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Arts of Survival

Alternative Historiographies of Trans Agency

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: Troy Kilgannon

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Abstract

This thesis considers forms of trans agency that dominant modes of historiography have struggled to ratify. I intervene in prevalent trends in scholarship about trans lives, which tend to claim that trans subjectivities are capacitated through rights-based politics. Such accounts are often characterized by their hyperfocus on spectacles of trans of colour people in pain and crisis, and corresponding disregard for the forms of agency, care, and protest in which trans people find everyday joy and freedom.

I turn to the arts of flourishing and survival elaborated by trans people themselves, in order to redress some oversights of dominant historiographies, which routinely dismiss trans people's own interpretations of their capacities and agencies as not of historical, sociological, or theoretical significance.

Crucially, this project recognises trans people's chosen approaches to care, community, and agency – which are occasionally legible to conventional historiography as real and worthwhile political activity, but are more often interpreted as trivial, irrational, and inconsequential – as the essential point of departure for scholarly work about trans lives.

Introduction

In December 1968, two men, Bobby Crain and Bobby Chrisco, drove a car belonging to the vaudeville entertainer, “female impersonator,” and very possibly transsexual Rae Bourbon to a ranch near Big Spring, TX (Riddle 2020). They were there because Bourbon had contracted them to intimidate – and perhaps murder – a man named A.D. Blount. Blount was the owner of the petting zoo and kennel where Bourbon paid for her beloved dogs to be sheltered while she was travelling to and from performances. Bourbon had fallen behind on her payments, and Blount had sold the animals to medical researchers, who may have had the dogs destroyed. Rae, distraught and heartbroken over the loss, made threatening phone calls to Blount, lobbied local news outlets to take an interest in the story, and even wrote a desperate letter to Texas Governor John Connally. Bourbon, who had been raised on a farm and formed deep companionships with animals, thought of her dogs as her family, and seems to have resolved to take matters into her own hands, sending her accomplices to rough Blount up (Page 2018). As well as lending them her car for the task, the two Bobby’s were in possession of Rae’s gun. On arriving at the kennel, Chrisco shot and killed Blount. The two Bobby’s were convicted of murder with malice, and although Bourbon would claim in court that she had never wanted Blount to be killed, the prosecution contended she had paid the pair to murder Blount as revenge for killing her dogs. On February 21, 1971, she was convicted as an accomplice to murder and sentenced to 99 years in prison (Riddle 2020; Leitsch 1971).

Although Rae never explicitly referred to herself as transsexual, and accurate details of her life are difficult to pin down due to her gift for fabulation, what does seem clear is that she lived a gender non-conforming life that might be productively thought of as trans in some important ways. Bourbon made her debut in acting by submitting a photo of herself in drag as a beautiful young woman to a *Photoplay* magazine contest seeking new actress talents (Riddle 2020; Coleman 2005, 68-69). The prize for winning was a contract with Paramount. In her *Photoplay* application, Rae made no mention of the fact that she had not been assigned female at birth, or that she presented day-to-day as a man, so when she arrived in Hollywood, studio executives were more than a little surprised to learn that Rae was not a cis woman. Rae was allowed to work the contract, however, and often appeared in those early years as a body-double for Esthelle Taylor, another Paramount actress. Rae developed her own act, a blend of highbrow wit and lowbrow bawdiness, and began working the vaudeville circuit, then later the pansy clubs of New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (De la Croix 2012, 112-113). Although she had enjoyed a successful start, by the late 1940s her career was flagging, largely due to police raids that accompanied the public success of the pansy clubs; Rae's San Francisco show, *Boys will be Girls*, was closed down by police after it was live-broadcast by a local radio channel (De la Croix 2012, 112-113). Relentless arrests for crossdressing caused Rae and other pansy performers to stop performing in drag (Coleman 2005, 68-69).

However, Rae's career took an interesting turn during the 1950s. In 1952, Christine Jorgensen emerged glamorously into the public eye following a sex change in Copenhagen. Jorgensen ignited an unprecedented media frenzy and became an overnight celebrity; Rae took notice (Page 2018). Rae's first party album of the 1950s was called *An Evening in Copenhagen*; perhaps as an homage

to Jorgensen (Page 2018). Rae's affinity with Jorgensen and other well-known transsexuals like Charlotte McLeod continued throughout the 1950s, culminating in a trans-themed party album called *Let Me Tell You About My Operation*. In the album itself and associated media coverage and interviews, Rae disclosed that she had received a sex change in Juarez from a Hungarian surgeon and gynaecologist, Dr. Emrick Szekely. In 1954, Rae quipped that she planned to go to Denmark to "have more put on" (Page 2018). Rae told the newspaper, *New York Journal American*: "psychologically, I think I'm going to be happier than I've ever been in my entire life, now that I am what I always wanted to be" (Carpozi 1956).

Rae's career was briefly reinvigorated by the revelation of her sex change. She was interviewed by national newspapers, played sold-out shows in West Hollywood, and opened her own revue, named *She Lost It in Juarez*. Club advertisements took pains to bill her as "Miss Rae Bourbon: not a female impersonator" (Page 2018). While at the beginning of her career, she had appeared in drag more or less exclusively for her nightclub gigs, after *Let Me Tell You*, she spent more and more time presenting as a woman in her day-to-day life, occasionally scoring side gigs modelling women's fashions for high-end department stores. By 1961, however, Rae's career was back on the skids; while she could still engage an audience with her Depression-era pansy routines, her act was beginning to show its age. Rae's once-outré take on pansy life "was starting to seem almost quaint to a new generation on the brink of Gay liberation" (Riddle 2020). That left her, in 1965, broke and travelling between two-bit jobs in an old sedan with a pack of trained showbiz dogs, whom she apparently loved dearly. Rae wanted to spare her dogs the trials of itinerant life, so she arranged for them to be cared for by Blount. Rae was unable to get work that was either consistent or well-paid, and so she eventually fell behind on her payments to the kennel; setting in motion

the chain of events that would lead to the loss of her dogs and the subsequent murder of Blount (Nesteroff 2012).

Accounts of Bourbon's life and eventual death in prison are haunted by historiography's attempts to either grapple with or elide the following question: what could possibly prompt a real transsexual to relinquish her grip on the forms of cultural assimilation – and therefore forms of safety – that proximity to whiteness and legible embodiment afford access to? For that was surely the consequence of Rae's involvement in the murder of Blount; a complete and total revocation of the conditional cultural legibility, if not exactly acceptance, that embodiment as a medically transitioned transsexual had temporarily conferred. What could bring her, having tasted the vexed pleasures of transsexual quasi-celebrity and industry darlinghood, to surrender aspirational forms of notoriety and scandal for infamy of a more ignominious kind? To be sure, even in her heyday, the forms of safety and citizenship to which Rae had access were, at best, ambivalent and fragile. As a transsexual, her ability to participate in juridically enfranchised life could be easily punctured, and was liable to unravel in unexpected ways, as in 1958, when she was arrested and detained for “impersonating a man” (Riddle 2020). The limited protections from which Rae benefitted as a white trans person offered unreliable, precarious, and heavily circumscribed modes through which she was able to become fleetingly legible to cultural imaginaries of ontological personhood.

Despite the clear failures of a state-proctored politics of inclusion, dominant paradigms for thinking social and political movements instruct us that if we belong to a minoritized class of subjects – for instance, if we are trans – the horizon of our political ambitions should be to lobby for legislative enfranchisement, citizenship privileges, and participation in the dominant

institutions which structure the state (Spade 2015; Puar 2015; Duggan 2003). The “belief that marginalized and hated populations can find freedom by being recognized by law [...] and protected by anti-discrimination law and hate crimes statutes is a central narrative of the United States” (Spade 2015, 139). Having secured these rights, and having managed to rehabilitate a pathologized subjectivity into a newly productive one, we are supposed to allow ourselves to be enfolded into proper citizenship, and to never, ever, under any circumstances, give them any reason to call us crazy, delusional, or perverse again.¹ In this way, concepts like trans agency become predominantly legible to mainstream discourse in the context of self-transparent and self-interested political activity; even if they disagree that trans people should have rights, which they frequently do, such paradigms have no difficulty ratifying that the trans man who wants to reform legislation such that he can be recognised as his child’s father, or the trans woman who wants access to better healthcare, are agentic subjects. These trans agencies are easily ratified under neoliberal governmentality because they appear to orient their subjects toward the things and the domains of things that are supposed to bring us greater security, prosperity, and legibility: “the good life” (Berlant 2011, 2-11; Ehrenreich 2010). Self-transparent, sensible, autonomous subjects are supposed to want what’s best for themselves, and in the case of trans people who lobby for rights, inclusion, and legislative reform, their agency is recognised because their desires demonstrate their

¹ Recent calls for transgender military inclusion have emerged as sites of asymmetry in the way trans people are portrayed, where trans soldiers who can be enfolded into paramilitary state-making and colonial expansion are articulated as nonpathological, and anti-war trans activists are described in pathological terms. In 2013 Col. Jennifer Pritzker made headlines as the first “transgender billionaire,” philanthropically donating much of her wealth toward military ends, such as the establishment of the Reserve Officer’s Training Corps. Pritzker vowed to “preserve [...] sites of significance to American and military history,” Spade 2015, 143-144. The same year, a U.S. military court sentenced Chelsea Manning to 35 years in prison for leaking military secrets. The biggest U.S. trans advocacy groups, Lambda Legal Defence and National Centre for Transgender Equality, who were at the time lobbying for transgender military inclusion, declined Manning their support, querying whether she was really trans, NCTA, 2013. Manning was portrayed by transgender Navy Seal Kristen Beck as unstable and a bad actor, saying she was a “liar a thief and a traitor [...] and a tarnish on Dr. [Martin Luther] King’s dream,” Beck 2013.

investment in the promise of a durable, stable future (Berlant 2011). Under these orthodoxies of representing the intentional subject, “a manifest lack of self-cultivating attention can easily become recast as irresponsibility, shallowness, resistance, refusal, or incapacity” (Berlant 2011, 99).

So what of trans agencies like Rae’s that divest from a more stable future? What of trans agencies that seem indifferent to the promises of greater security, prosperity, and legibility? How to account for trans subjects that don’t seem to want what’s best for themselves? Dominant neoliberal frames for thinking transness, individualism, and agency break down when faced with problems like these; they can provide no explanation for why a trans woman – who is meant to want nothing more and nothing less than to be seen and treated as a woman – might be moved to forego the privilege and safety of cultural legibility for the sake of some animals. Why she might – having more or less recuperated exposure to life-threatening forms of criminalization and pathologization into general conditions of liveability – turn around and solicit all the worst things that they say about transsexuals; that we’re deluded, paranoid, absurd, inane, grotesque, faking. They have no way to comprehend what Rae did or intended to do when she contracted the two Bobbys to kill Blount as agency; no way to ratify Rae’s actions as those of a viable social actor. The attachments between humans and animals, we are told, are not meant to be compelling enough that a woman would risk dying in a men’s prison to avenge herself on her dogs’ killer; our fantasies of revenge are not meant to be so satisfying that we jeopardise our freedom to follow them through. More to the point, transsexuality, we are told, is an ardent, inextinguishable, irrepressible need to live as a different gender from the one we were assigned at birth, or it is nothing at all. It is certainly not something that transsexuals are allowed to have complicated, opaque, or indifferent feelings toward. If Rae chose to throw away everything she should have wanted for some dogs, the logic goes, then she

must have been a bad transsexual; perhaps she wasn't even transsexual at all. This is where neoliberal and individualist orientations toward the optimisation of the self leave us; unable to recognise self-destructive, opaque, paranoid, and nonrational actions as real excersises of agency. Under this rubric, those who make choices that don't appear to bring them greater proximity to "the good life" are dismissed as bad objects and bad actors.

The terms under which the state will stipulate to the existence of trans people dictate that transitioning is a matter of deep psychic need, perhaps even a matter of life and death; not something to be done opportunistically, on a whim, ambivalently, or for purely practical reasons. With the exception of Morgan M. Page's excellent trans history podcast, *One From the Vaults*, most historiography of Rae Bourbon's life accepts this received wisdom uncritically; if Rae jeopardised an enfranchised life and the ability to "pass" among cis people – something a real transsexual could never bring themselves to do – then she must not have been a real transsexual (Page 2018). The historiography, taking her murder charge – the moment she proved herself to be an unviable social actor – as a point of departure, then reverse-engineers Rae's life, seeking moments in which to locate the certainty that she could not have really been trans. Dominant historiographies have therefore speculated that Rae never received any gender affirming surgery, and that she only claimed to have had a sex change in order to cash in on the fame of "real" transsexuals like Jorgensen (Riddle 2020; Nowling 2013). Others have claimed that while Rae did undergo a sex change operation, or even a series of surgeries, she did so purely to revitalise an unsuccessful career and to circumvent the anti-crossdressing laws that hampered her work in showbiz (Riddle 2020; Nesteroff 2012; St. James 2016). Still others have contended that there was

an operation, but one which only took place because Rae was suffering from cancer (Riddle 2020; Nowling 2013).

Such historiographies are not necessarily wrong on the facts; as with so many of the details of her life, it remains unclear whether Rae actually underwent any sex change surgery at all. However, what interests me is the way in which such claims are made in order to attenuate and diminish Rae's proximity to a trans identification. Rae may or may not have been trans in the ways that we think trans today, but what I realised when I was researching her life is that the historiography, broadly speaking, *doesn't want her to have been trans*. Biographical details which frame Rae as erratic, unreliable, and paranoid have been specifically leveraged to signify as both her diminished viability as a social actor, and to prove that she was not a credible trans subject. Dominant historiographies of Rae's and other trans people's lives have therefore fostered conditions under which trans and gender non-conforming people both in the past and present only become legible as such when they have demonstrably participated in the things that trans people are supposed to want (a better life, more rights, stable attachments), where those desires align with the broader demands of proper citizenship (self-transparency, rationalism, self-preservation).

Clearly, we are in need of an alternative heuristic to the "moral science of biopolitics," which links "the political administration of life to a melodrama of the care of the monadic self" (Berlant 2011, 99). We must rethink agency and personhood outside of state-proctored idioms of sovereignty and performative action, so that agency can be recognised in its real texture "as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality [...] and lifelong accumulation or self-fashioning" (Berlant 2011, 99). This

thesis therefore posits that trans people's relationships to transness are very often inflected by impulsivity and ambivalence, dispassionate pragmatism, opacity and regret, career and financial opportunism, nonsecular and nonrational beliefs, paranoia and delusion. Moreover, this thesis contends, these modes are in fact constitutive of the lifesaving art of trans agency, though they are rarely recognised as such. Despite the fact that they sustain our lives and wellbeing far in excess of what can be offered by our current pro-military, pro-business, pro-criminalization politics of inclusion and legal protection, trans agencies rarely appear as the sensible actions of self-preserving subjects. More often, trans people's practices of care, kinship, and freedom look like failure, instability, and incomprehensibility to scholarly and historiographical rubrics that imagine enfranchised citizenship to be the sole domain and end of political agency.

This thesis is not an attempt to go into the archives and recover dubiously trans subjects, but a means of proposing that existing historiography and existing trans studies scholarship often encounter problems ratifying both the agency and the transness of subjects who have been criminalized and pathologized, who have nonsecular and nonrational beliefs, who have been hailed as self-destructive, eccentric, delusional, or insane. As AJ Lewis observes,

even in the most sympathetic scholarship, they are subjects who are implicitly understood to have had compromised access to reality, to have imaginatively projected things that were not there. In particular [...] their own accounts of their lives have been disproportionately represented by historians as subjective – rather than literal or objective – truths. (Lewis 2017, 208)

I revisit scenes that have been read historiographically as sites of “the erosion of viable sociality and, by extension, the attenuation of social capacity” (Lewis 2017, 212). I do so in order to imagine that these ostensible disengagements from relationality – often framed as failures to act, failures

to care, or failures to resist – can instead be read as flourishing forms of trans agency, attachment, care, and protest that simply cannot be ratified by state-proctored structures of political reform or correlationist historiographies, and are therefore invisible to them. There are many trans people in the archive whose practices of expressing themselves and living freely were, and are, met with hostility, censure, and indifference, or worse, criminalization, pathologization, and incarceration, and it is vital that our historiographic efforts recognise the agency of these trans lives with as much enthusiasm as they do the lives of those who engage in self-transparently political activity. Some of the trans people with whom my thesis spends time chose, like Rae, to prioritise their connections to animals over and above participation in state-proctored social life; some chose connections to the ghosts of dead relatives and ancestors; some chose each other; some chose magic, or religion, or enchantment, or nihilism, or privation. I think it is vital that we approach these instances of trans people’s broad, vibrant webs of care and sociability with human and nonhuman forces both as “indictments of the hermeneutic foreclosures of secular [...] historiographies” and as direct challenges to “the intensifications of debility left in the wake of neoliberal advancement” (Lewis 2017, 212).

I believe that rather than reflecting the eccentricity, madness, or tragedy of individual trans subjects, such affinities direct our attention to how deauthorized methods have always been integral to subaltern political movements, who find themselves constrained and unable to act within state-proctored structures of reform, and therefore seek out the capacities for action offered by agentic and animistic forces that exist beyond the state’s purview. Due to metastasizing neoliberal processes of austerity, ethnonationalism, and the strategic maldistribution of resources, trans people’s ability to build liveable lives is deeply precarious; in the wake of these conditions,

taking up disallowed methods and embarking on deauthorized alliances has furnished trans people with unexpected capacities for social and political action. My research therefore seeks, across several chapters, to renew calls made in early iterations of the trans studies field for coalition with cyborgian, monstrous, and nonhuman powers. Taking up Susan Stryker's definitive reading of Frankenstein's creature, the subjects in my work speak to agencies accrued through lateral, outlawed, and otherworldly means as indispensable technologies of world-building, mutual aid, and resistance for trans subjects (Stryker 1994). Incoherence, self-opacity, retreat, contradiction, and departures from rationalism are typically framed as the modes of subjects who have given up or given in, but I choose to read these registers and their invocation, both in the archive and in creative texts, as capacitive, sustaining, and deeply, durably social. These are trans subjects' real arts of survival and flourishing, cultivated and leveraged to both live with the world we have and to build the world anew.

Impact, Intervention, and Literature Review

I recount the above about Rae because it opens onto the central concerns of this thesis: trans agencies and arts of flourishing, historiography of trans lives, and the institutionalization of trans studies. I hope to contribute to the trans studies landscape by developing current understandings of what agency can mean and look like for trans subjects, believing that at present, only a few forms of agency that conform with governmental expectations of personal sovereignty and entrepreneurship are recognised as such, with deleterious consequences for all but a small minority of elite and professional trans people.

Dominant analyses of what agency is and how it functions often misalign agency with control, decision-making, lifelong trajectories of accrual, and self-transparent acts of self-fashioning. Agency is typically “understood as a project undertaken by an enterprising self who cultivates personal autonomy as a career and personal asset in a world mediated by markets and exchange relations” (Binkley 2007, 12). Work on agency by Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, Georges Bataille, and Achille Mbembe similarly frames sovereignty as “the foundation of individual autonomy” (Berlant 2011, 96; Schmitt 2005; Agamben 1995; Bataille 1973; Mbembe 2003). The corpus of scholarship on agency has broadly emphasized a nonmimetic relation between political and personal sovereignty by overidentifying “the similarity of self-control” to fantasies of “sovereign performativity and state control over geographical boundaries” (Berlant 2011, 96). Such work therefore recapitulates “a militaristic and melodramatic view of individual agency by casting the human as most fully itself when assuming the spectacular posture of performative action” (Berlant 2011, 96). Under this rubric, self-destruction, self-opacity, delusion, paranoia, and inability to entrepreneurialise the self all fail to register as agency, and going further, are problematized, pathologized, and often criminalized.

This poses problems with regard to trans people, insofar as we – having recognised that we have very little recourse to build more liveable worlds through state-proctored means – frequently turn to other methods to transform the conditions of our own and each other’s lives. Deauthorized methods that trans people leverage for survival are often regarded as confusing and absurd (such as knowing something might make you unhappy but desiring it anyway); often criminalized (such as sex work and other informal economy labour); often dismissed as evidence of instability and unviability (such as inducing threshold-states, performing magic, or appealing to divinities); often

trivialized and regarded as depoliticized (such as dressing up, being glamorous, and engaging in play); and are often not recognised as real activism (such as forms of protest that lack clear and deliverable goals). Dominant paradigms for recognising agency can therefore be actively harmful to trans people because they struggle to ratify the agency of subjects who cannot be assimilated into forms of proper citizenship structured through self-improvement, individualistic personhood, and capitalistic productivity.

One interpretive problem historiography has faced when contending with forms of trans agency that encompass non-lucidity and departures from rationalism has been a recurrent preoccupation that a deconstructed identity, or a person who is interested in self-dissolution, represent acute problems for agency. Jasbir Puar points out that, in general, scholarship subscribes to the “assumption [...] that representation [and] its recognized subjects is the dominant, primary, or most efficacious platform of political intervention,” while a Deleuzian “nonrepresentational, non-subject oriented politics [...] is deemed impossible” (Puar 2012, 58; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). I agree with Puar that Deleuzian postrepresentational and postsubject conceptualizations represent not a loss of the conditions of possibility for politics, but are actually integral to subaltern political methodologies.

Dominant analyses of agency mistake the emergence of neoliberal technologies of the self as totalizing. Although it is easy to find theoretical texts which avow agency’s indivisibility from genealogies of neoliberalism, this thesis hopes to demonstrate that such analyses are derived from predominantly white, middle-class cultures, and therefore do not really account for the ways in which agency means for queer, trans, black, and brown subjects. Speaking to the phenomenon we

now call rainbow capitalism, Sam Binkley claims that the emergence of queer countercultures may have “contributed significantly to a pattern of cultural change that has produced identity as a highly autonomous, individual accomplishment, mediated by consumer markets and the lifestyle offerings they naturalize and the inevitable frameworks for the choice of the self” (Binkley 2007, 12). It is undeniably true, as Myrl Beam points out, that queer and trans countercultures have experienced points of overlap and imbrication with neoliberal regimes of self-making: “particular kinds of queer subjects [...] are invited to understand themselves and orient themselves toward entrepreneurial self-governance in an economic and cultural order in which queerness is not oppositional, but [...] upwardly mobile, included” (Beam 2018, 87). However, it is also fair to say that for many, queer and trans community is radically estranged from economies of neoliberalized self-fashioning. Indeed, many queer and trans counterpublics, both in the period of neoliberalism’s advent and in the present, have emphatically distanced themselves from injunctions to be healthy, to be productive, to produce capital, to exercise self-control. As Tim Dean (2009), Leo Bersani (2009), Lee Edelman (2004) and others have observed, many queer countercultures have negotiated their commitments to social change through experiences of nihilism, antisociality, social withdrawal, and self-harm.

