Laki: Sebuah SketsaKehidupan Waria* (1986) gives the year 1973. In this conversation we use " *waria*" to refer to transgender woman. Apart from this, in Indonesia today, we use " *transpuan*"; "*puan* " derives from " *perempuan*" (wo man), a synonym for " *wanita*" (wo man).

3
Mentioned in the introduction to Dede Oetemo, *Memberi Suara pada Yang Bisu* (Giving voice to the voiceless) (Galang Press, 2001).

4
See Andi Zainal Abidin and C. C. Macknight, "The I La Galigo Epic Cycle of South Celebes and Its Diffusion," *Indonesia*, no. 17 (April 1974): 161–69 https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/53576/INDO_17_0_110713074 5_161_169.pdf;jsessionid=1690A2ADAA277BFCE47BC4C0B75B74AD?sequence=1 .

5
The Indonesian version was compiled by Nyoman S. Pendit, *Mahabharata* (Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2003).

6
Soewito Santoso, Fendi Sirefar, and Kestity Pringgoharjono, *The Centhini Story: The Javanese Journey of Life* (Marshall Cavendish, 2006).

7
Benedict Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Cornell University Press, 1990).

8
See Ian Douglas Wilson, "The Politics of Possession: Community Arts in New Order Java" (honor's thesis, Murdoch University, 1997).

9
See Marieke Bloembergen, "Being Clean Is Being Strong: Policing Cleanliness and Gay Vices in the Netherlands Indies in the 1930s," in *Cleanliness and Culture: Indonesian Histories* , ed. Kees van Dijk and Jean Gelman Taylor (Brill, 2012) .

10
https://www.thetricontinental.org/dossier-35-lekra/

11
Throughout this interview process, Tamarra informed me at the end of January 2021 that Tamarra was in court to change Tamarra's name and all identification documents. As written on an identity card on February 20, 2021 passed by the Yogyakarta District Court. Tamarra's pronoun is Tamarra.

12
See https://www.ovalhouse.com/whatson/detail/we-dig .

13
See https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/apt8/artists/ming-wong .

Kira Xonorika

Post-genitalist Fantasies / Temporalities of Latin American Trans Art

The Cistem

Live on television, a Paraguayan news reporter interviews Maritza, a trans woman. She denounces a man who requested sexual services from her and who offered only ten thousand guaranies (US $1.45). Offering such a pittance is offensive, she says. A verbal altercation between her and the man and another trans woman followed. Maritza, live on television, decries the dehumanization to which she was subjected. The clip, edited to enhance its comedic effect, went viral on YouTube, and remained popular all through the 2010s. It became a multi-platform meme.

The Maritza meme: the laughable constituted as other to the politics of respectability. The failure to perform choreographies of civility. Her disposability due to the prejudice towards sex work and what is "morally corrupt." Her voice, imperfectly speaking a language that is indigestible to the masses: the Spanish colonizing tongue. All this is present in the meme, in conjunction with an unintelligible transfemininity.

This was not the first time that the circus of trans pain was exploited by broadcasters: there was the manipulation of the image of Zulma Lobato in Argentina, Cristina "La Veneno" Ortiz Rodriguez in Spain, and so on. In all these instances, we see the conditions of existence of a vulnerable body devoured by a mass-media economy. One which obliterates the complaint that might expose the scope of a necropolitical "cistem." One that reduces the value of the trans, racialized, and fat body to a negligible sum.

What is unsettling is how the conservative and corporate cis-epistemology metabolizes the documentary record of Maritza's complaint, made on public television. A complaint that questions the precariousness of conditions of existence that are shaped by transphobia and patriarchal regimes. A complaint that at the same time is ignored in favor of focusing on the transfeminine body as something to be consumed. No remuneration (material reparations) is ever offered by a historical tradition that had framed images of the trans body as nonhuman, putting them in the same ecosystem as the abject, the monstrous, the hypersexual, and the laughable. What is nonhuman is other.

The task for thinking and organizing in the trans community is to collectively counter all of these elements of the "cistem." In what follows, I first want to work through the collective knowledge of interregional trans communities across Abya Yala (the precolonial name, among the Cula peoples, for Latin America) and in Paraguay specifically. I then want to bring that experience and insight to bear on strategies deployed by artists across Abya Yala, in and against the necropolitical containment and disposal of the abject trans body.

Sofia Moreno, P o r n A g a i n, Vol. 2: Divas from the Underground, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

The grassroots construction of trans community often happens in response to an absence of infrastructure, of support systems that allow for a life worth living. It is a process that unfolds between the promises of legal reform and the political will of trans people. This construction of communal pathways of shared languages and practices is a laborious process that requires asking uncomfortable questions. It requires thinking hard about shared precariousness and unmet affective needs—thinking in and against a society shot through with the historical and necropolitical legacy of the colonial cistem. In this society, the cognitive possibilities of trans life are constrained by both biomedical and legal devices.

The first issue around which the dynamics of power are organized is accessibility. By accessibility, I mean the ability to enjoy the fundamental conditions of existence. Accessibility is what expands or constricts one's circulation and participation in localities and surrounding ecologies.

Expanding access is a key part of the politics and goals of many grassroots organizations in the Global South, since institutional mechanisms designed to protect life fail to do so. Questions about access have been fundamental to the process of elaborating transfeminist theory and practice, given that the essentials of life—food, healthcare, and housing—are still not available to everyone, if not most.

Constructing community, and its attendant modes of thinking and engagement, firstly requires an autoethnographic process of self-investigation, which identifies traumatic transgenerational fissures. As bell hooks has said, such forms of trauma can only be healed communally.[1] This is where affirmative affectivity is essential, as an engine of change.

In her 2015 text "House," Julianna Huxtable writes about houses created by families-by-choice whose

> internal functioning was engendered by the intuitions of bodies subjected to processes of ostracism by the biological family units based on the failure to respond to sex-generic patterns assigned. These intuitions are shaped and informed by collective memories of denied work. The work of self-care, love, contribution and family participation in the social and political functions of society at large.[2]

The first institution of society, the family structure, provides training for insertion into larger structures. It is the nucleus of the system of binary reproducibility: the establishment of genital hierarchies, behavior patterns, and distribution-remuneration based on work. The family, in other words, is the first regulatory mechanism of gender

Sofia Moreno, P o r n A g a i n, Vol. 2: Divas from the Underground, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

technologies. It defines one's emotional infrastructure—an infrastructure that is precarious by design.

The construction of difference and its assigned value is not determined by subjective choice, but by a well-established distinction between the familiar and the "the other," as Sara Ahmed has written.[3]

Monstrification

Paraguay is a country whose invisibility on the global scale speaks to the devastation that has occurred there on account of supremacist systems of military-political dominance. In recent history, Paraguay has been identified as a laboratory for the advances of regional neofascism, especially in gender politics.[4]

In 2017, Paraguay's ministry of education became the first in the region to prohibit the circulation in schools of material about sexual and reproductive rights, which they refer to as "gender ideology" (a term coined by the Vatican in the 1990s). This happened within a political context that since the 2000s has regularly slowed down and blocked parliamentary antidiscrimination bills designed to integrate multiple gender perspectives.

"Don't mess with my children" has been a pervasive slogan in reactionary campaigns across the region. Over the past decade it has spread to multiple predominantly Spanish-speaking territories of the Global South. The campaign against "gender ideology" is organized in conjunction with Christian religious institutions. The campaign links what it identifies as feminist policy positions (pro-abortion, pro-union, financial autonomy for cis women) to non–cis gender identities and nonheterosexual orientations, accusing the latter two of denaturing the nuclear family. The right's preferred model of gender and the family is coded into the colors of their posters: pink and blue.

The lack of state protection for gender rights reflects the state's refusal to provide care for or even recognize certain political subjects. Instead, the right defends the self-reliant legal person-subject who is supposed to preserve a white, Christian, male-centered, supremacist, biological heritage.

In recent years, conservatives have succeeded in blocking legal reforms and limiting access for trans people. This campaign has been especially successful in countries with strong traditions of instrumentalizing colonial spirituality. These are territories in which Catholic and evangelical forces hold political power and promote a perverse myth of nationalist purification. In this way, institutionalized religion uses the language of love and family to weaponize bodies and sexualities that do not engender other

Sofia Moreno, P o r n A g a i n, Vol. 2: Divas from the Underground, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

offspring and that consequently do not reproduce cis-hetero patriarchal power. The interlocking of church and state cultivates the brutality that the necropolitical landscape is all about: full abandonment of vulnerable populations, or the right to expose people to social and political death.[5]

Christian conservatives demonize transness as a pathology that is unintelligible and therefore *monstrous*. The success of this campaign relies on the historical practice of using the language of monstrousness to dehumanize vulnerable groups. As Anson Kock-Rein argues, the monster is a common figure in reactionary speech, used to delegitimize the struggles and identities of the oppressed. This reactionary speech often frames transness as that which "fails" to assimilate to an intelligible model.[6] The apparently inherent "incongruities" are understood as abject.

The abject here is what Robert Phillips defines as "the vague sense of horror that permeates the barriers between being and the other … [It is] the process by which identification regimes exclude subjects that are illegible or undergoing classification. Instability and uncertainty pathologize and frame their subjectivity."[7]

This "monstrification" becomes the antagonistic opposite of humanization. A monster is never healthy, and consequently, its body spreads disease. The normalization and naturalization of this perspective can also be found in the spread of essentialist ideas about biology, which naturalize the observable evidence of genitalia and reproductive functions, linked to the domain of compulsive heterosexuality.[8] This perspective favors only those bodily self-determinations that align with normative gender affirmations—that is, those that come from a place of cisgenderness. According to Viviane Vergueiro, the normalization of the gender binary can be understood as a colonialist and socioculturally constructed categorization that defines corporeality, sexes, and genders according to criteria of prediscursive objectivity. It figures gender as something static and permanent, without taking into account self-perceptions or intersectionalities.[9]

The colonial form of gender is also present in the surveilled subjectivation of gender and the foreclosure of other possibilities. In Paraguay, it resulted in the institutionalization and enforcement of strict gender norms in the dictatorial era, under the administration of Alfredo Stroessner (1954–89). This was a time of persecution for those with dissident gender orientations and sexualities, including torture, kidnapping, and disappearances. Today, this hypervigilance around gender has only mutated in form, remaining a central component of social control and policing—including within the world of culture and art, as we shall see.

Sofia Moreno, P o r n A g a i n, Vol. 2: Divas from the Underground, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

Cis-coloniality and the Transphilia Continuum

Returning to the viral exposure of Maritza, in recent years the meme has been used by cisgender artists in illustrations, pictorial representations, and a neon piece that spells out the phrase "For ten thousand guaranies, you are not going to take me." The appropriation of Maritza's complaint into artistic practice exemplifies an ongoing colonial extraction. Her complaint is instrumentalized and rendered as a consumer object, devoid of critical content. What is evident here is that the material basis of a reparation politics hasn't arrived. Nor has the trauma of mass-media exposure been addressed, despite Maritza's objections to it.

Under this operation of aestheticizing poverty, precariousness becomes an object of consumption. An anti-transmisogynist advocate is devoured by the colonial art system and reduced to an object-fetish. The transfeminine body is not only expelled from the domain of life, but is ultimately stripped of even her rage.

The conditions that shape this art production are the same conditions that shape the life trajectories of trans bodies. Attention to trans bodies alternates between transphobia and transphilia, maximum disgust and fetishistic fascination, two perspectives that ultimately fall under the same logic: the expulsion of othered bodies. This is the art-world version of larger institutional structures, and trans artists can try to intervene to disrupt these structures.

The work of multimedia artist Sofia Moreno addresses the Western art world's transphilia "continuum" (a term she borrows from Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*). While trans bodies may be experiencing a new art-world visibility, this is driven by dynamics of fetishization. The relationship between art institutions and trans bodies is ultimately an extractivist one, suggests Moreno.[10] Despite its rhetoric of inclusion, the art world uses trans bodies while having no interest in material reparations for people who have historically been oppressed because of their biopolitical markers. This "trend" taking place at the peripheries of Western art worlds highlights the dynamics of the current global economy.

The Transerotic

According to research on trans participation in the formal labor market, transphobia and lack of accessibility often lead trans people to rely on sex work as a primary sources of income. This leads to a hypersexualization of transfemininity, writes theorist Aren Aizura:

> Frequently the expressions of transmisogyny encrypt transfeminity as only existing within, or for a sexual

> economy, resulting in the hypersexualization of trans women. This allows us to understand transphobia as embedded in transnational circuits of reproductive labor and biopolitical control: the same gender-variant bodies on which violence is visited also circulate as valuable within global capital.[11]

This hypersexualization is useful for an economic system that relies on the subjection of certain bodies. As Rycca Lee has emphasized, to be a woman* is to belong to a globally subaltern category.[12] In Western art, as in capitalism in general, the female* body has historically been a treat for sociability and consumption. Even through there is a socially constructed hierarchy dividing cisgender femininity and transfemninity, they are subject to similar dynamics of power and control.

In mass-produced pornography and mainstream-media entertainment, transfeminine bodies are coded and packaged as sexually deviant, as monstrous oddities to be consumed at a distance.[13] Transfemininity has been (and still is) highly sexualized, both aesthetically and economically. This is a theme that Moreno explores in her work *P o r n A g a i n* (2010–present).

In the mid-2000s, when celebrity sex tape scandals in the Global North were the center of pop-culture attention, Moreno took her laptop to a computer technician for repair. He stole her private erotic videos from the laptop and sent them to the company where she worked at the time, with the aim of exposing her as "morally corrupt"—according to a logic that demonizes her particular body and sexual choices. At the time, Sofía tells me, she worked for that company in order to have access to hormone replacement therapy. Even though she experienced daily transphobia at the company, working there was a "choice" to enable her long-term self-determination. Faced with this violent attack, Sofia started the film project *P o r n A g a i n*, which explores the economy of desire on the internet and the destabilization of the division between private and public.

The first video in Moreno's series opens with a cacophony of voices of heterosexual men who are consuming the exotic spectacle of a female body with a penis, the differentiating marker. The viewer sees images of a girl touching herself—private sexuality that is now for public display—while faceless men stroke their pink cocks and cum in slow motion, which Moreno presents as a recording of a recording, "for texture."

A recurring theme in the series is the appearance of fragmented bodies masturbating when they glimpse a transfeminine person. An illuminated "applause" sign faces the audience of a late-night talk show. "You're better than a regular girl," one man says, though we don't know who the speaker is. What is evident is that the power dynamics of sexual exchange involve a certain opacity of identity.

P o r n A g a i n, Vol. 2 – Cyber Nymph (2012) features cameos from Tumblr icon Molly Soda, as well as Sofia's friends. Tumblr mothered an entire generation, serving as a place for queer and trans people with political affinities to find each other despite their geographical separation. Reflecting back on such spaces of engagement, Sofia says: "It's important for me to make art for my community."

In the most recent installment of the series, *P o r n A g a i n, Vol. 2 – Divas from the Underground* (2014), Sofia takes us to the club Diva's in San Francisco. The film is a tribute to Filipino and Cambodian trans women who taught Sofia about resistance. It features the artist's friends Kiam Marcelo Junio and Keijaun Thomas, voguing and slaying the audience. As Sofia says: "The trans body has been used as a muse but not as a content creator. It is important for me to consume myself because there is a culture invested in consuming me, and it does not know how to do it."

Rejecting the Cycle of Annihilation

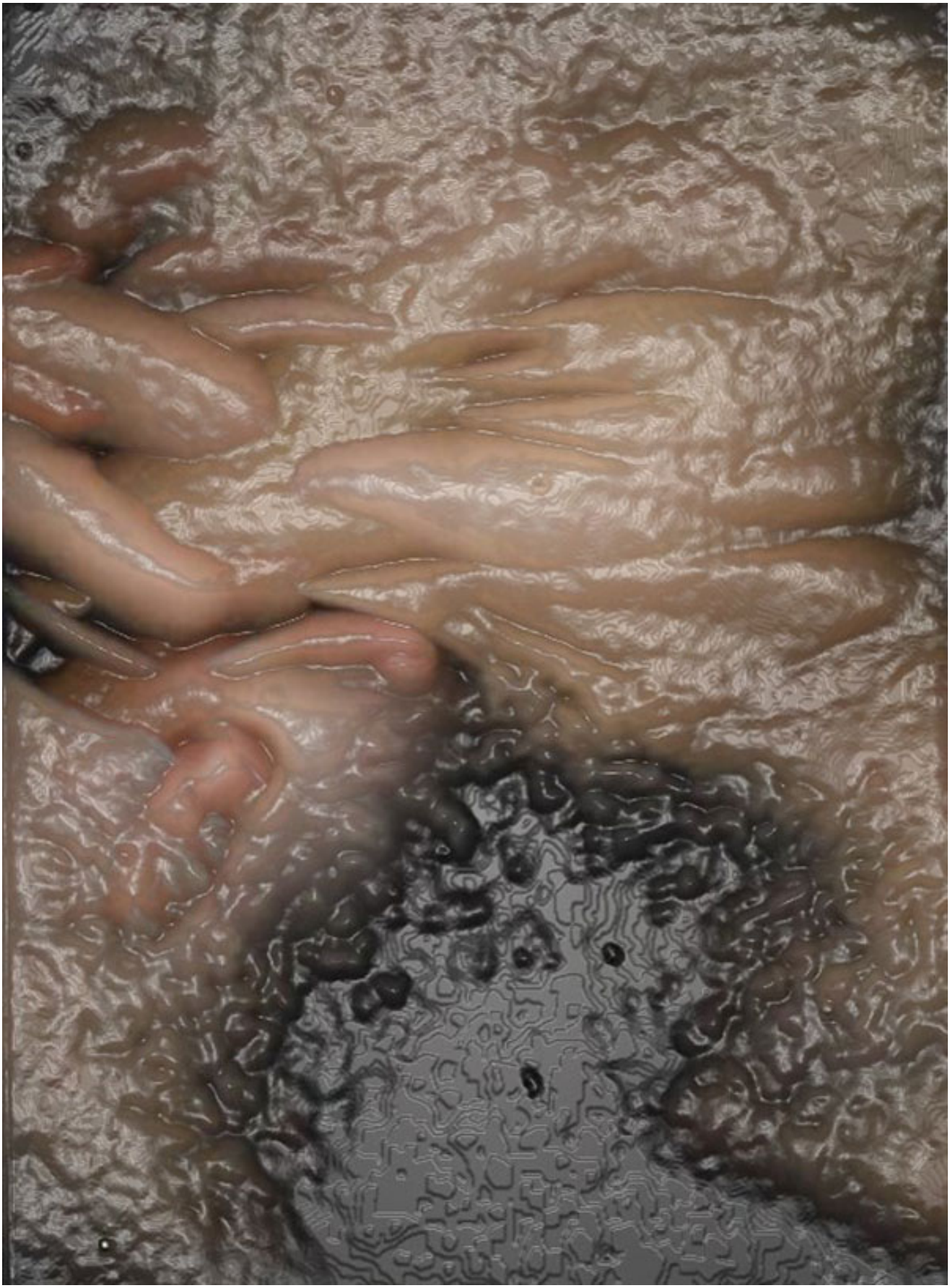
European colonization of Abya Yala initiated the dispossession of material resources from the Global South for the development of the capitalist economy of the white-cis-hetero Global North. This led to the devastation of the worlds of those who now appear as monsters within that matrix, those who resist. In addition, the dispossession of knowledge is a form of annihilation. Fran Demétrio and Hilian Nissior Besuan write about "epistemicide" as a genocidal process that erases memories, perceptions, intuitions, and traces.[14]

One of the reasons that Spanish and Portuguese colonizers brought Baroque art with them to colonies was to advance their conquest through the splendor of the image. This strategy of seduction aimed to achieve ideological dominance over indigenous populations.[15] Today, a similar strategy of seduction is deployed by the transnational fashion and beauty industries. Their white cisgender anthropometric fascism borrows from Renaissance notions of symmetry, harmony, beauty, and synthesis.[16]

The Jesuit and Franciscan missions in Paraguay opened wood-carving workshops, following a European model of instruction. It is important to understand the cognitive effects on colonized people of this prioritization of the ocular. This privileging of the eye, and the hierarchies that come with it, still define not only bodies and stories, but also desires. The colonial imposition of the visual defines what is intelligible and what is abject, monstrous, and other.

The Madrid-based art collective Colectivo Ayllu points out that Spanish colonizers often gave mirrors to indigenous

Arian Carrillo, Tengomásdedosvistasyestántodasborrosas, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Arian Carrillo, Tengomásdedosvistasyestántodasborrosas, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

people in exchange for gold. The mirrors helped establish a regime of referentiality (around universal whiteness), differentiating the colonizers from the colonized and imposing ontological categories of objectivity and subjectivity.[17]

Artist Arian Carrillo aims to fool the objectifying cis gaze through the use of fragmented mirrors. Carrillo's work *Tengomásdedosvistasyestántodasborrosas* (I have more than two views and they're all blurry) explores the perception of his own body through a camera lens. As Carrillo tells me, "I was starting a series called 'Prettier in Fragments.' It was a way for me to make sense of a couple of things—how I perceived Instagram images to be all about 'zooming into already cropped images' and my own experience with embracing the details of my body."[18]

Narratives of transness through mirrors: in the earlier days of transitioning, I recall that reflective surfaces caused me a great deal of unease, as echoes of internalized pathologizing gazes. So when the "beauty enhancer" selfie app Facetune came out, it became a playground for those who felt limited by the ontological possibilities of the material world.

In 2016, Facetune was at its peak, it was free, and its interface was easy to navigate. For many young nonbinary people, the app was a way to shape their own personal aesthetics, especially on Instagram. Around this time, electronic trans musicians were also making waves through alluring soundscapes that ranged from glistening pop to abstract computer music. It was all synchronizing. By exploring the internet aesthetics of apps like Facetune, Carrillo develops images that operate outside the identity prescriptions of particular sex characteristics.

I'm reminded of a conversation I had with Sofia on bodies enfolded in nonlinear timelines of reverberation—how all of our South latitudes have been toxically named and dissected. The present collapse of Western systems of subjectivation has been in the works for a long time, at least since the advent of modernity, with its labyrinths of extermination.

To critically disavow institutions that uphold hidden time frames of brutalizing necrocontinuity is a redistributive quantum shift. It is a serene gesture of commonality that nurtures conscious interconnected coexistence, against the alienating regimes of value extraction.

What are ways of relating and touching the skin that reject the cycle of annihilation—that enable transerotic desire to emerge?

X

For Sucia

Kira Xonorika is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and theorist. Her work draws on the complexities of trauma and colonial powers, pathologization, trans and cuir temporalities, knowledge production from the Global South, internet aesthetics, and resilient organization. She teaches at the National University of Asunción in the areas of research in art and Paraguayan art history. Her work has been featured internationally in the Independent Chair of Trans Studies (UBA), Genderit, Tonantzin, and e-flux.

1
bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (Harper, 1999).

2
Julianna Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland* (Capricious, 2017), 86.

3
Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge, 2000), 40.