In this thesis, I focus on deauthorized ways of doing agency, believing they are better adapted to recognising trans lives as worth living. Shifting the lens of study by departing from paradigms of agency premised on sovereignty, I turn to methods of being and becoming elaborated by marginalized communities. I do so in order to respond to trans lives that have been lived in ways that productively rupture modern secular subject formation, producing cracks and fissures through which dispositions for living and relating have flourished. In order to reread deauthorized and

unorthodox forms of agency as politically and socially efficacious where they are typically problematized as dysfunctional, ineffective, and directionless, I turn to insights from postcolonial studies scholarship, which has developed rigorous critiques of secularism as an inheritance of the European Enlightenment and its colonialist directives. I turn also to women of colour feminism and disability activism, which have long and well-developed practices of observing how charges of insanity and diminished social capacity are leveraged by a hostile state to neutralize the political threat represented by coalitional subaltern political movements. Lastly, I turn to insights about animisms from anthro-decentrizing and posthuman scholarly work. These genealogies recognise animism/agency “not [as] a property of [humans] imaginatively projected onto things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded,” but as “the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence” (Ingold 2006, 10). A new animist approach to the archival traces left by historical trans people therefore allows us to perceive personhood more broadly, and facilitates the recognition of forms of trans agency, care, and attachment that have been neglected in most scholarship because of their invocation of the occult, irrational, and nonsecular.

Trans Historiography

In a second key strand of my thesis, I hope to develop and broaden understandings of what historiography can *do* for us in the present. To that end, I divest to a certain extent from historiographic orthodoxies of factual certainty and terminological precision, believing that under some conditions, dogmatic adherence to these concepts narrows the scope of true and useful things we can say about history. Following C. Riley Snorton and Saidiya Hartman, the act of “imagining

the otherwise of documentary evidence” is an ethical necessity when engaging with archives that have “been organized to diminish and disparage certain kinds of lives” (Snorton 2017, 184; Hartman 1997; 2007; 2019). This thesis, for example, does not put pressure on archives to disclose and definitively identify historical trans people as such, believing that this impulse is often unproductive and somewhat self-defeating.² Categories of identity that are now presumed to be relatively stable – such as transsexual, intersex, and homosexual – were far more fluid, and used by many different people to mean and gesture to many different things in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Heaney 2017). Additionally, following Jules Gill-Peterson’s arguments in her article “Trans of Colour Critique Before Transsexuality”, the non-transparency of a historical subject’s embodied self-knowledge wields a significant force for undermining medical claims of authority over trans lives and the terms on which they are lived (Gill-Peterson 2018a, 610-15).

As Lewis (2017), Aaron Devor (2013), Kadji Amin (2013; 2018), Hil Malatino (2020) and other trans historians have repeatedly demonstrated, trans archives recurrently and proliferatingly produce insights and material that cannot be proven through historical evidence. More to the point, the imperative to seek factual certainty through the unearthing of stable, immutable proofs has more in common with the taxonomic, categorizational impulses of a hostile, antitrans state. Trans people are constantly surveilled and prospected for clear proofs as to who we really are by visual ontologies that presume the coextensivity of the image and reality. As trans people know, terminological and taxonomic “certainties” are rarely so certain; they are often too reductive and too declarative to offer useful insights into real lives. We know too, that probing the surface of a

² See for example the arguments made in Amin 2013, 126-29.

body, or a life, rarely secures “a path toward its inside, its value, [or] its meaning” (Raengo 2013, 163).

For this reason, I defer the expectation to provide new modes of demographic visibility and countability for trans bodies, anticipating potential complicities between such historiography and schemas for the biopolitical regulation of trans subjects in the present (Aizura and Stryker 2013, 7). I try where possible to work with archival opacities. Such instances as, for example, a medical case study in which the subject appears as ambiguously trans, disclose the complexity, indeterminacy, and messiness which characterize all lives. I also read such instances as symptomatic of trans people’s astute propensity to retreat from spaces we can’t trust to hold us, to become strategically invisible. The turn toward trans archives therefore has little to do with attempting to “rescue” subjects who are not in need of our rescue.

Trans historiographies, I contend, can do transformative, useful, and life-sustaining work. Indeed, “a common feature of trans arts of cultivating resilience has to do with turning to the historical record for proof of life, for evidence that trans lives are livable because they’ve been lived” (Malatino 2020, 7). I write toward a historiography that acknowledges the ways in which connection which archival trans presences is lifesaving and life-sustaining for trans people living in the present. Like Malatino, I write because, in ways that are simultaneously clear and self-apparent and opaque and difficult to explain, our lives are interconnected with the lives of historical trans subjects (Malatino 2020, 57). They have made our existence possible by modelling new dispositions for altering our worlds, by surviving institutional violences, by exceeding conditions of constraint, by cultivating and realising conditions of possibility. In the wake of denials of care,

caring for one another fiercely is what keeps trans people alive, and care work must enter into our historiographic and archival practices too: I feel compelled to write about historical trans subjects because I feel indebted to those whose existence has provided indelible evidence of trans lives filled with as much flourishing, joy, fear, and pain as mine.

We are related to these subjects, but “these people are not our ‘transcestors,’ – that word we sometimes use to position ourselves in relation to the pantheon of repeatedly memorialized trans subjects” (Malatino 2020, 59). In fact, the mainstream and corporate attention now paid to such a pantheon through the iconification of select trans “heroes” – Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, for instance – structures an ever more demobilized and deracinated political history. The assertion of an “unbroken line from Stonewall to today,” erases historical context, overlooks the issues of actual importance to Rivera and Johnson, and ignores the complex, self-opaque, and nonlinear forms through which their actions – now hailed as intentional and revolutionary – actually accrued (Gill-Peterson 2021a).³ As Gill-Peterson points out, “every June, we’re told a similar story about Pride: Trans women of color led the fight for LGBT rights, and we have to honor them because they still suffer the most” (Gill-Peterson 2021a). This characteristic mythologization of trans women of color is more platitudinal than it is useful, in that it seeks to reassure us “that our noble victims left us with a road map to a better world than the one that treated them as disposable” (Gill-Peterson 2021a). This is clearly untrue, since black and brown trans women continue to experience the most violence, harm, and precarity in our communities. The real problem therefore is “not that we haven’t centered trans women of color enough during June, it’s that this circular story of trans

³ “STAR marched with the Black Panthers and Young Lords, joining a broad coalition of activists challenging white supremacy, American imperialism, and the capitalist system that criminalized their lives and kept them deprived of housing and welfare”, Gill-Peterson 2021a.

women of color's tragedy and triumph is itself a refusal to reckon with history" (Gill-Peterson 2021a). Ratifying the complicated entanglements between historical and present day trans subjects necessitates forms of historiography that transcend the "logic of succession," and exceed clearly delineated chronologies of "precedent and antecedent" (Malatino 2020, 59).

I am particularly interested in the imbrication of antiblackness and eugenics in the fields of sexology and trans medicine, as well as the ways in which racialized histories of transness continue to restrict, deny, and foreclose black and brown trans people's intelligibility as living, desiring, agentic subjects. Cross-disciplinary scholarship by Washington (2006), Skloot (2010), Kapsalis (1997), Kuppers (2007), McGregor (1998), and Wanzo (2009) has elaborated how one legacy of transatlantic slavery was its institutionalization as a medical plantation. The medical plantation marked the transformation of conditions which presented impediments to the profitability of slave plantations into forms of medical entrepreneurship secured through the instrumentalization of black bodies in pain.⁴ Visionary and dedicated archival work by trans historians has built on this corpus of work to demonstrate the imbrication of eugenics in sexology and the lasting legacy of antiblackness on trans medicine.

My analysis is deeply indebted to the histories advanced by Gill-Peterson (2018b), Snorton (2017), and Amin (2013), among others. Their work interrogates the role played by trans medicine in the production of racialized epistemologies of binary sex, and demonstrates how, for the actual trans

⁴ It is well-documented, for example, how the prevalence of vaginal fistulas was imagined to disrupt the profitability of slave plantations by compromising enslaved women's availability to reproduce and be sexually available as a condition of their bondage. This apparent impediment to the working of the plantation was recuperated through James Marion Sims' experimentation on captive black women with fistulas, whose pain he extracted into a theory for a new branch of medicine, gynaecology. See Washington 2006; Skloot 2010; Snorton 2017.

people forcibly channelled through those epistemologies, the consequences were more than just abstract and metaphorical harms, but real attempts to erase their agency as ontological people. Their work offers genealogies of how black trans people have been instrumentalized to signify as the nonagentic, inert, primitive material from which medical theories of the sexed body's alterability can be abstracted. They show that the same epistemological mechanism that animates the dehumanization of black and brown trans people has also occasioned conditions under which white trans bodies signify as mobile, plastic, agentic, and self-transparent. I take up Snorton and Gill-Peterson's work to propose that what trans medicine has attempted to extract from black bodies and subjectivities it has attempted to confer on white bodies and subjectivities in equal measure; that what has been framed as impossible or nonexistent about black agencies is recapitulated in terms that frame it as a special, innovative capacity proper to white embodiment and subjecthood (Gill-Peterson 2018b; Snorton 2017). I explore the ways in which clinical idioms of white exceptionalism orient white trans subjects toward neoliberalized processes of subjecthood that are premised on the association of agency with individualist rather than relational forms of being and becoming.

The Field of Trans Studies

A final strand of my thesis is more intimately connected to trans studies, its development, and its future as an increasingly professionalized academic field. Stryker, who has worked for close to thirty years to establish the field, and who oversaw the first transgender studies faculty cluster hire at any university, has spoken eloquently to the trials (institutional transphobia, co-optation by the neoliberalized academy) and rewards (the production of audacious, useful knowledges that are committed to benefitting trans people) of working toward institutionalization (Stryker 2020a).

Trans studies' path to institutionalization has been rapid, fraught, and uneven, with some contending that trans studies was over before it even began,⁵ others arguing that it is still in the process of arriving,⁶ and others still calling for recognition that the terms of trans studies' disciplinary "arrival" can and will never look like those of a traditional academic program, and further, that although the reasons why are largely disheartening, perhaps a "more distributed model" will nevertheless prove more sustainable in the long run (Stryker 2020a, 365).

Trans studies is a heterogenous field, and as Stryker has observed, "there are disagreements about whether trans studies is about studying trans people or whether it's about looking at the world through a trans lens" (Stryker 2020a, 362). In a world where trans people have been, and continue to be, instrumentalized as the objects of study from which other people's theories of gender are extracted, I consider the ways in which instances of trans studies "being about" studying trans people sometimes produces unwanted forms of demographic visibility that overlap with neoliberal identity management to articulate a "proper" trans activist subject and its electoral concerns.

As Spade and Rohlf's scholarly work on demography has described,

statistical methods are being employed to produce an image of a rights-deserving gay and lesbian or LGBT population [...] the explosion of new empirical data about gay and lesbian or LGBT people is not discovering the truth about an existing population; rather, it is formulating that population in order to frame it as a "deserving" population in the contexts of US racial norms. (Spade and Rohlf's 2016)

⁵ See Chu and Harsin Drager 2019.

⁶ See Adair, Awkward-Rich, and Marvin 2020, 306-307.

Statistical analyses, and the population-level interventions waged in their name have always structured the related framing of undeserving populations (Spade and Rohlf 2016). In the context of the contemporary US, data-driven campaigns like the “War on Drugs,” or the “War on Terror” mobilize a range of demographic-targeting technologies. They justify the ways in which post-Keynesian regimes of accumulation that depend on the racialized mass production of poor people have criminalized poverty as fundamentally destructive to the social prosperity of the state. An understanding of “how accounting contributes to the distributions that occur through certain vectors of population or identity” by recognizing “technologies that sort the population” as “the locations at which life and death are distributed” therefore prefigures my reticence regarding even good faith academic projects to count, quantify, study, extrapolate data, or produce empirical insights about trans people as a demographic (Spade and Rohlf 2016).

I consider the ways in which the entrenchment of an ideal “transnormative” subject has fostered a general climate under which trans of colour lives and subjectivities are unthinkable (Puar 2015, 54). Although trans studies has been pioneered, built, and sustained by scholars with deep commitments to producing knowledge that actually contributes to the liveability of trans lives, the uptake of trans grammars of being and becoming in adjacent academic disciplines, such as the new materialisms, increasingly produces deracinated insights about trans ontology that fail to materially benefit the people whose experiences are abstracted into research. Trans studies, as it existed in the 1990s and 2000s, habitually articulated trans embodiment as an exuberant capacity to transgress bodily norms, and revelled in the trans body’s apparent potentiality for autonomous self-making. Recent black trans studies scholarship has directed our attention to “the unmarked whiteness of notions of bodily plasticity and capacity for transformation that have long been

central to trans aesthetics and analytics” (Stryker 2020b, 302). Proceeding from the insights of work in black trans studies by Snorton (2017), Calvin Warren (2017), Treva Ellison (2019), and others, I attend to the ways in which trans studies’ long held claims of the white trans body’s exceptionalism structure the solicitation of white trans subjectivities for proper subjecthood, and correspondingly contribute to the erasure of black and brown bodies from legibility as trans.

Despite occasional claims from within the field that trans studies and associated scholarships are over, “or that they simply never began in the first place, or that they are self-cannibalizing, or that they are wrong, or stupid, too limited or too expansive [...] use too much jargon, are too political, lack a politics, exclude too many, lack clear membership, depend on identity politics, [and] ignore the very people who are the subjects of the discourse,” I remain hopeful and optimistic about the future of trans studies (Halberstam 2020, 322; Chu and Harsin Drager 2019, 114). To this end, I follow some of the scholarship that is taking trans studies in new directions, disrupting dominant imaginaries of the field, paying particular attention to gender as always already racialized, and carefully divesting from “the terms of white trans studies as trans studies per se” (Adair, Awkward-Rich, and Marvin 2020, 307). Adair, Awkward-Rich, and Marvin affirm “the field’s necessary cross-pollination with black feminist theory, woman of color feminisms, and disability studies”; my work throughout is guided by ongoing conversations in those disciplines about how to recognise agency without prioritising an individualistic subject, how to write theory that takes care of its own, and how to do pedagogy that is loving (Adair, Awkward-Rich, and Marvin 2020, 307).

This thesis makes a contribution to contemporary trans studies by adding to knowledge in three key areas: trans agencies, historiography of trans lives, and what trans studies should and could be

doing going forward. I begin the chapters of this thesis by approaching this third aim. In chapter one, I contribute to knowledge about trans studies as an academic discipline by critically evaluating the trajectories of trans studies scholarship, weighing the aims, objects, and effects of particular methods and trends in trans studies. In chapter one, analysis of trans studies scholarship that foregrounds racial histories of transness leads me to establish my own position and stake out my vision for how trans studies might develop in the future in relation to these histories. In chapter two, I consider how some areas of thought and theory that have not always been seen as aspects of trans studies, such as black feminist theory, woman of color feminisms, and Afrofuturism, are vital to understanding and interpreting trans lives and relationalities. In chapter three, I take my contribution to expanding the terms of trans studies beyond the whiteness that has dominated the field further. This chapter explores how the history of trans medicine is a history that can't be told without talking about processes of racialization and their effects. Through this analysis I urge that trans studies scholarship about trans medicine has to reckon with this fact. Finally, in chapter five, I reflect on how trans studies paradigms have inflected other areas of academic thought, including theorizations of being and becoming. In this chapter, I reorient what we think of as the point of thinking about cyborgs when we think about trans people. I suggest that this should be more about methods of relationality and care than a reification of fluidity in and of itself. A second key contribution my thesis makes to the contemporary trans studies landscape is to broaden understandings of what historiography can do for us as trans people. I do this in chapters two and four by demonstrating how more expansive historiographies that include speculative work as well as literal interpretations of magical phenomena and their effects leads to scholarship that is better at seeing the personhood, relationalities, and forms of care of trans people whose agencies are most often denied. These chapters show how limited and limiting conventional and correlationist

historiographies can be in their encounters with trans lives. My third key contribution to the contemporary trans studies landscape is that I develop current understandings of what agency can mean and look like for trans subjects. This key theme is carried through all the chapters, but it is something that I pay special attention to in chapter two, chapter four, and the coda. In these chapters, using historical and artistic examples, I focus on how histories of violence limit but do not entirely foreclose forms of trans agency, and attend to the very specific ways that trans agencies emerge. I try to come up with new frames for recognizing these agencies because part of my analysis shows how conventional methodologies have consistently frames trans people as nonagentic subjects. These frames again include working imaginatively with opacities, using elements of speculation, taking trans people's own accounts of their capacities and experiences at face value, and assuming the literality of trans people's invocation of magic and transformative experiences.

Outline of chapters

In chapter one, I outline the current state of trans studies – an academic field on the brink of mainstreaming. I interrogate the implications of mainstreaming within the contexts of a neoliberalized academy and a cultural moment that has been hailed as a “transgender tipping point.” I conduct a brief survey of trans studies’ history, taking in crucial developments in the field, before looking at the ways in which trans studies is now, in response to its new academic popularity, refining, historicising, and periodizing a narrative of its own discipline formation. I look at the ways in which trans studies in the academy entrenches an implicitly white, “transnormative” subject (Puar 2015, 54). I survey the work of some of the scholars in the field

whose work produces analytics that seek to redress the erasures of trans studies' overwhelming whiteness.

In chapter two, I ask how the violence of the Middle Passage continues to structure black people's life chances, gendered experiences, and access to being perceived as meaningfully human within colonizer ontologies. I respond to Tourmaline's short film *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* (2017), reading for the arts of survival elaborated by black trans people living in the wake of chattel slavery. In my reading, *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* is especially sensitive to the ongoing political and social agencies exercised by people long dead. Here, ratification of forms of community and kinship that are inadmissible to state and secular interests allows black trans people in the present to be nourished by convivialities with enslaved relatives.

In chapter three, I contend that today's trans medicine is deeply inflected by antiblackness. I offer a lesser-known history of the eugenicist origins of the nineteenth century protosexological fields and twentieth century gender clinics. I show how trans medical fields have a long history of approaching nonwhite bodies as a raw material from which surgical epistemes for the medical alterability of the sexed body have been extracted. I show how trans medicine has played a critical role in attempting to evacuate black people of personhood and deny their agency in order to instrumentalize their bodies. I demonstrate how trans medicine in our present day maintains a deep stake in coding white bodies as exceptional, resulting in extreme racialized disparities in healthcare access, and a related and proliferating racialized medical tourism industry.

In chapter four, I argue that trans characters in Jordy Rosenberg's novel *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) exert forms of agency and unpredictability which upend institutional attempts to constrain and produce meaning from trans bodies. I turn to the arts of flourishing, survival, agency, and protest elaborated by trans people themselves, in order to redress some oversights of dominant historiographies, which are liable to dismiss trans people's own interpretations of their capacities and agencies as not of historical, sociological, or theoretical significance. Trans people's lives, I show, are often characterized by intentional departure from the secular registers of protest that are normally expected from legible resistance work. I explore the forms of capacitation to have emerged from trans people's nonsecular and antirational practices of living, caring, and protesting.

In chapter five, I attend to the ways in which the cyborg is used in theory and in fiction as a cipher for trans embodiment. In order for genre fiction to make metaphorical gambits about shape-shifting, identity-morphing, and mobility, trans experience gets abstracted through the substitution of trans bodies for cyborg bodies. Often, a reductive, universalized trans subjectivity is invoked to gesture to the trans/cyborg body's supposed availability for open-ended self-making. This entrenches an ahistorical and deracinated synonymy between trans and fluidity that bears little relation to the precarity under which most trans lives are lived. I close-read Torrey Peters' dystopian novella *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* (2016) for an alternative formulation of the trans/cyborg body. Peters looks to the cyborg as a fugitive, a survivalist, and a composite of deeply relational commitments. For her, the cyborg's existence is not marked by the ease with which it transforms its body and moves between states, but by its commitment to ratifying the relations through which being and becoming are made possible, and its cognizance that corporealities are continuously engendered "in relation to others and to a world" (Sullivan 2014, 188).

In the coda, I look at trans madness and trans magic as two sides of the same coin. I ask if historiography of trans lives, which often tries to correct for stereotypes of trans people as delusional, absurd, and paranoid by privileging stories of rational subjects engaged in self-transparently political activity, sometimes misses out on the ways in which forms of madness have proven both life-sustaining and capacitive for trans subjects. I look at some oft-cited examples of historical trans people to have been dismissed as having failed, having experienced a tragic decline, or having had a difficult personality that destabilized their promising political work. I ask if there are better ways of recognising them as agentic subjects and better ways of creating scholarship about them. I propose that trans madness is a kind of magic for creating liveable worlds. I try to reread trans people who have been dismissed as unviable actors not as unfortunate subjects offering flawed and malfunctional epistemologies, but as agentic subjects offering compelling, satisfying accounts of their experience. I try to show that many of the trans subjects about whom I write deferred the expectation to produce insights about their lives that are articulable through modes of verifiability, defensibility, criticality, and rationalism, in order to enact politics through forms of emotional intensity, affect, intuition, gut feeling, and conviction.

Chapter One

Histories of Trans Studies

Transgender studies, how are you doing? No, I actually mean what are you doing? How are you doing what you're doing? And for whom are you doing it? What are you doing to honor and strengthen your relationship to your birthplace? How does an increasingly institutionalized academic field do love? Do healing? Do revolution? Can it?

Ian Khara Ellasante, "Dear Trans Studies, Can You Do Love?"

In this first chapter, I respond to the path of trans studies' rapid institutionalization in the academy and elsewhere, arguing that this trajectory, and the conditions which enabled it, have produced a potent political imaginary and idealized white trans subject, on whose behalf an entire raft of rights claims, legal protections, antidiscrimination legislation, and calls for inclusion in the dominant institutions of our day have been mobilized. I consider the ways in which the entrenchment of this ideal "transnormative" subject has contributed to the pathologization, precarity, strategic neglect, and managed death of trans of colour people, as well as to the creation of a general climate under which trans of colour lives and subjectivities are unthinkable. Taking a long view of epistemologies of trans life that recognises the significance of the 1990s – in the formation of the field of trans studies in the US and in the mobilization of the term transgender – but which also insists upon longer, more diverse genealogies of trans knowledge production, this chapter asks what trans studies has stood for and what is at stake for trans studies in the present.

Building on the points made in my thesis introduction, as I begin here it is important to mark that trans studies has undoubtedly proven a successful and necessary project, one with a deep stake in helping to keep actual trans people alive. Trans studies and its contributors have produced many generative and useful resources for living and thriving in the form of

work on cultural production and artistic expression, work that recovers and reinterprets trans histories, work that critiques institutions and social policies and proposes better ones, work that intervenes in environmental practice, [and] work that enacts new aesthetics, ontologies, epistemologies, cosmologies, and metaphysics. (Stryker 2020b, 304)

In calling attention to and critiquing the ways in which the promise trans studies holds for trans lives is not always fully realized, Susan Stryker makes the solid point that “it’s low-hanging fruit to critique the institutionalization of minority forms of expert knowledge production [...] as merely contributing to the university’s profitable management of difference, in service to state and capital” (Stryker 2020a, 356). She observes that “those of us who do the work [...] know that the kinds of labor we perform, intellectual and otherwise, in and around the university, can be part of liberatory, abolitionist, and transformational social justice practice” (Stryker 2020a, 356).

It is nevertheless worth asking “what happens to the category of transgender as it becomes routed through the logics and power lines of institutionality and the metrics of administration?” (Ellison et al. 2017, 162). Reflecting on the state of trans studies in 2013, Stryker and Aren Aizura ask: “if transgender studies is not to become [a] conceptually vacuous creature [...] we need to attend to the ways in which many transgender and gender non-conforming people live lives that are abstracted and theorized in ways that do not materially benefit them” (Aizura and Stryker 2013, 6).