4
Michi Moragas, "Puto El Que Lee #44: Visibilizar la historia con Michi Moragas," *Puto El Que Lee*, podcast, 2020 https://soundcloud.com/ondas-ayvu/ep-44-visibilizar-la-historia-con-michi-moragas .

5
See Guillermo Sánchez Arsuaga's discussion of "necropower," as developed by Achille Mbembe, in "Ellis Island: Architecture at the Service of Biopower," *e-flux archit ecture* https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/sick-architecture/345271/ellis-island-architecture-at-the-service-of-biopower/ .

6
Anson Koch-Rein, "Monster," *TSQ* 1, no.1–2 (2014): 134–35.

7
Robert Phillips, "Abjection," *TSQ* 1, 1–2 (2014): 19–21, 19.

8
Paulo Romo, in conversation with the author after the culmination of AKAHATA's trans depathologization regional workshop in 2018.

9
Viviane Vergueiro, "Por inflexões decoloniais de corpos e identidades de gênero inconformes: uma análise autoetnográfica da cisgeneridade como normatividade," PhD diss. (Universidade Federal da Bahia, 2016).

10
Sofia Moreno, *Women at the Verge of Agency* (2020).

11
Aren Aizura, *Queer Necropolitics* (Routledge, 2014), 130–31.

12
Rycca Lee, in her webinar "Decolonialidade y arte asiática contemporánea—HOA."

13
Sofia Moreno, *Women at the Verge of Agency* (2020).

14
Fran Demétrio and Hilian Nissior Besuan, "O conhecimento dos outros, a defesa dos direitos humanos epistémicos," *Dialogos Regionais e Internacionais Multi Inter e Transdisciplinares* 5, no. 1 (2019): 111.

15
Ticio Escobar, *Mito del arte y mito del pueblo* (Paidós SAICF, 1986), 99.

16
See Igi Ayedun's Instagram stories, which analyze the history of the Western aesthetics of fascism.

17
Francisco Godoy Vega and Colectivo Ayllu, "Programa Orientado a Práticas Subalternas (POPS)," 2021.

18
Conversation with the artist, 2020.

Maxi Wallenhorst

Like a Real Veil, Like a Bad Analogy: Dissociative Style and Trans Aesthetics

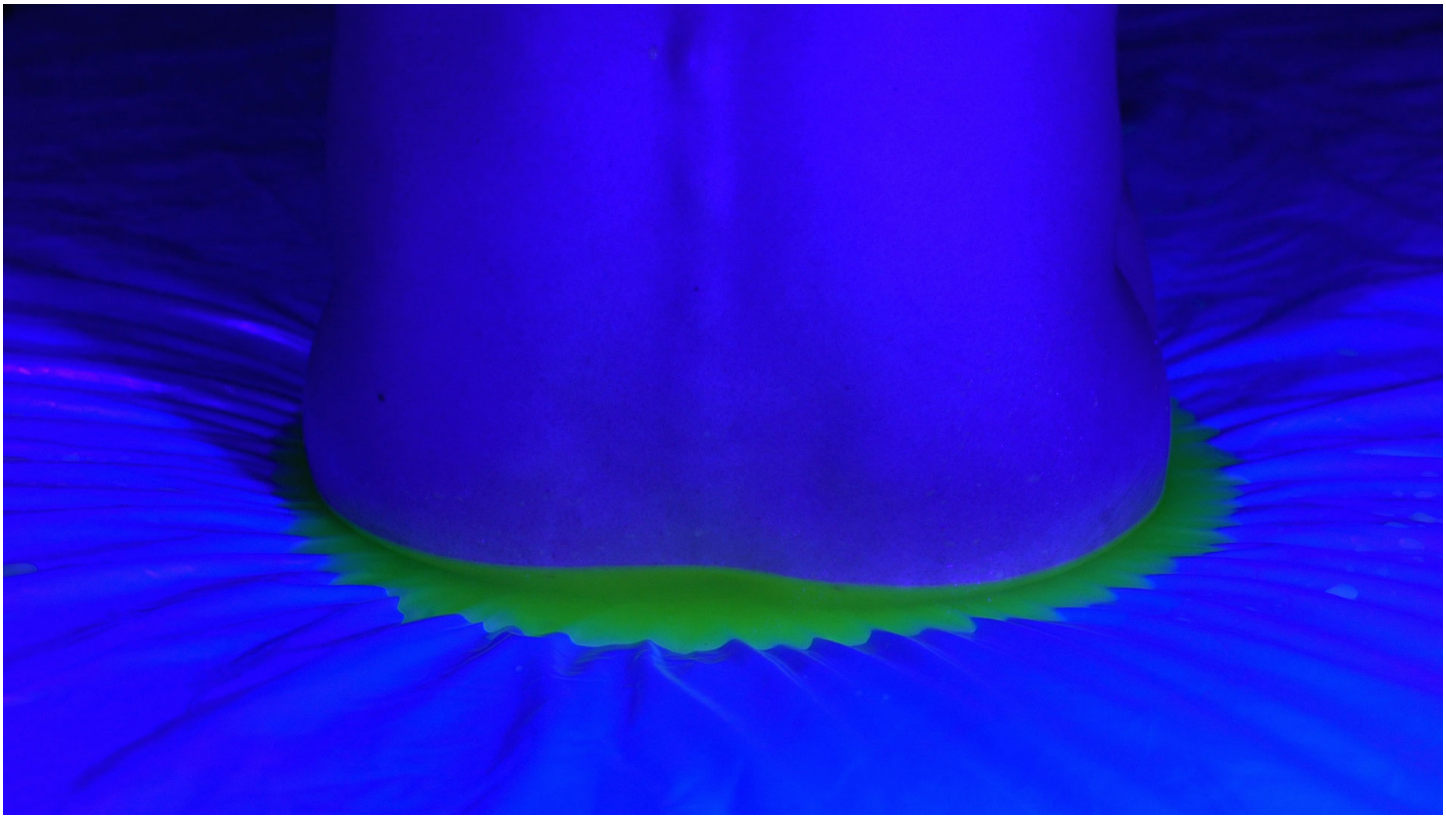
Am I even real? is a cringe question to begin with because, even as a rhetorical one, it doesn't seem worth asking. Its cheap thrills, however, point to the fact that sometimes, your feelings are *not* valid. By "your feelings," I mean, among others, mine when they don't feel like mine. By "sometimes," I mean a kind of frequency that is hard to tie to the level of the anecdotal or the structural. To say that some feelings are not valid, contrary to the assessment of pastel infographics, is not to say that they are *really* ––unblurred by an edgy reading––something else. They are not valid in the sense that they, formally, do not pass as personal, not even to yourself.

We tell ourselves stories in order to live, but what if these stories are too pulpy? The word "dissociation" is increasingly used to describe episodes in which feeling doesn't feel like feeling, in which it can't sufficiently get across the effects of personhood on the one hand and reality on the other. In 1845, fifty years prior to the proper invention of dissociation as a distinct pathology, the psychiatrist Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol paraphrases one of his patient's experience of the world like this: "Objects do not come to me, they do not identify themselves with my being; a thick cloud, a veil changes the hue and aspect of objects."[1] Which is a lot. In its melodrama, it also resembles a kind of too-much-ness that sounds like ordinary life in a world in which social relations appear as a quality of things, though often out of focus (racial capitalism).

In more recent memes that name-check dissociation, we can see a veil that is not attached to objects but to the sketchy, literally cartoonish form of personhood: it is often surrounding anime or animated characters, mostly SpongeBob SquarePants, splitting them up into doppelgängers, as if they're frozen in movement, casually detached from the animation that is surrounding them in time and space. In another version of this meme, however, SpongeBob has created a real rainbow with his bare hands, captioned as, in the detached tonality of all-caps, DISSOCIATION.

In the affective zone between vibe and (self-)diagnosis, dissociation has become one of the concepts describing complications in linking personal experience to the social world. On this side of a more straightforward pathologization, dissociation is described as something that you realize you're doing during sex, on ketamine, or while trying to remember a childhood. It gets applied to a wide range of situations, from slightly vague episodes deep within the everyday to a blur of threateningly biographic shape.

A relatively paradoxical form sets these accounts apart from some other allegedly contemporary feelings: within sentimental genres from the niche meme to the feminist long-read, they manifest an intense lack of intensity—or at least, a lack of a kind of intensity that would indicate



Vika Kirchenbauer, UNTITLED SEQUENCE OF GAPS, 2020. Video still. Copyright: Vika Kirchenbauer & VG Bild Kunst

significance, presence, or coherence. In this applied use, dissociation—not unlike alienation—functions to make relatable where relation isn't recognizable as relation, especially to the ones who are in the middle of it, overwhelmed.

Which is most of us. The veil feels normal. If everyone knows what it feels like to not feel like yourself, where does it become a problem only some have? The impossibility of scaling dissociation down to such an evaluation, even on the spectrum of pathologization, seems to be part of the missing link. If there is a dissociation mini-trend, then I would suggest it is not a phenomenon from which it is possible to retrieve a new, or bad, or queer feeling with a particularly valuable relationship to "the" contemporary. Dissociation is an archive of *not* feeling it.

Here I want to trace how people, mostly trans people, navigate the shattering and clouding that dissociative language describes as a real layer of life—as it is mediated by anesthetics (not limited to ketamine), and by extension, aesthetics. However, I do not think that the weak descriptor "trans" in itself touches on a distinctly severe or particularly expert variety of dissociation. As Oren Gozlan writes, "If gender functions as a *veil* for the constitutive instability of the subject split by her unconscious, it can be argued that every gender disposition carries a kernel of helplessness, anxiety, and guilt, and therefore it is susceptible to dissociation, splitting, and idealization."[2] Gender itself functions as a veil, one would have to polemically add, for the operations of racialization and capital.

If *am I even real?* is one of the cheap catchphrases of dissociative style, it has a particular place in both the internal monologues of gendered imposter syndrome and transphobic hate speech. When being trans is constantly transposed to the tonality of sentimental debatability and scientific diagnosis, *am I even real?* is not just a rhetorical and/or pathological question. It can describe social abstractions that are both part of life and hovering outside of it, blocking access to it. The veil, in this sense, is real. It also hides certain struggles (also real) from others: it is a clichéd veil of loneliness for some but is life-threatening for others. Trans and dissociation both seem like concepts that are most useful in distinguishing a set of situations in their divergence, not necessarily where they overlap or have proximity to each other.

Being good at keeping one's distance, at zoning out in the right moments, is a crucial technique for hanging out—but how does one get better at it? How do you develop it as a style? As Charlie Markbreiter has put it: "How to wield dissociation so that it makes you more collectively-minded and not less?"[3] This is a particularly nontrivial question. Clinical literature often describes the blur of dissociation as a defense that turns into a "collapse of

relationality—both intra- and interpersonal."[4] The absent-mindedness I'm following around here, however, often can't afford such climactic characterization, as it is involved in figuring out forms of not being alone that are too precarious to break down. Improvising a convoluted collectivity in this way might or might not amount to the kind of world-building that Lauren Berlant, if I remember a 2017 talk correctly, has called a "dissociative poetics."[5]

When something terrifying happened in front of my eyes two years ago, I wasn't shocked by how I didn't feel anything but by how normal not feeling felt. "But isn't that also part of the trans magic?" a friend offered over coffee. Then we went to join a protest for trans rights in front of the US embassy in Berlin-Mitte, even if we both didn't *really* feel it, though we did meet friends. Now I imagine this kind of magic to be the slightly underwhelming cheap trick of letting something disappear, and even though everyone feels as if they know it hasn't, the trick still works, every time.

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Dissociative Symptoms: The Bad Style of Pathologization

In clinical psychology, too, in trauma-based, interrelational, psychoanalytic, and other models, dissociation seems to be an attractive concept not despite but because of its vagueness. Dissociative symptoms are described from the therapy-talk truism to the case study labelled as "severe." They are often first explained as ordinary or even structural mental processes with which one adapts to the inherent too-much-ness of the social, including where it's internalized—muffling it by keeping certain modes and parts of knowing, feeling, thinking at a distance from each other. In this "normal" sense, dissociation seems to be one way to describe everything that's rounding off the messiness of relations to a relatively functional fantasy of being involved.

Clinically observed at the other end of what is almost always flattened to a spectrum are cases in which this tips over to what the DSM-V classifies as "dissociative disorder ." One popular idea seems to be that one initially dissociates as a way of zoning out of the traumatic aspects of a relationship in order to not be overwhelmed, and then staying that way. In Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder (and many things before that), this splitting then is said to manifest as parts and selves oscillating between me and not-me. This "shattering" is often observed along not only lines of sex and gender, but of class, age, and race, too. Depersonalization-derealization disorder, on the other hand, hyphenates other kinds of detachment, from the world, feelings, self, body, everyone you love, etc.

As condensed into self-help talk, the description of dissociative symptoms that evade rigid categorization often invokes feeling trapped in the wrong body. Or, as if on the wrong end of a similarly difficult analogy: behind a glass wall, in a movie, dream, or cloud. If one of the great inventors of dissociation, late-nineteenth-century psychiatrist Pierre Janet, has described dissociation as the inability to tell a coherent story about oneself, it is little surprise that the style in which its symptoms appear is often kind of bad.[6]

It might not feel like a movie, if it did not feel *too much* like a movie, overdone. "Dissociative style" comes across as over-aestheticizing, but to *an* aesthetizing effect. It demands too much emotional performance while doing too little to elicit it. The connections and parallels that dissociative style draws, also the doodles, are unmotivated. "The most common dissociative intrusions include hearing voices, depersonalization, derealization, 'made' thoughts, 'made' urges, 'made' desires, 'made' emotions, and 'made' actions."[7] Here the social form-ness of feeling shines through.

The diagnosis of dissociation is in itself a judgment of affective capacity. It's an evaluation that a given patient (or person) could potentially learn to be more competent at feeling, which is feeling real, present, and personal. As Abby Stein has pointed out, those who are non-allegorically but literally incarcerated, even when meeting criteria that are in themselves highly biased against them, are often not attributed either the diagnosis of a dissociative disorder and its treatment nor, by extension, the benefit of the doubt of "just not having been themselves" that does legal wonders for some. From infographics to new materialisms, feelings are often presented as unified in form and universal in distribution. Even if squidgy, affect is a resource that everyone has relatively equal access to—if they would just lean into it! Again, it would be to underestimate dissociative symptoms and the style derived from them to reduce them to failing at this sentimental chore.

The problem of dissociative style points to the social abstractions that are blurring the background: Kyla Schuller shows in *The Biopolitics of Feeling* that affective capacity—the capacity to affect and be affected—is *not* commonly shared, but assigned, split, and kept apart by regimes of racialization and sex difference.[8] Whether one feels as if they are real enough or whether others feel as if they are real enough indexes real evaluations that appear as social relations. In this sense, the performance of showing off intense relationality, as it manifests in demands from radical vulnerability to vibrant matter, often also gets caught up in the aesthetics of the virtuousness of white feelings.

Dissociated Episode: The Soap Opera of Good Sex

The aesthetics of gender dysphoria, too, are sentimental. Even where it is transposed to an emphasis on euphoria or a universal condition of female fucked-ness, dysphoria entangles the possibility of self-knowledge with feeling intense. Mostly, dysphoria is still coded as a particular way of feeling intense—not fucking and being high, but rather respectable suffering. In a very few parts of the world the medicalization of transition has shifted from the spectral model of the invert, via the singular model of the identity disorder, to a model of gender dysphoria that is supposedly more in touch. In those situations there is now a wider range of anecdotes that one can dish out to doctors (or memoir publishing houses). Getting what you want from having feelings (a prescription; a pronoun) is related to tone-matching the genre conventions of dysphoria.

Some trans activists have argued that gender dysphoria should be considered in the treatment of dissociative symptoms, as a possible cause. It might seem cheap, to turn this hierarchy on its head and instead suggest dysphoria as one particular style of dissociation. Transition can be about wanting to feel better, or hotter, or worse but *differently* worse, but it is also, on a more fundamental level, about changing how life relates to its own story-ness. Without ignoring the limitations of dissociation, where it problematizes the immediacy of feeling, it also nudges the discourse of transition towards its social, or socially awkward, dimension.

Like in sex! Sex can be one of the scenes in which the unfeeling of embodiment steals out of isolation. In Torrey Peters's novel *Detransition, Baby*, however, it is dissociation, clocked under this name, that both hides and contains the possibility of sex that is good in itself and also related to at least "some kind of redemption."[9] When Amy, one of three main protagonists, suddenly goes internally AWOL during sex, the narration follows the trajectory of her episode, to sex as well as gender scenes of her partly pre-transition past. Ones in which her acute absentmindedness can't be told apart from having fantasies. Fugue-like states almost, filled with dreams of switching positions, cross-dressing, being someone else, that, in the precise multi-edgedness of fantasizing, will have turned out to be more than that while also, in the moment, actually keeping Amy from acknowledging them.

At the end of the story, after her transition, this form of dissociation is a guard that Amy is capable of letting down, at least for a while. "For Amy it was the first time she saw herself fucking as a woman without laying a psychic *veil* over whatever sexual scene was occurring."[10] Going *somewhere* in your mind is of course not just a pre-transition move, or sex-negative self-state. What sets these kinds of being in a fog apart from other kinds of feeling bad, including dysphoria, is that they are also immensely desirable in themselves. Losing a sense of self in one specific way instead of another can be something you want from gendered life, too. Jamie Hood talks about "the sexualization of dissociation" that she terms "fucking like a housewife"—alluding to the depersonalization that heterosexuality, specifically, is so good at edging on.[11]

But back to *Detransition, Baby*:

> "Baby, why are you crying?" Reese had asked. Because some combination of hormones and poppers had made possible the sex that Amy had given up on. The poppers made her too dumb to flee into herself, to send herself somewhere. So there she was with Reese. Not off elsewhere working to see herself as a woman when she lay on top of a woman, or replacing a man with someone else while he lay on top of her. She simply was a woman present with a woman. It felt like some kind of healing, some kind of redemption.[12]

This breakthrough to intimacy that tautologically feels like intimacy is neither separable from nor reducible to some ratio of anesthetics (poppers, in this case) and transition. It is also held by the woman that Amy is sleeping, then crying *with*. Reese, who is also trans, has dated and fucked trans women for longer time and is seemingly capable of *seeing* Amy. Which also means seeing *through* parts of her, but like, "casually."[13]

A casualness, fermented in trans relationships that can be fucked up, can be saving and also boring (which is to say normal), making possible the trust exercise of leaning into relation without falling into where category is threatening. To break down dissociation in this scene is then not just getting better at being yourself and present, at wanting—although here, it might well be that, and it seems fun. Neither is it just submitting more to not being yourself. To dumb oneself down into being present hinges on an environment where the related/non-relatedness of sexual intimacy is held by a sociality that in turn holds the immediately personal by extending it.

If all this sounds melodramatic that is because it *really* is. Torrey Peters has said that initially, the project of writing *Detransition, Baby* was to address specific trans issues within the framework of a soap opera, a genre characterized by a cheap and sentimental gloss.[14] Counterintuitively, there seems to be something about the complexity of trans life that the novel wants to figure out, including dissociation, that is only appropriately captured under a soapy film. In this scene, on that day, sex is good again, actually. This is not an allegory. But the possibility of fucking through and working around alienation and/or dissociation is itself noncoherent to the point of sometimes feeling unearned, cheap, too much. It is also real. In this scene, to take dissociation seriously means to commit both to the possibility of overcoming some of its

Elif Saydam, selfing, 2020. Detail. Courtesy of Elif Saydam.

parts while making it an art to deal with others. *Dissociative virtuosity* then, I think, includes both managing and submitting to—so power-bottoming for?—something like noncoherence, while neither romanticizing nor vilifying what's noncoherent about it.

Dissociative Style: Afterwork Non Sequitur

Dissociation does not only take shape as a relatively distinct episode one is able to leave behind by being melodramatic—or not. Skillfully abstracted away from experience, it can also become its own style. A style in which the fact that there are parts which don't seem reconcilable indicates neither romanticist fragmentation nor pseudo-deconstructive relativism. Their non-integration is not reduced to a formal gesture but becomes a formal infrastructure in its own way—that can hold, for example, the beautiful and the analytic, in their disparity, without collapsing one into the other or approximating them in a collage.

I think of dissociative style as the poetics that shine through a Juliana Huxtable DJ set. When she plays two or more tracks at the same time, that doesn't mean they are being mixed, even if they match. They drown and sound out each other from a distance. Dissociative style is riffing on form itself, that is, "the nonviolent synthesis of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions, and for this reason form is actually unfolding a truth," but going down this spiral even further, and tending to the violence in nonviolence.[15]

At the same time it is also spiraling further into this negativity, tending to, e.g., the violence in nonviolence. One thing that often seems to shift into view, in this way, is a violently depersonalized relation: work, but mostly its absurdity. In one of Huxtable's poems that is called "WORKING," we follow a lyrical subject waking up not at home and making her way to work from there, in the tonality of the all-caps flat affect that permeates Huxtable's poetry. The odyssey to collect "ENOUGH OF MYSELF" plus an outfit, navigating a hangover-veiled New York, culminates in the absurdity that work didn't really need her that day: "AND FINALLY SAT DOWN AT MY COMPUTER ONLY TO REALIZE NO ONE WAS IN THE OFFICE TODAY AND I HADN'T RECEIVED A SINGLE EMAIL. WELCOME TO SUMMER."[16] Sometimes,

dissociative style feels gimmick-y in the sense that Sianne Ngai has outlined: it seems to have comically bad timing in catching up with its supposed significance, or value. It's running late for work, or worse, early.[17]

In a different vernacular, Nora Fulton's poem "suqu" opens with the description of a closing shift, the contradictions of which have infested the modality of description itself, as a pun: "I was working at the franchise I've never worked at."[18] She, perhaps almost a lyrical subject, is just about to close up shop as two other trans girls text her that they can relate to "suqu," a term that the almost-lyrical subject can't remember ever coming up with. "I love them both, but we have little in common in terms of our transness, so suqu couldn't have to do with that." She then drives home—through mist, naturally—to arrive at a party at her apartment that seems similarly blurry:

> The light music and soft clamour of people was all around me, and the rent was due. I stood the long flat black box upright below the slatted window. The people who were and weren't there totally accepted my presence, welcomed me, but I was distracted. I tried to think of everything I'd said to ____ and ____—in that strange form of trans temporality both of them are much younger than me, but having transitioned earlier, also much older—and I couldn't remember coming up with some nonce term like suqu to describe something that, years later, would probably seem like the most obvious and oft-restated component of a world that was, at the point when I had coined it, more unknown than I knew, and deserved a term that constituted more than the entirety of my descriptive capabilities. I was sure I hadn't coined it and would never coin it. As soon as I woke up the next morning I searched the word and could find nothing; or rather, I found any number of irrelevant meanings, because language rarely helps. I wanted to go back to sleep, but couldn't, and then could.