Lines of inquiry to which trans studies is uniquely suited – such as the ways in which knowledge production about trans people is imbricated in a eugenic imaginary of binary sex, which relatedly structures the dehumanization to which nonwhite people expelled from ontological frames of personhood are exposed – are often overlooked in favour of political demands made on behalf of an elite transnormative subject (Puar 2015, 54).

In this chapter I reflect on how and why certain lines of inquiry have been privileged over others, and ask what (and who) is discarded in those scenes of prioritization. In order to do this, in the following discussions, I map out genealogies of the terms transsexual, transexual, transgenderist, posttranssexual, and transgender, following their uptake in political and academic contexts. In doing so, I trace the ways that transgender studies' academic institutionalization has entrenched the idealization of a white transgender subject and its exceptionalism. Finally, I look to the scholars and projects that are intervening in the dominant imaginaries of the field, that insist that gender is always already racialized, and which refuse “the terms of white trans studies as trans studies *per se*” (Adair, Awkward-Rich, and Marvin 2020, 307). This survey aims to ground the remaining chapters of this thesis in a trans studies committed to recognising and supporting the agency and flourishing of trans of colour people and in collaborating in our collective survival.

*

Although the production of institutional knowledge about gender variance has been an ongoing project for over one hundred years, there is a pervasive perception that the academic assemblage

known as trans studies emerged only recently.⁷ As Jasbir Puar notes, “transgender studies [is] often thought of as coming into being in the early 1990s in the US academy” (Puar 2015, 51-52). This periodization of trans studies’ emergence makes some histories visible and obscures others; it renders some trans epistemologies viable, while distancing others. As Puar explains, the periodization of the emergence of trans studies in the 1990s is partly the result of “a shift in practices of recognition [...] that obscures prior scholarship” (Puar 2015, 51-52). Stryker and Aizura note that

to assert the emergence of transgender studies as a field only in the 1990s rests on a set of assumptions that permit a differentiation between one kind of work on ‘transgender phenomena’ and another, for there had of course been a great deal of academic, scholarly, and scientific work on various forms of gender variance long before the 1990s. (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 1)

This set of assumptions obscure the diverse genealogies of knowledge production on trans lives.

Among these assumptions is the supposition that until recently, gender non-conforming people were prevented from contributing to (medical, academic, or scholarly) work on gender non-conformity and trans phenomena. While it is certainly accurate that trans and gender non-conforming voices have been distorted and sidelined in discourse produced by the university-based clinics of the twentieth century, trans people have nevertheless always been active participants in the contested production of institutional knowledge about trans life. Trans and gender non-conforming people who have had complex, ambivalent, and exigent relationships with the institutions that made trans bodies their objects of study, nevertheless intervened in and dramatically transformed the landscape of institutional knowledge about gender variance in the

⁷ See Krafft-Ebing’s work on gender variance and inversion circa 1886.

twentieth century.⁸ They produced important knowledge about the texture of trans life which aimed to remove administrative barriers, establish functional, accessible gender clinics, mitigate the harmful effects of pathologization, and make trans lives more liveable.

Another serious problem with the tendency to name the 1990s as period of trans studies' inception is that it centres the US as the primary source of meaningful trans epistemologies and positions the academy as the preeminent site of knowledge production. As Stryker observes of the establishment of Australia's first queer and trans Indigenous studies program, "trans studies has many genealogies, not all of them rooted in settler colonialism" (Stryker 2020b, 300). Alongside the institutional enterprise of knowledge production about gender variance exists an entire spectrum of identities and positionalities which query the epistemological coherence of trans life as an object of knowledge altogether. These identities and positionalities dispute the secularism and empiricism that characterises the production of knowledge about gender variance in institutional contexts (such as the academy and clinic), gesturing to the colonial violence dealt by rationalist paradigms in their distortion, pathologization, and fetishization of trans of colour and indigenous trans lives. Despite their illegibility when seen through western medicine's reductive therapeutic model, many indigenous and non-Western practices of gender variance predate the university clinics by hundreds of years (Jacobs et al. 1997; Lang 1998; Roscoe 1998; Driskill 2016; Hossain 2018).

The dismissal of centuries of knowledges produced by indigenous, two-spirit, and trans of colour people from academic epistemes of what counts as rigorous, professional, and scholarly has been a precondition for the emergence of academic, state, and clinical projects which claim to produce

⁸ Such as Louise Lawrence, Michael Dillon, Harry Allen, Reed Erickson, Lou Sullivan, Alan Hart, Louise Ergestrasse, and Leslie St Clair, among innumerable others. See Stryker 2007.

“new” insights about gender variance. In the sense then, that it was preceded by at least a century of institutional knowledge production about gender variance in the university clinics of the US, and many more centuries of decentralised, informal, nonsecular praxis in non-western and indigenous communities, it is ahistorical to locate the emergence of trans studies in the 1990s.

The rapid institutionalization of trans studies as a reputable academic field in the US is nonetheless inextricable from increased political activity in this period around the category transgender. This is worth examining closely, as this is a history which clearly points to the racial stratification of the category, despite its claims toward inclusivity and liberation.

David Valentine observes, “since the early 1990s when the term was coined, the category transgender has come to be understood as a collective category of identity which incorporates a diverse array of [...] gender variant people who had previously been understood as distinct kinds of persons” (Valentine 2007, 4). He rightly notes that

in its collectivity, the capacity of transgender to incorporate all gender variance has become a powerful tool of activism and personal identification. And, even more remarkably, in the period since the early 1990s it has already become institutionalized in a vast range of contexts, from grassroots activism, social service provision, and individual identification, to journalistic accounts. (Valentine 2007, 4-5)

Following Valentine, I query whether “transgender as a category of analysis and action restricts [...] possibilities of [...] gender variance as much as it enables [them],” effacing in particular the lived experiences of trans people of colour (Valentine 2007, 15-17).

This effacement finds a longer genealogy in the shifting terms for gender non-conforming embodiment that sought distance from what transsexual had come to signify in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Following the publication in 1966 of Harry Benjamin's influential clinical text, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, transsexual was the prevailing idiom for discussing trans subjectivities. By 1973, however, trans activists like Wendy Davidson and Leslie St Claire recognised that regardless of how they may have personally identified, the term transsexual had become associated in both the clinical and popular imagination with Benjamin's medical model, and felt, in order to depathologize their gender non-conformity and solicit greater engagement from professional partners, it was necessary for their organization to strategically drop the 's' from transsexual, to transexual (Page 2017; Meyerowitz 1998; Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California 1998).⁹ St Claire and Davidson felt the term transsexual was freighted with associations to the street queens, sex workers, and working class trans people from whom they wanted to be distanced (Page 2017; Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California 1998).

By the 1970s, trans people had recognised that in both the cultural imagination, and in the institutions that administrated life chances to trans people, transsexuality as an idiom was associated both with a particular class experience and with Benjamin's therapeutic model. Those who wanted to distance themselves from informal economy labour, avoid criminalization, and be solicited for subjecthood now began to articulate themselves as transexual or transgender. Many historians credit the activist Virginia Prince with coining the term "transgenderist" in the late 1970s

⁹ Davidson and St Claire established the well-known Transexual Counselling Service in San Francisco's Tenderloin district.

(Docter 1988; Frye, 2000; MacKenzie 1994).¹⁰ She used the term transgenderist to characterize those who, like her, lived full time in a different gender to their assigned gender at birth, but did not engage in practices of body modification (Stryker 2007, 64-65). By doing so, she and others intentionally differentiated themselves from both transsexual men and women, and from crossdressers. For Prince and others, transgender named recourse to a subjectivity less stigmatized than transsexuality, which they regarded as inextricable from heavily pathologized technologies of re-embodiment, and one also decoupled from pathologized desires such as crossdressing (Stryker 2007, 64-65). This distinction has been a crucial intervention through which transgender was sutured to the idea of normativity and the imperative to become proper in the eyes of the state; for Prince, strategic disidentification from fetish communities and pathologized sexual subjectivities oriented her toward respectability, improved chances for life, and social participation (Califia 2003, 199; Meyerowitz 2004, 181). In this way, disidentification with the transsexual body, a discursive process already underway by the mid-1970s, indexes an intentional, strategic means to achieve the ends of middle-class respectability and access to healthcare desired by some trans actors. Articulations of this type by Prince and those like her initially structured transgender's ongoing moral claim to an implicitly white, middle-class citizenship and the juridical privileges it entails.

Further shifts in the political meaning of transgender took place in the 1990s. Stryker and Aizura list various historical changes as significant to the emergence of an academic imaginary which believed the 1990s to be the ground zero of trans studies' discipline formation, as well as the occasion for "new possibilities for thinking about, talking about, encountering, and living

¹⁰ In reality, the term's actual origin is unclear, and Prince used many different terms interchangeably throughout her work. See Hill 2007.

transgender bodies and lives” (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 1). What changed, they posit, in the early 1990s, was

the relatively sudden appearance of [...] new political alliances forged during the AIDS crisis, which brought sexual and gender identity politics into a different sort of engagement with the biomedical and pharmaceutical establishments. They emerged as well [...] from new strategies for managing bodies and populations within the neoliberal world order [...] from the increasingly broad dissemination of poststructuralist and performative theories of subjectivity and embodiment within academe, which allowed a different kind of sense to be made of transgender phenomena; from new forms of media and communication that fostered new social and communal forms; and from *fin de mille* futurist fantasies of technologically enhanced life in the impending twenty-first century. (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 1)

As Stryker and Aizura explain, a series of concrete sociopolitical, economic, theoretical, and technological shifts occurred during and just before the 1990s, which created conditions under which knowledge production about trans life by trans actors appeared to be unprecedentedly cohesive, coherent, visible, rigorous, expert, and academically useful, providing the ground for the rapid consolidation and institutionalization of trans studies as an academic assemblage.

Trans studies’ discipline formation was structured during the 1990s and early 2000s by several landmark publications; Stryker’s 1998 introduction to the Transgender issue of *GLQ*; a Temple University Press transgender-studies reading list; the 1998 publication of a new social sciences journal, *The International Journal of Transgenderism*; transgender special issues in various high profile journals, such as the *British Journal of Gender Studies*, the media studies journal *Velvet Light Trap*, and *Sexualities*, culminating in the 2006 publication of the *Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Stryker and Stephen Whittle.

In the reader and other texts, trans studies is articulated as a nascent academic discipline and protocommunity of distant but connected trans and queer scholars, which

shared a genealogy and its broad concerns with other areas of cross-disciplinary critical inquiry that developed in the latter part of the twentieth century—feminist scholarship, lesbian and gay studies, queer theory, critical race theory, subaltern and postcolonial studies, and disability studies—all of which emerged in the context of wider postmodernist and poststructuralist critiques. (Valentine 2007, 146-147)

With the advent of the 1990s, activism informed by the AIDS crisis and scholarship indebted to queer and postmodern theory coalesced in the contexts of (mostly) white, middle-class activist enclaves in California and New York. These scholars and activists radicalised around the pathologization of gender non-conformity, the necropolitical consequences of the state's indifference to the AIDS pandemic, and in opposition to the assimilationism of the mainstream gay and lesbian rights project. Seeking a collective form of transgender which “explicitly politicized transgender identification beyond individual radical acts and called for a social movement organized around its terms,” activists supplemented Prince’s earlier formulation of transgender, conceptualising it as an umbrella category for all gender non-conformity (Valentine 2007, 146-147).¹¹ These cultural workers felt it was necessary to claim a space for transgender as more than a taxonomic category between transsexual and transvestite (as it had been in Prince’s formulation); it was articulated by proponents as a political mode of gender non-conforming identification which indexed disidentification from binary gender in ways that many people felt transsexual – due to its perceived imbrication in the surgical production of binary phenotypes – was unable to (Stryker 1998, 150).

¹¹ See Feinberg’s early call for “transgender liberation” in 1992, among the first published uses of transgender as a collective organizing term.

These concerns form dynamic tensions in Stone's 1987 essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto". Arguably, "transgender studies was first articulated as a distinct [...] field" in this essay (Stryker 2014, 4). However, despite being credited with inaugurating the conceptual shift from transsexual to transgender via the figure of the "posttranssexual", Stone's thinking is not subtended by the antitranssexual sentiment incubated in the discourses outlined in the preceding paragraphs. In the "Manifesto", the term posttranssexual is given to name an intervention in harmful practices of medical gatekeeping, and functions as a good faith attempt to help gender non-conforming people contest the typical claim made of trans bodies – that they are technologically produced in ways that cis bodies are not.

Stone tells "a story disruptive to [...] accepted discourses of gender" wherein the posttranssexual body is cognizant of the circumstances under which it was produced, and acknowledges that it is a composite of natural and cultural signifiers (Haraway 2016). Posttranssexual acknowledgement of a corporeality that is both relationally and technologically produced constituted a counterdiscourse to "epistemologies of white [...] medical practice" which insisted on the "naturalness" of sexual dimorphism (Stone 1992, 163-164). The "Manifesto" was one of the first widely circulated texts to indict transgender medicine's disciplinary and normalizing functions. Stone claims that "the foundational idea for the gender dysphoria clinics was [...] to provide help, as they understood the term, for a 'correctable problem;'" and in so doing, to stabilize the precarity of western biological essentialism by assigning binary morphologies to gender non-conforming bodies (Stone 1992, 160).

For Stone, posttranssexuality as a critical orientation consists in acknowledgement that the multiple dissonances and unanticipated juxtapositions of the trans body produce conditions of possibility and freedom in our lives (Stone 1992, 164). These possibilities “exceed any frame of representation,” she contends, and therefore render “the old constructed positions” of male and female defunct and unproductive (Stone 1992, 164). Because transsexuals usually identify as binary male or female, Stone’s formulation appeared to offer “a decisive break with what transsexuality had meant up until that point,” occasioning the term posttranssexual (Stryker 1998, 152).¹² For Stone, the “essence of transsexualism is the act of passing” (Stone 1992, 168). In response to the harm dealt by the clinic and its normalizing mandates, Stone calls on trans people “to forego passing,” to “read oneself aloud – and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself into the discourses by which one has been written – in effect, then, to become a [...] posttranssexual” (Stone 1992, 168).

It seems likely that Stone’s original intention in the “Manifesto” was to leverage the mobility and capacity gestured to by late twentieth century trends in critical theory, poststructuralism, and feminist new materialism to contest biological essentialisms and destabilize visual ontologies that presume the coextensivity of the image and reality. And while it also seems clear Stone wrote the “Manifesto” in order to disrupt medically authorised narratives about natural and unnatural forms of embodiment with a view to realizing conditions of possibility and joy for trans lives, the essay is so frequently, in my opinion, misread, that posttranssexual has come to mean a largely deracinated and uncritically praised assertion of the exceptionalism and perceived plasticity of certain (white) bodies and practices of re-embodiment. Stryker affirms, “as Stone is often read, the

¹² I pursue a substantial critical genealogy of the relation between trans embodiment and the figure of the cyborg in chapter five.

disruptiveness she called for is reduced to a cut-up version of heteronormative morphology that celebrates psychosocial men with female genitals and psychosocial women with male genitals” (Stryker 1998, 151-152). As the “Manifesto” is commonly (mis)read, transsexuals have been duped into harmful recapitulations of biological essentialism, against which posttranssexual subjects self-consciously generate new dispositions and productive capacities by piecing together visibly trans bodies.

“The word posttranssexual functions ambiguously,” Stryker notes, “in Stone’s important essay, contributing to a confusing tangle of transgender, transsexual, and queer” (Stryker 1998, 150). In analyses of the “Manifesto,” many of which have proved influential in shaping the trans studies’ landscape, posttranssexual fluidity is coded as a transgressive capacity, and subjects who become legible as posttranssexual are hailed in elite queer spaces and academe “as futurity itself” (Halberstam 2005, 18). In a response typical of transgender’s largely white, academy-affiliated, professional class proponents, Halberstam argues in his 1998 essay “Transgender Butch,” to the need for political categories of gender variant identification which exceed the perceived biological essentialism of transsexual:

transgender and queer are synonyms whose disruptive refigurations of desires and bodies are set in opposition to [...] transsexuality’s surgical and hormonal recapitulation of heteronormative embodiment—its tendency to straighten the alignment between body and identity. (Halberstam 1998, 291)

In this way, in the 1990s, transgender came to be associated with radical and emancipatory political commitments, celebration of visible gender indeterminacy, the goal of depathologizing gender non-conforming lives, the intentional use of re-embodiment technologies to produce visual effects

of indeterminacy and queerness, and the imperative to “read oneself aloud” as gender non-conforming (Stone 1992, 168).

As transgender became synonymous with an intentional aesthetic and politic of visible gender indeterminacy, it remained freighted with other meanings it had accrued, such as the respectability, normativity, and disidentification from pathologized subjectivities it had signified for Prince and many others. The residual meanings which structure transgender from Prince’s day – wherein transgender named an aspirational trajectory focussing first on “individuals’ legibility as transgender, and then [...] on their ability to conceal any trans status or deviance” – were supplemented in the contexts of 1990s activism and academia by the exceptionalizing of the trans body, the political aim of which was “to convert the debility of a nonnormative body into a form of social and cultural capacity” (Beauchamp 2009, 47; Puar 2015, 52).¹³ As Puar explains,

this exceptionalism is not only about passing as gender normative; it is also about inhabiting an exceptional trans body — which is a different kind of trans exceptionalism, one that gestures toward a new transnormative citizen predicated not on passing but on “piecing,” galvanized through mobility, transformation, regeneration, flexibility, and the creative concocting of the body. (Puar 2015, 54)

The resulting paradigm produced transgender subjectivities as those which could simultaneously lay claim to both exceptionalism and normativity, those which could variously be articulated as mobile, maximally agential, and oriented toward proper citizenship. Whiteness is the condition of eligibility for transgender embodiments that simultaneously register in queer contexts as visibly

¹³ Whether that cultural capacity manifested in terms of “state recognition, identity politics, market economies, the medical industrial complex, academic knowledge production, subject positioning, or all of these,” Puar 2015, 52.

gender indeterminate in a way that signals political engagement, and in state contexts as the rightful recipient of juridical privileges. That is, despite the imagined future of justice and freedom for which transgender supposedly stands, its employment in most contexts does not account for the experiences of black, brown, and indigenous gender non-conforming people. Many BIPOC trans people either do not, or only strategically understand themselves as transgender. They are often told this is because they use “an outmoded view of gendered and sexual identity” which is the “result [...] of class, racial, or cultural inequalities” that have left them “outside the conversations and historical developments” which have made transgender possible (Valentine 2007, 5). In actuality, BIPOC trans people may disidentify with transgender because they recognise it for what it is, an administrative tool for differentially distributing debility and opportunity to gender non-conforming populations according to their value under racialized capitalism. Trans of colour people, who are frequently denied access to the clinic, whose gender non-conformity is pathologized in institutional contexts, and discarded in elite queer spaces and academe as discontinuous with what politicized gender indeterminacy is meant to look like, are more likely to identify with idioms for gender non-conformity that have resonance in non-elite spaces; sometimes only strategically identifying as transgender in order to become momentarily legible or eligible for resources (Valentine 2007, 3-6; Beauchamp 2009).

Stryker and Aizura note that the “production of transgender whiteness” is a “process of value extraction from bodies of color” (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 10). Thinking of this racial dynamic as “a process of value extraction highlights the impossibility of a rights platform that incorporates the conceivability of trans of color positions” (Puar 2015, 46). As Puar observes, the expulsion of trans of colour people from what the category is intended to signify “is a precondition to the emergence

of the rights project, not to mention central to its deployment and successful integration into national legibility” (Puar 2015, 46). In this way, “trans identity [...] has centralized a white [...] subject”; the transnormative subject is a body “producing toward [...] norms,” and, as a result, Puar argues, “trans studies [...] suffer[s] from a domination of whiteness and [...] with the normativization of the acceptable and recognizable subject” (Puar, 2015, 51-52). This fact is well known even by those working in the field:

The year we launched TSQ—2014—was the year of the so-called tipping point [...] it was the year the trans studies initiative at the University of Arizona hired its first three tenure-track lines [...] and liberal society seemed poised to offer at least the whitest and most normative trans people a seat at the table of social inclusion [...] We [...] knew even then that the gains represented by those fragile beginnings were unevenly distributed and tied to a neoliberal politics of identity management, one that celebrated a patriotic “transnormative” citizenship while reproducing sharp violence against the most marginalized trans people and enacting “slow death” for most of the rest. (Stryker 2020, 302)

Whatever the intentions of scholars and activists who began to use transgender in the 1990s – who saw it primarily, I think, as a “way of wresting control over the meanings and definitions of gender variance from medical and mental health professionals” – it is now mostly understood to have replaced a preceding “assumption of individual pathology” coded as transsexual with a series of claims about the eligibility of certain exceptional bodies for rights and citizenship (Stone 1992, 165; Valentine 2007, 33).

The most enduring thing to be produced under the sign of transgender is the exceptionalism of white transgender subjectivities, enlivened and capacitated by their supposedly endless availability for becoming and self-transparency, as conditions which structure their eligibility for participation in nationalist and capitalist activity. The transgender body, then, is a white body, plastic enough to

be valued not only in queer contexts for its visual ontology of politicized gender indeterminacy, but valued also in institutional and state contexts through the promises of proper citizenship it makes for itself, and its claims to incubate special capacities and qualities. In this way, not only has transgender – and trans studies – become associated with “a ‘queer’ utopianism, the erasure of specificity, and a moralizing teleology that condemned certain practices of embodiment that it characterized as transsexual,” but also with the entrenchment of the exceptionalism of white bodies, and the radical plasticity they supposedly incubate (Stryker 1998, 153).

This process of racialization bears out in the political moment of the 2010s that has been frequently hailed as a “transgender tipping point”.¹⁴ This “tipping point” has been characterized by calls to recognise the contemporary visual landscape’s hyperfocus on the bodies, crises, and fabulousness of black femmes like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock as victories for trans representation and visibility. As Gill-Peterson writes,

I have yet to see any evidence that mainstream culture, academic trans studies, or mainstream trans political discourse have any real interest in what trans women of color know, do, want, and feel. They are collectively far more invested in using paranoid and idealized modes to traffic in us as political and cultural signifiers. (Gill-Peterson 2021b)

In the “transgender tipping point” the “contemporary visual landscape is populated with the bodies of Black women” and femmes (Ellison et al. 2017, 162).

The “tipping point” has also been characterised by the scaling up of forms of legal protection and state recognition which purport to improve the life chances of gender non-conforming people, but which in fact mesh seamlessly with neoliberal governmentality’s biopolitical calculus of life worth

¹⁴ See Stryker 2008; Steinmetz 2014; Puar 2015; Spade 2015; Ellison et al. 2017.

resourcing to articulate a white, wealthy, able-bodied, transgender citizen as the universal subject of trans rights. Treva Ellison, Kai M. Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton, editors of a 2017 *Transgender Studies Quarterly* issue named “The Issue of Blackness,” ask “how does the language and discourse of the tipping point elide the presence of a saturation of Black bodies?” (Ellison et al. 2017, 162). Since state, administrative, and institutional bodies are the primary distributors of racialized harm to black and brown people, a transgender rights platform that appeals to the state for legal equalities has done little to alleviate the precarity experienced by trans of colour people. Therefore, as Dean Spade, Rori Rohlfs, Ryan Conrad, and others have observed, not only do rights and reforms based solely on soliciting state recognition (such as antidiscrimination legislation, hate crimes statutes, and institutional inclusion) categorically fail to prevent transphobic violence, they often exacerbate existing racialized maldistribution, and contribute to narratives of deservingness/undeservingness, eligibility/ineligibility, and citizen/noncitizen that reproduce “anti-immigrant, anti-poor, racist, and ableist logics” (Spade and Rohlfs 2016).¹⁵ Transphobic violence, maldistribution of resources and life chances, and juridical disenfranchisement rarely affect the lives of propertied, professional white trans people, but routinely end the lives of black and brown trans people (Spade and Rohlfs 2016; Bassichis 2007).

The so-called “transgender tipping point,” arguably the legacy of the institutionalization of transgender as a category in the US, has resulted in limited and highly conditional legal equality projects, which at best fail to substantially meet the goals of the populations in whose names they are mobilized, and at worst, consolidate and obscure racialized structural disparities. Spade and Rohlfs point to the impact of “the dismantling of welfare programs, the expansion of criminal

¹⁵ See Barnard 1996; Cohen 1997; Robson 2002; Sycamore 2004; Agathangelou et al. 2008; Hanhardt 2008; Reddy 2008; and Conrad 2013.

punishment systems, the criminalization of social movement work that demands transformative change, and the expansion of non-profitization” (Spade and Rohlf 2016). They argue that during the twenty-first century these shifts have significantly altered the political terrain, such that the range of legible political demands now made under the aegis of transgender rights extends only to reforms which superficially alter and ultimately strengthen neoliberal governmentality by bolstering the projects of militarism, criminalization, and deregulation of labour, environment, and capital. Such shifts provide many new opportunities for white transgender subjects to become proper citizens and produce as many scenes of subjection for BIPOC trans people (Spade and Rohlf 2016).

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The rise to popularity of posttranssexual paradigms for articulating transness has produced conditions of debility and effacement for BIPOC trans people. The ways in which posttranssexuality recapitulates the demands made of bodies solicited for neoliberal subjecthood, and the ways in which this imbrication is overlooked, and often, reiterated, in elite queer and academic spaces, facilitates the ongoing erasure and pathologization of black and brown trans bodies in the clinic, academy, and elite, professionalized trans spaces. Posttranssexual’s affirmation of a politicized aesthetic of visible gender indeterminacy typically entails a corresponding disavowal of “a trans[sexuality] it imagined as primitive, backward, unenlightened, and less advanced” (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 3).

The foundational logic underpinning popular formulations of the posttranssexual body relies on a largely ahistorical presumption that transgender/posttranssexual, as it is currently understood and experienced by trans and gender non-conforming people, is significantly different from transsexualism as it seems to have been conceptualized and lived prior to the 1990s. This is sometimes attributed to the idea that late twentieth century academic trends – such as postmodernism, queer theory, and transgender studies – influenced trans people’s identification with idioms for gender non-conformity, so that terms like transsexual now supposedly register as out-of-touch. While it is certainly true that conceptual shifts popularized by professional trans people in academe have impacted how many trans people think of their transness, it is more accurate to recognise how theories now popular in the academy in actuality predated the emergence of academic trans studies, in the form of praxis, protest, and mutual aid among street queens.

Many trans identifications and practices have emerged not from the academy, but from trans people and activists (who may not even have understood themselves as activists) radicalized by their experiences of criminalisation, homelessness, distributional inequality, medical gatekeeping, and denial of healthcare.¹⁶ It is therefore unhelpful to periodize trans history in this way, where a before/after relation to the 1990s as the supposed ground zero of contemporary trans existence erases the real texture of trans life. Idioms for gender non-conformity handed down by the clinic and the academy, such as transsexual and transgender, fail to resonate among most trans people, especially those who are more likely to be excluded from, or harmed in, institutional contexts. In this way, the periodized narrative – which associates some trans modes of being with the past and others with the present – that dominates cultural imaginaries of trans life is largely the result of

¹⁶ See Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California 1998; Meyerowitz 2004; Stryker 2007; Page 2017; Lewis 2017.

archival whitewashing and distortive and selective clinical histories of transness (Snorton, 2017; Gill-Peterson, 2018).

Since academic discourse typically aligns the posttranssexual body with a political activism and insurrection, articulating transness through posttranssexual paradigms can encode the implication that the lives and actions of trans people prior to the mid-century were politically demobilized. As is well documented, there is overwhelming archival evidence of transsexual-identified people in the first half of the twentieth century engaging in political activism, actively and at great personal cost attempting to achieve the goals of depathologization, decriminalization, and prison abolition by any means necessary.¹⁷ As many have demonstrated, trans and gender non-conforming people made and make strategic identifications in order to avoid criminalization, access healthcare, become eligible for citizenship privileges, and avoid surveillance, scrutiny, and institutionalization (Valentine 2007, 3-6; Beauchamp 2009; Bassichis 2007). Throughout trans history, popular idioms for gender non-conformity – such as intersex, invert, transsexual, transgender, and posttranssexual – are largely developed within and by institutions like the clinic and the academy, by clinicians, experts, and the tiny minority of elite trans people to secure precarious places in such institutions, and bear little resemblance to the texture and reality of most trans lives. Trans people's shifting personal and collective relations to such idioms are therefore a result of complex factors, such as lack of choice, the need to appear respectable, the need to access conditionally available healthcare and citizenship privileges, and other exigent circumstances, pieced together to ensure survival.

¹⁷ See Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California 1998; Meyerowitz 2004; Stryker 2007; Page 2017; Lewis 2017.

As Valentine demonstrates in *Imagining Transgender* (2007), the people who are harmed by the institutionalization of idioms for gender non-conformity are black, brown, Indigenous, and First Nations trans people; trans people who are poor, old, or who work in informal sector economies. Although perhaps unintentionally, the dissemination of new grammars for trans being – that are supposed to index how free we are – by elite trans people in the academy and other exclusive queer spaces becomes imbricated in the state project of demographic categorization; which functions to administrate life chances. Trans of colour people are therefore often marginalised and erased, find their lives becoming illegible within dominant scripts for trans being, told their positions are impossible, or told that their narrations of the idioms through which their lives are lived are simplistic, reductive, anecdotal, inappropriate, paranoid, and digressive. Trans people continue to articulate a range of shifting, ambivalent, and context specific relations to different terms signifying gender non-conformity. In Valentine’s book, trans of colour informants report that they identify as gay in some contexts, and transsexual in others; they also understand transvestite, transsexual, and transgender to mean approximately the same thing, seeing no real need to differentiate between their own gender non-conformity and the gender non-conformity of their chosen family, lovers, friends, and co-workers (Valentine 2007, 1-8). Some informants understand their gender non-conformity and nonheterosexuality as co-constitutive; a trans woman with cis boyfriends knows she is both a woman and gay (Valentine 2007, 3). The presumption of a stable, monolithic, contemporary gender non-conforming population – hailed variously as transgender, or posttranssexual – describes such identifications as impossible; an “outmoded view of [...] identity which conflates [...] transgender identity with homosexual desire” (Valentine 2007, 4).

If transgender/posttranssexual is to continue to act as a useful prompt for trans studies, and moreover, if trans studies hopes as a discipline to respond to the experiences of all gender non-conforming people, we must reckon with the racial, generational, and socioeconomic disparities experienced by trans people that are frequently obscured or made invisible by posttranssexual idioms for transness. We must take seriously the task of noticing the ways in which posttranssexual idioms – in their often uncritical relationship to the demands made of neoliberal subjects – exacerbate racially determined distributional inequality and exposure to harm.

*

As trans studies is often articulated – routed through idioms like transgender – the promise it holds is unevenly realised. An increasingly institutionalised trans studies is not always accessible or relevant to the people whose lives it should be invested in preserving, and whose experiences it extracts into research (Ellison et al. 2017; Ellasante 2020). Aizura and Stryker attend to the

concern that, as trans subjects become “countable,” we also become vulnerable to new modes of biopolitical regulation, including the increasingly tight management of precisely what combination of surgical and hormonal bodily transformations are required to legally define a person’s sex or transgender status. It is important to locate potential complicities between such regulatory schema and an institutionalized transgender studies. (Aizura and Stryker 2013, 7)

Alienated by an increasingly professionalized field that routinely extracts from QT2BIPOC, Ian Khara Ellasante asks the most prescient question; “Dear Transgender Studies, Can You Do Love?” (Ellasante 2020, 421). They wonder,

Dear Transgender Studies, remember when we first met? [...] I guess I kinda thought we'd have more in common [...] Remember me attempting to chart your genealogy, poring over pages of soulnumbing theory? In my mind, you'd have a throbbing heart, infused and churning with life blood: real transgender people living and bearing witness to real transgender lives had birthed, grown, and nurtured you. How is it that, according to these pages, your roots were more entangled with the dusty theories of white [...] men than they were suffused with the embodied knowledges of [...] folks like me? (Ellasante 2020, 421)

As Ellison, Green, Richardson, and Snorton observe, “the institutionalization of transgender studies as a discipline functions as a scene of subjection for blackness” (Ellison et al, 2017, 162). They argue that the transgender rights assemblage has consolidated the dehumanization, fungibility, and hypervisibility to which black trans bodies are exposed, and that “in academia this [...] has taken the shape of the expansion and institutionalization of transgender studies as a discipline” (Ellison et al. 2017, 162). In the introduction to their edited issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Ellison, Green, Richardson, and Snorton write against “what we observe as a trend in scholarship to deconstruct the human and its attendant spatial narratives [...] while neglecting to reckon with the contributions of Black feminism and Black queer studies to this line of thought” (Ellison et al. 2017, 163). They articulate a trans of colour method that “further names the work of charting the present absences in multiple sites of intersection by demanding a moment of critical presence”; calling for attention in the field to the ways in which black lives, bodies, and experiences are both made invisible, and instrumentalized “as a springboard to move toward other things [...] white things” (Green 2016, 80; Ellison et al. 2017, 162). Noting that new materialist theorists can seem more invested in the vibrancy of inanimate matter and object lives than in reckoning with the lives of dehumanized people and people treated as objects, Ellison et al. attempt to “bring and ring the alarm [...] we been through this too long” (Ellison et al. 2017, 163). Calling for recognition of the ontological implications of chattel slavery, which continue to necropolitically structure black life chances, pathologize the genders and bodies of black people,

and determine the maldistribution of resources experienced by black people in its wake, trans of colour scholars call for a more accountable trans studies (Green 2016; Ellison et al. 2017; Snorton 2017; Warren 2017). Noting that disciplines, like trans studies, which are indebted to new materialisms often make their theoretical gambits “by eliding and/or instrumentalizing those not-quite humans and sometimes humans whose violability forms the abstracted imaginative surface [...] upon which the human and its metrics are conjured,” Ellison, Green, Richardson, and Snorton write toward a black trans studies that acknowledges twentieth-century black feminist thought as its primary genealogy (Ellison et al. 2017, 163). As Joshua Aiken, Jessica Marion Modi, and Olivia R. Polk observe, for Ellison, Green, Richardson, and Snorton, the move to make black feminism the intellectual center of black trans studies “not only resists black women’s persistent erasure from institutional narratives of knowledge making but also opens the contributions of trans* studies onto new fields of possibility for thinking and feeling embodiment, sociality, and memory otherwise” (Aiken, Modi, and Polk 2020, 427).

Fundamentally, “transgender studies promises to offer important [...] insights into [...] questions as how bodies mean or what constitutes human personhood,” and for this reason, it is being taken in promising and restorative directions in and outside of the academy by scholars, activists, cultural workers, street queens, hustlers, sex workers, incarcerated, criminalised, poor, and homeless people with a vested interest in ensuring one another’s survival (Stryker 1998, 155). Trans of colour analytics interrogate the foundational logics of the human. By recognising the historic and continuing imbrication of institutional knowledge production about gender diverse people in the medical production of binary phenotypes, trans of colour scholarship can offer important insights into the ways human is made to signify eugenically. Such insights offer fruitful and productive

critical ground for all dehumanized people; trans studies has an important role to play in disclosing how antiblackness structures what is considered meaningfully human, as well as in how foreclosure from human ontology is weaponised against black and brown people, both historically and in our neoliberal present. In this way, trans of colour studies – which exceeds description as either academic scholarship, or non-academic praxis – is critical to the material survival of actual trans people:

my perception of what matters when it comes to these topics is skewed [...] I'd rush in late to the evening seminar after spending the day alongside Black, brown, and Indigenous trans, nonbinary, and Two-Spirit young people in support groups: driving with them to their appointments for housing intakes or health care, shopping with them to pick up food at the grocery store or clothes at the thrift store, dropping them off at the queer youth center or the bus stop or wherever home was for the time being, and working and advocating beside them. (Ellasante 2020, 422)

Trans of colour work is trans studies at its best. And at its best, trans studies offers abundant grammars of being and becoming for trans people, critiques of the institutions, practices, and policies which harm us, and resources both for surviving the conditions of the world as they are, and for building conditions under which we can thrive. Trans studies, at its best, is a real part of the fabric of trans social life, part of our mutual aid, abolitionist, and decolonial praxis; one which matters because it can materially improve our lives. Trans of colour work “is [...] fully cognizant of the ways in which an increasingly neoliberal-structured, corporatized, for-profit university operates [...] and attempt[s] to keep open a space in which the scholarship articulated through transgender studies can continue” (Aizura and Stryker 2013, 7). This requires a “perhaps reckless ambition to nurture a transgender political imaginary that moves beyond a rights-and-representation based framework,” and follows Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in approaching the

“university as an [...] ‘unsafe neighbourhood’ we seek refuge in [and] steal resources from” (Aizura and Stryker 2013, 7).

At its best, trans studies decouples from what it is solicited for: participation in the imaginaries of self-transparency, autonomy, and individuality upon which cisness, like capitalism, is premised. Recognising that we are all always already modified, trans of colour analytics unmask the instrumentalism which subtends Western thought, and which veils over the ways in which coindebted bodies and subjectivities relationally constitute one another. Trans of colour analytics favour and ratify their commitments to the other bodies, subjectivities, worlds, and conditions in relation to which our own bodies are engendered. The scholarship, activism, and cultural texts which inform my own research across the next few chapters work to restructure and leverage trans studies against the dehumanization the most vulnerable trans people experience. They know this:

Transgender studies, you are born and reborn of dynamic tumult, sustained by movements, debates, and transgressions that are transnational [...] you are born of Black, brown, Indigenous, immigrant, genderqueer, and nonbinary folks; of activists and artists and addicts; femmes and fairies; butches and banjee girls; leitis and fa‘afatama; aggressives and studs; queers and queens; Two-Spirits and travestis; street kids and sex workers; and, yes, scholars too [...] our grit and glamour, our triumphs and traumas, our hypervisibility, our invisibility. Our saltwater tears and a vast sea of lived experiences: these stormy waters are your birthplace every time. (Ellasante 2020, 422)

It is these insights that I aim to be guided by through the remaining chapters of this thesis, starting in the following chapter with a tracing of the arts of survival evident in the artistic practices of black trans people living in the wake of chattel slavery.

Chapter Two

Black Trans Lives and Afterlives in the Transatlantic Wake

Though they go mad they shall be sane,
 Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again,
 Though lovers be lost love shall not,
 And death shall have no dominion

Dylan Thomas, *And Death Shall Have No Dominion*

The living and the dead and the yet unborn are all fully involved in our struggle, all present, all demanding our accountability

Combahee River Collective, “Combahee River Collective Statement”

A tendency of white scholarship and archival practice about and after slavery has been its characteristic hyperfocus on black pain, suffering, and crisis; and its equally characteristic neglect of black possibility, black joy, and black arts of survival. My attempt in this second chapter is to propose a counter-historiography which both reckons with the ongoing violence of the Middle Passage through addressing the forms of precarity it continues to visit on black life, but which also declines to read slavery’s deathscapes merely as inert sites of settled disappearance. In this chapter, I contend with the limitations of secular and correlationist archival practices. Such approaches do not always yield accurate, responsive, or nuanced analyses of the lives of enslaved people, or of post-slave diasporic people’s ways of forming community with these murdered relatives. Indeed, conventional historiographical work about slavery often unintentionally reprises the ontological harms of slavery by evacuating black bodies of personhood and subordinating the actual texture

of enslaved people's lives to the demands of white meaning-making. I join calls for more expansive historiographies which suspend disbelief that phenomena like haunting, transtemporal visitation, and magical rites are incapable of producing their intended effects. I focus on accounts – Ngozi Onwurah's *Welcome II the Terrordome* (1995), the poetry of Lucille Clifton and Nourbese Philip, the music of Drexciya – which fantasise about the Atlantic seabed as a space that generates possibilities and capacities for black lives, afterlives, and agencies, rather than as a site that has nothing to offer black people but violation and dehumanization. In particular, I read Tourmaline's *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* for the arts of flourishing and survival elaborated by black trans people in the present with the help, care, and love of those drowned in the Middle Passage.

Contemporary scholarship and news media often circulates spectacles of black death, producing a daily traffic in stories about the murder of black people. This endless reproduction and citation of anti-black violence in mainstream scholarship and media, regardless of intent, cumulatively effects its own kinds of harm. Some have noted that the practice of listing and enumerating black death – commonplace in mass and social media – echoes the dehumanizing arithmetics of mattering employed during chattel slavery (Snorton 2017). Slave ship and plantation manifests and ledgers used precisely these types of inscriptive practice – dispassionate, crude lists of identifiers, prices, names, and deaths – to inventory the slave's status as object-commodity: "Willie, male, 20, 5 feet 8 inches, black";¹⁸ "negro girl meagre";¹⁹ "Samuel Minton, 60 years, nearly worn Out [...] Formerly slave to Thomas Minton, Norfolk, Virginia."²⁰ As Katherine McKittrick observes, the epistemological rift created by the transatlantic slave trade continues to be taken as the point of

¹⁸ Manifest of the schooner *Wildcat*, NARA Microfilm Publication M1895, Slave Manifests of Coastwise Vessels Filed at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1807-1860, M1895, Roll 7.

¹⁹ Manifest of the *Zong*, cited in Sharpe 2017, 52.

²⁰ Manifest of the *Peggy*, cited in the *Book of Negroes*.

departure for new world blackness in ways that misidentify blackness as always already violated, dispossessed, and dying, and therefore never eligible for survival, care, or protection: “black is naturally malignant and therefore worthy of violation [...] black is violated because black is naturally violent [...] black is naturally unbelievable and is therefore naturally empty and violated” (McKittrick 2014, 17).

McKittrick explains that this kind of necropolitical arithmetic continues to structure a racialized calculus for the distribution of life chances in the present: “this is where we begin, this is where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving” (McKittrick 2014, 17). Under such terms, she argues, which take it as given that “blackness originates and emerges in violence and death,” black lives are circumscribed and black futures foreclosed by “analytical pathways that are beholden to a system of knowledge that descriptively rehearses antiblack violences” (McKittrick 2014, 18). The archive of valued artefacts about new world blackness is structured almost exclusively by the citation and display of death, violence, and dispossession. Therefore, as McKittrick argues, a lot of historiography that views the Middle Passage and its legacies through this archive unintentionally analytically recapitulates antiblack violence in ways that are both “cyclical and death-dealing” (McKittrick 2014, 18). To put it differently, “historically present anti-black violence is repaired by reproducing knowledge about [...] black subjects that renders them less than human” (McKittrick 2014, 18). In this way, the almost daily publication of a certain genre of news item – an article, normally replete with journalistic errors, sensationalized details, and routine misgenderings, informing us that a black trans woman has been murdered – seems therefore “to conform to the logics of accumulation that structure racial capitalism,” in which the quantified abstraction of black

and trans deaths reveals the calculated value of those lives “through states’ grammars of deficit and debt” (Snorton 2017, viii).²¹

Even when the accounts given in inventories of black death are true – a newspaper tells us a black trans woman has been murdered, a ship’s ledger tells us that a slave died of illness, was thrown overboard, was lashed – they cite “a history of violence written on the slave's body [...] in the master's hand” (Hall 2006, 89). In the scarred back, “the viewer reads a narrative inscribed by the slave owner himself” (Hall 2006, 89). In this way, acts of antiblack violence – a scourged back, a dead black trans woman – have almost nothing to do with the people harmed by them. They have everything to do with the “ways in which brutal acts of white supremacy actively mark blackness as they erase black lived experiences and interpretations of slavery” and its afterlives (McKittrick 2014, 21). Our collective archival practices have enfolded and accepted ubiquitous records of black suffering apparently precisely because they record violence. Antiblack violences and the historical records which detail them are repeated, cited, and circulated with such commonplaceness that it is taken for granted that images of black suffering – a scourged back, a dead trans woman – “can tell a truth more truthful than claims written and told by black people” about black life (McKittrick 2014, 21). One problem this presents for scholarship is how to write about a world where “the very notion of justice [...] produces and requires Black death as normative,” and where the routine killing of black people by means both legal and extralegal is a constitutive aspect of Western democracy, without correspondingly normalizing scenes of black death in our own work (James and Costa Vargas 2012, 193).

²¹ See Hensley 2019; Rice and Burns 2015; Ennis 2015; Kellaway and Brydum 2016.

If dominant modes of archival practice, inventory-taking, news reporting, and cataloguing around black death are freighted with associations to the architecture of slavery, what, if anything, can be salvaged from these accounts? Can they be repurposed in any way to hold more fully the lives described therein? How “do we ethically engage with [archives] that compile [...] black death?” (McKittrick 2014, 18). And can such materials ever be leveraged to elicit the sense, however incomplete, of a person with a presence, feelings, loves?

Writing about AIDS, loss, and black grief, Dagmawi Woubshet theorizes a “poetics of compounding loss,” in which the leitmotif of numerated deaths – common to news reporting about AIDS before effective antiretroviral therapy – is reconceptualized as a compounding, rather than cumulative elegiac mode (Woubshet 2015). Following black AIDS elegies like Melvin Dixon’s *And These are Just a Few* (1991), and Essex Hemphill’s *Heavy Breathing* (2000), Woubshet wonders if and how hostile methods like cataloguing and inventorying, often used to dispassionately show how a death was inevitable, is not mournable, or comes as no surprise, can be used to do work that is loving. In Dixon’s *And These are Just a Few*, relentless serial deaths are thought of not as itemizable, numerically predictable, ephemeral increments of loss (cumulative), but as multiplying, devastating, corporeal, recollective, and prospective (compounding). In the poem Dixon lists the deaths of twelve friends and the death of his lover before looking proleptically forward to his own death. Woubshet proposes that

in addition to synchronizing a unique timeline of loss, the poem also takes a tally of the dead, and each loss builds on the loss that precedes it. Although the number of deaths in Dixon’s poem is thirteen, the total loss is greater than that figure, since each death contains

within it and builds upon the preceding loss [...] one poem for the series of deaths that saturate his life. The seriality of the poem underscores the relentlessness of death, that there is no reprieve from mourning the deaths that surround him. (Woubshet 2015, 8)

By repurposing a method – inventorying – typically used to frame black deaths as unavoidable and ungrievable, black AIDS elegies like Dixon and Hemphill’s demonstrate that possibilities for real care and mourning can be recuperated from hostile and indifferent epistemologies and archives.