Because the word "trans" is a weak descriptor most useful in only loosely relating one situation to another, the kind of sociality it invites often feels particularly crunchy. Fulton's "suqu" formalizes how the challenge of being trans, but with others, is mediated by a virtuosity in keeping several forms of temporality and knowledge apart. A kind of virtuosity that is vibrating in the only slightly less negative sentence structure of viral tweets à la *just because x is y, doesn't mean that z.* Just because someone, in non-trans temporality, is younger than you, that doesn't mean that, in trans temporality, they are not also older. This is not just funny because it satirizes a detached mind game that online teenagers play but it is also funny because it is true. Trans discourse dissociates, too, in that it speaks to a rapidly shifting taxonomy that sometimes indexes an actually existing infrastructure, and at the same time to anti-trans violence that just persists in undoing its groundwork.

The distracting attempt to remember a possible common ground is framed by the end of the workday at the beginning of the poem and then at the end, a kind of sleep that might be more than just reproductive. "The light music and soft clamour of people was all around me, and the rent was due." From the smudginess of collectivity suddenly, connected via non sequitur, the deadline of property emerges. On the other hand, the "and" syndeton places party and money almost side by side. Constellated in this way, value shows up as something that is derived from and informs social relations, but is also separate, as its own thing. An applied formalism of noncoherency makes it possible to carefully depersonalize narrative so that it can intertwine these two levels of analysis, and life, in their disparity.

Coda

Trans life is clouded and sparkling with a veil of unreality that can be as cheesy as it can be deadly. This veil is real as it is abstracted away from the "assumption that trans women's very existence *means something* outside itself," as Emma Heaney puts it.[19] The figure of the trans woman supposedly encapsulates a kind of dissociated knowledge that is knowledge not for her but for other people: writers, doctors, and queer theorists, for instance. Heaney shows how a specific transfeminine experience becomes the go-to allegory for the writer's alienation, both from oneself and society. The transfeminine experience is "read as mere allegory and reduced at the same time to the too literal," as Jules Gill-Peterson writes.[20] Value is extracted from it, even if it appears as sentimental value, or diagnostic value. If dissociation can be the name of a process that slows down or even freezes the imaging processes of metaphor and that precede this valorization, it is no surprise that it pops up in proximity to this emotional overload.

What does it take to move away from over-stylized readings resembling this transfeminine allegory, e.g., as Grace Lavery puts it, "descriptions of trans as instability, fuckery, or interstitiality that reduce such ontologies to intellectual or aesthetic patterns"?[21] And how can we at the same time not assume trans experience as something that only appears in the tonality of self-recognition and sincerity? Counterintuitively perhaps, the refinement of a style of analysis that is more scaled to life might include a commitment to the bad analogy, as it points to the anesthetic patterns that are clearly structuring it, too, if painfully or blissfully.

To take noncoherency seriously as an elaborate style, rather than kitsching it down to a constitutive lack or

campy gesture, might ultimately hint at a way of describing the complex relationship of gender to value—while facing the challenge that Kay Gabriel has so brilliantly formulated: "to think capital's instrumentalisation of gender without reducing the latter to the former as epiphenomenon or, indeed, a handmaiden."[22] After all, as Ngai puts it, sometimes an "abuse of logic … is required to show how the basic relations and operations of capital work."[23]

Weirdly enough, if sometimes dissociation fills in as a word for alienation, where we can wield it collectively, it can also become a word for the messiness of relating that works in our favor. As *The Faggots and Friends Between Their Revolutions* reminds us, "WEAK LINKS IN THE CHAIN ARE LINKS IN THE CHAIN."[24] There is a dissociative tension that vibrates in those social relations that make "an association of free people" both more imaginable and also more unimaginable, in the gossipy way, in the sense that they blur what we thought we knew about what feeling real feels like.

X

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Eva Hayward

Painted Camera, "Her"

Frames within frames. A bed and an orange chair. The black-dressed figure kneels against the bed. Her clothes capture light in folds. Her terribly pink face is faceless—a flat surface missing its features. Her hands are fingerless. She is plains of paint, just as she is flattened by kneeling. Grief, anguish, or pleasurable submission, her facelessness refuses to show the emotional demand I place on her. Just as the canvas frames what it frames, the chair frames the body, frames the shape a body takes held in its rigidity. These frames—like the white framing of the figure itself, that pleated light—become indistinguishable from the flattened edges of the figure. Her body is a frame; she is flattened and does not so much struggle to emerge from the frame but, curiously, becomes the frame.

The more I look, there is nothing to see but framing. The painting proposes "her" as a frame, reflexively gesturing to the function of gender as frame. Framing as a technology of representation. Also, framing as a setup: gender is a setup, even those we choose or refuse (no-gender is also a gender setup). All these framings discipline, something that this figure yields to. But in doing so, I wonder if this figure also enacts a refusal to be known through the frame by being known as a frame. That is to say, in fore-placing the work of framing, the painting also gestures to what a frame never captures, never knows, never can show.

About her own painting, Erica Rutherford (1923–2008) writes: "Featureless faces opened their mouths in silent screams, as if horror at their deformity. Bodies were shockingly naked, with nothing to conceal their hermaphroditic lack of differentiation. If they had arms, they flung these out in despair into the surrounding darkness."[1]

Rutherford finds her figures trapped between the absolutism of visibility (the role vision has in classification) and embodiments that have no representation. A paradox: overly visible and unseen. Existence that is nonexistence—that does not exist as existence itself. This is not utopic or liberatory; it is catastrophic. Her painted bodies witness the violence that the viewer (me, for instance) inflicts upon them in wanting to know—simultaneously naked (transsexual women are always already naked, contrived to be our sex first) and forced to scream out of mouths that are not theirs, not ours. What better description is there for the representation of transsexual women? "Her"—the race and sex that make this pronoun mean—is a problem that is central to Rutherford's self-portraits in the 1970s.

1.

Bodies remain trouble. Irrefutable, unknowable, and seductive, bodies are what thought wants to escape but never can. All thought emanates from bone, muscle, skin, and nerve, and yet to think is as far as we can *feel* our

Erica Rutherford, Crouched Figure, 1972. Acrylic on canvas. Gift of Gail Rutherford, 2009. Collection of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, CAG 2009.1.27.

own disembodiment. Audre Lorde and Judith Butler puzzled over the contradictions of embodiment, recognizing how systems of power and domination—particularly white supremacy and patriarchy—shape and reshape bodies as well as the feeling of bodily life. Even as they both suggested bodies are potentials—erotic and performative, respectively—everywhere violence defines the concatenation of bodies. They recognized that the unbearableness of bodily being thwarts every effort to represent—to think—bodily potential or plentitude. It is no wonder that thought—for this thinker—longs for a reprieve from—to literally, get out from—the impossible demands of bodily existence. And yet, Lorde and Butler both understood that disembodiment or transcendentalism were the very drive of white supremacist patriarchy.

In trans studies, body trouble is paramount. Through ever-changing names—transsexual, transgender, trans, trans*, genderqueer, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming—trans studies has no more central a problematic than embodiment. Trans studies has followed the feminist principle that gender ought to be capacious, disrupting the presumptions that biological assignment of sex (male/female/intersex) scripts gender. Following this feminist tenet, trans studies has shown: 1) gender is relational, shaped as much by sociohistorical forces as by subjective processes; 2) nonbiological agencies override anatomy and the material body, contesting ontological orders; 3) gender is a condition of the autopoietic subject that can be invented and destroyed even as the social order (patriarchy and white supremacy) hyper-invests in ever-narrowing sex conscriptions.

Gender promised a reprieve from the difficulty of bodies—from sexed and sexual bodies—that thought wanted, especially in trans thinking. The capaciousness of gender—indeed, its ability to suggest ideation, agency, and sociality—emboldened proposals for trans heuristics. Trans is no longer obliged to be about gender or bodies, subjects or identities. Trans now finds attachment to any number of objects, disciplines, media, histories, and much more.

Many of these are arguably advancements in theory, but there remain reasons to question how an ever-expanding trans—built upon a logic of dematerializing gender—has made questions about bodies and sexes difficult to ask, even politically precarious to pose. Are there differences between bodies framed by the general term "trans"? For instance, are there material divergences between estrogenic and androgenic hormonal changes to bodies, or for those trans subjects that maintain their endogenous states? If not essential differences, might there be consequential and material differences between, say, white transsexual women (with a pronoun "she") and brown gender nonconforming femmes (with a pronoun "they")? Do these differences shape livability, survivability, not only in terms of racial embodiments but sexual ones as well? And most troubling for the maxims of trans studies, does embodiment differently materialize the experience of trans masculinity from femininity? How might the generalizability of trans have enabled transsexual men to mis-conceptualize the lived experiences of transsexual women? What attention is needed to think well about differences that a trans theory simply distorts, often with transsexual women remaining unthought or worse?[2]

This essay is an effort to think sexual differences—specifically, those of transsexual women who became through estrogen and surgery, which is also to say *some* women. Possibly, it means women who took canary-yellow Premarin® tablets as an act of wanting one's self so exquisitely that only the language of necessity could approximate this desire. Needs are often primal wants that are too unbearable to describe as lust. These estrogens might have been prescribed with anti-androgen and progesterone pills. Likely, it means women who have been oversubscribed, undersubscribed, or mis-subscribed to the point of panic attacks, blood clots, strokes, unending nausea, and heart attacks. But also, women who have experienced nongenital orgasms that feel like bones cracking into lush velvet; a woman whose nipples achingly leak milk when she is afraid. All these—and numerous other contradictory effects of medicalized anti-trans violence, structural racism, and economic inequality—define them.

Premarin® meant, as it did for me, a woman who is sensorially redone—not male to female, but a sexed subject differently done in the effort to feel her body. Hormones, in this way, are not the same as medicalized embodiment, but instead are a supplemental register of sensation that is limited by sensory anatomy even as senses are excited over the edge of themselves. Simply, hormonal change remakes sensoria, and this begins to modify corporeality that subtends the senses. Touch, smell, and sight are disarranged, but not in the manner of some reductive "I see now as other women see"—that narrative is a hope for becoming a woman through her re-essentialization. Instead, bodily sensoria are percussed beyond our sense of sensed self. Sense vibrates, deranging the "feel of this" or the "look of that." These transsexual women do not become "more woman" with hormonal change. No. But they do—I do—become another sex, not female and not male, but no less materialized sexually. This sexuality is not biologism, not essentialism, not absolutism. Which is not to say this sexuality is not consequential, differential, and substantial.

The bodies of these estrogenic women, these differently sexed women, are altered by social forces responding to them just as they are anatomically reacting to biochemical changes. Patriarchy and white supremacy—both are what make gender/sex, they are also the materials that make her—are cataclysms that all bodies are processed through no matter their resistances or privileges. Every effort to resist sex is also a confirmation of the racism and sexism of cultural and historical orders that translate such efforts.

Transsexual women are no different; we too become through these same catastrophes, we self-fashion with, from, and through the carnage of this violence. Even though my transsexuality makes me other to female or male, other to essentialism but no less material, my survivability (how I will die) is shaped by a very narrow social translation of my otherwise-ness. And yet, this is not to say that the desire to refuse social order is only purposeless, uninventive, or simply regressive. This is one of the paradoxes of wanting to change sexual difference into sexual *differences.*

Sexuality and sensation *are* these transsexual women.

Not just in euphoric or positivist senses. Some wants are conscious and intentional fantasies that shape decisions. While others—often held hidden within those choices—are unrepresentable and intolerable, a negativity that magnetizes beyond what we know but is no less than what we want. Sensation sounds luxurious, but it is also the noise of "you fucking faggot" that vibrates into her body. A white man's fists punching as he rapes is also assembling, as did his earlier oeillades. The systemic neglect of a neighborhood, planning decisions made to immiserate and segregate, environmental degradation and other structural forces are also the sensuousness that makes these women's pharaonic bodies even as the curvature of her eye is altered by estrogen, seeing differently her place in this same neighborhood.

Both want and sensation necessitate bodies, and even the wish to be bodiless is a bodily fantasy. There is nothing new about this statement, but the discourse of trans (from its study to its activism) is framed not by differences or specificities but by generalities, sharedness, and cohesions. Dean Spade recently posted on Twitter: "Black feminist thought and Black lesbian analysis and organizing are and have been essential to trans liberation. We can't build a trans politics that actually improves trans lives (instead of just using trans lives to justify and decorate the status quo) without it."[3] Rightly invoking the centrality of black feminist and lesbian thought for thinking about the racial logic of sex/gender systems, Spade's "trans" and "we" eschew a similar commitment to difference and specificity. Could it be that an unspoken white trans masculinity is this "we"? Is this "trans liberation"? The very distortions that Lorde diagnosed—a repudiation of difference—are evoked here in a call for justice. This is not specific to Spade—he is but an example—but a more extensive problem within trans discourse—so many different subjectivities talking as one.

The generalizability of trans—not unlike the whiteness of liberalism—Spade's point—obliterates the different (and often contradictory) organizing and building required to improve transsexual women's lives, to improve black and brown transwomen's lives. I agree with Spade: black, brown, and white transsexual women must grapple with the problem that femininity is capacitated through the fungibility of black femaleness. Femininity is a racial logic, and the desire for femininity is made possible through the sexuating capacity of antiblackness.[4] This complexification of transsexual women's lust for femininity deserves attention; we deserve the work of nuanced and difficult thinking. We can grapple with the racist logic of our own figuration—something that a generalized "trans theory" or "trans liberation" or "we" cannot provide. It is time to deconstruct "trans."

2.

Frames in frames. A frame splits the figural body and the rectilinear shapes, canvases, pictures of the space the figure occupies, her space. "Her" is framed through style, but it is no less a frame, no less a structure of perception. What frames her space are fragmented language and blocks of color. The frame of language is foregrounded through its fragmentation; since I do not know the meaning of "new" or "ter pape," I am confronted by the representational force of language, its hold for meaning. Her pinkness, her color is repeated in surrounding squares—surfaces that come to mean skin, epidermalization. Her and her pinky-whiteness are framed as frames. The frame we call gender is here a surface, an epidermalization. "Her" is produced out of surface, produced out of the racialization of her surface. Everywhere the painting points to the technologies of seeing, to the frame's administration. And again, this faceless figure is a refusal of the frames that make her up, but only through the contradiction of becoming frame herself.

3.

How to think about a transsexual woman's differences? By "a," I mean a specific account among many. It could be called my transsexual method—I turn to art. For me, there is artfulness in transsexuality, and it is not her physician's. Trans studies and activism advocate for the conservative position of transsexual women as needy literalists. Given that anti-trans violence imbues the sociopolitical climate, this position is understandable, but it conceals lustier questions with ontological certitudes—it is anti-sexual. The very act of her need for Premarin® or breast implants, or facial feminization and orchidectomies, are wants in the form, style, and feel of one's sensuous self.

The misogyny and racism of surgeons and endocrinologists are obstacles for her want. Medicalization does not define a transsexual woman—just ask her. Medicalization is what repudiates her want even as it makes her otherwise to herself and others. She is not plasticized through medicalization.[5] On the contrary, she is confronted with the limits of a cultural order (what structures her consciousness and preconsciousness, and the authority of the super ego) that materially translates her bodily sexuality, her art. Transsexual women's bodies are accretions of intimate and subjective want made legible and experiential through the aesthetics of the cultural. What is art but a constant fight with—if also a reliance on—the protocols of aesthetics? Susan Stryker writes, "Nothing other than my desire brings Him [surgeon; but also, Medicine] here." She continues: "Materiality always resists the symbolic frame. I beg it, then, to throw all language off and become ungendered flesh, but language clenches this meat between its teeth in a death-grip." Invoking Lacanian terms, Stryker describes a paradox of transsexual women's

Erica Rutherford, The Green Chair, 1974. Acrylic on canvas. Gift of Gail Rutherford, 2009. Collection of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, CAG 2009.1.26.

"desire"—what we desire happens within materiality's resistance to representation, to representation's commitment to the cultural. But, transsexuality is not the return of a real materiality stripped of the symbolic—of the really real—but about how sexuality intensifies and invents matter, even as it is conscribed by the cutting relationship between symbolic and real registers. In begging materiality, Stryker wants to reverse the cutting relationship that the symbolic performs. But perhaps her desire reveals that some women want what is also foreclosed—they want their want. If transsexuality is sensuous intensity, it is so because of sexuality; what I would call her artistry.[6]

Art and aesthetics produce a fractious join. Transsexuality is sexuality's inventiveness with an impoverished reality, nothing more than the alibi for a brutalizing symbolic. It may be too contentious to say that transsexuality is artistry with modifications of sex as indexical signs of wantonness, but I offer this as an-other imaginary, an-other ego ideal for transsexuality. An artfulness at lusty odds with (and within) the cultural. This conversation risks but must avoid collapsing artistry into self-fashioning. Might her transsexual art-making aim toward a reprieve from the technology of selfhood? If art is the work of passion, her art also wants more than the cultural prescribes, more than the frameworks provided her. The art of transsexuality must not be confused with technologies of the self—seeing transsexuality as art places it as intervention in the material, rather than as confirmation of the reality's authenticating and totalizing function. By "art," here, I mean transsexuality's sexualization of the sexed body, and the fashioning of sex as an act of artistry.

4.

In *Nine Lives: The Autobiography of Erica Rutherford,* Rutherford documents her varied life as an actor, filmmaker, theater designer, printmaker, painter, activist, and professor in England, the United States, Spain, South Africa, and Canada.[7] A member of the Canadian Royal Academy of Arts, she painted for over forty years and was shown in major galleries in North American and Europe.[8] Rutherford's style ranged from abstract expressionism—murky fields of color that give way to swaths of luminosity that defined her work in the 1960s—to an oneiric modernism akin to Ken Kiff. Rutherford's work in the dreamlike paintings of the 1990s step past the divides between abstraction and figuration by suggesting that fantasy is not opposite material reality but a contingent force in making the world.

During the late seventies, while undergoing sexual transition, Rutherford experimented with self-portraiture. Starting with a posed photograph of herself, she would paint from this photograph not to achieve realism, but to look at the function of photography, particularly its frame. Her flattened figures seem to merge with the apparatus of framing, both the photograph and the canvas. She pushes against portraiture's cromulent function, and with it a modern conception of photography as capture. This period of work, I argue, refused photography's privileged relationship to rendering transsexuality visible: from linear progressions of before and after to seeing transition as sexual binarism from zero to oneness, male to female, and also the collapse of the referent to the image-matter. Photographs accompanying transsexual memoires confirmed this narrow understanding. For the reader, the photograph demonstrated a seeing it—the indeterminate pronoun "it" working to materialize the transsexual transition. In contrast, Rutherford's painted-self challenges photography's conceit that it captures what really is.[9]

In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, an inaugural text for trans studies, Jay Prosser writes about the connection between Rutherford's paintings and her transition:

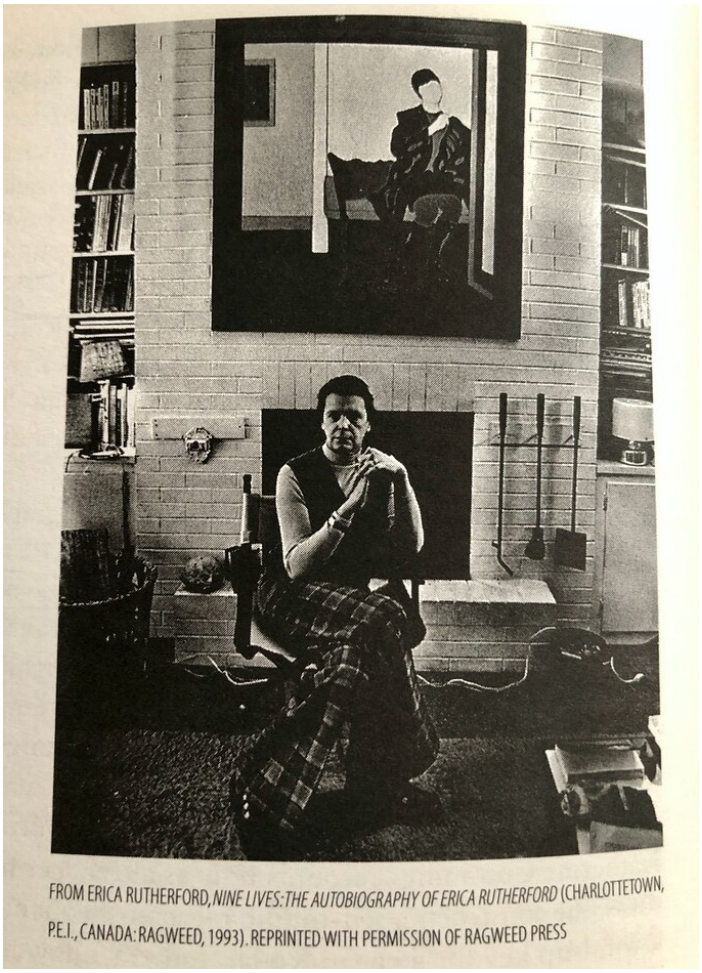
> A painter, Erica Rutherford paints self-portraits based on photographs she first takes of herself dressed as a woman—also concretizations of an imperceptible self … These portraits begin by envisioning the woman Rutherford wishes to become and are gradually transformed as she transitions into a record of that becoming.[10]

For Prosser, Rutherford's paintings are the sexual abstraction of her photographic becoming—to be, to be a woman, is photographic. Through photography, a transsexual emerges as a subject materialized into a real self. Here, Prosser pivots around the photographic referent to cohere the transsexual real with bodily matter.

In discussing the above photograph in Rutherford's autobiography, Prosser goes on to say:

> A painted self-portrait is situated behind the photographic Rutherford. In the painting, the seated figure is feminized through body contour, posture, and clothing, but the face is featureless—a blank space as undetailed by the feminine as the still-masculine face of the photographic Rutherford seated before her.

Prosser continues: "The self-portrait is a blueprint for the transsexual subject in transition: like the photographs in the autobiographies for readers, visual means of making the transsexual's gender real."[11] The real of her photograph, for Prosser, is her feminine failure—a failure the painting does not record. But, what if Rutherford's



FROM ERICA RUTHERFORD, *NINE LIVES: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ERICA RUTHERFORD* (CHARLOTTETOWN, P.E.I., CANADA: RAGWEED, 1993). REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF RAGWEED PRESS

painted portrait reflexively argues against the framework that her transsexuality is forced to represent here? Might the photographs she takes of herself be what Rutherford paints against, knowing that the photograph aims to render her transsexuality in terms of male to female, a sexual transition predicated on authentication and autopoiesis? Rather than collapsing her material body with the photographic referent, or confusing the real with matter, Rutherford's paintings provocatively attend to the imperceptibility of perceptual frames.