Writers and scholars working with slavery’s archival traces have followed poets and theorists like Woubshet, looking for ways to make such lists disclose something besides and in excess of subjugation. Rachel Hall’s work has used plantation inventories and ledgers to pursue a restorative reading of “Dolly,” a woman who escaped captivity to a South Carolina planter in 1863, and whose runaway slave notice has achieved some notoriety as one of the most in-demand exhibits held at the University of North Carolina’s Southern Historical Collection. Hall remarks that the popularity of the runaway notice cannot be divorced from a wider cultural traffic in numerical and administrative ephemera pertaining to slavery, in which the actual texture of a particular black person’s life is subordinated to the demands of white meaning-making. Dolly, then, often “appears in white imagery or is interpolated into white discourse to serve the communicative and representational needs of diverse white cultures” (Hall 2006, 72). Against this trend, Hall’s analysis does what it can to expand the hostile and indifferent language of the runaway notice, unearthing biographical details about Dolly’s family and relationships that are only gestured to in the ledger notes of her owner, in order to give the sense of someone with an actual personhood inside the text.

More than simply offering a restorative reading of Dolly's life secured through the excavation of facts and details that, while not acknowledged by her owner, can be verified elsewhere in the archive, Hall works to incorporate elements of informed guesswork and speculation into her analysis. Hall approaches the archive not as a way of learning what happened, but as a repository of indicators of *what else* happened. She imagines the world in which Dolly's runaway notice was circulated more expansively than many scholarly works, which tend to cite Dolly's existence merely as part of a continuum of harm and violated blackness proceeding from the Middle Passage. Hall speculates that the notice discloses liberatory and joyful possibilities that are inconceivable and inadmissible to dominant modes of archival practice, simply because they are unwritten, unspoken, and therefore unindexed. Noting that slave owners often read runaway notices like Dolly's aloud, "especially when slaves were present, and for their benefit," Hall contemplates the likely irony of white slave owners performing readings of these runaway notices, fantasizing that they were terrifying their slaves into submission and eliminating the possibility of future rebellion, while they were in actuality not only providing ample proof of living escaped slaves, but also explicitly reminding every slave within earshot that freedom, hope, joy, and insurrection were possible (Hawkins 2019, 8).

In this speculative reading, Hall liberates the traces of slavery with which she works, such as Dolly's runaway notice, from "the dismal dance of authenticity," recognising that conjecture and non-verifiability are essential tools through which what is so often evacuated from the archive – black people's personhood, joys, loves, agency, and communities – can be rendered more legible (McKittrick 2014, 25). Such work is necessary because, as Carrie Mae Weems has pointed out, there are "no stories of the Middle Passage. One hundred million people were stolen and sold from

their homes, shipped across the world, and not a single story of that journey survives” (Weems 1996, 22). Working with the ghostly traces and absent presences that exist beyond what the archive can verify urges consideration of the ways things that have been violently made to disappear can only be reassembled through imaginative, mythological, and fabulous readings. Delany has observed:

until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our Past [...] every effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of what might endure as African social consciousness. When, indeed, we say that this country was founded on slavery, we must remember that we mean, specifically, that it was founded on the systematic, conscientious, and massive destruction of African cultural remnants. That some musical rhythms endured, that certain religious attitudes and structures seem to have persisted, is quite astonishing, when you study the efforts of the white, slave-importing machinery to wipe them out. (Dery 1992, 747)

What is unindexed, inadmissible, and unverifiable about the lives and afterlives of captive people prompts us to consider how imagination and speculation can contribute to historiography that really invests in the agency of historical subjects.

Dominant historiographies have struggled, for example, to frame the self-inflicted deaths of stolen and captive people who walked or jumped into the Atlantic as anything more than either a tragic attenuation of agency, or a romantic and dignified final act of defiance. In the opening sequence of *Welcome II the Terrordome* (Onwurah 1995), an Ibo family watch a slave being branded, before turning away and walking into the sea. A narrator says:

we must leave before it was too late. As children our mothers had told us that when you died, you return to the beginning, and lived in the land of the spirits, until it was time for the earth to give birth to you again. Evil warriors had brought us here and now we had to find our own way back. (Onwurah 1995)

The branded man, left on the shore, turns to his attackers, and says, “You can’t touch them. Them is free. Them is going back home” (Onwurah 1995). The scene refers to Ibo landing, which took place on a stretch of coast on St. Simons Island, Glynn County, Georgia. In 1803, it became the setting of a mass suicide by captive Ibo people, who had successfully taken control of the schooner where they were kept prisoner. The few extant eyewitness accounts of the event are those written by slave owners, and describe how the West Africans came ashore, before walking into Dunbar Creek to drown (Powell 2004). Accounts of Ibo landing in Gullah mythology and folklore describe how the captives appealed to divinities for safe passage through the waves. Floyd White, a former slave interviewed by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s explains:

Heard about the Ibo's Landing? That's the place where they bring the Ibos over in a slave ship and when they get here, they ain't like it and so they all start singing and they march right down in the river to march back to Africa. (Georgia Writer's Project 1940, 185)

Many versions of the story exist, in which the slaves escape either by walking over the water or flying away:

Ain't you heard about them? Well, at that time Mr. Blue he was the overseer and [...] Mr. Blue he go down one morning with a long whip for to whip them good [...] Anyway, he whipped them good and they got together and stuck that hoe in the field and then [...] rose up in the sky and turned themselves into buzzards and flew right back to Africa [...] Everybody knows about them. (Powell 2004)

Conventional historiographies are reluctant to take such accounts at face value. Since correlationist paradigms struggle to ratify the agency of divinities, scholarship typically reads encounters with enchantment as metaphorical and allegorical, where those agencies are interpreted as effects of human belief. As Jean Langford puts it, “within the compartment of religion made available by a modern civil Order [...] relationships with spirits of the living or the dead are reconfigured as symbolic interactions in order to be rendered intelligible to a liberal respect for freedom of

worship” (Langford 2013, 262). Such hermeneutics systematically “anthropologize” the supernatural, constituting “gods and spirits [as] ‘social facts,’” in order to produce a reading compatible with dominant ontologies that avow the human primacy (Chakrabarty 2000, 106). Correlationist orthodoxies therefore narrow the interpretive scope of events like Ibo landing, with most historians agreeing the episode is important to remember primarily for the figural, moral, and symbolic lessons it can teach us. Conventional historiographies are characterized by pronounced scepticism that a literal reading of Ibo landing is possible: “They are reported to have sung a hymn *in which the lyrics assert* that the water spirits will take them home” (Watts 2006, 211, emphasis mine).

Some historiography finds Ibo landing literally incomprehensible, and is unable, it seems, to come up with any rationale for why a group of stolen people might have walked into the water, appealing to divinities to be taken home; in such accounts Ibo landing is merely “a weird and moving ritual” (Mayer 2000, 559). Other historiographies tend to claim either that Ibo landing was a “desperate act” of “tragic group suicide,” in which suicide counts as just one more way that captive Africans lost their agency to white slavers, or as a courageous act of defiance, in which self-destruction is framed as a more dignified choice than dehumanization: “the West Africans upon assessing their situation resolved to risk their lives [...] rather than submit to the living death that awaited them in American slavery” (Mayer 2000, 559; Watts 2006, 211).

Following Hall, McKittrick, Weems, and other scholars who have used forms of speculation and suspended disbelief in their historiographical work, I am interested in what a literal reading of the supernatural phenomena at work in accounts of Ibo landing might do for the agency of these

historical subjects. A centring of the literal, descriptive, and surface-level has been important to the new materialisms, primarily as a reparative to the linguistic turn's emphasis on what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed "paranoid" reading practices; the mining of the text for metaphorical, hidden, and repressed meanings (Sedgwick 2002, 123-150). Susan Sontag explains the turn "against interpretation"; arguing that

interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it. The interpreter [...] is altering it. But he can't admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning [...] the modern style of interpretation [...] digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one [...] All observable phenomena are bracketed [...] as manifest content. This manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning—the latent content beneath. (Sontag 2009)

Theorists such as Heather Love, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have called for practices of "surface" reading that defer complex, non-literal interpretations in favour of readings that privilege elements considered too obvious, farfetched, and trivial to typically be considered interesting, likely, or consequential (Best and Marcus, 2009, 1-21; Love 2013). While most of these theorists write about surface reading from the perspective of language studies or art history, descriptive and literal reading practices are increasingly being taken up by decolonial scholars. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has explained, in decolonial work, surface, or literal reading is seen as a uniquely appropriate resource through which to challenge correlationist assumptions that citations of the supernatural are intended to register as nonliteral (Chakrabarty 2000, 28). Literal reading, as Ranajit Guha has proven, allows those working in subaltern studies to recognise agency and political engagement as co-extensive with religious and superstitious belief, and to read engagement with nonhuman agentic forces as real political praxis, where rationalist historiographies remain vexed by the "struggle of Enlightenment with superstition," and tend to

read nonsecularism as premodern, prepolitical, and fundamentally attenuative of a given person's agency and self-transparency (Guha 1988, 4-6; Hegel 2018, 143).

Surface reading allows us to engage with the mythology that surrounds Ibo landing literally; offering recourse to a set of interpretations that simultaneously acknowledge the violation and dehumanization to which stolen people were subjected, but which also take the agentic capacities of nonhuman forces they appealed to for aid at face value. Decolonial and subaltern studies scholarship uses literal reading practices to explore the meanings of stories of Ibo who flew above or walked below the waves; Jason Young proposes that, if they seem to defy the laws of physics, stories of “the flying African” can and should be read as an indictment of the Western scientific and philosophical epistemologies that were deployed to justify slavery (Young 2017). Young notes that none of the former slaves interviewed as part of the Federal Writer's Project indicated they were speaking symbolically or metaphorically, and gave every indication that they were speaking literally (Young 2017, 50-70). Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, to which the “flying African” mythos is also central, borrowed words and phrases found in the Federal Writer's Project interviews with former slaves; she explains that her interpretation of the supernatural phenomena in Gullah folklore is also literal: “if it means Icarus to some readers, fine [...] but my meaning was specific: it is about black people who could fly” (LeClair 1981).

Against dominant historiographic interpretations, which inadvertently recapitulate the literary stock-character of the “noble savage” and other primitivisms through the implication that the Ibo's “bravely” chose death as free people over life as enslaved people, a surface reading considers the possibility that the Ibo's walked into the water never intending to drown, and that, when they

walked into the water, they chose not to die, but to live. It becomes possible to believe that they survived, transported over or under the water by the divinities to whom they appealed. It becomes possible to believe that if the Ibo did indeed drown, a self-inflicted death was not intended to signify as a violent act of self-negation, or as a divestment from political, material, and social realities, but as participative, capacitating, social, connected, and relational. Langford asks us to imagine “a death drive, an orientation or surrendering to death that is not a desire to return to the inanimate, but a desire to reanimate and reunite with the dead. This movement toward death would not be opposed to an impulse toward connection and change but would be another version of it” (2013, 216). Such readings necessarily and productively destabilize secular historiography’s ontological presuppositions that death is inert, antisocial and debilitating. Numerous sources in Gullah folklore describe how St. Simons island and other nearby stretches of coast are haunted by the spirits of the captive Ibo:

to this day when the
breeze sighs over the marshes and
through the trees, you can hear the
clank of chains and echo of
their chant at Ebo Landing. (Weems 1992)

For the Gullah people living on the coastal plain and sea islands, these ghosts are a meaningful part of their social world; they are real actors who can be interacted with, appealed to, appeased, consoled, avenged, and cared for (Hallock 2019; Worley 2020). In 2012, a delegation from Nigeria travelled to St. Simons island to perform a symbolic burial “to restore spiritual order where disorder has set in as a result of abominations, such as was occasioned by slavery” (Daily Independent Nigeria 2012). In Langford’s *Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning from Southeast Asians in Exile*, she describes how

the Tuol Sleng compound, site of Khmer Rouge torture of political prisoners, remains a haunted site. Both staff and visitors report seeing ghosts wandering the buildings after dark. In 1999, as I conducted fieldwork for this book in the United States, monks were invited to the museum memorializing the prison in order to offer food to propitiate the restless ghosts. Reciting sutras, the bikkhu (monks) sprinkled holy water onto the bare skulls to calm the angry souls of the dead. (Langford 2013, 216)

She explains that in this way, “material engagement with the dead can be critical to inhabiting the pervading grief of political violence” (Langford 2013, 216). In *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, for the present day black trans people who must try to survive slavery’s institutionalized afterlives, convivialities and attachments with the dead are both nourishing and political.

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Atlantic is a Sea of Bones, a short film by Tourmaline, belongs to a robust tradition of black elegies, histories, and forms of protest to have embraced fabulation, speculation, and counterhegemonic storytelling in order tell a history more truthful than the one that can be told by the archive. Ruth Mayer explains, “to capture events that were never documented in writing by the ones who experienced them might very well require another structure than the realist ones of representation. All narratives around the Middle Passage are invariably and necessarily speculative, and the more so today, over one hundred years after the fact” (Mayer 2000, 556). She argues that “fantastic, mythic, or grotesque narratives seem so much more adequate” (Mayer 2000, 556). In *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, the possibility of literal and reciprocal forms of kinship and care between those killed during the Middle Passage and post-slave diasporic people is ratified, despite the fact that transtemporal convivialities, communion with ghosts, and encounters with the divine are typically disallowed under dominant secular and correlationist paradigms. Similar works in this tradition –

which might broadly be described as Afrofuturist – such as the Drexciyan mythos, the science fiction of Octavia Butler, and the poetry of Clifton and Philip, also query secular historiography’s privileging of symbolic, allegorical, and figural reading practices. They contend that magical rites are more than capable of producing their intended effects, that the Atlantic seabed is far from an inert, stagnant site of settled disappearance, and that black people living in the present can and do form lifesaving convivialities and practices of flourishing with people long dead.

In particular, surface or literal readings of *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* allow us to imagine the Atlantic seabed as a place populated by lively and loving ghosts who lead their descendants toward new dispositions for surviving and thriving in an antiblack world. In *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, the Atlantic seabed is imagined as more than a space of violated blackness, disappearance, and nothingness. Tourmaline’s Atlantic seabed is a site of fabulation, vibrancy, and sociability; a place where linear time and Euclidean space become porous and the barriers between worlds are stretched thin. A bathtub becomes a portal, the bathwater becomes the sea, the sea becomes a dance club. It is imagined as a site that is haunted by the spectral presences of those who drowned during the Middle Passage: here the “people who jumped and were thrown overboard in The Middle Passage [have] start[ed] underwater colonies and cities” (Tourmaline 2018). In the short film, black trans people living in present day New York travel through time, space, and water to meet each other and their ancestral relatives. These hauntings and transtemporal visitations offer opportunities for love, joy, conviviality, capacitation, closeness, and mutual aid. *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* acknowledges the ways in which connection with murdered enslaved people and their living spirits is as life-saving and life-sustaining for black trans people living in the present as it is critical to recognising the ways in which people long dead can continue to have agency and effect

political change in the world. In *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, present day black trans people find that they have the resources they need to survive a world that wants them dead, and see that such resources are bestowed not through a vague utopian imaginary, but through magical and nonsecular rites that are both durable and deeply interpersonal.

The short film contains two narratives, running in parallel. In one, the time is the present, the place New York, the subject Egyptt Labeija. This narrative nominally reflects on scenes from Egyptt's life and the ways that being black and trans has constituted her experience of the world; she is a member of the legendary drag family, House of Labeija, and well known for her performances on the New York ballroom scene of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. She has also worked as a coordinator for TransJustice, an activist mutual aid project created by and for trans and gender non-conforming people of color in New York. Egyptt has experienced extreme forms of harm and precarity resulting from antiblackness; she did not have a home for a long time, and lived out on the West Side piers by the Hudson River. In the other narrative, Egyptt travels through time and space, meeting with queers of colour from other times and places, the spectral presences of those drowned during the Middle Passage, and her own ghost-self.

The film opens portrait orientation, to footage shot on a phone camera. This footage has a documentary feel, and Labeija, wearing an everyday look, addresses the camera conversationally, as if speaking to a friend. In this opening scene, she stands by a window, in a large, light, white, glass-fronted gallery space. We learn the building is the new Whitney Museum of American Art in downtown New York. Although Egyptt seems at ease in this scene, her situation in the Whitney is fraught. The Whitney building in which she stands was constructed between 2010-2015 on a

previously city-owned site that was home to many homeless trans of colour people, including Labeija (Ultra Omni 2018). The trans people who lived on the site were all displaced to make room for the new gallery and the expensive cafes and boutiques that arrived with it. Those who tried to stay became subject to aggressive policing and criminalization; those who had lived there had no choice but to leave (Ultra Omni 2018).

The camera cuts between Egyptt, standing in the gallery, and the Hudson River immediately below the window. The camera lingers on her face as Egyptt's gaze is caught by the West Side piers, and she begins to narrate the period of her life where she was homeless, and how she lived on a spot directly outside the window: "I literally lived on that pier that's no longer there [...] I lived there in a hut" (Tourmaline 2017). In a 2018 interview with Victor Ultra Omni, Labeija goes into more detail:

EL: I used to live on the pier years ago [...]

VUO: How many other people were living on the pier at that time?

EL: Oh my god. At the time I was there it was about 50. Stretched throughout the whole Pier.

VUO: Do you know when people first began living there?

EL: Long before I did. (Ultra Omni 2018)

Egyptt describes her life after leaving the West Side piers as more sustainable, explaining "one day I just snapped out [...] I just started reaching for better things" (Tourmaline 2017). Despite her recalling the time she spent living there as traumatizing and hard to survive, she nevertheless recognizes that the neighborhood represented by the piers was also an important "haven for black and brown gay and transgender folk," which has, with the construction of the Whitney and similar projects, "now been entirely gentrified for upwardly mobile leisure-seekers" (Tourmaline 2018; Nyong'o 2018). The construction of the new Whitney building, and the resultant gentrification of

the surrounding neighborhood not only did not improve life for Egyptt and other trans of colour people, it destroyed a place of relative safety from police surveillance and an important space for queer kinship and conviviality:

VUO: What do you think the Pier represents today?

EL: A new age [...] They have gentrified it too. Now it's called a park not a Pier [...]

EL: But it's not the same because the love that was down there is not there because they pushed everybody away [...]

EL: We didn't have to worry about the police that much because that was our haven. It was a safe haven for the LGBT community. (Ultra Omni 2018)

Numerous legal justice initiatives have identified that in recent decades, the gentrification of black trans neighborhoods – such as the West Village, Chelsea Piers, and Meatpacking District in New York City – has resulted in policing that explicitly targets black trans people for arrest on “quality of life” and three-strikes ordinances like loitering, turnstile jumping, and solicitation (Bassichis, 2007). The Sylvia Rivera Law Project reports that:

The fact that the ‘Quality of Life’ [QOL] policies were initially tested on the 6th Precinct [West Village] in the early 90’s is not a coincidence. As one of the few remaining safe spaces for low-income queer and trans youth of color and homeless people, the QOL policies specifically criminalized these communities to remove them from sight and to maintain the ‘quality of life’ for the people who could afford to live in the West Village. The policies continue today imposed all over New York City and have been mimicked in many urban centers throughout the United States. These types of policies are directly connected to gentrification projects that seek to displace and criminalize poor communities and communities of color. (Bassichis 2007,16)²²

Atlantic is a Sea of Bones names and draws causal connections between neoliberal practices of law enforcement and violent harms experienced by trans of colour people; Tourmaline explains, “loss has happened through gentrification [...] and really intense ‘quality of life’ policing on Christopher Street, in the Meatpacking District, in Chelsea, and in the West Village” (Tourmaline 2018). But

²² Excerpted from SRLP personal interview with Rickke Mananzala 15/05/2004.

as much as – even in their heyday – the West Side piers were a scene of dispossession, overpolicing, and unliveability to their residents, they simultaneously and unevenly contained temporary zones of fabulousness, autonomy, and safety; offering residents occasional fugitive moments from surveillance, a place to cruise, a place to be with family, and a place to call home.

As Egyptt attests:

EL: I'm still here because the Pier taught me how to live [...]

EL: When you came down to the pier you felt love from one end to the other end you always knew somebody. And if you didn't know somebody, somebody was always speaking to you [...] It was like going to a family park. Like when you go to a picnic [...] that's what it was like. But it was everyday. It's like you'd go down there at any given time and there was somebody that was down there you can laugh. There was music. It was a party, an outside party every day.

VUO: Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

EL: The pier is Home [...] it made Houses come together. It was a place where you can come and be yourself without anybody judging you on the outside. (Ultra Omni 2018)

The choice to begin the film on the material site of the Whitney therefore stages complicated local histories of antiblackness, displacement, and gentrification, in which Egyptt's black trans life is considered disposable except under highly specific circumstances when it can lend cultural capital to white enterprises and meaning-making. As Egyptt stands in the white, empty Whitney Museum space, she thinks about how this building occupies the ground that she used to call home. She thinks about how the creation of this gallery was the reason her home was taken away from her. She reflects on how she, and others like her, are unwelcome in spaces like the Whitney, except in the rare moments that black femme bodies become objects of interest to white artmaking.

Egyptt's uneasy occupation of this ascetic art gallery space – in the rapidly gentrifying Chelsea piers/West Village neighborhood – recalls a conversation between her and Tourmaline, the short's director, about “the extraction of black life, black trans life, black poor life that happens by artists

who get public recognition and the feelings that surround that” (Tourmaline 2018). Tourmaline recalls a day when Egyptt came to see her, carrying “this coffee table book that featured her and others in the ‘90s in the West Village. She was talking about how every single person in the book other than her was dead, and how no one who made the book asked for her permission to be photographed” (Tourmaline 2018). Egyptt and Tourmaline’s discussion of loss and mourning over the coffee table art book positions *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* as a work of memorialization, a means of reflecting on the legacies of femmes and street queens who came before, whose lives and activism are a joy to learn from, whose ghosts continue to haunt West Village, and whose presences continue to invigorate and console trans people living in the present. The short is lovingly haunted by street queens like Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Bebe Scarpi, Bambi L’Amour, Bubbles Rose Lee, Andorra Marks, and others who lived and died in the West Village. Tourmaline describes working with Labeija on the idea for the video: “we were also talking about loss, what it means to lose so much, and how that can haunt a place” (Tourmaline 2018). Tourmaline begins her artist’s statement about *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* by characterizing the film as an attempt to reinscribe and the West Village landscape with the presences of trans of colour people who lived, died, survived, and flourished there:

everywhere I went, I wanted to talk about Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson and Bambi L’Amour and Andorra Marks and S.T.A.R. [Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries], who I was learning more and more about through their friends, and the traces and imprints they left all over New York City, whether in the archives or in someone’s bedroom [...] I found that the connection was sharing these stories that were so impactful to me, like Marsha’s. (Tourmaline 2018)

Tourmaline reads the material traces left in the West Village by black femmes and as closely and inextricably related to the ghostly presences of enslaved people taken captive and drowned in the Middle Passage, en route to North America. For Tourmaline, the care networks New York’s street

queens elaborate to survive contemporary forms of antiblackness and transmisogyny are undergirded by and indebted to practices of loving care and community modelled by drowned ancestors. Tourmaline imagines connections between black people across history whose lives have been marked by their resistance to slavery's attempts to dehumanize.