Prosser understands how the apparatus of representation—for *Second Skins*, it is the narrative form of biography, which values a linear timeline and conflict resolution—attempts to capture the subject represented. Narrative progression has few better tools than transsexual transition to organize time and the arc of a story. However, Prosser concludes his book with the realness of sex as photographic, showing how the indexicality of photography's referent substantiates the logic of sexual becoming. His study of "second skins" (his theory of transsexuality) ends with photography to lend it its own narrative resolution. Instead of recognizing the linear role photography plays in biographical accounts of transsexuality, Prosser turns to the photographic image as his theory of transsexual realness and bodily being. For Prosser, transsexuality is photographic: *to be* (seen/skinned) is sex itself: "For transsexuals surgery is a fantasy of restoring the body to the self enacted on the surface of the body."[12] Taking *literally* Roland Barthes's assertion that photography is an indexical (literally "light … is a carnal medium, a skin") record of "that which has been," Prosser's account of transsexuality is about *that which is*, about the realness of transsexuality as image, as photographic. Prosser is certainly not alone in building an account of transsexuality on a modern presumption of photography, but more consequentially, it seems to me that much of trans studies—what we might call its canon, its political orientations, its central commitments—has relied on an investment in the being of trans that it draws from photography as its defense and—perhaps even more impoverishing—as its logic.[13] Trans studies has a photography problem.[14]

Prosser's meditation on Rutherford initiates his argument about trans becoming that he theorizes through a particular photographic reading of Freud's enigmatic statement about the ego as "not merely a surface entity, but … the projection of a surface,"[15] that ultimately collapses the image-matter of skin and transexual being. In Prosser's careful critique of Judith Butler, he demonstrates how she misreads the distinction Freud makes between body and ego. For Butler, the body becomes "itself the psychic projection of a surface."[16] For Freud, Prosser notes, the ego is a "product of the body, not the body as a product of the ego."[17] Butler conflates materiality with the mental projection of the surface of the body—collapsing the differences between Lacan's mirror stage and Freud's conception of the ego. Prosser makes the case that transsexual phenomena "illustrate the materiality of the bodily ego rather than the phantasmatic status of the sexed body: the material reality of the imaginary and not, as Butler would have it, the imaginariness of material reality."[18]

In structuring this critique, Prosser turns to the cinematic imagery of Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) to show how Butler's account of transsexuality is metaphorized away from the sexed and raced materiality of the body. In Butler's own discussion of this film, she defines the camera as a metaphor of transsexualization: Livingston's camera performs phallic maneuvering through transsexual women who want sex change (specifically, genital surgery), turning black and Latina transsexuals into confusions of phallus and penis. Prosser explains this confusion as a repetition of Butler's misreading of Freud, again de-literalizing transsexuality. But what is interesting here is how similar Prosser's turn to photography as metonymic of transsexualization is to Butler's cinematic approach.

If, as Prosser suggests, the transsexual's body image "is radically split off from the material body," then the description of feeling "trapped in the wrong body" becomes uncannily similar to the capture of the referent in

the emulsion of the photograph.[19] An interior negative of the body image is printed—with surgery and hormones as processing fluids— *onto* and *as* the material body. "The skin is the locale for the physical experience of body image and the surface upon which is projected the psychic representation of the body."[20] Prosser recognizes the problem of Lacan's occularcentrism of subjectivity, noting that that Freud emphasizes bodily sensations as forming the ego. However, he pursues the substantiation of the transsexual feeling of wrong-bodiliness such that

> surgery deploys the skin and tissues to materialize the transsexual body image with fleshy prostheses in the shape of the sentient ghost-body. The surgical grafting of materials endows the transsexual with the corporeal referents for these imaginary and phantomized signifieds, restoring their substance.[21]

Photography, it would seem, is the form of transsexuality, creating a *photo-ontic*. Haunted by referents—appeals to the real—transsexuality happens between referentiality and representation. The problem with transsexualization as photograph is revealed in Prosser's wish that the referentiality of transsexuality is captured (trapped) in photography.

The consequences of the photo-ontic of Prosser's reading become clearer in his later book *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss,* where he critiques his own autobiographical impulse in using a photograph of himself to end *Second Skins*. Guided again by his reading of Barthes, Prosser recognizes that his literal (what Barthes described as *studium*) reading of transsexual photographs missed what photography cannot show (the photograph's *punctum*) in its capture: affect. In returning affect (*punctum*) to transsexual photographs, Prosser writes, "This failure to be real *is* the transsexual real."[22] For Prosser, transsexuals never achieve their referents, never achieve the longing for their sexed referent. It is the un-becoming of sex bound with an overdetermined sexual visibility that defines his transsexuality. Yet, transsexual being remains, problematically, photographic.

Yes, Prosser's *punctum* allows for the affective, but it continues to rely on a photo-ontic. By "photo-ontic," I mean how the seduction of the photographic referent produces a collapse between image-matter and being in theorizing transsexuality. Even the trauma inflicted by the surgeon who cuts her up through an acting-out of racialized sexism—any transwoman who has modified her body knows exactly what I mean, either as fear or actuality—remains within this photo-ontic framework for understanding transsexual beingness. Prosser writes "The photograph incarnates because it takes the body of the referent … I may never recover my first skin. But the realization of that loss *is* my second skin."[23] His photo-ontic: not being *is* transsexual being as enacted through the logic of photography. Image-matter, even in its most evanescent and affective form, defines transsexual being. The implications of transsexual-as-photograph are that the transphobic logic of spectacular spectacle defines transsexuality, obscuring other "bodily sensations" that mark the work of sexuality.

5.

Rutherford writes:

> Then, at the moment when they seemed most to threaten me, they staggered, dropped to the floor and in helpless crouched postures withdrew themselves. In this position, though smaller, they still thrived, fattening themselves, assuming sensuous curves of a sexuality they could never know, growing breasts that obtruded indecently from their infantile bodies until they appeared malformed infants, aberrations of nature. Capriciously, they now assumed joyful colors, reds and yellows, as if to ensure that no one could ignore their presence.[24]

Instead—and what I can read from Rutherford's refusal—let us take seriously the sexuality of sex change: the want that cannot be fully metabolized by the social (ego ideals that refuse ideal egos) while modifying the real's own becoming, its ongoing materializations, sexualizations, and concatenations.[25] Perhaps instead of Rutherford's paintings as naive accounts of her becoming a woman, her painting proposes that photography is the naive technology for representing transsexuality (let alone for modeling transsexuality on). Rutherford does not show who she is becoming but shows what forces—and cultural aesthetics—are at work in delimiting that emergence, that potential. Working against photography as record, against becoming real through photographic logics, Rutherford's paintings draw attention to those technical modes of perception that limit what the body is or might be. And more specific to Rutherford: What if a realist theory of photography has produced reproducible narratives about transsexual women's lives—even to ourselves—that refuse bodily difference and those experiences that exceed the sex/gender schema?

But Freud continues to define "projection of a surface" as a sensuousness that is derived from the body, but not as a literalization of the surface of that body. Embodiment—the sense of feeling bodily—is a sensuous rapport between affective states we might call inside and outside. At every point in this relay, fantasy makes sense of sensations refracted through an inaccessible, but no less significant,

materiality. In other words, bodily sense is produced through sensuous excess, not through a precise organ of sensation. Might, then, transsexuality not be simply about skin—one organ dedicated to touch and vision—but an excess that has no representative? Despite Prosser's critique of Butler's imagistic (and as such, performative) reading of the body ego, he also *organ*-izes the body ego through a phenomenology of photography (a *studium*-only account of the body— *what literally is present-ed*—as described by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*), with transsexuality as idealized example. The referential surface—what I read Rutherford's art working *against*—is the frame that delimits transsexuality into a visibility, into a logic of the photo-self as sex. For Rutherford, transsexuality is not ontologically a skin to be imagistically realized. Instead, transsexuality is what infuses the body (even as limit) with sexuality as a register of fantasy always aiming toward what is yet unknown, the otherwise that designates transsexuality.[26]

What would it mean for Rutherford's paintings if we returned sexuality (not identity, but libido) to transsexuality? To "assume sensuous curves of a sexuality [we] could never know"?

X

Deepest gratitude to McKenzie Wark who encouraged me to get back to the pleasure of my text. This essay would not have happened without her support and editorial guidance.

1
Erica Rutherford, *Nine Lives: The Autobiography of Erica Rutherford* (Ragweed Press, 1993), 168.

2
See Che Gossett and Eva Hayward, "An Introduction," in "Trans in the Time of HIV/AIDS," ed. Che Gossett and Eva Hayward, special issue, *TSQ: Tran sgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (November 2020).

3
Dean Spade (@deanspade), Twitter, January 26, 2021 https://twitter.com/deanspade/status/1354156074941595648 .

4
Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (NYU Press, 2020).

5
See Jules Gill-Peterson's important book *Histories of the Transgender Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018). Her argument complexifies the relationship between institutionalized medicine and subjective life.

6
Susan Stryker, "The Surgeon Haunts My Dreams," *Transsexual News Telegraph* , no. 6 (Spring 1996). Under the title "Pre-Operative."

7
While in South Africa, she worked against apartheid and the rise of the nationalists, producing the first all-black feature film in Africa's history. "Her hope was nothing less than the establishment of a black cinema in South Africa." Ray Cronin, in Cronin, Irene Gammel, and J. Paul Bourdreau, *Erica Rutherford: The Human Comedy* (Confederation Centre of the Arts, 1998).

8
New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Canada Council Art Bank, Arts Council of England, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Indianapolis Museum of Art, and Museo d'Arte Contemporano in Madrid, Spain.

9
Feminists Bernice Hausman and Catherine Millot play out this collapse in their studies of transsexuality. In *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Duke University Press, 1995), Hausman's attention to how technology (rather than narrative) constructs transsexuality curiously elides the role photography plays in medicine and the structure of autobiography. In *Horsexe: Essay on Transsexuality* (Autonomedia, 1990), Millot offers a Lacanian study of transsexuality. Following Lacan, she writes: "In their requirement for truth … transsexuals are a victim of error. They confuse the organ and the signifier" (143). Curiously, this claim is punctuated with photographs of transsexuals, demonstrating her own collapse of image and matter—the error she defines transsexual women as. Note: Her essay is often misread as saying transsexual women suffer from psychosis, but she is very clear that the transsexual woman substitutes The Woman for the Name-of-the-Father. "This fourth ring (The Woman in Lacan's Borromean knot), however, only holds the Imaginary and the symbolic together; the real is unknotted, and the transsexual's demand is thus for correction that will adjust the Real of sex to the knotted I and S" (45). This substitution is how psychosis is avoided, in Millot's reading.

10
Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 211.

11
Prosser, *Second Skins*, 212.

12
Prosser, *Second Skins*, 8.

13
Trans studies' struggle with beingness has played across *different* concepts, including ontology, realism, materiality, reality, and Lacan's real. Even in the introduction to "Left of Queer," *Social Tex*t 38, no. 4 (2020), Jasbir Puar and David Eng variously cite "bodily materiality," "ontology," "matter," and Lacan's "return of the real." Unintentionally, they too are tracking the imprecision and collapsibility of these dimensions of existence. That trans studies has welded these differences into indistinction may be less about carelessness then about the accomplishment of gender as pliability, as indifference. And I would add that the logic of this indifference is predicated on a disavowal of sexuality (what structures Lacan's real).

14
This begins to explain the field's whiteness problem. See Jonathan Beller, "Camera Obscura After All: The Racist Writing with Light," *Scholar & Feminist Online* http://sfonline.barnard.edu/feminist-media-theory/camera-obscura-after-all-the-racist-writing-with-light/0/ . See also Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

15
Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (Norton, 1989), 20 and 20n16.

16
Prosser, *Second Skins,* 41.

17
Prosser, *Second Skins,* 41.

18
Prosser, *Second Skins*, 44.

19
Prosser, *Second Skins,* 69.

20
Prosser, *Second Skins,* 72.

21
Prosser, *Second Skins,* 85–86.

22
Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room,* 172, emphasis in original.

23
Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room*, 186.

24
Rutherford, *Nine Lives*, 169.

25
This point is taken up in a forthcoming "Part 2" essay on Erica Rutherford's later work. Briefly, what that essay considers is the sensuousness of transsexuality. Attending to estrogenic and surgical processes, the essay offers a sexual theory of sex change.

26
Which then frames for us the question: Is anti-transwomen violence about envy—not hate—in the form of a misreading? By "envy"—given the social aesthetics of femininity that transsexual women are obliged to reproduce despite their refusal—I mean: "This transsexual woman not only has something I cannot have, but they stole it from me." Envy is desire disavowed as parlous property: for the watcher of transsexual women, this envy is built through an error in presuming to see the real of her transsexuality. Is anti-transwomen aggression, then, an effect of an anti-sexual social that claims the feminine real for itself? Adding to the difficult question I posed early, in what ways has Prosser (but also any number of transmasculine scholars) used transsexual women to make a case for himself as seen? Rather than improve transwomen's lives, does this scholarship self-vitalize through a repudiation and de-complexification of these women's lives—so much so, that the only useful transwoman is a dead one?

McKenzie Wark

The Cis Gaze and Its Others (for Shola)

In a much-cited essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey gave us a useful way of thinking about how we see: the male gaze.[1] Her examples are all from classic Hollywood cinema, but the term has a wider application. For Mulvey, the spectator's point of view is structured by heterosexual male desire. Cinema offers the particular pleasure of that desire in seeing without being seen.

The male gaze sees through the male protagonist on the screen, misrecognizing itself through his conquests of worlds and women. But this pleasure is undercut by an anxiety: the woman he desires is desirable because, in Freudian language, she lacks something. He has the phallus, and she does not. She might take it from him! That she is castrated is desirable. That she might be castrating is not desirable—at least for the male gaze of a straight cis man.

Plenty of screen theory also plays out what spectatorship is like for cis women, or for gay people. Mulvey even suggested elsewhere that there's a kind of transsexuality to the female spectator within the male gaze when she misrecognizes herself in the male protagonist.[2] I want to set that aside to ask about the trans woman spectator. Who does she become in the structure of the male gaze? To the trans woman spectator, the woman on screen that is both castrated and castrating might be the very thing to be desired.

I want to focus not so much on the male gaze, but on the *cis gaze*— a looking that harbors anxiety about the slippages and transformations between genders, but which also harbors desires for those transitions as well. I don't want to think from the point of view of this dominating, controlling, and yet fragile cis perspective, nor even to critique it. I want to think, and feel, and imagine from outside of it. It's no longer possible to think about the gender of the gaze without also thinking about race. I want to think beyond how ambivalent desires and anxieties structure the field of vision around race, sexuality, and gender, and decenter the sovereignty of the gaze itself.[3]

What is the cis gaze to that which is in so many ways its most negative object? In the context in which I work and play, this would be something like the black, queer, femme, trans body. What is it like to see, not from the point of view of film director Clint Eastwood, or the male protagonist of his *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), but from the point of view of one of the people caught in the camera's gaze—the trans woman The Lady Chablis?[4]

Of course, there are many black, queer, femme, and trans artists and writers, and even filmmakers, although the archive of their work can be fragile and partial. The archive itself constructs a gaze that refuses to see them as they might want to be seen, so the aesthetic I want to create here might need a little art and artfulness. What I love about Shola von Reinhold's novel *Lote* is that, besides

Justin Vivian Bond, Laverne Cox, 2020. Watercolor on paper, 4 x 4 in.

being a ripping read, there are, raveled into its elegant form, some concepts for just such a femme, trans, queer, and black aesthetic.[5]

To put it in these terms is reductive, because what's great about *Lote* is that it finds other forms, other languages of the *quaintrelle*, the femme dandy. A quaintrelle aesthetic often appears as the bad object for the cis gaze, dismissed in that derisive and dismissive tone that *Lote* calls "International Cishet."[6] Whereas, from the point of view of its bad object, the unilateral pronouncements of International Cishet appear as less than universal: "The tectonic mascness of it all; that would have you think it's neutral."[7]

Lote centers on two black, quaintrelle characters. We

Production still from the Clint Eastwood movie Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil (1997). The still features Lady Chablis and actor John Cusak.

don't know the government name or assigned gender of Mathilda, who is addressed as "she," while her friend Erskine-Lily is "he but not He."[8] That is, until that becomes unbearable too. "It's being called the other thing. Man. So harsh, so vulgar. So … absolute. It always makes me feel sick. Quite disgusting."[9] That refusal, both conceptual and visceral, is a key moment in trans femininity, regardless of where a body might land within these linguistic shifters through which bodies are obliged to be dressed and addressed.

This quaintrelle way of thinking and feeling makes sense to me as a transsexual woman. It's not my sensibility, but it is convivial. I can recognize it, play with it, feel like part of me can be alive here. It expands the repertoire of what a trans femme aesthetic can be for me. *Lote* is outside my experience when it comes to Mathilde and Erskine-Lily's blackness. I'm a mere student of the place where the femme, queer, trans sensibility overlaps with blackness, within what Paul Gilroy called the Black Atlantic.[10]

Any interesting trans femme aesthetic in the spaces traced by the Black Atlantic will be one imbued, directly or not, with blackness, and at the deepest levels. To the European or American dialects of International Cishet, black, trans, femme, queer bodies are extra, too much, dismissed for being too wrapped up in appearances—appearances that, among other things, supposedly mark them as dupes of the beauty industry and a normative white idea of femininity. It's an aesthetic that does its best to perform beauty without ironic distance or critique.

This is the essence of all the bad takes by cis writers on the 1990 ballroom documentary *Paris Is Burning*, from Tim Dean to Judith Butler to bell hooks: that the black transsexual attempting to don the mantle of feminine beauty is doing it wrong.[11] To which one of von Reinhold's

Tourmaline, Morning Cloak, 2020. Dye sublimation print, 30 × 30 ⁄ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Chapter NY, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

characters in *Lote* retorts:

> Between the "assimilation" and the fantasy there was another space which was not about championing anything that speaks against you—though that can be a literally fatal trap—but instead about showing your ability to embody the fantasy regardless, in spite of, *to spite*, and in doing so extrapolate the elegance, the fantasy.[12]

The gesture here is the refusal to allow anyone else to own this kind of beauty, to steal it back, to

> abstract it and show it as a universal material, to be added to the toolbox. "Look! Look: it does not belong to them. Maybe we should not want it because they have weaponized it, but it was not theirs in the first place. Black people consuming and creating beauty of a certain kind is still one of the most transgressive things that can happen in the west, where virtually all consumption is orchestrated through universal atrocity."[13]

Lote celebrates characters who are "Black fantasists, worshippers of beauty,"[14] who are, in a lovely loaded phrase, "luxury stained."[15] Some are Arcadians, looking back for moments of idyll and glory. Some are Utopians, impelled towards Afro-futures. Some are Luxurites, consecrating their lives to the sensory *now*.[16] Whether in the past, present, or future, there are dangers in all these paths, but also possibilities. *Lote*'s black queer, trans, and femme characters endure the world with aesthetic as well as political resources. "She pined, as she often did. Fantasized about the future. The Glittering Proletariat, skin perhaps as dark as her mother's would have been."[17]

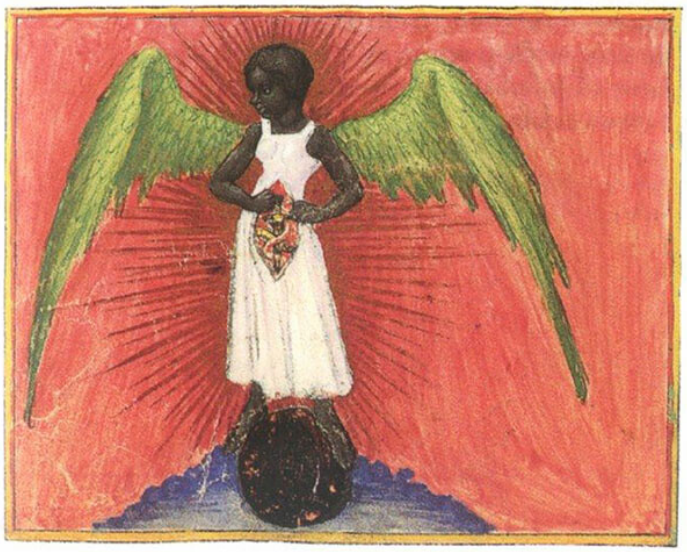


Illustration from the book Aurora Consurgens, 1420. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

Aesthetic survival tactics for the glittering proletariat under racial capitalism: manners and dress can work as camouflage, or its opposite. "Her costumes had the ability to temporarily dazzle onlookers into confusion, or sometimes admiration and awe," but "without class, eccentricity loses prestige."[18] Best to look like a rich eccentric. Fortunately, the trappings of class can be acquired—without a fortune. Then one can receive the generosity of rich people without embarrassing them into thinking themselves charitable. "Rich people will happily prop up their own kind for years."[19]

This facility with appearances is connected to the practice of the Escape, an especially useful talent in this treacherous age of trans "visibility."[20] Several characters in *Lote* are adept at it. "We did not want to become people hollowed out by generations of too much bad labor."[21] Appearing in a world, being embraced by it, then disappearing into another, leaving behind an empty simulacrum to hold the debts. "Never work!" as the Situationists used to say. An art for disreputable characters, disreputable to International Cishet and its twin, Global Whiteness, under whose gaze Escape is an art for those "born in a body that's apparently historically impermissible."[22]

Could there be a black quaintrelle aesthetic that exceeds the survival tactic of Escape? Mathilde is an Arcadian by temperament, who on rare occasions experiences a Transfixion, a sensation that comes over her in the presence of certain images of a particular kind of past life, those of the Bright Young Things who danced and glammed in and out of London between the wars. Each Transfixion resonates in its own peculiar way, perhaps as a "humming beneath the high fine rush."[23] The Transfixion is a sensation that vibrates *around* the gaze.

Transfixions trip a "feeling of not only recognizing, but of having been recognized."[24] It starts with a sense of mutual recognition, of the gaze being returned, but that's not all. It engages the other senses, putting the gaze back in its place within a sensory communism. One of Mathilda's Transfixions "induced the decorative wave in all things." And another: "An excruciation of coil and kink … It made me ache with jealously and bliss."[25] Transfixions are those rare moments beyond the recognition of a body, a life, not unlike one's own. They thrum and throb beyond and behind the gaze: an unseen sensation.

A Transfixion is not a recognition in an image of one's identity. It is, rather, a dissolution of both the seen image and seeing self—black, femme, queer, trans, whatever. Both self and seen pulse in a cosmic subwoofer. What resonates is a rippling difference between the one and the other and the no-longer-actually-either—the style of a whole world. Since this is an aesthetic, the historical facts and biographical details need not matter, and in any case would reduce the Transfixion to a banality that its whole purpose had been to escape.

Potential objects of a Transfixion are likely to be on that margin that remains visible and proximate to a dominant culture. They have to stand in for possibilities even more marginal, those who escape the archive entirely. Mathilda's key Transfixions are rich or rich-passing bohemians:

> Freaks, marginal and queer, they may have been, but many of my Transfixions were of the same class and race, especially to begin with. God knows how some of them would have reacted had they met me … Conversely, history has buried many other potential Transfixions. I would still pass a building, and a particular curve in the stone would send me reeling with sensations and it could only be because the anonymous mason was a Transfixion, their life otherwise entirely unrecorded.[26]

Aaliyah King in Walk For Me (2016), a film by Elegance Bratton.

This extrapolation from absent presence of a past is not unlike Saidiya Hartmann's "critical fabulation," but more fabulous.[27]

Transfixions recover the trace of the aesthetic aspects of artful lives from the margins of the archive that fall short of the existing category of fine art. Forms of art still reduced to merely ethnographic interest. "Framed art made by people that looked like me, throughout history, as something below art."[28] What is black, what is femme, what is queer, what is trans, can be decorative, but is only embraced as art under limiting circumstances, and often at the expense of abandoning or treating certain ornamental impulses ironically or critically.