She explains that while she was learning about the lives and activism of New York street queens like Johnson, she was “also listening to Alexis Pauline Gumbs reciting *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, a Lucille Clifton poem,” which got her thinking about intergenerational inheritance and community (Tourmaline 2018). Tourmaline expands; “I became interested in [...] mythology of people who jumped and were thrown overboard in The Middle Passage” (Tourmaline 2018). Clifton's poem imagines the restless bones of captive people on the Atlantic seabed: “atlantic is a sea of bones. my bones” (Clifton 2012). Clifton pictures these bones tethering North America and Africa: “connecting whydah and new york, a bridge of ivory” (Clifton 2012). She contemplates slavery and matrilineal inheritance, thinking about *partus sequitur ventrem*, the legal doctrine concerning the slave or free status of black children born in the US during slavery: “seabed they call it. in its arms my early mothers sleep [...] maternal armies pace the atlantic floor” (Clifton 2012). *Partus* marked “the black mother's gender [as] vestibular, a translocation marked by the capacity to reproduce beings and objects” (Snorton 2017, 107). In the poem Clifton wonders aloud whether these ghostly maternal presences can offer her consolation and aid in excess of the trauma she has inherited: “i call my name into the roar of surf and something awful answers” (Clifton 2012). Black studies scholars have explained the impact of *partus*, and other historic “matrilineal arrangements that at their root were concerned with black women's capacity to produce black children as property” (Snorton 2017, 103). Christina Sharpe explains that

reading together the Middle Passage [and] the birth canal, we can see how each has functioned [...] to dis/figure Black maternity, to turn the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship's hold and the prison, and turning the birth canal into another domestic Middle Passage with Black mothers, after the end of legal hypodescent, still ushering their children into their condition; their non/status, their non/being-ness. (Sharpe 2016, 74)

Atlantic is a Sea of Bones (both Clifton's poem and Tourmaline's film) takes up questions about inheritance and the black maternal. Perhaps, as Dionne Brand has written, there is no ancestry and no inheritance for post-slave diasporic people except that black water, or, as Fred Moten and Stephano Harney have proposed, perhaps among the awful legacies left by those "churning waters of flesh," was also an indelible lesson about love and community, about "forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths" (Brand 2001, 61; Moten and Harney 2013, 99; Tinsley 2008, 199). Moten and Harney argue that what survives the awful experiment of the hold, of the shipped, is a reconfiguration of conventional transactional understandings of need and ability, where one person "possesses" the need and another "possesses" the ability, toward more informal, fluid, mutually constitutive social obligations and loves (Moten and Harney 2013, 99).

Thinking carefully about the kinds of intergenerational inheritance passed down between black women and femmes, Tourmaline intentionally excavates and probes affects surrounding *partus* by embracing and ratifying her familial relations to enslaved mothers. She positions the ghosts of black femmes, trans women, and street queens as loving maternal presences who watch over their daughters in the present, just as they are in turn watched over by the maternal ghosts of the Atlantic seabed. Tourmaline positions the black transfeminine as a maternal presence, against normative epistemologies which frame black and transfeminine womanhood and motherhood as ontological

impossibilities. Tourmaline explains that “The [Clifton] poem called out to me about the possibility of transformation offered by listening to the violence that is haunting a landscape from historical traumas that happened hundreds of years ago” (Tourmaline 2018). She explains that she “wanted to make a film about the lingering energetics and violences that shape a person's life and social space” (Tourmaline 2018). For Tourmaline, the topographic and the hauntological are intimately and meaningfully related, as are the physical and ephemeral; the film’s central project is to recognize and feel the West Village as a place that was, and is, deeply marked by the presences of black trans femmes, where their lives, hopes, joys, struggles, and achievements continue to offer their chosen family new dispositions for living and thriving in an antiblack world.

Atlantic is a Sea of Bones reads the gentrification of the West Village area as a deliberate attempt to erase the traces and presences of black trans people from the touchable world. In response, the film is acutely focused on mapping and contextualizing physical coordinates from the urban environment – such as Christopher Street, the West Village, Chelsea Piers, Whitney Museum, and Hudson River – onto a broader topography of intergenerational trauma, containerization, and the geopolitics of displacement. In *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, the consanguinity of the Hudson River and the Atlantic Ocean creates a liquid and elegiac space from which to approach the links between the Middle Passage and contemporary black trans life.²³ Tourmaline argues that the harms experienced by black people across time – from “the transatlantic slave trade to HIV criminalization” – are all “deeply, inextricably linked and bound up with each other, and not separate at all from Egyptt's story” (Tourmaline 2018).

²³ The Hudson drains into the Atlantic Ocean at New York Harbor. During the Atlantic slave trade, New York City was an important port in the triangular trade that brought millions of enslaved Africans into bondage on the Caribbean islands and the mainland of North and South America. Those enslaved people who died in the Middle Passage were thrown into the Atlantic, where their bodies remain.

As she gazes from the window into the waters of the Atlantic estuary, Egyptt tells the camera: “people should never forget where they came from” (Tourmaline 2018). At this important moment of the film’s diegesis, the aspect ratio changes dramatically to landscape, the handheld documentary effect collapsing into a rich cinematic fantasia, and the film’s other narrative begins. It is no longer daytime, but dusk, and Egyptt is no longer in the gallery, but on its roof. As the camera completes a slow aerial pan, she vogues in a red ballgown and jewels, framed by the grey water. She looks very glamorous as she poses defiantly on top of the Whitney building, showing us her contempt for white artmaking and academic practices that abstract and theorize black experiences in ways that not only do not materially benefit black people, but are actively debilitating. She is no longer “being extracted from by these artists” (Tourmaline 2018). Expelled from academic and artistic spaces like the Whitney, except as the fetishized other of white artmaking, Egyptt performs her estrangement from normative epistemologies of artistic production by inhabiting the non-place outside and on top of the Whitney. She articulates a dissident relation to formally recognized zones of cultural production and institutional life, and speaks eloquently to the possibilities of dislocation as location: black trans life in the diaspora finds “space[s] of freedom that [are] at the same time space[s] of captivity” (Hartman 1997, 82).

Egyptt’s occupation of this interstitial non-place on top of the Whitney exemplifies McKittrick’s theory of “the garret”; so called after the attic space in which Linda Brent lived for seven years as a fugitive slave in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (McKittrick 2006, 43). When Brent enters the garret, she experiences its darkness as both sensory foreclosure and loss of hope; “[its] continued darkness was oppressive [...] without one gleam of light [and] with no object for

my eye to rest upon” (Jacobs 2012, 121). However, Brent creates an opening in the caulking from which to experience light and air, and through which she can catch glimpses of her family, a unique perspective which allows for the possibility of hope: “I [...] succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in. In the morning I watched for my children” (Jacobs 2012, 121). McKittrick contends the garret “highlights how geography is transformed by Jacobs into a usable and paradoxical space,” arguing that Brent creates for herself a dissident perspective on the workings of the plantation (McKittrick 2006, xxviii). In this way, Brent comes to inhabit what McKittrick terms a “disembodied master-eye, seeing from nowhere” (McKittrick 2006, 43). The garret constitutes a fugitive space which materially offers Brent reprieve from hypervisibility and antiblack violence, while as a discursive provocation, the hole she has made in the wall occasions conditions under which Brent can reimagine her world and picture her own and her family’s survival. On top of the Whitney, Egyptt is in the garret; a vestibular, fragile, and “vexed space of ongoing fugitivity that emerge[s], however briefly, from within more general conditions of confinement and constraint” (Snorton 2017, 69).

There follows a slow pan of Egyptt between the New York skyline and the Hudson, before the frame dissolves into a bubbling, aqueous imaginary. Egyptt now reclines, half-submerged, in a large bathtub. Her skin glistens, and the bathwater is a cloudy milk white. Egyptt slips below the surface of the water, green and roiling now. Air bubbles escape the opaque surface, and, after a few moments she re-emerges, transformed. For the remainder of the short, Egyptt the character assumes a para-fictional relation to the performer, Egyptt Labeija. In this way, the bathtub is positioned as a space of transformation, recollection, and time-travel. As Egyptt emerges from the

bathub, she is followed, or perhaps haunted, by a younger, different self, played by Jamal Lewis. That Lewis is a magical character, summoned through the water, is immediately apparent. Tourmaline expands,

I wrote a script with this character Egyptt – who is based off of, but not actually Egyptt – working towards self-actualization, supported by Jamal, a [...] ghost figure whose self-actualization Egyptt also supports [...] A lot of times in these stories you get the one character that is a magical figure who is just there for the main character. I really wanted to invert that narrative of care being one-directional. (Tourmaline 2018)

In *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, the feeling of being immersed in water offers generative, nourishing, and materially and politically useful participation in thriving black social worlds. *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* does not recognize the Atlantic seabed as a place of settled disappearance, instead embracing its hauntological possibilities. Here, water, deep and boundless, is not something to fear, but something which shimmers, is adaptable, and is capable of concealing and sustaining that which flourishes just below the surface.

The bathwater is imagined as a metonym for the Atlantic Ocean, and the bath itself is imagined as a portal to another time. As Egyptt submerges herself, she is transported beneath the waves, borne down to the Atlantic seabed, to discover a vibrant, queer, convivial space where many wait to welcome her. After leaving the bath, but still beneath the Atlantic, Lewis and Labeija both emerge into a floral-wallpapered bedroom. Labeija and her ghost, the other Egyptt, played by Lewis, visually transform into and through one another. Immersion in the water offers participation in a methexic black trans relation; Labeija was alone before, but she now has a constant companion. They go about their *toilette*, at ease in each other's company, performing everyday tasks, slowly dressing in a corset and silk bathrobe respectively, encountering one another's gaze through a

mirror. The atmosphere is sororal at first, but subtle changes to the lighting, aspect ratio, and movements of the performers create a feeling of the uncanny, and a frisson of the erotic. The bedroom is suffused by a green-blue light – the light from the seabed – while the aspect ratio becomes “surreally anamorphic,” and the two Egyptts begin to circle one another, moving with angularity (Nyong’o 2018). Their fierce, purposeful movements are evocative of ballroom competitions, and it becomes increasingly unclear whether the two Egyptt’s are one and the same person, whether they are cruising each other, or whether there is a competitive edge to their performance. The indeterminacy unsettles and interests as the viewer wonders what the two Egyptts are to each other, and whether they experience the relation we are watching as capacitive, joyful, creative, erotic, or something else entirely.

As Nyong’o explains, chattel slavery, the Middle Passage, and their institutionalized afterlives in the convict lease and prison systems have “left a legacy of violently ungended black flesh” (Nyong’o 2018). Hortense Spillers argues that through forced conditions of fungibility, “the captive body reduces to a thing,” while “at the same time – in stunning contradiction,” becoming “the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality” (1987 67). As much as the atomization, fetishization, and disposability to which black people have been exposed has created conditions under which dehumanized people experience foreclosure from dominant paradigms of gendered being, this forced “ungendering” and “thingification” of the flesh has also become “a site of perpetual experimentation and improvisation” for black people (Nyong’o 2018). Ambivalent, exigent, and improvised forms of safety can be leveraged from being that which simply cannot be imagined by white epistemologies. In this way, indeterminacies, including gendered indeterminacies, sexual indeterminacies, and relational indeterminacies, can and do protect black

trans people from harm, even as they also, and unevenly, attract scrutiny, surveillance, and violence. *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* refuses to read the contradictory provocations of fungibility and hypervisibility, which are the Middle Passage's lethal legacy to black trans life in the present, as totalizing. The film instead focusses on the ways in which the "forced queering" of New World blackness has provided ground for significant and peculiar forms of agency to accrue and strengthen black resistance and black sociality:

queer relationships emerged in the holds of slave ships that crossed between West Africa and the Caribbean archipelago. I began to learn this black Atlantic when I was studying relationships between women in Suriname and delved into the etymology of the word *mati*. This is the word Creole women use for their female lovers: figuratively *mi mati* is "my girl," but literally it means *mate*, as in *shipmate*—she who survived the Middle Passage with me. (Tinsley 2008, 192)

Indeed, in different parts of the diaspora,

the relationship between people who came over to the "New" World on the same ship remained a peculiarity of this experience. The Brazilian "malungo," the Trinidadian "malongue," the Haitian "batiment" and the Surinamese "sippi" and "mati" are all examples of this special, non-biological bond between two people of the same sex. (Wekker 1994, 145, quoted in Tinsley 2008, 199)

As Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley observes, "some *mati* and *malungo* were probably sexual connections, others not"; but irrespective of whether these pairings were erotic, "relationships between shipmates read as queer relationships" (Tinsley 2008, 199). Not queer in the sense of retrievable, knowable, documentable "Atlantic, Caribbean, immigrant, or 'gay' pasts," but queer in the sense of a resistance praxis. Queer in the sense of "marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist" (Tinsley 2008, 199).

In this way, “stolen and disposable life finds new dispositions for itself and others” (Nyong’o 2018). That is to say, “the Black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic,” and “black life in and out of the ‘New World’ is always queered and more” (Tinsley 2008, 191; Sharpe 2016, 32). Lewis and Labeija’s fluid and constantly shifting, but never hostile, relationship recalls the queer platonic, erotic, and familial bonds created between captive Africans in the sex-segregated holds of the slave ships. The indeterminate qualities of Lewis and Labeija’s relationship – by turns familial, eroticized, confrontational, and joyful – is a queer relationship between those who, if they are not exactly shipmates, are mates in the wake, “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship [...] a region of disturbed flow” (Sharpe 2016, 3). To be in the wake is “to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (Sharpe 2016, 15). Lewis and Labeija speak to what a legacy of violent expulsion from gendered subjecthood can mean when it is repurposed by black queer people to aid their survival. By “feeling and feeling for their co-occupants on these ships,” stolen and enslaved people “resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies” (Tinsley 2008, 192). Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe how slave traders and owners operationalized conditions of forced contact and proximity in the hold of the ship to desensitize captive people to pain and containerization, and to alienate them from the sensory world. They contend that from these conditions, black life in the diaspora has succeeded in building generative and sensual languages of embodied care:

thrown together touching each other we were denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment, family, nation, language, religion, place, home. Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other. (Moten and Harney 2013, 98)

In this way, “the hold’s terrible gift [to captive people] was to gather dispossessed feelings in common” (Moten and Harney 2013, 98). Through conditions of forced contact and dehumanization, they argue, black life, both in the hold of the slave ship and in the wake of slavery has sought recourse to

another kind of feeling [...] a way of feeling through others, a feel for feeling others feeling you. This is [...] skin talk, tongue touch, breath speech, hand laugh. This is the feel that no individual can stand, and no state abide [...] to feel others is unmediated, immediately social, amongst us, our thing. (Moten and Harney 2013, 98)

That Lewis and Labeija care for one another, and seem able to do so in ways that are both sensual and practical, without the need for words, is immediately apparent from the way they regard each other and move around one another.

Lewis finally leads Labeija from the bedroom into “a mysterious interzone of trans and queer conviviality” (Nyong’o 2018). What follows is a montage, constructed from archival footage of Egyptt performing to a West Village crowd, interspersed with more sumptuous imagery of Egyptt’s face – made-up now – and dress. The camera lingers over Egyptt’s hands, eyes, and mouth, staging the haptic and sensual presence of the black trans body. Finally, Lewis and Labeija emerge into a dance club. The club used in the scene is a real New York club, the Spectrum. After a few moments, the walls of the club dissolve away, and many other people begin to arrive. The feel of this utopian interzone is futuristic, the people dancing are all black and brown, but cinematic effects make them shimmer. Many of the presences, which are iridescent and holographic, seem to be ghosts, or other magical entities. Multiple exposures compel these figures to dance on top of, over, and through one another beneath the surface of a rippling, oceanic exposure, creating the impression of heterogenous bodies cruising and dancing beneath the sea; it seems clear that Lewis

and Labeija are clubbing in Atlantis, or something like it. Here, which may be in New York, or may be at the bottom of the Atlantic, or is perhaps somewhere else entirely, Egyptt finds ways of being with herself and with others. She learns how to see the others who came before her, accept their support, and ratify their autonomy, agency, and capacity to continue to effect political change in the world from wherever (and whenever) they are.

This club scene is a moment in the film that is clearly coded as ratifying the actantial properties of magical beings and nonhuman forces such as ghosts and the Atlantic ocean. As such, it allows us to examine the idea of a privileged relation between queerness and magic, and the ways in which such a relation, if it exists, might afford marginalized people new and powerful capacities for action and survival on the political and social planes. What are the ontological implications of queer engagements with the supernatural? AJ Lewis asserts that while the direction of magic toward political ends is by no means unique to queer social justice movements, “queer communities do present a distinct case,” in that they recurrently claim special and “unique connections between the magical and the queer” (Lewis 2015, 13). Indeed, the connections between nonhuman agencies, magic, and queerness avowed by queer actors are not “strictly discursive or historical but ontological” (Lewis 2015, 13). What does it mean to believe that there is something about “nonnormative sexuality and gender” that has a “privileged relation to the supernatural, sacred, or divine”? (Lewis 2015, 13). *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* experiments with an ontology of queer that is rooted in domains which are understood to exceed human social orders. Unlike popular forms of white queer activism and historiography, which offer some non-Western cultures’ sacralization of gender variance as equivalent to, and proof of, queer and “witchy” magical powers in the Western present, for the black trans people in *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, the

belief that queerness is proximate to magic becomes the basis “for new kinds of political acting” which enable disallowed forms of care and reciprocity (Lewis 2015, 13). While some prevalent ontological mappings of queerness-as-magic have abetted the recapitulation of colonialist primitivisms – in the form of deracinated and reductive claims about the perceived gender and sexual nonconformity of premodern religious authorities – *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* demonstrates how “magical queer ontologies may hold a generative, imaginative, and political force” that is not “exhausted by [their] imperial function” (Lewis 2015, 13-14; Halberstam 2014, 140). In *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, magical ontologies are synonymous with the very things that distinguish trans of colour being; black transness is a special capacity for changing the world and for caring for others. Black transness is inexhaustible and inextinguishable, and will continue to flourish and thrive, despite being “systematically disallowed within the knowledge regimes of gender and sexuality studies” in an antiblack world (Lewis 2015, 14). The magical club scene in *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* documents “the outlawed social life of nothing,” and shows how black transness reinscribes dislocation as not simply left over space, but as an unregulated zone and perspective that simultaneously offers possibilities for fugitivity, resistance, sociability, and care (Halberstam 2013, 11-12). In *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, “fugitivity is not only escape,” but a way of learning that “there are spaces and modalities that exist separate from the logical, logistical, the housed and the positioned” which offer possibilities for life that exist beyond the wildest dreams of an antiblack state (Halberstam 2013, 11-12).

Across the remaining chapters of this thesis I carry forward the conceptual tools that have guided my readings of *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones* to explore fugitive forms of relationality and care crafted by trans people from within the scenes of subjection, dehumanization, and abstraction that have

subtended trans medicine and its eugenic antecedents. In the following chapter, I map the development of trans medicine, tracing racialized patterns of resource extraction and violent exclusion through its histories.

Chapter Three

Cultivating Plasticity: Histories of Trans Medicine

The earliest beginnings of endocrinology had as their *raison d'être* such ends as the procurement of a form of man-power safe for the harem, the salvaging of a male soprano voice for the choir, and the increased palatability that a rooster attains when he turns into a capon.

Fuller Albright, "Introduction to the diseases of the ductless glands."

The visual regimes of race and antiblackness that inflected the clinical treatment of actual children is a central feature of the modern medicalization of sex.

Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*

The term "trans medicine" describes a Western clinical assemblage which aims to diagnose and explain trans phenomena, as well as provide and regulate gender non-conforming people's access to healthcare and technologies of body-modification. It is, and has historically been, comprised of sexological fields like endocrinology, gynaecology, and urology; surgical fields; life sciences like genetics, embryology, and heredity; and other elements like psychology, psychoanalysis, and neuroscience. Although designated gender clinics were only formally established in the US in the 1960s, and although transsexuals were not regarded as a distinct demographic until roughly the same period, clinicians and life scientists had been studying the endocrine and sexed body in ways

that brought them into proximity with trans phenomena and trans and intersex people since at least the nineteenth century.²⁴

This chapter pays close attention to an overlooked history of trans medicine in order to contextualise the present day functions of the clinic. Historicising trans medicine in this way unmasks the well-camouflaged and covert logics which subtend the clinic's treatment of trans people. Attending to the historical conditions which produced trans medicine as we know it today discloses how the clinic can sometimes produce good, affirming, and hoped-for outcomes for individual trans people while still maintaining a culture of hostility and antagonism to trans life in general.

Frequently ignored and repudiated chapters from trans medicine's history reveal that trans medicine has functioned as a clinical project that sought to correct forms of life that were considered non-normative and phenotypically "undesirable". This history discloses that trans medicine emerged, in some important ways, from early twentieth century US and European eugenics movements, where medical research in heredity, sexology, and genetics aimed to improve national stock by manipulating acquired characteristics at the population level.²⁵

²⁴ The Johns Hopkins multidisciplinary gender clinic was formally opened in 1966; putatively the first of its kind in the US. Harry Benjamin was arguably the first clinician to produce a holistic therapeutic model aimed specifically at the diagnosis and treatment of transsexuals. See Benjamin 1966. Earlier engagements with transsexuality include Krafft-Ebing 1967, and the work of Karl Maria Kertbeny and Magnus Hirschfeld, among others. For historical details of clinicians' interactions with people we can read as trans in the early nineteenth century, see Heaney 2017.

²⁵ The research of many sexologists and protosexologists whose work touched on trans phenomena had explicitly eugenic motives, including Eugen Steinach, Paul Kammerer, Oscar Riddle, Thomas Hunt Morgan, Frank Lillie, and Richard Goldschmidt, among many others. See Kammerer and Steinach 1920, Riddle 1924, and Dietrich 2003, 68-74.

As I will go on to show, medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries pathologized people who did not fit narrowly conceived Eurocentric models of dimorphic sexual differentiation. Dimorphic sexual differentiation was framed as an evolutionary achievement, and people with any kind of incongruence between the number and type of their secondary sexual characteristics, their gonads, endocrinological profile, morphology, and psychological sex were framed phenotypically undesirable, less evolved, and more atavistic than idealized binary sexual subjects. As many have shown, the sexual subjects idealized by the nineteenth century and early twentieth century eugenics movement were always white-coded, and black and brown people were repeatedly associated with developmental waywardness, primitivity, and regression (Morland 2015, 76-77; Gill-Peterson 2018b, 100-101). To the nineteenth and early twentieth century European eugenics movement from which the medical fields of sexology and heredity are directly derived, “an abstract whiteness [...] signals the capacity for the scientific transformation of the body and mind in the broader service of the human species” (Morland 2015, 76-77; Gill-Peterson 2018b, 100-101).

Trans medicine emerged from nineteenth century medical fields like sexology, endocrinology, and heredity, which were primarily invested in cultivating phenotypes considered desirable. When trans medicine professionalized in the twentieth century, it retained a vested interest in producing “normal” bodies. In real terms, that has simultaneously entailed endeavours to recuperate white trans people from sexual dissidence back into phenotypic desirability through the surgical normalization of their bodies, as well as clinical attempts to instrumentalize black and brown people’s bodies as raw materials of knowledge production.

The consequences of trans medicine's attempts to extract valuable qualities and forms of knowledge from supposedly primitive bodies have been particularly grave for black and brown trans people. The history of trans medicine is saturated with examples of non-consensual and nontherapeutic medicalization of racialized subjects, and, in many ways, the early endocrinological clinics of the twentieth century functioned as an extension of the medical plantation (Washington 2006; Skloot 2010; Snorton 2017).²⁶ As we will see, all trans people, but predominantly black and brown trans people, as well as trans children, have experienced more than just metaphorical or abstract harm from being treated as “referents that rhetorically directed scientific and medical accounts of the endocrine system [...] in the early twentieth century”; their flesh has quite literally been the raw material harvested by the clinic (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 39).