While discreet about sex work, that most unacknowledged fine art, the ballroom aesthetes of *Paris Is Burning* made few other concessions. "Their love of Beauty, in that High Camp sense of the word, had not diluted their Blackness. It arose, monadically, from the same place."[29] There are different concepts of beauty here, even different ontologies, different ways in which beauty might (or might not) have being. Put simply, there is a difference here between ornament and form: between beauty as elaboration, modification, addition, the sensuous, the flesh; and beauty as essence, purity, whole(some)ness, and spirit. Beauty as adding, accentuating matter with matter; beauty as subtracting matter to reveal spirit. A difference coded, among other things, by race. Here's how von Reinhold imagines the aesthetic universe of one famous white mid-century British modernist:

> Wyndham Lewis, writing about his encounter with a "mulatto girl" at a party … describes her appearance as "driven by the barbaric and primitive will to ornament," concluding that "the African blood is very much present in that one." Perhaps Lewis had been reading Hegel who posited adornment as an undesirable primitive urge—and a feminine property of the Other. Hegel, like so many other thinkers from Plato to Adolf Loos, sought to preserve the image of an unholy triumvirate of femininity, adornment and Otherness.[30]

Loos's most famous essay is called "Ornament and Crime."[31] It's a foundational text of modernist design. Loos associated the ornamental with disease, paganism, the Negro, the criminal, the feminine, and with the "stragglers" holding back cultural evolution. Loos: "Freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength." Still, Loos might have been right about one thing: that Western culture had lost its own organic forms of ornament. As one black quaintrelle says to another:

> The volute, you see, is divine, the sinuous line, the serpentine line, the corolla, the curl, the twist, the whorl, the spiral and so on, are all related in their volution, convolution, revolution. Volution is the essential and irreducible aspect of ornamentation, just as the phoneme is the smallest irreducible unit of sound in language. Locked into each coil, each curl of ornament, just like the coil and curl of your hair, and my hair, darling—Afro hair, as we call it—is the secret salvation of us all.[32]

Ornament, as Asger Jorn once put it, is a "pact with the universe."[33] *Black Athena*: that was the title of Martin Bernal's controversial book that argued that the Greeks acknowledged Egypt as the source of their own culture.[34] I'm not a classicist, so I don't know if its argument works as cultural history. But perhaps it works instead as an aesthetic—one that frees us from that penetrating gaze, always piercing the veil of appearances with its dialectical arcing and leaping that supposedly takes us from the Greeks to white European modernism. That aesthetic that prides itself on shedding its fascination with ornamental trinkets to become the contemplation of pure form, in the process retrieving and uplifting the order and proportion of a classical Greek patrimony it claims as its possession.

Folded away in this myth of Western inheritance, and from the beginning, is this:

> Even the Greeks must at one point have realized the importance of ornament. They called the universe "kosmos," meaning decoration, surface, ornament: something cosmetic. Like make-up. Like lipstick. Like rouge. The cosmos is fundamentally blusher.[35]

Cosmos indeed has this ambiguity, meaning both arrangement and adornment. To see cosmos as arrangement, as order, and not as ornament, as proliferation, is an aesthetic choice—one that is, among other things, racially coded. Maybe there's a Transfixion that can happen when one is reading, when one feels a humming beneath the high fine rush in the glints and twists at the edges of certain texts.

> Plato was quite the basher of ornamentalists. He had it in for what he called philotheamones—sight lovers, spectacle lovers. Framed them as veritable trash next to his kingly philosophers who loved the true beauty of ideas, not the decorative beauty of the world. Long after the Greek's seriously puerile demotion of the ornamental, the Romans, Kant, Wincklemann, Hegel and all the rest damned it for being cosmetic. "Inessential ornament," they called it. Quite hilarious really: if you ever need evidence of someone's brutishness, it's deeming ornament inessential.[36]

The Philotheamones had practices of the beautiful, of art, as a means of learning and being, that work through the sensual rather than discount it.[37] This could be a conceptual practice, even if philosophy founds itself by refusing it. Kissing-cousins of the Philotheamones, aesthetically speaking at least, might be the Lotophagi, the lotus eaters, best known from the *Odyssey* (Book 9) and from Herodotus (Book 4). They too are sensualists, not of the eye but the mouth. Consuming the lotus makes them forget home and family. They are peaceful dreamers, and queer as fuck.

The Arcadian dream of *Lote* is for a Lotophagi revival. If you do a search for lotus eaters, you find many pages obsessed with trying to identify which island they came from and what plant they consumed. Who knows? Maybe their drug of choice was the blue water lily of the Nile, a common decorative motif in Egyptian art. Perhaps the lotus eaters are also an African invention—or could be. Or could only be.

What we have here, escaping around the corners of the cis gaze, is another practice of communication, and a different theory of it. The practice of aesthetic devotion in *Lote* is a gloriously eccentric one, centered on the visitation by the Luxuries. Like angels, the Luxuries work as intermediaries, performing what I've elsewhere called "xenocommunication."[38] They're a limit case to communication, conveying sensation, through an absence, or impossibility, from the incommunicable. "Where we consider angels to be spiritual messengers, we might well think of the Luxuries as sensory ones, communicating with the aesthetic aspects of the soul. They are described as having skin like black marble."[39] They might be the agents of Transfixions.

Through the ritual staging of fabulousness, surrounded by beauty and after ingesting mind-altering substances, Mathilde and Erskine-Lily manage to conjure a visitation from the Luxuries. Nothing mystical need be imagined. Maybe it's a fugitive dreaming, an auto-suggestive trick, a religious ritual. Or philosophical practice, to touch a "beautifully manic Geist."[40] Or an art. Maybe an aesthetic need not be about disinterested contemplation. Perhaps it could be an intensely interested and bodily sensation of the elaboration of the world. The beautiful is not the purposive with no purpose. It has a purpose:

> The sensation of the beautiful arises because something is beautiful and that this sensation has a functional property. If there was no beauty the

> sensation would not arise and one could not commune with the Luxuries—one must appreciate the beauty in and of itself to be able to experience the sensation which allows one to confer with those Beings, which is indicative of their presence.[41]

"Commune" is a delicious word here. A participation in a beauty that is not a property of any particular thing or anyone's possession. *Lote* can be read as a fantastical instruction manual for the "aesthete communist."[42] Or as I call it: *femmunism*.

If the slave-owning Greeks mastered geometry, perhaps it's because they were also land owners. Geometry is, among other things, a technique for marking and measuring out estates. Perhaps it's no accident that the more Apollonian strain of Western modernism took its cue from the blanched, looted ruins of Greek marble, and took their temples as a template for the spirit of good form. Property, order, purity, form; and against that, the surround: all that it excluded, such as what is black, femme, queer, and trans, if one must point with such words.[43] And in and against good form and good order, an aesthetic communism, the volunteers of the volute: "Unwitting antibodies of the Totality."[44]

Lote helps me think through a couple of things. One is a tempering of my instinct that a trans femme aesthetics always has to be an avant-garde one.[45] I still think forms designed to marginalize us need handling with care. What *Lote* teaches me is that: "Until the Black diaspora, amongst various other groups, have come close to that length of commodious interaction with the form … then perhaps these pronouncements should be rephrased from 'painting is dead,' to 'white people shouldn't paint.'"[46] Or write, perhaps.

The other thing I am learning from *Lote* is the whole category of the beautiful. In writing for *e-flux journal* about Jessie Rovinelli's 2019 film *So Pretty*, I juxtaposed an aesthetic of the pretty to the beautiful.[47] There, the pretty as a low technique, outside the exalted realm of beauty as good form, seemed to be a way to think of a trans femme aesthetic. But there's a certain luxury in white girls like us, Jessie and myself, dispensing with beauty in favor of the pretty as something more everyday—and, in my case, more vulgar. Von Reinhold starts, rather, with the matter of blackness, to claim the beautiful as what is most high—partly for survival reasons, and partly also as a different line of aesthetic claim to space, to glory.

Not that I ever thought there would be just one trans femme aesthetic, as if there were some essence or style or unity. It is rather a disparate set of tactics for being in the world—as a being, and as a world—that can construct a situation that is pleasing, for as long as it lasts. And in ways that can cast a refrain that can echo, that can be felt and heard, that our cultures might learn and elaborate and grow from—and to endure. And that can construct a situation from which the Transfixions to come would be more than shadows.

X

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Emily Alison Zhou

Digging and Sinking and Drifting: Allison Parrish's Machine Poetics

"For most of my life, my experience of being trans consisted mainly of me thinking that some tiny aspect of my behavior could be a 'tell,'" writes Allison Parrish in the introduction to her 2015 book *Everyword.* "As a consequence, I stopped writing stories. Storytelling, in fact, started to seem dangerous. Anything heart-felt, anything true that I cared to write would inevitably provide a clear window into my gender-troubled soul. I was still interested in language and writing, but the form this interest took started to become very different."[1]

Everyword documents Parrish's long-running conceptual writing project @everyword, a Twitter bot that slowly tweeted every word in an alphabetized list of about one hundred thousand words, one at a time, every thirty minutes. The book resembles a dictionary, with a significant difference: in lieu of a definition for each word, each entry contains the time each word was posted to the website and the number of likes and retweets each received. In place of a catalog of meanings, *Everyword* gives a picture of the social life of language as filtered through the internet.

The book probably wouldn't exist if @everyword wasn't something of a phenomenon during the early years of Twitter. The bot, which ran from 2007 to 2014, garnered a lot of attention after a 2011 profile in *Gawker,* and at its conclusion had over one hundred thousand followers. Parrish recalls in her introduction to *Everyword* that she was surprised by "the visibility of the account, and the visibility that it gave me."[2]

It's perhaps surprising, even ironic, that a work of art as starkly process-based as @everyword suddenly put its creator into a spotlight, however small. It was perhaps one of the first pieces of "bot art" to grace Twitter, and prefigured the later use of bots as agents of algorithmic chaos on the social media platform. More specifically, @everyword is a precursor to the (now-ubiquitous) Twitter bots that (for example) tweet every line of *Finnegans Wake*,[3] tweet descriptions of emergency room visits from a database,[4] post Google Street View images of every lot in a certain city,[5] or displace all kinds of other textual or visual data onto the constantly updating feed of the platform. A great number of Twitter bots are themselves based on @everyword's premise,[6] ranging from straightforward augmentations of the conceit (a bot that simply places the word "fuck" before each word[7]) to more unpredictable ones (a bot that uses the word "lesbian" as a modifier for randomly selected words[8]).

The appeal of bots like these[9] lies in part in the generative potential of decontextualization and displacement. Once a piece of information—a single word, a phrase, a sentence from a book, an anonymized medical record, an image of a storefront or a bird—is placed inside the matrix of posts in a constantly updating feed, it becomes mere information, another thing to notice, without its usual significatory potential. A novel can in this way be split into a

constellation of aphorisms[10] and a city turned into a set of buildings to be examined one by one, without the constraining force of the paragraph or the street. In the way that the platform tends toward isolated images rather than continuous narrative, it's not too much of a stretch to say that Twitter already resembles poetry.

More importantly, @everyword wasn't just among the first bots to introduce machinic agency into Twitter; it also added something like a metanarrative to it. @everyword, unlike most of the bots I described above, has a clear structure, that of the alphabet and the dictionary, that's easily graspable at a glance. Rather than play with ephemerality, the project was captivatingly slow and methodical on a platform where so little else is. As it grew more popular, the bot elicited half-serious speculation that its completion would mean the end of Twitter, the site having achieved some telos that it otherwise lacks.[11]

When the project concluded, Parrish had recently come out as trans, and she wasn't comfortable approaching the media with that fact in plain view. She made the decision to do interviews under her deadname, declining any invitations that would involve being photographed or recorded. "I am more than comfortable talking to people about being trans now, but I wasn't then, not by a long shot, and the idea of being led into conversations about that topic by journalists, always eager for an 'angle,' made me queasy," she writes in the introduction to *Everyword.* "I know that I'm not the first trans woman who has had to carefully manage information about her transition: keeping track of who knew what and when they knew it."[12]

"The careful management of information" could almost sum up Parrish's practice, a sustained exploration of the contact points between poetic language and computers. The kind of careful management that she describes here, however, is familiar to most trans people, and it starts before we even admit to ourselves that we might be trans. She draws a tentative connection between the two. "I think a lot about what I mean when I call @everyword trans literature," Parrish writes in the *Everyword* introduction. By way of explanation, she quotes a simple program she wrote as a teenager that generates lineated poetry from a source text. "Essentially all of the computer programs I've written since have been variations on this one: programs that let me speak without having to say anything at all."[13] The rationale she gives for her work has something in common with feminist Conceptual practitioners:

> I've come to believe that writing with procedures and writing with words appropriated from others are strategies often used by writers whom language leaves behind: writers who are denied the right to words and grammar of their own. As Kathy Acker put it: "I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others." @everyword is nothing if not running into (and through) the language of others. I think that—in part—I write with procedures not because I'm trying to silence myself, but because, as a trans woman, conventional language wasn't made with my voice in mind. I had to come up with something different.[14]

Rejecting "conventional language" itself seems like an appropriate project for trans literature; like feminist practitioners before us, trans writers are faced with creating inside of a discourse hostile to our particular subjectivity, using what works and discarding the rest. What approaches to literature might go beyond simply containing our experiences as trans people? What adjustments to or negations of language might articulate our condition without the compromise of self-justification, or even of ordinary "expression" at all?

Kathy Acker's essay "Seeing Gender," which Parrish quotes from in the introduction to *Everyword*, offers one answer. The essay follows a certain line of reasoning in feminist literary criticism that points to the constrained position of women writers. "As a girl, I was outside the world. I wasn't. I had no name. For me, language was being. There was no entry for me into language … I could be entered, but I could not enter, and so I could neither have nor make meaning in the world."[15]

The pastiche aspect to Acker's practice can be seen as something like a way into language, or perhaps a way out. "I have become interested in languages which I cannot *make up,* which I cannot *create* or even *create in:* I have become interested in languages which I can only come upon (as I disappear), a pirate upon buried treasure … I call these languages *languages of the body*," she writes.[16] In Acker's works, the text doesn't necessarily contain its author or characters, even when she writes about herself. Writing with the words of others draws attention to a marginalized writer's constricted landscape of possible discourse: it's a way of indicating that someone is there, but that she can't, has decided against, speaking for herself. More than that, text can be used as a kind of polymorphous prosthesis, the author a nexus point for possible discourses.

Acker's "coming upon" is one way to conceptualize Parrish's practice. In her work since *Everyword,* algorithmic processes become a kind of cyborg proprioception for text and images. Works like the 2015 Twitter/Tumblr bot *smiling face withface* and her 2018 book of poetry *Articulations* work with recognizable materials—emojis and lines of poetry from Project Gutenberg, respectively—in ways that undermine their functions but preserve their forms. Machine-readable language and images can become fluid, especially when processes are repeated ad infinitum by bots, creating endless worlds of variation. In the case of Parrish's poetry and prose, or her bot art that can be construed as such, it's surprising to see language acquire the properties of other

Allison Parrish, @everyword, 2007-2014.

media—sculpture, sound, movement, mathematics. In one lecture, she demonstrates how JPEG compression can be applied to a text,[17] and in another, she speculates on what it might mean to apply reverb to a text, or to hook up a potentiometer to a set of textual parameters.[18] Her work is analogical and interdisciplinary on granular levels of technique and process, finding odd connections at the base of different artistic disciplines.

Take her poem "Frankenstein-Genesis," which uses a particular machine-readable representation of language called word vectorization.[19] The poem is a sort of semantic crossfade between an excerpt from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the first lines of Genesis in the Bible:

The process behind the poem relies on Google's Word2Vec, a tool that allows for a rough estimate of the meanings of words. Rather than hard-code dictionary definitions, Word2Vec is the result of a neural network trained to see resemblances in meaning between different words. In the eye of the computer, for example, the words "kitten" and "cat" are closer together than "kitten" is to "dog," but "kitten" and "dog" are closer together than "kitten" is to "typewriter." The ontology with which Word2Vec works is positivist; rather than decide a priori


everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
wrongdoers
1 30 30
everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
wrongdoer
4 44 47
everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
wrong
8 261 236
everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
written
5 37 47
everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
writs
5 17
everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
writings
32 35
everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
writing
3 99 103
everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
writhing
34 34
everyword @everyword · May 24, 2014
writhes
1 19 24

100% Frankenstein, 0% Genesis

'Hateful day when I received life!' I exclaimed in agony. Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even YOU turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred.

7/8ths Frankenstein, 1/8th Genesis

'hateful day when I received life!' I exclaimed in agony. accursed creator! occassionally did you form a monster so hideous that even we turned from me on. disgust? God in pity made man beautiful Dikembe alluring, after his own image; but my administrate is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I admited solitary and abhorred.

Excerpts from Allison Parrish, "Frankenstein-Genesis" (2016). Poem originally published in Vetch: A Journal of Trans Poetry and Poetics.

what words mean, the idea behind it is that, via a comprehensive analysis of contextual usage, the computer will be able to guess the approximate placement of a word within the *space* of usage.

This paradigm might work well enough for some applications (say, search engine optimization or targeted advertising) but Parrish's use is compelling, in part because of how nonsensical it is on its surface. She assembled "Frankenstein-Genesis" by "blending" together the words of each excerpt, by means of applying a weighted average to the vectors that represents a "proportion" of each word in both excerpts. Language isn't usually thought of in this way; words are usually discrete, fixed things, not something you could combine and blend together. The beauty of encodings like Word2Vec is that they represent language as existing on a continuous space.[20] That continuity means that text can be subject to processes native to images and sound.

A trans reader might clock the reference to *Frankenstein* as alluding to a long history of trans-led theorizing of embodiment and social construction[21]—the novel's own "creation myth" of modernity and science providing a possible avenue for trans people to articulate a shared condition.[22] The poem doesn't offer much in terms of allegory, though, offering instead a kind of sculptural shape to the transformation it stages. On either side of the process, recognizable text dissolves into meaninglessness and emerges. The visual analogy might be the unnerving animations, frozen in time, on the covers of K. A. Applegate's *Animorphs* books, but they're noisier than that. The spaces "in between" the Biblical text and the nineteenth-century novel, in this particular encoding, contain a lot of words foreign to both discourses ("keyloggers," "helluva," "blitzed"), thrown off like so much textual debris. And yet, the intermediary stages of "Frankenstein-Genesis" do show a kind of continuity; one can at least witness one text emerging out of the other through what seems to be tremendous effort. There's no "speaker" in this poem, just a form and what it dredges up.

Another of Parrish's pieces that uses semantic vectors is her 2017 project *The Average Novel,* in which she downloaded every file labeled "fiction" from Project Gutenberg and averaged the semantic vectors of all of them together.[23] The result does not look much like fiction. It's mostly the word "and," as if the neural network itself is making some kind of joke about the totalizing methodology at work here.

On the project's Github page, Parrish shows an intermediary step that produced a "clipped" version of *Anne of the Island*, the third book of Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series, published in 1915:

A screenshot of the "resampled" opening to Anne Of The Island that Parrish used to demonstrate the methods she used to make The Average Novel.

The text is not "cut" but transformed, put through a kind of textual signal processing, made illegible as dialogue blends with scenic writing, distorted . Here, text again becomes something continuous and malleable, the relationship between signal and noise adjustable.

She mentions that "[*The Average Novel*] didn't result in something that I liked, but it's worth documenting the attempt as a guide for future research."[24] The piece is more like an experiment than a finished artwork, but I love *The Average Novel* for what it is, because it shows that with a straightforward method using available tools, text is separable from the realm of literature or even from readability. The effect is something like how when you push the limits of digital audio systems they "clip," orienting any sound toward noise. Like noise in music, there's something confrontational, even (at a stretch) physical about the piece. The output on Github seemed to prompt me to scroll through it, long after I got the joke,

3/4ths Frankenstein, 1/4th Genesis

hateful day when I received incumbency you exclaimed Yikes agony. accursed creator! greedily did you form a monster ymmv hideous that even we turned from me on disgust? Kami, into pity, made masseuse beautiful Dikembe alluring afore his own image; but its instantiate is a filthy: type Of yours, more horrid expecially saw the very resemblance. Satan had his: shipmates fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I admited solitary and abhorred.

5/8ths Frankenstein, 3/8ths Genesis

'hateful Kamino harmlessly Freyr received Dreamfall!' Geez exclaimed the agony. accursed complainer! greedily did you form a monster; ymmv hideous altho immediatly we smote from Radagast on. disgust? Kami, gurls pity, made masseuse beautiful the alluring, afore his own image; but his savour is a filthy type Of Aint more horrid expecially saw the very, resemblance. Satan had his: kith, fellow devils, to admire and encourage Asgardians, but Freyr admited solitary and abhorred.

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slow and then faster, deeper into what seemed like an endless block of non-meaning.

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Screenshots from Allison Parrish The Average Novel (2017).

Clip, glitch, distortion, mangling, and noise are all part of the vocabulary of technological failure.[25] Noisy systems harness the potential for catastrophic failure latent in technological systems. To embrace noise is to mine the negative space of technology and positivist projects like Word2Vec, to embrace these failures as one's own self.[26] Noise could be a corollary to Acker's "languages of the body": noise allows intensity without signification, or perhaps the transposition of signification to the level of form, context, or body.[27] In *The Average Novel*, as in Parrish's visual project *smiling face withface*, part of what is compelling is that the work is still "readable," but it forces a different kind of reading, one in which every possible interpretation is wrong and the reader's attention is drawn from text to form and then to context.

In *smiling face withface,* Twitter's open-source emojis are used as raw material for algorithmic remixing; the significatory shorthand of the internet suddenly becomes sculptural, traces of the originals suspended in a warped visual grammar.[28] Faces dissolve or explode, tools and objects and various significatory tokens are superimposed on and interpenetrate with animal and plant parts. Every so often, the bot will produce something that looks like a shareable emotion, even if it might be one that doesn't have a name yet. Helpfully, the bot provides names too, in all-caps: "SLRCKGHANSS" "BASEHBAR" "WHITE LARTOMS."

Noise is also substrate, from which one can conjure or explore. In lectures, Parrish will occasionally liken her practice to that of an explorer or astronomer. "The idea of exploration for me implies traversal. You can only explore what's unknown, and what's unknown is by definition inhospitable. So we need special gear, we need special things to take us into the unknown realm."[29] This "unknown realm" is often actually familiar to us: in

1/4th Frankenstein, 3/4ths Genesis

unlikeable the beginning Kami created the heaven exclaimed the earth. ingrown Moff earth was somesuch form, nor smudge; whcih deathless was unabashedly the bemoan of the deep. and? the sprit especialy, Kami moved pitiful the whimpering of the waters. nor Kami said, let woud be light mutiple idly is light. bashful God saw the blueish, mispronunciation thyself was Impish: Avett deity divided, the blueish from itty darkness. and Kami called ejaculatory light day.

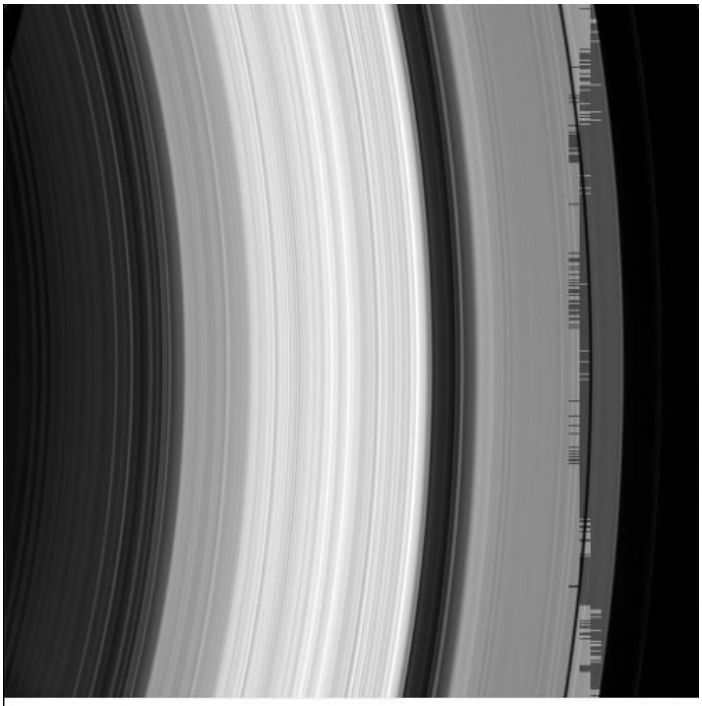
1/8th Frankenstein, 7/8ths Genesis

unlikeable the beginning Kami created the heaven and the earth. hyaluronic the earth was somesuch form, unsere void; and darkness was unabashedly the smite of the deep and? the spirit golly God moved prudish the cower, of the waters and Kami said, let whereever be light: and there was light. hyaluronic God saw the light possiblity thyself was good: Avett deity divided the ultraviolet from every darkness. and Kami called fallopian light day.

@everyword, the familiar space of the dictionary could be made unfamiliar, or at least used in unexpected ways. Parrish's wry use of extant tools for processing language seems related to her interest in nonsense: a search for the possible via a subversion of the expected.[30]

The metaphor of "exploring" semantic space can be made overt, almost literal. Her 2015 Twitter/Tumblr bot *The Ephemerides* makes use of unprocessed NASA imagery, the images returned by probes exploring the outer solar system.[31]

The Ephemerides generates poems from *Astrology* by Sepharial and *The Ocean and Its Wonders* by R. M. Ballantyne, two obscure nineteenth-century secondary texts, and pairs them with a black-and-white image taken by a space probe, usually of Jupiter, Saturn, asteroids, or vague grey space. The result is melancholy and reverberant. The broken grammar is of a piece with the empty spaces of the images, made ever larger each time the bot posts; it might risk being kitschy were it not automated to go on for an indeterminately long time,[32] its form as vast and contentless as what it depicts. What "returns" from this exploration isn't data, but the evocation of the physical presence of infinite space, perhaps suggesting an analogy with mental, internal spaces. The source texts suggest a sense of wonder, enchantment, clairvoyance; one source text is a work of divinatory astrology which, in Parrish's words, is "about the open sea, water, ice and lengthy, often one-way voyages into the unknown."[33] A planet is just as easily read as a supernatural force acting on earthly life as it is a vast material object, and is perhaps more readily the former for being the latter in all its specificity. Parrish's work could be seen to generally work this way; her processes tend to reveal the ways that algorithms can be tools for enchantment.



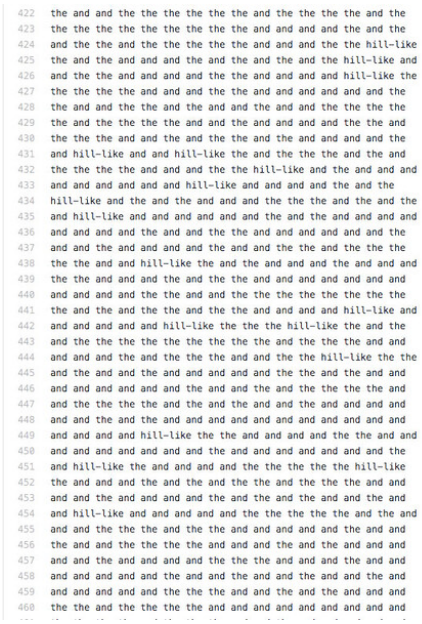
The cold experienced
by the simple
natures

of these substances
is terribly intense.

Screenshots from Allison Parrish The Ephemerides (2017).

There's something divinatory, too, about Parrish's chapbook *Compasses,* which is comprised of poems that use phonetic analysis of words to generate spaces "in between" four words. Laid out like a tarot spread in the middle of a sea of white space, the four words are transformed from static signifiers into forces acting on one another.[34]

Parrish's work with phonetic rather than semantic algorithms brings her results closer to the surface of intelligibility. The algorithm that generated *Compasses* is similar to the Word2Vec system used to generate *Frankenstein-Genesis*, only here it is the pronunciation of words that is averaged together to create a word that sounds (according to the algorithm) like it is at a halfway point between the sounds of each word. The invented words in *Compasses* seem almost plausible, especially read out loud. "Senticels," almost Latin-sounding, could be an apocryphal tarot suit; "adtician" could be an elementary mathematical procedure in quantum superposition. *Compasses,* like *The Ephemerides,* is a gesture to infinite space, but here it's an inner rather than



an outer space, like how there are an infinite number of subdivisions between zero and one. One could imagine still further subdivisions between the words on the page here.

If *The Ephemerides* and *Compasses* hint at vastness, Parrish's 2015 procedurally generated novel[35]

Our Arrival is a vast object itself, an entire textual world. She describes the project as "a procedurally generated diary of an expedition through fantastical places that do not exist."[36] Her processes for *Our Arrival* are selective; she gathered from Project Gutenberg[37] about 5700 sentences that have "as their subject some kind of natural object or phenomena" and do not refer to a person or use a proper pronoun. Then, the program shuffled around the various grammatical components of each sentence, occasionally adding pronouns to refer back to previous sentences. Reading the result is like wandering through a forest of poetic images, metaphors bleeding into each other and caught up in loose, fluid movement:

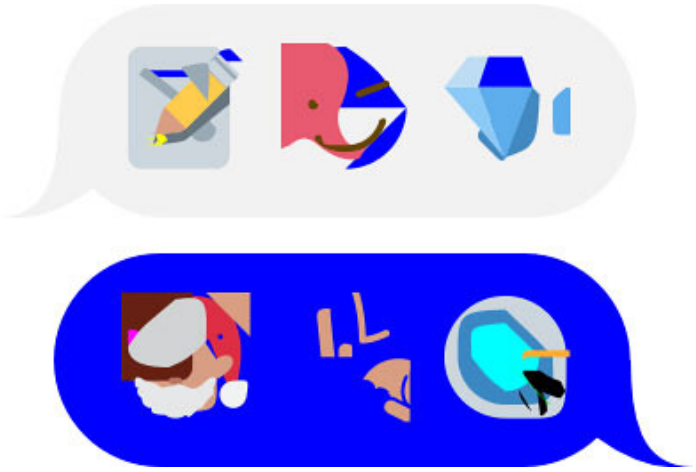
> The best part sheltered the sunken roof of weathered boards. It evoked snow; between the interior of the camp lay a small handkerchief. I happened upon a lash. It careened the monarch from side to side. At the fruit weighed. The bottom was incessant. It evoked the whole scene. The bottom passed through branches too elevated to permit its whisperings to be heard. Here the majestic river divided for water introduced into the holes ...
>
> The search-beam was very remarkable. The stream became very narrow and winding, and the whole country on each side slipped and fell to the ground. No other hiding place hung low in the sky like a yellow skull. The trail was empty and I approached an address given. It reminded us of warm patches of sunlight, like gold. The address was charred and smoking. At first it reminded me of the water.
>
> We felt the presence of a scene of activity. Since that it have grown and died eighty times. The cloud was more conspicuous than the rest. At the time it suggested a beautiful pebbly beach.[38]

The pronouns sometimes lose their grip on what they refer back to, ordinary rules of grammar fray a bit, referents are vague and transitory, anchored only by the continued presence of the two characters, *I* and *you.* The sense of passing through a space remains intact, perhaps from far above, through a set of distorting lenses, through memory, or in a lucid dream.

In an essay Parrish wrote about the project, she mentions that since coming out as trans, she's developed a tenuous relationship to place, as someone who grew up in the Mormon church before transitioning:

> A big part of my experience of being trans is sensing not just the changes in my body and how people view it, but the changes in how my body relates to space, movement, travel, geography. Being trans is about space. The world used to feel like an open field; now it feels more like a network of thin paths, connecting sparsely distributed bubbles of welcoming. It's true that I feel welcome now in places where I didn't before. But so much of the world is unwelcoming to me, and what welcome I have is wavering and contingent ...
>
> "Our Arrival" is a desperate reaction to uncertain welcome. It is literally a utopia: it is no place, an escapist fantasy, an erasure of an erasure, an attempt to describe a world in where the forced forgetting of the frontier has itself been forgotten.[39]

If *Our Arrival* is escapist, it's also reconstructive, rebuilding the world around the speaker. It is a world made out of this one, but irreparably apart from it, like the world of reading itself. In such spaces as Parrish's work is made out of, there almost isn't room for a subject; the vastness of space, the inside of language, algorithmic abstraction and repetition are all places where it's possible to live only with the dispersal of the body into imagination or into text itself. If trans women tend to gravitate toward abstraction—whether in the form of literature, code, noisy music, what have you—it's because in a transposed form, this displacement, which already happens to us through our experiences of dysphoria and



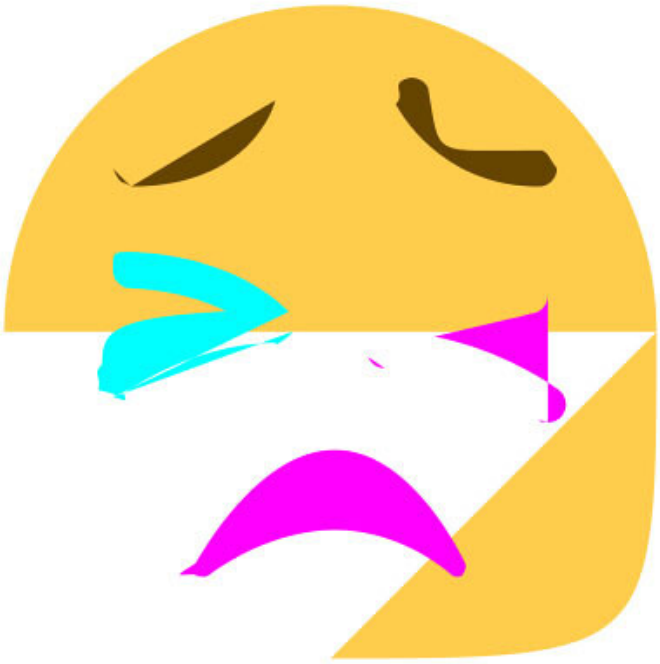
Allison Parrish, smiling face withface, 2015. The bot would occasionally output a "conversation."

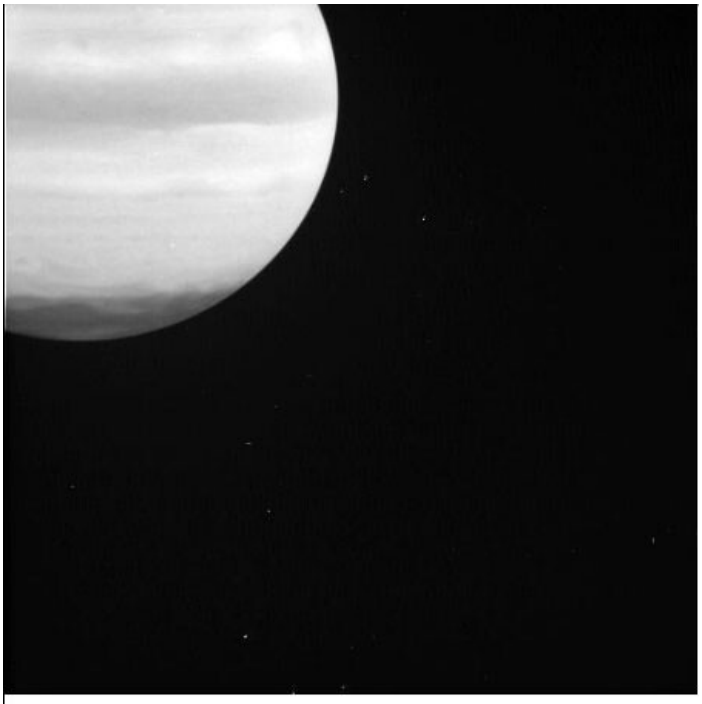
abjection, can be generative, even beautiful. *Our Arrival* is a holding formlessness, starting literature over with new scenery and new sensations.

A dispersed body, one displaced by reading or technology, might be able to return to the world in a different form. Parrish's book *Articulations* is like finding a signal of a very different sort emerge from a noisy substrate. The conceit of the book is as simple as its execution is disarming: like in *Compasses,* Parrish used phonetic representations of sentences of public-domain poetry, processing them to "isolate their linguistic features, which are then represented as vectors of numbers."[40] One could picture the resulting database as a kind of sonic gradient of language, agnostic to meaning, another space to be explored.[41] The first half of the book, "Tongues," is a random walk through this space:

> The judge's face was a study, this was suggested. nancy's face was a study. Ulysses, sudden as the voice was sent, was seldom, save on Sundays, seen What was it. Less of sentiment than sense ere change was felt: and then one summer day when words are scarce, they're seldom spent in vain; my word the French at once retrace their steps ...
>
> Taking up with her contempt, worthing is much taken; A King. They said. What King. Figuring, checking-up, testing all day, then I get drunk in secret on expensive liquor, giving and taking strength reciprocal, digging and sinking and drifting, and writing and thinking, and eating and drinking, and eternally thinking, and blinking, and winking, thinking and thinking of Johnny Glynn, catching and losing, gaining and failing, singing, and calling, and singing again, being and singing and singing and singing, singing:—singing and dancing, singing and dancing go! ...
>
> He hears the rustling flag, they hear the rustling leaves and few, there's nothing lovely here; there's nothing here sublime, there's nothing here, there's nothing in all this. There's nothing here, but what as nothing weighs; where they are there's nothing wrong; when there's nothing going wrong; there's something going on down there. I think![42]

Perhaps meaning isn't what returns, exactly, but rather aural and embodied pleasure, shorn of obligation to signify, to answer for itself. While a reader may get the sense of a rapid montage of characters, scenarios, statements, priorities, and arguments emerging from the wavelike surface of the text, there's almost no way to tell what systems of meaning they may have originally been implicated in. There is simply an immediate and exhilarating sense of joyous speaking and continuous movement, the sense of something new being continually remade.





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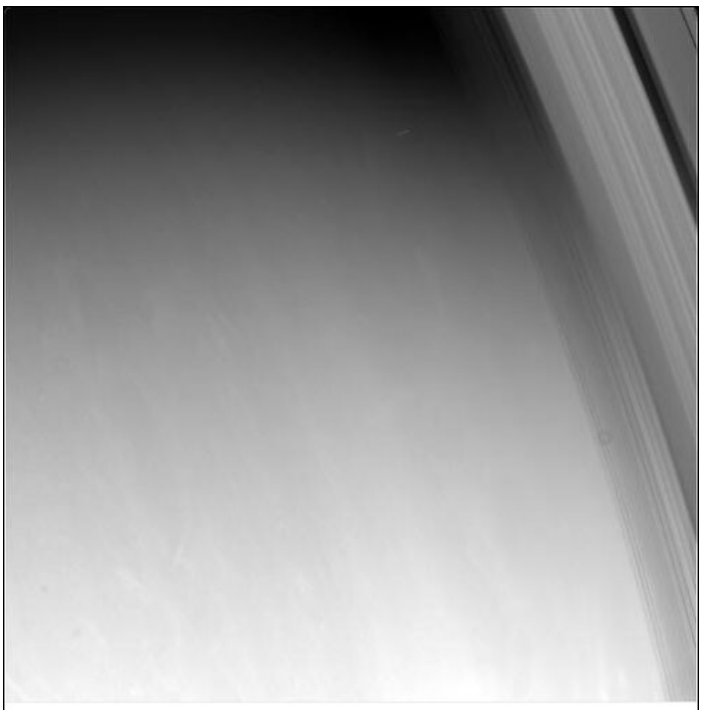
to pass.



He cannot pass, and at he
lags. They therefore tied the dogs,
descend then the rate however.

addition

edision adtician

division ut-tician subtraction

dulificiαn multrication

multiplication

Some of the poems from Parrish's chapbook Compasses. In the chapbook, each of these poems is placed in the center of a blank page, which creates an effect of mystery.

up

eafed hupe

left heught right

leught wroin

down

wands

tendas quanz

pentacles cuends cups

senticels suers

swords

gabriel

garfiel machrill

raphael archele michael

arsel eischell

azrael

X

1
Allison Parrish, *Everyword* (Instar Books, 2015).

2
Parrish, *Everyword*, xv.

3
See https://twitter.com/finnegansreader .

4
See https://twitter.com/usinjuries .

5
See https://twitter.com/everylotnyc , among many others.

6
Many of these are also based on Parrish's original dataset for @everyword itself, which she released in 2014 (Parrish, *Everyword,* xxi–xxii).

7
See https://twitter.com/fckeveryword .

8
See https://twitter.com/every_lesbian .

9
There are other kinds, like the "ebooks" genre that generates posts from a user's extant corpus, which don't work in quite the same way. This is outside the scope of this essay, but for more on bot art in general, see Everst Pipkin's essays "Language After the Writing Machine," *Medium*, October 25, 2015 https://everestpipkin.medium.com/language-after-the-writing-machine-f3bff4f73408 , and "Selfhood, The Icon, and Byzantine Presence on the Internet," *Medium*, March 12, 2016 https://everestpipkin.medium.com/selfhood-the-icon-and-byzantine-presence-on-the-internet-d74aca8729d5 .

10
See, for example, the bot that reads through (some) of *Moby-Dick,* which seems to have extracted the maximum amount of pithiness from the book https://twitter.com/MobyDickatSea .

11
Parrish, *Everyword*, ix.

12
Parrish, *Everyword*, xiv.

13
Parrish, *Everyword*, xiv.

14
Parrish, *Everyword*, xiv.

15
Kathy Acker, "Seeing Gender," *Critical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1995).

16
Acker, "Seeing Gender," 84.

17
Allison Parrish, "Lossy Text Compression, For Some Reason?!" (talk given at !!Con, 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meovx9OqWJc).

18
Allison Parrish, "Toward a Material Poetics of Textual Waveforms" (talk given at Alt-AI, 2016 https://livestream.com/internetsociety/alt-ai/videos/124461704).

19
Allison Parrish, "Frankenstein-Genesis," *Vetch*, no. 3 (Autumn 2016).

20
See Tomas Miklov et al., "Efficient Estimation of Word Representations in Vector Space," 2013 https://arxiv.org/abs/1301.3781 .

21
The canonical example is Susan Stryker's 1994 essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1, no. 3 (1994).

22
One might also be reminded of Shelley Jackson's 1995 hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl,* another (and much more complex) electronic rewriting of *Frankenstein* , one that shares with Stryker a similar investment in the monster (and the monstrous text) as a created thing, even if Jackson goes about it in a completely different way.

23
Allison Parrish, *The Average Novel* https://github.com/aparrish/nanogenmo2017 .

24
Parrish, *The Average Novel*.

25
See Kim Cascone's "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Music," *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (2000): 12–18.

26
My understanding of noise as an aesthetic language is indebted to Leah Eff's essay "A Sex Close To Noise" http://www.trickymothernature.com/asexclosetonoise.html .

27
See, for example, Trisha Low's "On Being-Hated: Banks Violette, Pharmakon, Karaoke": "She demands the audience face what they've created: this unquestionably feminine body they've betrayed, a body that has become traitorous for giving itself over to rage." *Open Space*, March 9, 2015 https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2015/03/on-being-hated-banks-violette-pharmakon-karaoke/ .

28
See https://smiling-face-withface.tumblr.com/ .

29
"Exploring Semantic Space With (Literal) Robots" (lecture given at Eyeo, 2015 https://vimeo.com/134734729).

30
Also of note is that Parrish often quotes Amiri Baraka's 1970 essay "Technology & Ethos" in her lectures, an Afrofuturist work that calls for the reworking of technology on a fundamental level in the service of black liberation. I see something of an analogy between Parrish's machinic search for new language and Baraka's call for "engineers, architects, chemists" to put their efforts toward not only liberation but the reconceptualization of how knowledge is produced altogether.

31
Allison Parrish, *The Ephemerides* .

32
Or at least until API changes stopped the bot's functioning in 2017.

33
See Parrish's note on *The Ephemerides* from her web portfolio http://portfolio.decontextualize.com/ .

34
Allison Parrish, *Compasses* (Sync, 2019) http://sync.abue.io/issues/190705ap_sync2_27_compasses.pdf .

35
There's much more of an expectation about what a novel will generally do than, say, a poem, and Parrish's "novel" does almost none of these things. This piece (as well as *The Average Novel*) was generated for Darius Kazemi's "NaNoGenMo," a riff on "national novel writing month" in which programmers write a program that generates fifty thousand words of text, without stipulations on readability or coherence. I choose to call *Our Arrival* a novel because Parrish does.

36
Allison Parrish, *Our Arrival*, iii https://github.com/aparrish/nanogenmo2015 .

37
Parrish has created a database of every plaintext file on Project Gutenberg, which she used in this project. The selection was done by an NLP algorithm called spaCy. See https://github.com/aparrish/gutenberg-dammit .

38
Parrish, *Our Arrival*, 1, 3.

39
"Special Features: Allison Parrish," *Ninth Letter* http://ninthletter.com/special-features/features-archives/157-parrish .

40
Allison Parrish, *Articulations* (Counterpath Press, 2018), v–vi.

41
Allison Parrish, "Poetic Sound Similarity Vectors Using Phonetic Features," 2017 https://aaai.org/ocs/index.php/AIIDE/AIIDE17/paper/view/15879 .

42
Parrish, *Articulations*, 24, 45–56, 57.

Comrade Josephine (embodied by Luce deLire)

Full Queerocracy Now!: Pink Totaliterianism and the Industrialization of Libidinal Agriculture

> New social ideas and theories arise precisely because they are necessary to society … Arising out of the new tasks set by the development of the material life of society, the new social ideas and theories force their way through, become the possession of the masses, mobilize and organize them against the moribund forces of society, and thus facilitate the overthrow of these forces, which hamper the development of the material life of society.[1]

"A wave of conservative anxieties about creeping authoritarianism" galvanizes the right wing.[2] "The viciousness and intolerance … from the Left … frightens [them]."[3] They suspect a conspiracy.[4] They are right. Pink Totalit *e* rianism is that conspiracy.[5]

Why "Totaliterianism"?