Later in the chapter, I ask what impact this history of racialization has for the bodies and subjectivities it solicits for medicalization today. I demonstrate how the racializing imaginary which founded trans medicine continues to structure trans life chances in the present, determining which bodies are seen as pathological and expendable, and which are considered worth resourcing. For black and brown people this impact takes the form of dehumanization, instrumentalization, and resource plunder, as well as routine denials of access to healthcare, safety, and security. For white people, I argue, conditional welcome into the ambivalent shelter of the clinic is predicated on the commodification of their whiteness, which similarly atomizes the body, reduces it to a

²⁶ The concept of the medical plantation refers to a locality spatially separate from the cotton, rice, coffee, sugar, wheat or tobacco plantation and specifically designated for medical practice on enslaved women (Kuppers 2007). Doctors expanded enslaved women's instrumentalization as forced participants in plantation economies to include positioning them as the experimental subjects of medical economies. Experimental gynaecological procedures on enslaved women were commonplace in the nineteenth century, because the recurrence of vaginal fistulas meant that enslaved women's were less available for sexual exploitation, and their reproductive capacity could not effectively be used to produce slave capital.

repository of certain valued qualities, and is disinterested in the personhood of the body it medicalizes. I argue that trans medicine instrumentalizes bodies of all colours so that they can be made to do the metaphorical work required to narrate racialized epistemological shifts in medical knowledge production. While this harms everyone, including the white trans people who can most consistently gain access to gender affirming care, the most acute harms are experienced by BIPOC trans people, who continue to experience specific forms of violence, pathologization, fetishization, hypersexualization, and exploitation in the clinic, where those harms contribute to a general political reality and weather of antiblackness under which black trans life fails to register as meaningfully human.

In narrating the history of the gender clinic as one of racialization, I follow arguments made by Jules Gill-Peterson in *Histories of the Transgender Child* (2018b), Kyla Schuller in *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (2017), and Nancy Ordover in *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (2003). My analysis is also indebted to other scholarship that has proposed the history of the medicalization of trans phenomena might be better understood as the history of the body's plastic potential and its instrumentalization. Following Gill-Peterson, in this chapter I mostly refer to the prized capacity that clinicians have attempted to extract from trans bodies as plasticity, although other scholars have made analogous arguments using different terms; Morland has called it malleability; both Jasbir Puar and Schuller have called it impressability (Morland 2015; Puar 2015; Schuller 2017).

I connect the work of several historians whose work has touched on medicine's instrumentalization of the trans body, expanding those accounts further, especially with regard to the role antiblackness

has played in structuring trans medicine's epistemes for bodily alterability (Meyerowitz 2004; Crews et al. 2014; Ha 2011; Henderson 2005). For instance, some historiography of trans medicine has focussed on the work of prominent sexologists, though this scholarship mostly addresses the second half of the twentieth century, and has, with the exception of Cheryl Logan's *Hormones, Heredity, and Race: Spectacular Failure in Interwar Vienna* (2013), also largely failed to link trans medicine and the workings of the gender clinic to processes of racialization. My analysis aims to offer sustained attention to the interplay of antiblackness and the normalization of the trans body, locating the emergence of trans medicine's impulse to produce phenotypically desirable bodies as early as the nineteenth century.

To date, only a handful of scholars have published on the history of medicine's instrumentalization of the trans body in a way that comments on that process as a racializing one, with Gill-Peterson's account being by far the most comprehensive. Some other historians have written about similar themes; but these tend to either be shorter articles or less recent books (Jackson 2016; Ordovery 2003). Gill-Peterson's book, a recent full-length study, is easily the most far-reaching work to link medicine's instrumentalization of the trans body to techniques of racialization.

At the time of writing, *Histories of the Transgender Child* has only recently been published, but Gill-Peterson has published several articles on similar themes over the last five or so years; so her ideas have been percolating in trans studies for some time (Gill-Peterson 2014; 2015; 2017; 2018a). My chapter joins a growing body of scholarship – for example Amin (2018) and Aren Aizura (2018) – to engage with Gill-Peterson's theory of plasticity and expand it. My chapter, like Aizura's *Mobile Subjects* (2018), and Puar's "Bodies with New Organs" (2015), is especially

interested in how a history like Gill-Peterson's can be used to contextualise recent and ongoing political developments affecting trans lives.

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The emergence of plasticity, or impressability, as the dominant endocrinological imaginary of sex development has been a long process. This process arguably began in the nineteenth century, in the context of new debates around the organism, latent sexual characteristics, and natural bisexuality. As Schuller observes, debates in the nineteenth century between mechanist and vitalist views on life renewed inquiry into a set of questions about “form and genesis, inheritance and impressability, [...] the individual and the species,” and the relations between them (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 39; Schuller 2017, 35-36). An organismic model of biology was advanced in the late nineteenth century, which aimed to address the failure of cellular processes alone to explain ontogeny, development, evolution, inherited characteristics, and environmentally acquired characteristics (Haraway 1976, 33-64; Schuller 2017, 35-67).²⁷ Where mechanists explained the processes that made organic matter through physics and atomism, and where vitalists explained the special force that made the inorganic alive through a perceived distinction between “vital substance,” and ordinary matter, those who subscribed to the metaphor of the organism stressed the organism's capacity to receive impressions, both environmental and inherited, as integral to the organism's development (Haraway 1976).

²⁷ See also the work of nineteenth century biologists and zoologists W.E. Ritter, Georges Cuvier, and Geoffroy Saint-Hilare, among others.

The consequence of this widespread adoption of the organism and its inherent impressability was the proliferation of a “natural bisexuality” model of sexual differentiation, which held that organisms incubate both sexes and their characteristics in latent form. In his 1868 tract on heredity, Darwin articulated the newly popular theory of the organism’s natural bisexuality:

latent characters [...] the most obvious explanation is afforded by secondary sexual characters. In every female all the secondary male characters, and in every male all the secondary female characters, apparently exist in a latent state, ready to be evolved under certain conditions [...] We see something of an analogous nature in the human species. (Darwin 1896, 28)

Many other texts were written which supported this model of latent embryological bisexuality, and with them a proliferation of experiments aimed at altering the form and development of organisms by manipulating latent sexual characteristics.²⁸ It was from these experiments that both the field of endocrinology and the metaphor of the endocrine body emerged. In 1848 Arnold Adolph Berthold performed surgical orchiectomy on a group of cocks. Berthold observed “feminization” in the morphology and behaviour of the cocks whose testes he removed; they looked and behaved more like hens (Berthold 1944, 400-401). Berthold determined that such changes would not have been possible unless the birds incubated latent cross-sex characteristics. Darwin agreed:

it is well known that a large number of female birds [...] when old or diseased, or when operated on, partly assume the secondary male characters of their species [...] on the other hand, with male animals [...] the secondary sexual characters are [...] lost when they are subjected to castration [...] characters properly confined to the female are likewise acquired [...] the many well-ascertained cases of various male animals giving milk, show that their rudimentary mammary glands retain this capacity in a latent condition. (Darwin 1896, 28-29)

²⁸ See Hollingsworth 1884; Scott 1896; and Reed 1906 for examples.

Berthold then transplanted the testes he had removed into the stomachs of some of the birds, in order to ascertain whether the gonads could still function, separated from the nervous system. From the “masculinization” which took place following the transplant (the birds “exhibited the normal behavior of uncastrated fowls”), Berthold concluded that the gonads function by some means other than nerves: “it follows that the results in question are determined by the productive function of the testes [...] i.e., by their action on the blood stream, and then by corresponding reaction of the blood upon the entire organism” (Berthold 1944, 400-401). In this way, Berthold’s “concept of a system of chemical communication between various ‘ductless glands’ in the body by means of the circulatory system laid the basis for a specifically endocrine body” (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 40). Other physiologists working toward the end of the nineteenth century made analogous arguments.²⁹

This basic understanding of the endocrine body as one facilitated by the organism’s impressability was developed further by Ernest Starling and William Bayliss in the early twentieth century. Bayliss and Starling came up with the name “hormone” to help describe their theory of the endocrine system. They hypothesised that the function of the endocrine system was to integrate sexual differentiation and sexual reproduction:

sex, which was governed by hormones, simultaneously regulated the metabolism and the phenotypic form of the body (height, weight, bone structure, genitals, secondary sex characteristics), while ensuring the transmission of these traits to the next generation,

²⁹ In his *Cyclopedia of Anatomy and Physiology* (1852), W. B. Carpenter wrote an entry for the products of glands and their circulation which resembles “a sort of intuitive groping towards an endocrine control of intermediary metabolism” (Henderson 2005, 5). Claude Bernard, writing in 1855, is usually held responsible for the term “internal secretion,” which he used to describe the release of glucose from liver glycogen (Bernard 1855, 589–592). C. E. Brown-Séquard, writing in the 1890’s, theorized that every organ in the body produced an agent that could be extracted for therapeutic use, and moreover, that extracts from the gonads could be used therapeutically for the purpose of rejuvenation (Brown-Séquard 1889; 1893).

employing the same organs for both tasks. (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 42; Bayliss and Starling 1904)

Starling argued that:

The whole differentiation of sex, and the formation of secondary sexual characteristics, are determined by the circulation in the blood [...] Thus, it is possible by operating at an early age to transfer male into female and vice versa. (Bayliss and Starling 1904)

Bayliss and Starling reasoned that intervention in the developing endocrine body of a naturally bisexual organism would allow them to make real alterations to the organism's sexed form, and moreover, by the same means, ensure the hereditary transmission of desirable sexed forms.

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, it was well established that changes to sexual development and the expression of secondary sexual characteristics could be induced by manipulating the endocrine body. Although the field of endocrinological knowledge production was still in its infancy, and involved a good deal of speculation and uncertainty,³⁰ experiments such as those by Berthold, Bayliss, and Starling had demonstrated at least that sex, directed by surgical manipulation of the gonads, was a crucial means of access to the endocrine body. Moreover, if sex hormones could be synthesized, medical science could make direct alterations to the sexual differentiation and reproduction of the species. For neo-Lamarckian evolutionary biologists and population geneticists like Edward Drinker Cope, Robert Goldschmidt, and Eugen Steinach, the possibilities this implied seemed to promise new techniques for population improvement.

³⁰ See Henderson 2005, 9.

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As the field of endocrinology became more well established in the early years of the twentieth century, Gill-Peterson identifies two key developments which enabled American and European clinicians to move beyond experimenting on animals and move toward intervening in the human endocrine body (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 35-58). These developments were: firstly, renewed scientific attempts to draw an equivalence between the hypersexualised body of colour and species-level primitivism; and secondly, the establishment of the child study movement, which contended that both the plasticity of the body and the impressability of the mind were optimised for cultivation in childhood. These developments effectively recoded adolescence (a term which did not exist before 1904) as a period of crisis, during which the child's diminishing plasticity must be manipulated into congruence with a strict teleology of biological development, lest abnormal and undesirable growth occur and be inherited by future generations. In this way, childhood, as well as the new category of adolescence, were seen as a critical period in which the ideal, mature phenotype of the human could be cultivated. As they have always been in the US and Europe, ideal phenotypes were racialized as white, and nonwhite phenotypes articulated as hypersexualized, atavistic, and primitive.

With his theory of "civilization," and its relation to both racial purity and sexual dimorphism, Edward Drinker Cope, a neo-Lamarckian anatomist working at the end of the nineteenth century, helped to set the scene for the imbrication of sexological sciences in explicitly eugenic twentieth century population-improvement projects (Cope 1888). As Schuller explains, within Cope's logic of civilization "the two sexes represented a unique achievement of the civilized race" (Schuller

2017, 60). Cope and his fellow evolutionists, anthropologists, and anatomists “determined that only the civilized had reached the stage of sexual dimorphism and that all other peoples had only one sex” (Schuller 2017, 60; Ordoover 2003; Carter 2007). Cope argued that humankind was differentiated from nonhuman animals through sex-differentiated characteristics; while physical sex was a universal feature of both humanity and animality, only the civilized had achieved the level of sexual differentiation proper to the human (Cope 1888). Such logic simultaneously fed “elaborate caricatures of the androgyny of nonwhite and poor peoples,” and supposedly explained the hypersexuality attributed to black people (Schuller 2017, 60; Morgan 1877; Ordoover 2003). Cope argued that Anglo-Saxons represented the top rung of the evolutionary ladder; Anglo-Saxon phenotypes, he argued, characterised by the most highly differentiated physical and psychological profiles, represented the best possible forms of the human, and all population improvement projects should be directed toward their cultivation. For the great majority of the consolidating white middle-class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “sex difference represented racial attainment. Male and female were racial achievements born of the feedback loop between the material and cultural aspects of civilization” (Schuller 2017, 60).

Eugenic paradigms, such as Cope’s, advanced and attempted to rationalize a self-contradictory logic: black and brown bodies were, on one hand, undifferentiated, animal, and primitive, and on the other, hypersexual and endocrinologically overactive. In 1920, endocrinologist Eugen Steinach and biologist Paul Kammerer published *Climate and Puberty*; a paper which drew on the new theory of the endocrine body, and the ways in which morphology could be acquired, influenced, and inherited, in order to demonstrate and affirm a white supremacist evolutionary hierarchy. In the experiment which preceded their paper, rats born and raised in hot conditions supposedly

experienced a more rapid onset of pubertal development than those reared in temperate conditions. Additionally, the hot-conditions rats apparently developed more pronounced secondary sexual characteristics (Kammerer and Steinach 1920; Logan 2013, 65-73). When Steinach and Kammerer bred the rats, they reported that these sexed forms were heritable (Kammerer and Steinach 1920; Logan 2013, 65-73). They transposed their findings by analogy to humans, arguing that their experiment explained the hypersexualization, precocious puberty, and overdevelopment of secondary sexual characteristics which they attributed to nonwhite and non-European people from warm climates (Kammerer and Steinach 1920; Logan 2013, 65-73). Clinicians began to speculate about how they could use the bodies of black and brown people as a raw material for medical knowledge production. That is, they reasoned that if they could work out how to manipulate plasticity in the bodies of primitive beings, perhaps that knowledge could be enlisted to produce alterations in those with phenotypically desirable characteristics, in order to promote the betterment of national stock across generations.

Concomitantly to these developments in racial science, it was theorized by proponents of the child study movement that organisms in their juvenile stages were more impressable, more plastic, and more amenable to alterations of form. As Gill-Peterson shows, G. Stanley Hall established the category of adolescence in 1904, defining childhood as “the age of modification and plasticity” (Hall 1904, 128; Gill-Peterson 2018b, 47-48). In his influential book *Adolescence* (1904), Hall coded adolescence as a critical period, during which the degree of impressability juveniles incubated began to diminish. Adolescence was coded as a strict and linear teleology of somatic and psychological development. Hall argued that with the “wrong” environmental conditions, plasticity could go “dangerously” awry: “some linger long in the childish stage and advance late

or slowly [...] while others push on with a sudden outburst of impulsion to early maturity” (Hall 1904, xiii). Hall linked noncompliance with his teleology of pubertal development to “disorders of arrest and defect as well as of excessive unfoldment in some function, part, or organ” (Hall 1904, xiv). Hall argued that BIPOC children were especially prone to both precocious and delayed puberties (relative to his own model of ideal pubertal timing, which implicitly coded white bodies as the norm from which nonwhite bodies deviated), and that this explained their predisposition to “perversion, [...] hoodlumism, juvenile crime, and secret vice” (Hall 1904, xiv). Hall used his experiments with developmental thresholds to argue that the plastic indeterminacy all children incubated could not necessarily “be counted upon to achieve the specific (and fundamentally racist) form of the human that [he] advocated” (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 47). Therefore, he argued, the temporary plasticity incubated by juveniles required the intervention of “science, medicine, and education” in order to produce correspondingly normal growth and normative adults, ready to pass on desirable characteristics to future generations (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 47).

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Following Hall’s logic, during the early twentieth century, the first attempts were made to manipulate and cultivate the plasticity of juvenile humans and animals and encourage the transmission of racialized phenotypes coded as refined, civilized, and desirable to future generations. The techniques used for these early attempts mostly took the form of experimental attempts at hormone administration. In the US and Europe, both of which already had well-established traditions of non-consensual and nontherapeutic medical experimentation on nonwhite and captive people, these early endocrinological experiments largely used racialized subjects,

children, animals, and prisoners as their raw material.³¹ At the Brady Urological Institute of Johns Hopkins, Hugh Hampton Young alighted on the bodies of intersex children as the ideal experimental object of plasticity. Following contemporary logics, he believed that intersex conditions, while undesirable in and of themselves, were an expression of a far more valuable juvenile plasticity.³² Young speculated that endocrinological interventions in the bodies of children might produce the desired developmental organization to sex. In 1935, Young was contacted by another doctor, Edwards A. Park, about a black child, who had been diagnosed with hermaphroditism. This letter helps us decode and understand the racial significance of the shift in these decades from experiments on the sexed plasticity of animals to experiments on the sexed plasticity of humans. Park is writing about sex and evolution, and in the letter he draws equivalences between this black child's intersex body and the bodies of nonhuman animals:

[the letter] contains a complete review of the subject in different forms of life [and] discusses the basis of hermaphroditism in animals. From the picture [of the patient] I judge that the condition which you found in the little colored girl has been duplicated in mammals.³³

In this letter, Park conjures an imagined evolutionary regression, in line with the racial science of the day, which equates this black child's intersex body to an atavistic, primitive animality. Young subscribed wholesale to this model of racial plasticity. At the Brady Institute, he presided over a program for the normalization of intersex bodies. His primary test subjects were black people and children, on whom he conducted many non-consensual, nontherapeutic, and life-ending

³¹ See Snorton 2017, 17-54; Blue 2009; Washington 2006 for examples.

³² See also Riddle, an endocrinologist who experimented on animals and first theorized that juvenile "hermaphrodite" birds "might actually be a sex-reversal that had yet to complete" (Riddle 1924, 170 [cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 54]).

³³ Edwards A. Park to Hugh Hampton Young, June 19, 1935, Folder 3, Box 3, Series 1, EP [cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 79].

surgeries.³⁴ As is well documented, the prevailing ethos of Johns Hopkins was that as a medical institution founded with the philanthropic goal of serving the poor, clinicians expected total and unrestricted access to the bodies of the people they supposedly aided (Washington 2006; Skloot 2010). Johns Hopkins became notorious for the practices of “night doctors,” who kidnapped and grave-robbled with impunity in the black communities of East Baltimore (Washington 2006, 115-142; Skloot 2010, 158-169). Research at Hopkins, as in the majority of US university hospitals, did not imagine that black and brown people were meaningfully human; as such, they frequently subjected them to coercive and nontherapeutic experimentation (Washington 2006, 115-142; Snorton 2017, 17-54). As Gill-Peterson shows, many black families in Baltimore were relatively accepting of intersex children, repeatedly querying the need for medical reassignment to binary sex.³⁵ Young collaborated with Hopkin’s Social Work Department and other social services to encourage the surveillance, coercion, and intimidation of black families with intersex children, in order to guarantee access to their children and compliance with his protocols.³⁶ Between 1915 and the 1950s Young and his Brady Institute team treated at least 139 people for hermaphroditism (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 70). Young developed a series of surgical and organotherapeutic interventions, including a largely unsuccessful procedure, adrenalectomy, to excise the adrenal glands of children with hyperplasia, whom he considered overly masculinized.³⁷ While the procedure did decrease adrenal androgens in the bloodstream, it also killed many of the children to receive the treatment (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 71). In this way, Young was unable exert

³⁴ See Gill-Peterson 2018b, 71.

³⁵ See, for example, 1005.2, HHY [cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 75].

³⁶ For cases of black intersex children from this era, see 2001.17 and 2001.6, EP [cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 79].

³⁷ Young developed plastic surgeries to lengthen hypospadiac penises, as well as vaginectomies in male-assigned patients, and clitoral amputations and vaginoplastic procedures for female-assigned patients, Young 1937.

endocrinological influence on children patient's plasticity to any great extent. He contented himself with plastic alterations of their morphology and genitals, where inducing cosmetic changes was intended to give the illusion of the intersex body's compliance with binary sex (Reddick 2004).

After some years, when surgeons became more practiced, having honed their surgical technique on poor, racialized, incarcerated, and child subjects, elements of these procedures became both available and desirable to an elite coterie of wealthy clients. Experiments to leverage the plasticity of juveniles, such as Young's, were harnessed now with the explicit intention of racial rejuvenation, and the normalization of the white body. Steinach (1861–1944), an Austrian physiologist, began to offer a highly commodified and relatively risk-free organotherapeutic procedure to aristocratic and middle-class patrons, claiming benefits that included reduced fatigue and improved sexual potency in men (Logan 2013; Crews et al. 2014; Amin 2018). Steinach's procedure is a direct relative of the experimental organotherapies trialled on intersex children and racialized subjects by clinicians like Young (Amin 2018). Medical knowledge yielded by the disposable bodies Young's experiments were practiced on paved the way for middle class patients – who saw access to innovative medical technologies and renowned clinicians as hallmarks of upward mobility, refinement, and civilization – to receive exclusive forms of healthcare.³⁸ This, for Steinach, Kammerer, and the hundreds of other white supremacist physiologists, embryologists and geneticists working in the first half of the twentieth century, represented the proper eugenic end to which plasticity, now that they were confident it existed and could be endocrinologically manipulated, should be turned; racial rejuvenation and improvement of national stock. Plasticity

³⁸ For more on how the consolidating middle-classes of the twentieth century found that newly available models of medical diagnosis and treatment sutured them to upward mobility and socially desirable forms of citizenship, see Heaney 2017.

could and should be studied in and mined from less evolved, less differentiated, and more unruly bodies in order to be put to service in the production of refined, properly differentiated, sexually dimorphic bodies named as phenotypically desirable.

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By the mid-twentieth century, several things had occurred which prompted developments in the ways plasticity was made to signify in the endocrine body. Pharmacologists had successfully synthesised bioidentical versions of the sex hormones testosterone, progesterone, and oestrogen, providing new possibilities for intervention in the human endocrine body.³⁹ At the same time, clinicians who altered the bodies of intersex children began to become uneasy, not because they had developed any reservations about denying children's agency and self-knowledge, or testing their theories on nonconsenting subjects, but because the plasticity they had banked on to reassign a binary morphology to intersex bodies was starting to appear so unruly, unwieldy, and irrepressible that it seemed to challenge whether there was a stable scientific rationale for binary sex at all. To avoid the conceptual crisis this revelation posed, as Gill-Peterson shows, endocrinologists and sexologists at the university clinics doubled down on their efforts to reassign intersex bodies. They implemented new diagnostic protocols, attempted to standardize treatment, and enlisted newly available synthetic hormones to manipulate the juvenile endocrine body on a scale that was broader in scope than any preceding effort. In this way the mid-twentieth century

³⁹ Testosterone was first isolated and synthesized in 1935. Shortly thereafter, in 1937, testosterone became commercially available as a pharmaceutical drug in the form of pellets and then in ester form for intramuscular injection; Taylor 2002. While oestrogens extracted from the ovaries, urine, and placentas of pregnant women have been available since the late 1800s, the first pharmaceutical oestrogens were synthesized in 1929; Tata 2005.

marked a period of intensification of the discourse of plasticity, as it became yoked, for the first time, to something like a standardised diagnostic model for sex non-conformity.