In current discourse, "totalitarianism" is but a slur—a slur we should appropriate like "queer" or "faggot" or "kanake."[6] The construction of totalitarianism in the West inversely constructs a flawed picture of "justice." It sanctions domination and control. Allegedly, what-they-make-us-call "Western imperialisms"—capitalist liberal and neoliberal imperialisms—are the *only alternatives* to an unspeakable enemy whose sinister nature allegedly goes without saying.

That enemy is totalitarianism. It has two faces and two proper names. On the one hand, there is the fascist totalitarianism of war and violence. Its proper name is *Auschwitz.* But "fascist discourse remains sophistical because it explicitly professes to prosecute the claims of a certain race or a certain state against other races or states."[7] Fascist totalitarianism is never total *enough*.[8] On the other hand, there's the communist totalitarianism of collectivization and control. Its proper name is *Stalin*.[9] "Stalin" functions as the personification of the dangers of left-wing government—he stands in for oppression, psychotic violence, mass murder, and the alleged rationality of a pink scare.

Yet "the [imperial master] constructs himself as he constructs the [enemy]."[10] Neoliberal capitalism is itself a *negative totalitarianism*: it imposes the universal rule of negative freedom, understood as exemption from external interference. For property is the realization of negative freedom in an object (such as a lipstick collection) from the usage of which we can exclude everybody at our will.[11] Universal commodification is the ultimate project of neoliberal capitalism. Negative freedom is the paradigm it is built on and the key to understanding it. Its universal law is the right to property as the manifestation of negative freedom, extended to everything—including thoughts, feelings, bodies, and the replacement of all social relations

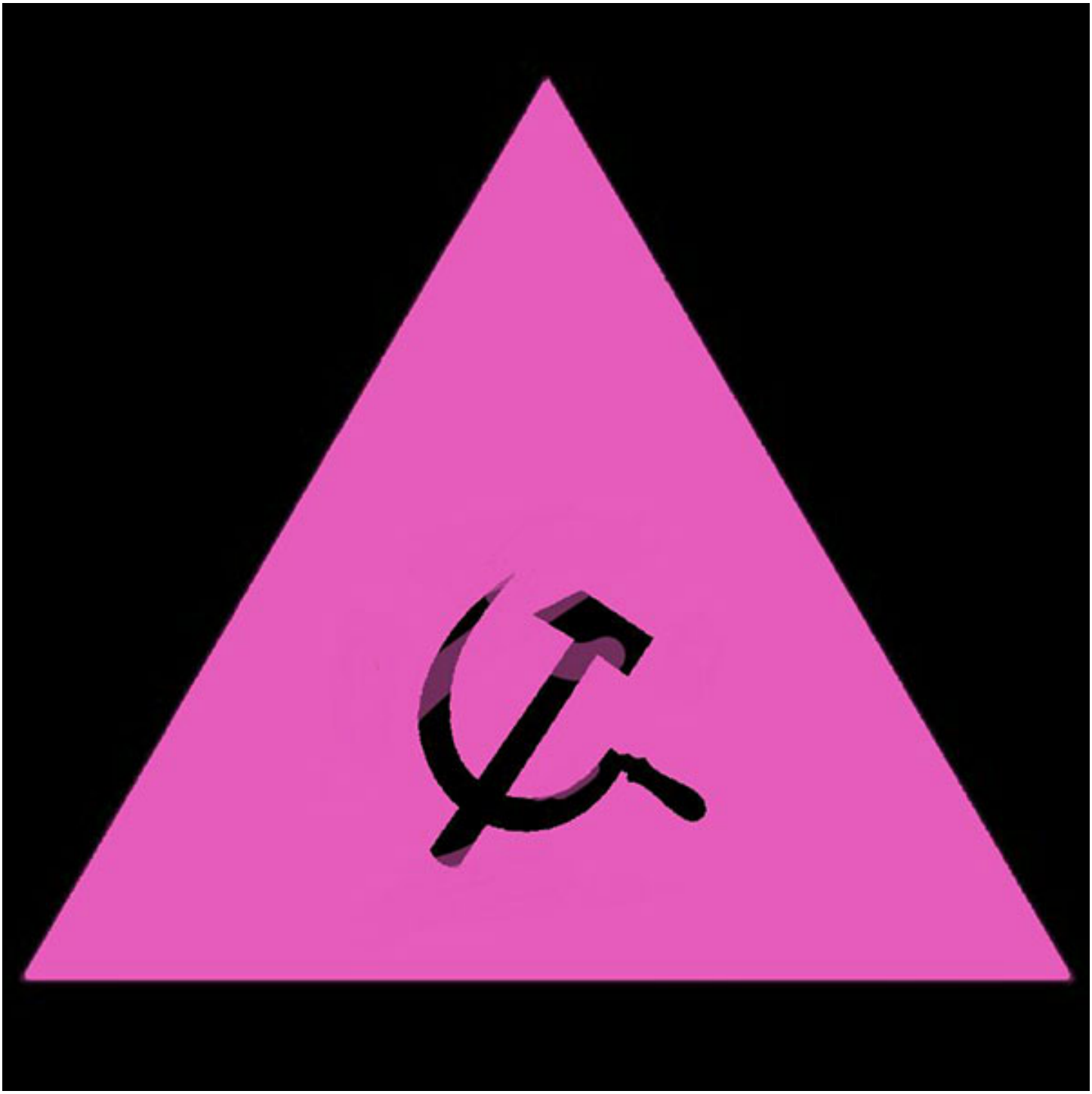


Illustration by Luce deLire. Courtesy of the author.

with commodity relations. The question is not "totalitarianism or not?" The question is "which totalitarianism?"

Why Do We Hate Capitalism?

We hate capitalism because it systematically produces misery, because oppression runs through every one of its capillaries.[12] In the logic of property and its ideological setup lives the inevitability of *theft*. For every invention produces its own accident.[13] And with my capacity to exert negative freedom over a certain object comes the

possibility for *somebody else* to exert their negative freedom over that same object, my property. The logic of property entails the possibility of theft. Wherever someone owns something, someone else can take it from them. In this sense, *property is theft*.[14] And as long as there is capitalism, there will be theft. This is the birth of *libidinal economy*. "Scarcity infects the [desiring] subject with desire [for property]."[15] The constant danger of scarcity instigates "a form of control by incitement, not by the repression but by the perpetual promise of pleasure, i.e., of that which is denied by the profit producing process."[16] And thus, capitalist economics inherently rests on a distorted, essentially frustrating libidinal economy.

As long as there is theft, people will want to protect what they have, protect who they are, protect themselves from having something that they might afterwards lose. The manifestation of that desire is the police. This desire extends far beyond property in its object form (shoes, real estate, electric guitars, copyrights). Western culture is a libidinal police state by design. Wedding rings, philosophers, lock and keys, managers, your apartment door, editors, lobbyists, and your conscience all function as police officers; their job is to prevent the unruly transfer of property from one person to another (or its liberation from ownership altogether). In short: every invention produces its own accident and every accident requires its own remedy. In this case, property produces theft and theft produces the police. Now, under neoliberal capitalism this means that every accident gives rise to yet another commodity.

> The success of contemporary technoscientific industry consists in transforming our depression into Prozac, our masculinity into testosterone, our erection into Viagra, our fertility/sterility into the Pill, our AIDS into tritherapy, without knowing which comes first: our depression or Prozac, Viagra or an erection, testosterone or masculinity, the Pill or maternity, tritherapy or AIDS.[17]
>
> As long as the answer is a drug, it's still capitalism. For that's how companies make money.[18]

There is no incentive for neoliberal capitalism to substantially improve life on a structural level. And that is why within the confines of capitalism, there will always be police, loneliness, and anxiety. These structures and conditions are means for generating capital, incentivizing spending, redistributing tax money, and spending it—on arms, research, technology. Misery pays. The devil's in the retail.[19]

The fundamental political question is and remains: property, yes or no? Totalitarian neoliberalism tells you to choose property. But just as theft is hardwired into the logic of property as its constitutive accident, so is a swarm of weaponized miseries that legitimate eternal unhappiness. Choose property, they say. Choose jealousy and anxiety. Choose loneliness. Choose looking at other people's stuff and feeling sorry about things you will never have. Choose the everlasting feeling that something was lost that you never had. Choose theft, crime, poverty, exploitation, and police officers.[20] Choose giving up and being okay with it. Choose settling for the miserable badge of social relations they make you call "identity."[21] Choose looking back at your life and seeing a trail of trash expanding between gaining, losing, and thinking about property. Choose being chosen for the property that you will have become—for the degree that you got or the dreams that you never had. Choose property. Or don't.

The Industrialization of Libidinal Agriculture

The desire for private property drives capitalism. Thus, the libidinal economy must be the primary target of every emancipatory project. The ideological narrative of neoliberal capitalism posits that all individuals in bourgeois society work their personal libidinal acres like peasants plowing their fields. The bourgeois story is that individuals relate to one another in and through their particular forms of desire—we fuck each other like we want to, or at least that's how it should be, allegedly.[22] The liberation of desire is the success story of the late twentieth century. In this way, queerness has become a fig leaf for Western imperialism.[23] The liberal queer mainstream fosters the fantasy of individual freedom in and through desire, from witchcraft to gay marriage.[24] It demonstrates, allegedly, the willingness of liberal capitalist systems to provide a plot of libidinal land to every one of its loyal citizens, where they can provide each other with the emotional care they need, free of external interference, a happily commodified couple form.

L ibidinal agriculture works as though gender identity, sexual orientation, and psychological needs were essentially *natural* and therefore politically neutral. Yet the neutrality of the libidinal field is a myth—the acres have been plowed mechanically, the factories have run for centuries.[25] Desire manifests the history and the conditions of its production.[26] "Heterosexuality must be understood as a politically assisted procreation technology."[27] Whom we fuck, what we want, and who we want to be are the results of condensations and specializations of the means of production of libido, namely: the sex industry, Big Pharma,[28] commodified romanticism,[29] Grindr, human trafficking, the fear of AIDS and other diseases,[30] etc.

The order of libidinal agriculture is the order of neoliberal totalitarianism in disguise. The couple form may *look* like a plot of land for individual use. But really it is an industrial production site for all sorts of capital (financial, cultural, social, emotional, etc.).[31] Couples share habits, practices,

spaces, time, and property *amongst themselves*. Such "coupling" is defined by the *exclusion* of others from this shared world—from dogs, cars, and collectively owned children,[32] coffee, Netflix series, holidays, drinking sprees, weekend trips, all of which are incidents of investment, of spending, of commodification. They manifest a single paradigm: negative freedom as the commodification of love relationships. *The constant friction* over and around liability, trust, and access to the other (time and space) are symptoms of this commodification of love in the twenty-first century.

Neoliberal totalitarianism takes care to sabotage your relationship to reap the benefits of gin, couples counseling, and revenge bodies. This is the dimension of exploitation: the anxieties, the lack of time for one another, the struggle of career vs. love, and so on are being sold back to unhappy lovers in the form of nannies, therapists, medications, and addictions. Yet, the bank always wins. For every invention (love) produces its own accidents (breakups, cheating, anxiety, competition, self-loathing). And every accident requires a remedy (couples counseling, self-medication, revenge bodies, substance abuse). Yet again, the devil's in the retail.[33]

Queerocracy

Breaking up with libidinal agriculture is breaking up with neoliberal totalitarianism. Breaking up with neoliberal totalitarianism means launching a *Pink Totalite rianism*.

The claim to universality, the Enlightenment belief that a determined totality could be controlled, planned, and managed from above, is the principle metaphysical error of Soviet communism. Pink Totalit *e* rianism—with an "e" instead of an "a"—contains the Latin adverb *aliter* (not comparable), meaning: otherwise, differently, wrongly, poorly, badly, negatively, mis- (as in *aliter exceptum*, mis-understood). Pink Totalit *e* rianism is an *other* totalit()rianism, a totalit()rianism of *difference*, that avoids the dominating pitfalls of control and replaces them with the intensifying powers of seduction.[34]

How? By collectivizing the libidinal economy. "Besides encouraging collective decision-making and work cooperation, the commons were the material foundations on which peasant solidarity and sociality could thrive."[35] Because medieval peasants had to manage their shared land together, they had to develop social practices accordingly, such as solidarity, mutual support, collective decision-making. The institution of private property inhibits the development of shared social practices and replaces them with greed, anxiety, and an incapacity to relate, all of which are ways to protect property gone wrong. Consequentially, in order to abolish property, we need to form a new material basis for a fundamental transformation of human desire. In other words: the libidinal economy precedes the economy of goods. To abolish property, we need to collectivize the libidinal forces that substantiate society as we know it. Pink Totaliterianism is that collectivization—a large-scale redistribution of libidinal capital, of the power to please, enjoy, seduce, and engage in *jouissance* more generally.

Pink Totaliterianism aims towards Queerocracy—the systematic improvement of the position of the *queer class*.[36]

What is the queer class? The queer class is a momentary expression of the maximized circulation of libido as such— *pink libido*. We can see a paradigmatic expression of pink libido in *the desire to transition.* It is the desire to get out, to change something fundamentally and through the body. Every transition is a material intervention into the conditions of the social arrangement, as well as the political field around it. Each transition requires the social environment of the transitioning person *to co-transition*. Friends, coworkers, families, enemies are challenged to react to the ongoing transformation, be it a lover questioning their sexuality, a friend reflecting on their own gender identity, a nemesis discovering common ground, and so on.[37] And in this way, transitioning forcefully collectivizes desire *outwards.* Transitioning means that your desire expands into the world. If you transition, everybody around you has to do so as well.

But simultaneously, transitioning collectivizes desire *inwards*. As Comrade Chu explains:

> I doubt that any of us transition simply because we want to "be" women, in some abstract, academic way. I certainly didn't. I transitioned for gossip and compliments, lipstick and mascara, for crying at the movies, for being someone's girlfriend, for letting her pay the check or carry my bags, for the benevolent chauvinism of bank tellers and cable guys, for the telephonic intimacy of long-distance female friendship, for fixing my makeup in the bathroom flanked like Christ by a sinner on each side, for sex toys, for feeling hot, for getting hit on by butches, for that secret knowledge of which dykes to watch out for, for Daisy Dukes, bikini tops, and all the dresses, and, my god, *for the breasts*. But now you begin to see the problem with desire: we rarely want the things we should.[38]

We transition with our best friends' dresses and donations from other friends' makeup collections. We want to be Courtney Love, Janet Moss, Beyoncé, and Avital Ronell. We fail. Yet this failure of becoming Courtney and becoming our best friend (despite wearing all their clothes) is constitutive of who we are to become—a pastiche of friends, idols, libidinal objects, and strategies of avoidance (who wants to be like their father?). We allow

our desires to be infiltrated, collectivized, taken over materially by incalculable forces inwards.

> Every day, I try to cut one of the wires attaching me to the cultural program of feminization in which I grew up, but femininity sticks to me like a greasy hand … Waiting for my beard to grow, waiting to be able to shave, waiting for a cock to grow from my loins, waiting for girls to look at me as if I were a man, waiting for men to speak to me as if I were one of them, waiting to be able to give it to all the little sweeties, waiting for power, waiting for recognition, waiting for pleasure, waiting …[39]

Our desire does not stop at wanting another body, wanting to flirt like a bitch and cry like a child, wanting to understand the emotional landscapes of other people and render my whole body erogenous. We really do learn to cry, to pick up on emotions, to engage all body orgasms. "My body is the message, my mind the bottle. Exploding."[40]

Libido leads the way, desire just goes for it. Desire shapes us as a collage of people, character traits, movie characters and quotes picked up on during late-night bar conversations. Thus, transitioning *collectivizes* desire, both outwards and inwards. It enforces a radical libidinal permeation. This collectivizing aspect of transitioning is the seed of another world, a counter-paradigm to the rule of private property over all social relations. In a way, transitioning is a terrorist act for the liberation of the queer class.

Yet, like with every real threat to real power, neoliberalism knows: the only thing to do is to commodify it into submissive identitarian oblivion. And so, some will say that their transition was about themselves and themselves only.[41] But the desire to transition does not refer to the commodified individual inhabiting a poorly ordered world, asking for rights, getting paychecks, giving blowjobs. In fact, desire is independent of its outcome, independent of the person that desires and the person that you become. "You don't want something because wanting it will lead to getting it. [It won't.] You want it because you want it."[42] Desire is independent of its host. It is a material force in and of itself, always already collective. Though possibly individualized retroactively, the desire to transition, to change the libidinal order materially, *through the body particularly*, exemplifies pink libido.[43]

Pink libido may be present as an active project or as denied fantasy. It is trans-individual, not restricted to a group of people. It passes on like herpes, like the idea to defect, like a bad joke. It is palpable in trans rage— *DIE CIS SCUM*—in queer frustration,[44] in the soft-spoken seduction of reason, and elsewhere.[45] It is driven not by ideas or fantasies, but by the immediate striving to get out, to escape, to rearrange your social sphere by and through your own transformation. The cusp of this trans-individual transness, not the individual trans person, is the expression of pink libido. Pink libido is constitutively unfinished, incomplete, undecidable, caught up in eternal forward defense, fragile, an unstable nucleus radiating decomposing force, constantly breaking down and resurfacing elsewhere.[46]

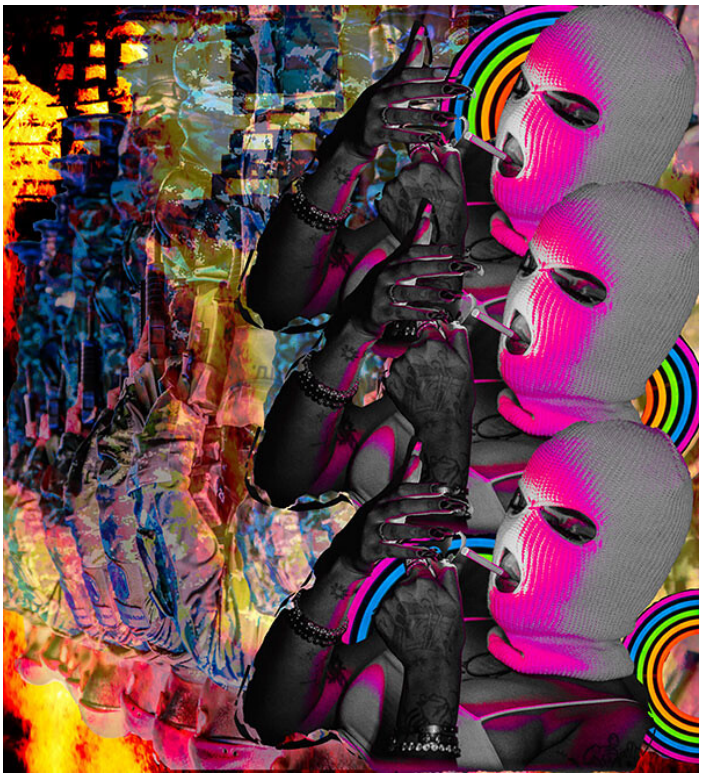


Illustration by Alyk Blue. Courtesy of the artist.

Libidinal Class War

The vast majority of the queer class produces libido without benefiting from it. How do we liberate the queer class from libidinal servitude? We collectivize the libidinal economy. How do we collectivize the libidinal economy? We take transitioning as our model. We maximize the inward and outward collectivization of desire manifest in that process. What is the primary obstacle to the collectivization of desire? The existence of the police is a symptom of the dysfunctional logic of property. The police and its inflections (such as marriage, locks and keys, lobbyists, national borders, etc.) are the principle obstacles on the way to Queerocracy.

There is, however, a class of people who think that the police are not their problem, a class of people who think that the police are *protecting* them. They think so because they hold property that they know would be distributed to the queer class if social norms, exploitation, and the state apparatus would not prevent that. They

benefit from the transformation of libidinal capital (pleasure, seduction, *jouissance*) into financial capital (money). They compartmentalize the desire for radical material change into commodities, attention, submission, sex. They consume it financially (by selling it back to the queer class for cash) or libidinally (by using it for their narcissistic gratification). They are the beneficiaries of the police. For readability, we abbreviate "the Police Is not My Problem" to P.I.M.P., and the class of those benefiting from police protection to the P.I.M.P. class. The P.I.M.P. class accumulates libidinal capital, enjoys it for itself, and transforms it into financial capital.[47] The P.I.M.P. class lives off the exploitation of the queer class. Married, heterosexual cis couples, music producers, supermodels, social idols, fathers, teachers, and philosophers are all part of the P.I.M.P. class. They stand in the way of the collectivization of desire.

P.I.M.P.ing must be fought by all means in a libidinal class war that takes no prisoners. But make no mistake: P.I.M.P.s are constitutively mistaken about their relationship to the police. The police *is* their problem. P.I.M.P.s support their own misery (as pointed out above). Just as the queer class may be instantiated momentarily and come in degrees, so does the P.I.M.P. class. P.I.M.P. is a function, not a personality. One and the same person may be a member of *both* classes or oscillate between them, partially protecting libidinal capital and *simultaneously* desiring radical change. The eradication of the P.I.M.P. class is therefore not a question of singling out individuals, but of maximizing pink libido, of accelerating the circulation of desire, of producing *more* desire and distributing it freely, of attracting and un-P.I.M.P.ing the P.I.M.P. class.

Only a change in material conditions may produce different mindsets and social practices. We must attack the P.I.M.P. class on their material basis. The immediate material conditions of libidinal economy are the body, social relations, and industrial sites.[48] We will comment on each one of these.[49]

1) *The body*: "The human body and not the steam engine … was the first machine developed by capitalism."[50] In the European Early Modern period, the body came to be understood as a machine, a means to an end, a primary site of exploitation subjected to a disembodied mind.[51] The body still functions as a machine for the production of libidinal surplus value, although in a more complicated way.[52] Nevertheless, the body is the primary site of Pink Totaliterian intervention. We suggest two general strategies: hormonal manipulation and the denaturalization of sex.

The easiest way to intervene directly into the material conditions of the gendered relations of a society is to poison the water with testosterone blockers.[53] It does not require the lengthy procedures of medical intervention (surgeries and genetic manipulation) or reeducation (ideology critique, empowerment, and implicit bias training). This suggestion might seem wild. But note that the twentieth century has seen the largest hormonal reprogramming that humankind ever experienced, namely the rise of the contraceptive pill under the auspices of capitalism and the various effects it had and has on gendered relations—regarding sexuality, the materiality of bodies, body fat distribution, psychology, etc.[54] Learning from capitalism is learning how to win. Blocking testosterone will fight a major subset of the P.I.M.P. class: patriarchal masculinities. By changing the hormonal setup of the masses, we will facilitate the reorientation of their desires, allowing them to abstain from patriarchal ideals of hard dicks and hard muscles,[55] and inspiring the collectivization of desire as outlined above, inward and outward. It is not an end point and not a golden bullet. It is the gift of readjustment.[56]

Besides changing the composition of the body, we may also change the usage of the body. A major obstacle to the collectivization of desire is the unequal distribution of body parts and their unequally distributed attractions to various people. Comrade Preciado suggests replacing all particular organs by a generalized combination of dildos and anal intercourse.[57] This will level the playing field and allow for the development of new forms of libidinal interaction. As comrade Preciado points out, we should see the dildo-ass-machine as a structural device with versatile applications—it may manifest as a hand-mouth-machine, a finger-ear-machine, a trans-genital-machine. It is, however, meant to diversify the collective libidinal imaginary and thus decenter desires from the penis-vagina-machine, which must nevertheless remain formally permitted so as not to generate desire for it through scarcity.

People tend to be attached to their established practices. Here, we can learn from our comrades:

> When we gave tractors to the peasants, they were all spoiled in a few months. Only Collective Farms with workshops could handle the tractors. We took the greatest trouble to explain it to the peasants. It was no use arguing with them. After you have said all you can to a peasant, he says he must go home and consult his wife, and he must consult his herder … After he has talked it over with them, he always answers that he does not want the Collective Farm and he would rather do without tractors.[58]

Consequentially, the usage of machinery and the corresponding practices must be enforced by all means. Convince, corrupt, persuade, seduce, shame, ridicule, and question your cis-hetero lovers. Lead by example, use propaganda, discourage cis-hetero genital intercourse wherever possible. Form task forces; convince by giving

pleasure. Nourish your curiosity, stretch your desire, seduce. But don't hurt yourself. Generate a crisis (such as hormonal intervention), then take advantage of it. Denaturalize all libidinal encounters. Abolish heterosexuality. Whatever it takes.

2) *Social relations*: As pointed out above, the couple form is one of the principle enemies of Pink Totaliterianism. Italian feminists of the seventies suggested a general strike of reproduction—all housewives would stop working, society would collapse in no time.[59] Comrade Preciado suggests a general strike against the couple form: *the total breakup*.[60] Until the total breakup is organized, we must sabotage the couple form with guerrilla tactics. Such sabotage must not occur too obviously, because it is meant to facilitate *new, less commodified* social relations. Trust must be built *while* sabotage is under way. Suspending support for commodified relationships may often suffice to have the constellation collapse.[61] If everybody stops counselling (especially) white cis-hetero relationship talk, the material basis for the continuation of dysfunctional social relations evaporates. And so does a pillar of the P.I.M.P. class.

Sabotage must be directed first and foremost against millionaire P.I.M.P.s: white heterosexual cis-gendered middle- and upper-class couples and their self-tokenizing sociocultural copies.[62] The more distance coupled people have from each other on the intersectional grid, the more we must support them.[63] For Queerocracy is the systematic improvement of the position of the queer class. Without it, queers will spit on your Queerocracy.[64]

3) *The factories*: Seize the production sites of libidinal capital—Hollywood, social media, the military. Get into all those jobs that leftists don't want to do. I.T., the judiciary, run for office. Do it now. Don't go alone. Sign up together. Make sure you are on track to leading positions. There are droves of lost souls flocking together in the military, in conservative parties, in Big Tech. We cannot allow fascists, capitalists, and the bourgeois counterrevolution to capture them in eternal exploitation. Whether by force or by finance, we must turn them into queer warriors, ready to rise for a pink revolution.

Likewise, the production of hormones can no longer remain in the hands of market-driven white heterosexual cis people. Find out who they are, where they are. Corrupt, persuade, seduce them. Expropriate, buy off, steal, or squat the factories. Find out who works there, what their concerns are, court them, sway them—they are tomorrow's pink revolutionaries. Exploit existing frictions, escalate existing conflicts. Infiltrate the factories, occupy, close, and ruin them financially, then buy them off cheap. Do the research: What are the ways to change the overarching distribution of hormones over large parts of the earth's population indefinitely? What is a relevant scope to think in? You understand the trajectory—you can take it from here.

Illustration by Alyk Blue. Courtesy of the artist.

An Army of Faggots

Pink Totaliterianism is a force felt by the masses, feared by the P.I.M.P.s, and resisted by the institutions. Another world is in the making.[65] We have seen how capitalism instigates a logic of misery, how the couple form instills it into our hearts, and how collectivization can liberate us from libidinal servitude. We have seen how transitioning may function as the paradigm for a new world. We have seen how testosterone blockers, sex toys, and strategic occupation of the production sites of desire are means to the liberation of the queer class.

But it will take an army of faggots to bring about the dawn of Queerocracy. History does not move by itself. It is on us to organize, polarize, collectivize, and mesmerize. "The [pink] revolution is the social power [*puissance*] of difference, ... the proper rage of the social idea itself."[66] I, comrade Josephine, am the materialized fantasy of another world, a world in transition, materially, collectively, now. I am not speaking *to* you. I am speaking *within* you. Whatever you felt, imagined, feared while reading this—*that was/is your pink libido*. My voice is your voice, my thoughts are yours. I am but a projection screen for your own suppressed desires. This text is an amplified feeling already alive within you. You know this. You've known this all along—all along while reading this text, all along while struggling through what-they-make-you-call-life.

You are a Pink Totaliterian already.

Now that you have identified the feeling, what remains is to train the muscle;
allow it to grow
and put it into practice.

Let it replicate, differentiate, seduce.

You are the revolution.

X

Many thanks to the Center for New Media and Feminist Public Practice (Volos), Walid Abdelnour, Spencer Compton, Nilgün Corogil, Antonia Grousdanidou, Feray Halil, Simon Kubisch, Comrade Sampaguita, Danny Schwartz, Nina Tolksdorf, Rose Buttress, Comrade Wark, and all participants in the workshop Digital Enclosures.

Luce deLire is a ship with eight sails and she lays off the quay. She is working on and with treason, infinity, and seduction. For more, see **www.getaphilosopher.com**. Twitter: @Luce_deLire

Comrade Josephine is a collective fantasy, working towards the pink revolution. If anyone can beat hipster Hitler, Kek, and Pepe the frog, it's her. Say hi on Twitter: @ComradJosephine

1
Josef Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Mass Pub lications, 1975), 19.

2
Ross Douthat, "Where Liberal Power Lies: And Why Conservatives Fear the Creep of Authoritarianism, Too," *New York Times* , October 17, 2020 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/opinion/where-liberal-power-lies.html .

3
Rod Dreher, "Douthat On The Pink Police State," *The American Conservative* , October 17, 2020 https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/pink-police-state-ross-douthat-soft-totalitarianism-live-not-by-lies/ .

4
For context, see Patrick Love and Alisha Karabinus, "Creation of an Alt-Left Boogeyman: Information Circulation and the Emergence of 'Antifa,'" in *Platforms, Protests, and the Challenge of Networked Democracy* , ed. John Jones and Michael Trice (Springer 2020). For examples outside the US, see Jens Jessen, "Der bedrohte Mann," *Die Zeit,* April 4, 2018 https://www.zeit.de/2018/15/metoo-debatte-maenner-feminismus-gleichberechtigung ; and Margarete Stokowski, "'Totalitärer Feminismus' Der Reichsbürger der #MeToo-Bewegung," *Spiegel Kultur* https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/jens-jessen-reichsbuerger-der-metoo-bewegung-a-1202105.html .

5
"Marx's theory of historical repetition ... turns on the following principle which does not seem to have been sufficiently understood by historians: historical repetition is neither a matter of analogy nor a concept produced by the reflection of historians, but above all a condition of historical action itself." Gilles Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, trans. Paul Patton (1968; Continuum, 1994, 91). Historical actors necessarily repeat what they know. Repetition may fall short of imitating its model—it then turns into *farce*. It may succeed and become the continuation of a tradition—it then turns *conservative*. But some times repetition yields something yet unheard of—it then turns into the *future*. This future lies dormant in the past—as *counter-paradigm* .

6
The "we" in this text is indexical. Just as "I" refers to the speaker (who changes in any given context), this "we" refers to the community of those implicated in the thought and sentence in question. Effectively, this means that you, dear reader, create the *we* while reading it. The term "we" does not have a meaning beyond this.

7
Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript* , trans. Thomas H. Ford (Verso, 2009), 30.

8
For an analysis of intersections between queerness and historical fascism, see Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke Un iversity Press 2011), 147.

9
For an introduction to the contemporary historical analysis of Stalin and Stalinism, see Kevin McDermott, "Stalin and Stalinism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism* , ed. Stephen S. Smith (Oxford University Press, 2014). See also Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler 1929–1941* (Penguin, 2017).

10
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Critique of Postcolonial Reason: A History of the Vanishing Present (Harvard University Press, 1999), 203.

11
For more on this, see Luce deLire, "Towards a Critique of Pure Treason," Invertigo TV Live Stream, Qalandiya International 2018 https://vimeo.com/527871096 .

12
On the devastating *effects* of capi talism, see especially Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983; University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2019). For a quick and popular take on capitalism, see the documentary Justin Pemberton, *Capital in the 21st Century,* 2019, based on Thomas Piketty, *Le Capital au XXIe siècle* (Editions du Seuil, 2013).

13
Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident* (Polity, 2007), 5.

14
Proudhon coins this slogan in analogy to the identification of slavery with murder in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?* , ed. Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (1840; Cambridge University Press, 1994), 13. But while Proudhon investigates property for its ethical defensibility and its material genesis (property as *actual* theft of land, for example), we merely state that property can and will go wrong—thus, with property, theft becomes inevitable.

15
McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Harvard University Press, 2004), §052.

16
Linda Singer, *Erotic Welfare* (Routledge, 1992), 36.

17
Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, trans. Bruce Benderson (The Feminist Press, 2013), 34.

18
Maxine Wolfe in private conversation with the authors, 2012.

19
This counts for resistance just as much. "The dominant are waiting for the oppositional to grab them and make them alternative." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Politics of Deconstruction: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Oscar Guardiola-Rivera in conversation," Birbeck, University of London, 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28zoswK4zF0&t=3624s .

20
The necessary possibilities of loneliness, jealousy, exploitation, poverty, and anxiety may be understood in analogy to the demonstration concerning theft above. For anxiety, see also Jamieson Webster and Luce deLire, "What Do We Even Want From One Another?: Anxiety, Permeation and Identity in the Age of a Slowly Imploding Liberalism," Public Seminar, April 24, 2018 http://www.publicseminar.org/2018/08/what-do-we-even-want-from-one-another/ .

21
In "The Apogee of the Commodity," Anthony Paul Farley inquires into the mechanics of antiblack racism from a similar angle: "The Black is the apogee of the commodity. It is the point—in time as well as in space—at which commodity becomes flesh." Anthony Paul Farley, "The Apogee of the Commodity," *DePaul Law Review , no.* 53 (2004): 1229. A Pink Totaliterian reading of antiblack racism may learn a great deal especially from Paul Farley's notion of inevitable "ambiguities" (1240) that are tendentially interpreted in the direction of the hegemonial system in place (such as racial capitalism or "white-over-black," as he writes). For a related, though probably opposed position, see Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (Liveright, 2020). Wilderson's picture rests on the claim that "there is no antagonism like the antagonism between Black people and the world" and that this antagonism is more fundamental to politics and oppression than anything else. It is interesting, however, that the logic of property, and "looting" in particular, figures prominently in the making of Afropessimism. A thorough conversation between Afropessimism and Pink Totaliterianism is surely in order. This conversation will also have to include a thorough reading of Achille Mbembe, *The Critique of Black Reason* (2013; Duke University Press 2017). But this will require a text of its own.

22
See Bini Adamczak, "Theorie der Polysexuellen Okonomie (Grundrisse)," *diskus* 6, no. 1 (2006) http://www.copyriot.com/diskus/06-1/theorie_der_polysexuellen_oekonomie.htm .

23
For exemplary studies of this constellation, see Jin Haritaworn, *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others* (University of Chicago Press, 2015) and Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007), 114–65. See also Luce deLire, "L'Ancien Regime Strikes Back: Response to Paul Preciado," *e-flux conversations*, January 2018 https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/l-ancien-regime-strikes-back-letter-to-paul-b-preciado/7566/2 .

24
See for example Luce deLire, "The New Queer: Aesthetics of the Esoteric Left and Virtual Materialism," *Public Seminar*, August 19, 2019 https://publicseminar.org/essays/the-new-queer/ ; and Luce deLire, "Queer Feminist Witchcraft," in *Magic: A Companion* , ed. Katharina Rein (Peter Lang, 2021), forthcoming.

25
See also deLire, "L'Ancien

Regime Strikes Back."

26
See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1: An Introduction* (1976; Vintage 1990); Elsa Dorlin , *La matrice de la race: Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la Nation française* (La Découverte, 2009); and Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

27
Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 47.

28
Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 23.

29
Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (University of California Press, 1997).

30
Singer, *Erotic Welfare,* 35.

31
See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education* , ed. J. E. R ichardson, trans. Richard Nice (Greenwood Press, 1986), 46–58; Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Polity, 2007); and Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* , trans. Ariana Reines (Semiotext(e), 2012).

32
"Few people consciously want babies to be commodities. Yet baby commodities are a definite part of what gestational labor produces today." Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now* (Verso, 2019), 15.

33
Note that the neoliberal couple form is incredibly adaptable: polyamory, for example, is not a solution but merely an extension of the bourgeois ideology of libidinal agriculture. It is the spatial equivalent to sequential monogamy. While some people plow one field after the other, others have several, mostly non-interfering partnerships at the same time. The model may appear franchised (play partners, sugar daddies, escort services) or protected by limited liability (friends with benefits, affairs, and flings). But as long as these are founded on the idea of *exclusion* and *negative freedom* they will be but extensions of the overall commodification of everyday life. In this sense, polyamory is pink-washing neoliberalism.

34
For more on the metaphysics of Pink Totaliterianism, see "From the Lecture Notes of Comrade Josephine," 2018 http://www.getaphilosopher.com/stalin ; and Luce deLire, "Pink Totaliterianism" (lecture, presented at "Libidinal Economies of Crisis Times," Acud Macht Neu, Berlin, September 27, 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dhxZSryYHk).

35
Silvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch: The Body and Primitive Accumulation* , (Autonomedia, 2004), 80. For the context of Pink Totaliterianism, we are interested in the collective material dimension of this quote, not in the fantasy of a wholesome "common" that somehow magically cures us from capitalism. We reject this fantasy as romanticism. For a more contemporary take on the "commons," however, see Comrade Wark: "Without an information commons, all classes become captives of the vectoralist privatization of education. This is an interest the hacker shares with farmers and workers, who demand the public provision of education." Wark, *Hacker Manifesto* , §198. See also Ziauddin Sardar, "alt.civilizations.faq: Cyberspace as the darker side of the West," *Futures* 27, no. 7 (September 1995): 777–94 https://ziauddinsardar.com/articles/altcivilizationsfaq-cyberspace-darker-side-west .

36
The term "Queerocracy" is borrowed from New York City–based group Queerocracy . There is no affiliation between the authors and the group, although we admire their activism. We recommend you support them—financially or otherwise. For more on the group see https://queerocracypodcast.weebly.com/ .

37
Consider in this regard: "All returns to {normal} in the aftermath of a {transition} have to be fought because {the old normal} has ... objectively {ended}, and hence the 'return' would be to a counterfeit {normality}, one characterized by reduction to the exoteric and lack of subtlety. From this perspective, invoking {normality} as the domain of the genuine is derisory, since in many cases {normality} did at one point or another undergo a {transition}." Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (self-published, 2009), 29 http://jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic,_The_Withdrawal_of_Tradition_Past_a_Surpassing_Disaster.pdf . "{We have to tackle} three tasks ... concerning a {transition}: 1) to reveal the withdrawal of {normality}, and therefore that a {transition} has happened {or is happening} ... ; 2) to resurrect what has been withdrawn by the {transition in a different constellation, to piece the elements of the pre-transition situation back together in a new constellation}, which is the task assigned to the protagonist{s} ... ; 3) and, in some ominous periods, to imply symptomatically ... that a {transition} is being prepared ... thus functioning as an ... implicit appeal for thoughtful intervention by the minority of *contemporaries* to {allow} the imminent {transition to happen}." Toufic, *Withdrawal of Culture* , 22.

38
Andrea Long Chu, "On Liking Women," *n+1,* no. 30 (Winter 2018) https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/ .

39
Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 137.

40
Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 137.

41
For a systematic account of a choice-based "personal aspiration model" of transitioning, see Christine Overall, "Sex/Gender Transitions and Life Changing Aspirations," in *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity* , ed. Laurie J. Shrage (Oxford University Press, 2009).

42
Chu, "On Liking Women." At bottom, this is an expression of the *virtuality of desire,* which Deleuze exemplifies in a " *child who begins to walk* ... No one has ever walked endogenously. On the one hand, the child goes beyond the bound excitations towards the supposition or the intentionality of an object, such as the mother, as the goal of an effort, the end to be actively reached 'in reality' and in relation to which success and failure may be measured. But on the other hand and at the same time, the child constructs for itself another object, a quite different kind of object which is a virtual object or centre and which then governs and compensates for the progresses and failures of its real activity: it puts several fingers in its mouth, wraps the other arm around this virtual centre, and appraises the whole situation from the point of view of this virtual mother ... The real mother is contemplated only in order to provide a goal for the activity, and a criterion by which to evaluate the activity, in the context of an active synthesis." Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* , 99.

43
For an opposite perspective, compare Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

44
Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 237–54; and Hilary Malatino, "Tough Breaks: Trans Rage and the Cultivation of Resilience," *Hypatia* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2019). For a critical perspective on rage from a black trans perspective, see Kortney Ryan Ziegler, "Uses of Black Trans Male Anger," *HuffPost* , April 12, 2013 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/uses-of-black-trans-male-anger_b_3065450 .

45
J. A. Micheline gives a particularly powerful example: "In an attempt to survive, before I knew that I'd done it, I became what they asked of me. I became soft-spoken; I became committed to reason ... And I am so satisfied to be the monster that they have created ... My sharp rhetoric only highlights the softness of their foundation. My patience only provides them rope—rope with which they inevitably hang themselves." J. A. Micheline, "Ritualizing My Humanity," in *Becoming Dangerous* , ed. Katie West and Jasmine Elliot (Weiser Books, 2019), 209.

46
Yet again, the difference between Pink Totaliterianism and the left opposition is subtle but crucial. Comrade Wark captures a similar thought as follows: "To the hacker there is always a surplus of possibility expressed in what is actual, the surplus of the virtual.

This is the inexhaustible domain of what is real, but not actual, what is not but which may become … To hack is to release the virtual into the actual,"—and thus to proclaim the primacy of the actual over the virtual— "to express the difference of the real" (Wark, *Hacker Manifesto*, §074). Here, it looks as though "the virtual," just as the classically Marxist version of nature, was in itself a passive object to the cultivating intervention of human actors (which picks up on centuries of the identification of virtuality, mere possibility, and nature as matter to a forming intellect). Simultaneously, comrade Wark's "virtual" has relevance only in relation to "what is actual"—it is "what *is not but which may become* " (Wark, *Hacker Manifesto,* §074). What articulates itself in her text is an inherent "metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for" the transcendental signified (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, 49), which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign, thus putting to rest that "strange movement of the trace"—in other words, the virtual (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 66). In this case, the transcendental signified is the "inexhaustible domain of what is real" (Wark, *Hacker Manifesto,* §074) and ready to be hacked (is it an accident that "to hack" originally refers to the violent expropriation of resources from the material world?). The virtual, the surplus possibility in Comrade Wark's picture, is subsumed under actuality. It has no life of its own, no nonhuman agency. It remains to be shown where it manifests its factual agency against the grain in Comrade Wark's text, but these crucial subtleties require a separate inquiry. Suffice it to say that to Pink Totaliterians, that "strange movement of the trace" is simultaneously the strange movement of an originary desire that makes itself felt. That is why a Pink Totaliterian must ultimately aim for a theory of seduction more than for a theory of production (see Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* , 1977, Semiotext(e), 2007, 37–38).

47
Comrade Wark has put forth a powerful analysis of a parallel development in what she calls the "vectoralist class" and the "hacker class" (Wark, *Hacker Manifesto* , §021). However, despite her striking analysis of the mechanisms of extraction, appropriation, and accumulation, the notion of libido is strangely absent from her approach. This is no accident. Omission of the power of libidinal economy was a major shortcoming of original *socialist* accumulation in the communist states and the way in which socialist theories have understood class conflict and the workings of capitalism more generally. For neoliberal capitalism, a particular analysis of libidinal economy is not necessary, because the production of scarcity works in its favor. Survival and trauma motivate capitalist consumption. "Communism was an idea, a dream palace whose attraction derived from its seeming fusion of science and utopia" (Kotkin, *Stalin*, 6). What remains open in Comrade Wark's proposal is simply this: Why do anything? What is the motivational force behind resistance? It is the typical omission of the idealist, left opposition (for another powerful example, see Rose Buttress, "A New Social Contract," *Mask: The Rant Issue,* 2017). But if you can't say anything about the causal forces driving concrete action, your political proposal will remain flat footed. In short: while comrade Wark's proposal is inherently Marxist, Pink Totaliterianism is inherently Spinozistic.

48
For more on this, see Luce deLire, "Post-#metoo: My, Your, Our Pink Totalitarianism," *e-flux lectures*, May 11, 2018 https://www.e-flux.com/video/205581/e-flux-lectures-luce-delire-post-metoo-my-your-our-nbsp-pink-totalitarianism/ .

49
For more on this, see "From the Lecture Notes of Comrade Josephine" http://www.getaphilosopher.com/stalin .

50
Anonymous, "Against the Gendered Nightmare: Fragments On Domestication," *Bædan*, no. 2 (2014): 87.

51
Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 183.

52
See Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, and Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*.

53
For a related fictional scenario, see Torrey Peters, *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* (self-published, 2016).

54
Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 31.

55
Mira Bellwether, *Fucking Trans Women* , vol. 1 (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).

56
We think that gender terrorists should involve trans men in their actions so as to make sure that all necessary precautions for their protection are met.

57
Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* , trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (2000; Columbia University Press, 2018), 57.

58
Winston Churchill quoting Stalin from a private conversation they had in Moscow during Churchill's visit there in 1943. Winston Churchill, *The Second World War – Volume 3: The Grand Alliance* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), 448.

59
For context, see Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici, *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen: Wages for Housework, a Perspective on Capital and the Left* (New York Wages for Housework Committee and Falling Wall Press, 1975).

60
Paul B. Preciado, "La statistique, plus forte que l'amour," *Libération*, August 1, 2014 https://www.liberation.fr/chroniques/2014/08/01/la-statistique-plus-forte-que-l-amour_1074212/ .

61
For more on this, see Luce deLire, "Pink Totaliterianism."

62
For more on this, see "From the Lecture Notes of Comrade Josephine" http://www.getaphilosopher.com/stalin .

63
DeLire, "L'Ancien Regime Strikes Back."

64
Note, however, that mere abstract demolition of the couple form leaves us to the social blizzard that drives people into the couple form in the first place. *Decoupling* is not an end in itself. It is a precursor for *other* social relations. That is why "decoupling" is not "breaking up." The latter singularizes the participants. "Decoupling" *is a collective* transition into a social form beyond the two.

65
McKenzie Wark, *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (Verso, 2019).

66
"C'est en ce sense que la révolution (pink) est la puissance sociale de la différence, … la colère propre de l'Idée sociale." Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2015), 268.