As Jemima Repo, Paul B. Preciado, and Gill-Peterson have demonstrated, by the mid-twentieth century, the bodies of intersex children, already instrumentalized by clinicians of all stripes, were pressured even more decisively to signify how abstract theories of endocrinology could be translated into a real surgical episteme for the medical consolidation of binary sex (Repo 2013; Preciado 2013; Gill-Peterson 2018b). In tasking intersex bodies to reveal a blueprint for how impressability could be translated into binary phenotypes, the stakes were high. Clinicians increasingly feared medical taxonomies of human sex were becoming unstable and unconvincing, inadvertently abetted by their own efforts. Since experimentation with plasticity had revealed human sex was composed of a great many factors, none of which exerted what could be described as a deterministic influence, clinicians were forced to consider the ways in which their work, intended to shore up ideas of binary sex and dyadic sexual differentiation, fell well short of the mark (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 97).⁴⁰ Clinicians found themselves confronted with “an infinite variability of bodies and desires,” including “multiple chromosomal, gonadal, hormonal, external genital, psychological, and political variables” that could not be straightforwardly explained by sexual dimorphism and heteroreproductivity (Preciado 2013, 105). When clinicians learned that their surgical, prosthetic, and hormonal techniques could not prove “sex to be natural, definitive, unchangeable, and transcendental,” and in fact proved the opposite; that sex is “malleable, variable, open to transformation, and imitable,” they resolved that their techniques must be leveraged to create an “artificially construct[ed] sexual dimorphism” (Preciado 2013, 105). The

⁴⁰ Such factors included gonads, hormones, chromosomes, genitals, internal organs, secondary anatomical features, and more.

protocols introduced by Young at Johns Hopkins reconceptualized intersex as a medical and social emergency (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 97). If the developing human embryo was originally mixed, it could not be guaranteed that a child would reach a binary form in adulthood. The instability of plasticity, and its ability to query whether humans were really sexually dimorphic, caused clinicians concern, even as that same plasticity seemed to promise the medical means from which to produce a binary (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 97-100). The demonstrable precarity of plasticity drove researchers to reassign intersex bodies as a matter of urgency.

Where Young's organotherapies were largely unsuccessful in reassigning intersex bodies as he intended, by the 1930s, his co-worker, Lawson Wilkins, was able to streamline the process. With the help of newly available synthetic sex hormones, Wilkins began treating intersex children on a nearly industrial scale. Under Wilkins, who directed the Brady Urological Institute after Young in the late 1940s, the number of intersex child patients seen at Johns Hopkins increased by five times (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 70). Whereas Young's patients had mostly been recruited from the local neighbourhoods of Baltimore, under Wilkins, the Institute began to see patients referred from much further afield, broadening the scope of the medical project to install binary sex in real terms. Like it had been for Young, Wilkins conceived of the intersex body as a plastic, undifferentiated body, medical intervention into which was necessary to guide the organism toward its complete, ideal phenotypic form (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 114). Whereas under Young – in the days when the organotherapeutic reassignment of the intersex body frequently killed the patient – surgeries had been performed on black children; under Wilkins, those treated were almost exclusively white. In fact, as Gill-Peterson shows, Wilkins treated only a handful of black intersex children during his

tenure at the Brady Urological Institute, whom staff records from this period uniformly dismiss as more unreasonable, “difficult,” illogical, and opposed to treatment than their white counterparts.⁴¹

The fact that – now the treatment was no longer likely to kill the patient – the majority of children treated for intersex conditions were white describes the ongoing racialization of plasticity in this period.⁴² As Edwards A. Park’s letter to Hugh Hampton Young demonstrates, black children were subjected to organotherapeutic procedures because the primitivity clinicians projected onto their bodies marked them as nonpeople, appropriate experimental medical subjects precisely because they were regarded as always already outside of the normativity a “cure” could promise.⁴³ Now, in a new iteration of this old logic, white children were subjected to similar procedures precisely because the presumption that their bodies incubated plasticity, coded as potential, enabled clinicians to imagine them as eligible for reintegration into normative citizenship structured by proper sex differentiation. Wilkins projected an abstract sense of alterability onto white children, where “the plasticity of white children’s intersex bodies, in spite of being abnormal, was nevertheless valuable for its biological potentiality” that “medicine could cultivate” (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 80). In this way, the phenotypically undesirable body of a child diagnosed with hermaphroditism could be and was rescued for normativity and made valuable through plasticity.

Repo agrees, arguing that

the hermaphroditic subject was a subject of biopolitical potentiality: a subject who, through the surgical alteration of genitals, could be psychologically managed into a different-sex desiring subject and hence become a subject useful for the reproduction of social order. (Repo 2013, 234)

⁴¹ See 2001.17 and 2001.6, EP [cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 79].

⁴² Although most intersex conditions have no life-threatening implications, what Wilkins called “congenital adrenal hyperplasia” was sometimes associated with a life-threatening sodium deficiency; Gill-Peterson 2018b, 102-123.

⁴³ See 2001.17 and 2001.6, EP [cited in Gill-Peterson, 2018b, 79].

The first gender clinics to treat transsexuals emerged from, and overlapped significantly with, the accelerating clinical project to reassign intersex bodies. In the mid-century, as Heaney puts it, “the life story of the sexological invert attached to the possibility of surgical services for people seeking social recognition of their sex identity” (Heaney 2017, 26). A growing number of people who we can now productively understand as in some way trans began to astutely and opportunistically recognise developments in intersex medicine, endocrinology, and surgery as potential pathways to body modification, medical transition, and rudimentary trans healthcare (Heaney 2017, 26; Meyerowitz 2004, 99-100).⁴⁴ Clinicians sought to name and explain the increasing numbers of people who were not intersex presenting at endocrinological clinics seeking hormonal masculinization or feminization; they would eventually name the rubric on which they alighted transsexuality.

At the same time, sexologists involved in the normalization of intersex bodies, such as John Money and Robert Stoller, invented a new term, “gender”, to help shore up the increasingly unstable scientific rationale for insisting on the reality of binary sex (Morland 2015; Meyerowitz 2004). Money was interested in intersex children who appeared to contradict the gonadocentric paradigm which organised endocrine medicine at the time. He met an intersex teenager whose parents had been advised to raise them as a boy, because they had been born with visible testes. The teenager, who said that inside they felt like more of a boy, now looked like a girl to most, due to the feminine morphology their hormonal puberty had induced (Money 1995, 19). Money recognised that the

⁴⁴ For example, see the case of Lane, a patient at Johns Hopkins in 1959, whose records state unambiguously “I would like to be converted from male into female as completely as possible” (5016.3, BUI) [cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 133].

science of his day was not equipped to reconcile the apparent paradox of an intersex child who was, by gonadal definition, male; by morphological and hormonal definition, female; and who, when asked, reported that they felt psychologically “like a boy” (Money 1995, 19). The child’s doctors were unable to agree on a medical sex assignment for the child, and the episode proved to be an important catalyst for Money’s invention of gender. In 1951, Wilkins hired Money to work at Johns Hopkins as a paediatrician. During his tenure there, Money wrote about his special interest in “cases of contradiction between gonadal sex and sex of rearing” (Money 1955, 255). He attempted to delineate differences between the “endogenous hormonal sex,” “type of hermaphroditism,” and “gender role” of intersex patients; where “gender role” is “used to signify all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman” (Money, Hampson, and Hampson 1955, 285). He concluded that “gonadal structure per se proved a most unreliable prognosticator of a person’s gender role and orientation as man or woman,” while “assigned sex proved an extremely reliable one” (Money 1955, 254). Money and Stoller, recognising that the gonads held no predictive value, shared Wilkins’ growing mistrust of the prevailing gonadal model, and joined him in his aim to replace it with a new system, in order to rescue the sex binary from the imminent collapse their own experiments with plasticity had catalysed (Morland 2015).

Money’s new system for assigning a gender to intersex children – which for the first time incorporated an acknowledgement of the “psychological sex” of the patient as an influence on sex assignment and reassignment, laid the foundation of trans medicine in the US. In 1965, Money went on to establish the Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic, the first of its kind in the US. Meyerowitz notes that the clinic’s explicit intention was to “reinforce the traditional norms of

gender in children who defied them,” using a “conservative clinical treatment that attempted to contain unconventional gender behavior and dispel the uncertainties concerning sex” (Meyerowitz 2004, 100). Unsurprisingly, Money’s protocol for diagnosing transsexuality and assigning a gender to transsexuals was heavily influenced by contemporary theories about juvenility, plasticity, and impressability. Under Money and Stoller, the idea of diminishing juvenile plasticity was refitted to justify their treatment protocols for transsexuals. Just like in his protocols for intersex children, Money’s system for treating transsexuals was predicated on whether his intervention came before or after “gender awareness becomes established,” at an age he located in infancy (Money, Hampson, and Hampson 1955, 289). Money believed that if he intervened early enough, the alterations that plasticity allowed him to make would be psychologically accepted by the child. Therefore, he reasoned, the best course of action was to choose a sex for the child that could most easily be matched to the appearance of the external genitals, surgically assign the child that sex in early infancy, and insist on the child being raised by their parents to perform the correct social role, in order to ensure the desired harmony between gender role and morphological and hormonal sex. Act too late, Money feared, and the child’s “misconceptions” (by which he meant self-determination) of their own gender would become so firmly entrenched as to be “ineradicable” (Money, Hampson, and Hampson 1955, 298-299). As Meyerowitz explains, Money’s system had everything to do with the concept of diminishing thresholds of impressability from childhood through adulthood:

scientists who studied intersexuality adopted the concept of a deeply rooted sense of “psychological sex.” Some of them suggested that hormones or genes created psychological sex, but others considered it conditioned, imprinted, or learned. In any case, they claimed that no one could change an adult’s psychological sex. Once established, they asserted, the sense of being a man or a woman remained firmly entrenched, immune to both psychotherapeutic and medical interventions. They applied this conception of psychological sex—which they later labeled “gender role and orientation” and “gender

identity”—first to people with intersexed conditions and then to transsexuals. In this view, the mind—the sense of self—was less malleable than the body. (Meyerowitz 2004, 99)

Money and Stoller at Johns Hopkins, and Harry Benjamin in New York transposed this logic to the transsexuals they saw at their respective gender clinics and practices: they believed that transsexual children were malleable enough that they could be convinced not to be transsexual, while the gender identities of transsexual adolescents and adults were too firmly entrenched to be treated psychotherapeutically; their cross-sex identification would need to be treated surgically and hormonally instead. Meyerowitz explains,

to some doctors, the transformation of the body seemed the best solution to the transsexual dilemma. To others, psychotherapy in childhood seemed to promise a better, and less controversial, result: the prevention of crossgender identification in adults. (Meyerowitz 2004, 100)

Fairly typically of clinicians in this era, Stoller, working under Money, was very willing to support surgical and endocrinological transition for adolescent and adult transsexual patients on the basis that his psychotherapy did not work on them: “It seems impossible to treat the adult transsexual successfully [...] even at age 6 or 7, our work is formidable” (Stoller 1975, 101). For younger children however, the standard protocol consisted of an attempt to recruit their presumed plasticity toward a preventative paediatrics which aimed to intercept and arrest the existence of transsexual adults:

If profound cross-gender orientation is detected early in life, no later than by age five or six and intensive individual therapy for the child and counseling for the family instituted on a regular basis, reversal of gender orientation is possible.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Lawrence Newman, “Transsexualism in Adolescence: Problems in Evaluation and Treatment,” typed manuscript, no date 3, Box 9, RS, [cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 148].

Predictably, psychotherapeutic methods of convincing trans people they were not trans were as ineffective when applied to young children as they were on adults. Regardless, as Gill-Peterson observes, the “intensified emphasis on the childhood onset of gender identity magnified the importance of children to the medicalization of transsexuality” during the mid-century. In this way, the abstracted sense of potential, malleability, and capacity for change that was projected on the white body in general, and the bodies of white children in particular, became inextricable from the clinical management of trans embodiment in the west (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 146).

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In our present historical moment, plasticity and its abstract value continue to circulate in medical practice and knowledge production. While trans medicine is no longer seen by most as having an explicitly white supremacist agenda, it still has a deep stake in producing normative bodies (Puar 2015). This manifests in various ways, including in transition narratives that code the white body as exceptional (Aizura 2018), in extreme racialized disparities in healthcare access, and a related and proliferating racialized medical tourism industry. Close attention to the history of the gender clinic helps us to see these harms as part of a continuum of racialized harm, even as we attempt to respond with specificity to the conditions of the present.

After the mid-century, gender clinics in the US became much more numerous. Through the 1960s-1970s, university clinics were established at Johns Hopkins, UCLA, Minnesota, Washington-Seattle, Stanford, and Northwestern Chicago (Meyerowitz 2004, 222). Several landmark publications in this period – such as *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*, and *The Transsexual*

Phenomenon (Green 1969; Benjamin 1966) – paved the way for the codification in 1980 of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) into the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Increasing numbers of white children successfully accessed medical transition prior to the age of majority (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 176). Clinicians permitted this because the racialized plasticity their bodies were theorized to harbour supposedly also guaranteed the reversibility of medical transition, should it prove necessary later on. Several clinicians, and even some patients, specifically articulated the plasticity of the white body as the rationale for conducting childhood surgeries:

I am willing to consent to mastectomy much earlier [...] because it does make occupational adjustment as a male much easier [and] it is not too difficult to do a breast implant, should there be a change of heart at any time in the future [...] I definitely go along with the idea of early treatment with male sex hormones [because their effects are reversible; only a lowering of the voice is] irreversible and permanent. (Money 1973)

[Experts] all seem to agree that the effects of hormone treatment, with the exception of the deepening of the voice, are reversible when the dosage is stopped. Under these circumstances, I feel that minors ought to be able to receive treatment without parental consent.⁴⁶

As recently as this year, the eligibility of trans children for forms of endocrinological and surgical treatment is clinically determined by the potential for their future reversal (Ortberg 2020, 44-60; Mermaids 2021). Under such extreme conditions of surveillance, suspicion, and medical gatekeeping, the success of any trans children who want and need to access gender confirming care is, without exception, a cause for celebration; however, the broader clinical logic that facilitates medical transition only on the condition that it can be reversed warrants scrutiny. As Gill-Peterson astutely observes, “the pernicious quality” of the discourse of reversibility in the

⁴⁶ “D.U.” to Charles Ihlenfeld, July 2, 1976, Box 3, Series II-C, HB. [cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 173].

plastic juvenile body “is that it could at one and the same time enable Money to advocate for hormone therapy and top surgery for trans boys,” on the grounds that it could be reversed if need be, while “also letting [clinicians] imagine reversing transgender identity and embodiment out of existence” through a program of aggressive psychotherapy that aimed to cure GID in children, and prevent the existence of trans adults (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 183). In this way, regardless of the access that individual children are sometimes able to leverage through some combination of their own persistence and shrewd ability to echo the accepted clinical rhetoric of the day, trans medicine as a broader project remains dedicated to eradicating cross-gender identification before it can be consolidated. Despite individual instances of (usually white) trans people being read as articulate, self-transparent, and insistent enough about their needs to warrant being granted access to gender-affirming healthcare, trans medicine, by and large, regards trans people as people without agency, and refuses to recognise our choices as those of self-possessed, rational, lucid subjects.

At the same time as Money, Stoller, Benjamin, and others were scaling up the numbers of trans patients they accepted as candidates for medical transition, US gender clinics continued to treat very few black patients; access to gender affirming healthcare at the age of minority was virtually unheard of for black children (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 185). There were several reasons for this: black people were far more likely to be turned away from the clinic than white people, and frequently experienced worse healthcare outcomes when they did manage to access it, while at the same time black people were wary of the gender clinic, often actively avoiding interactions with doctors, especially at clinics like Johns Hopkins, which were well-known in black communities for racist, harmful, non-consensual, and coercive practices (Washington 2006, 115-142; Skloot 2010, 158-

169).⁴⁷ Racialized differential access to gender affirming care persists today.⁴⁸ The homology that trans medicine had always drawn between black and brown bodies and evolutionary primitivism has been both more deeply entrenched, and made more invisible in our present moment. Replacing the explicit white supremacism that prevailed in early twentieth century sexology, endocrinology, and population genetics, we now have a range of biopolitical tactics and population-level interventions, mobilized in the name of promoting the life of the population against perceived threats. These interventions operate by sorting and producing regularities rather than by individual targeting. The explicit clinical work of claiming that black and brown bodies are primitive, atavistic, hypersexed, and endocrinologically overproductive – and therefore not plastic enough to warrant access to trans healthcare – is today achieved through biopolitical tools for constituting and normalizing populations. Foucault suggests that the link between biopolitics and discipline is “the norm”:

In more general terms, we can say that there is one element that will circulate between the disciplinary and the regulatory, which will also be applied to the body and population alike, which will make it possible to control both the disciplinary order of the body and the aleatory events that occur in the biopolitical multiplicity. The element that circulates between the two is the norm. The norm is something that can be applied both to a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularize. (Foucault 2003, 253)

This kind of power, and its specific concern with normalizing the population, relies heavily on the collection and analysis of standardized data, statistics, and statistical measure as a feature of biopolitics. Biopolitics describes how and why statistical projects, sorting and counting technologies, and recordkeeping technologies use data to create norms, producing structured

⁴⁷ Perhaps speaking to this well-founded wariness, Meyerowitz notes that “in one study of letters from 500 people requesting evaluation for surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital in the late 1960s,” only 13 of the applicants were black (Meyerowitz 2004, 134; Pauly 1969, 73).

⁴⁸ This is something made visible in the testimonials in Cotten 2012.

insecurity for populations framed as statistical outliers. In the context of Foucault's description of biopolitics as a form of power concerned with cultivating the life of the population, we may ask how this life-giving power can also incur death, exposure, and precarity. The answer Foucault gives to this question is "state racism": he observes that population-focused normalizing power is always in the business of identifying threats and drains to the population (Foucault 2003, 253-256). The destruction of these perceived threats and drains is always present in biopolitics. Achille Mbembe describes Foucault's notion of racism in the context of biopolitics by saying:

This control presupposes the distribution of human species into groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others.... In Foucault's terms, ... the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state. (Mbembe 2003, 17)

A good example of how this works in practice in trans medicine is the Tanner scale for puberty development, which attempts to naturalize the assumption that BIPOC people lack plasticity, and consequently mark them as ineligible for gender affirming care. In 1969, James Tanner, a British paediatrician, made a longitudinal study of the bodies of girls and boys from childhood to adulthood. The data was used to predict the onset and development of pubertal changes; Tanner and his colleagues proposed a statistical model for the "normal" progression of puberty and appearance of secondary sex characteristics in adolescents (Marshall and Tanner 1969; 1970). The resulting scale was obviously a poor fit with the overwhelming variability in actual rates of child development but had the effect of pathologizing any and all children who fell outside its parameters of normality. Because the scale focusses on centring white phenotypes as normal, the children who are treated as outliers are mostly black and brown (Marshall and Tanner 1969; 1970). Importantly, Foucault explains that killing, in biopolitical power, "do[es] not mean simply murder as such, but

also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (Foucault 2003, 256). As he explains, the function of biopolitical power is not the “right to kill” as in sovereignty, but the power to “make live and let die” (Foucault 2003, 241). Although the Tanner scale was ostensibly imagined as a way to “handle the overwhelming *variability* in child development,” in practice, the scale imagines certain white children as the norm from which BIPOC children deviate, where any divergence from the timing and growth rates of genitals, height, weight, and secondary sex characteristics the scale arbitrarily identifies as normal is coded as a developmental problem (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 184). In this way, biopolitical population sorting tools like the Tanner scale conceptualize children whose puberties do not align with its imagined norms as threats to the medical project of managing and regularizing child development. These children are consequently exposed to very real and sometimes contradictory harms, including but not limited to being disqualified from gender affirming healthcare on the grounds that their bodies are too unruly to benefit from treatment; being exposed to medically unnecessary and non-consensual treatments to “normalize” their bodies, and being exposed to obsessive and hypersexualized medical scrutiny focussed on the supposedly precocious pubertal development of black and brown girls (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 184). In this way, inventions like the Tanner scale have come to function as the new administrative apparatus for assessing sexual plasticity, where black and brown trans children are told trans identification is either impossible for them, or the result of a pathologized and developmentally disordered puberty.

Although our clinical model of trans healthcare undoubtedly incurs – and always has – profound material harms for white trans children, including extreme surveillance, withheld resources, denial

of agency and self-knowledge, and instrumentalization, it is nevertheless crucial to recognise that medicalization was and is “actually a relative privilege for those white children whose plastic bodies were desirable enough to be folded into the category of transsexuality by its gatekeeping clinicians” (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 187). Both in the archive and today, the “fact of blackness [has] often amounted to a disqualification from the discourse of transsexuality altogether” (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 185). Black trans people who present to the clinic seeking medical transition are often either dismissed without consideration, or subjected to much more severe forms of suspicion, scrutiny, medicalization, violence, and imprisonment than their white counterparts.⁴⁹ Black trans people in the late-twentieth century were likely to be forcibly sterilized, arrested, or committed to psychiatric institutions and juvenile homes for presenting to a gender clinic (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 185-187). When BIPOC trans people become entangled with the clinic, even today, such entanglements frequently and rapidly unravel into neglect, incarceration, and nontherapeutic medicalization.⁵⁰ It is well documented that it is significantly harder for BIPOC trans people to access medical transition, due to clinical gatekeeping, lack of affordable health insurance, and endemic clinical mistrust of the embodied self-knowledge of people of colour (Spade 2008; Minter and Daley 2003; Mottet and Ohle 2003; Gehi and Arkles 2007). BIPOC trans people are more likely than white trans people to be told that their cross-sex identification is not authentic, or is the result of unrelated factors like childhood trauma, disability, and mental illness. BIPOC trans people may face additional administrative foreclosures which prevent them accessing the gender clinic, relating to hospitals’ and insurance provider’s narrow interpretations of identity documentation requirements (Spade 2008). BIPOC trans people, who are targeted and criminalized for trying to

⁴⁹ For example, see interviews in Verman 2018.

⁵⁰ John Money to Joseph L. Rauh, October 5, 1970, Box 7, JMK, 1; John Money to Joseph L. Rauh, October 5, 1970, Box 7, JMK, 2; Richard S. Peterson to John Money, September 10, 1974, Box 8, JMK; cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 186-187].

survive, are routinely denied access to basic healthcare in carceral settings (Bassichis 2007). BIPOC trans people also have a harder time “proving” that they are “really” trans to clinicians who accept only one standardised narrative – that makes no room for indigenous, First Nations, and non-European understandings of gender non-conformity as nonpathological – of coming into one’s awareness of themselves as trans (Verman 2018). BIPOC trans people also sometimes, for many and complex reasons, seek access to forms of transition-related body modification that differ from what clinicians have come to accept as the standard to which medicalized trans bodies should adhere, resulting in further denials.⁵¹ In this way, the consequences of medical inventions like the Tanner scale – which are predicated on the normalization of white phenotypes – continue to determine healthcare outcomes for trans of colour people in the present, where black and brown trans children are told trans identification is either impossible for them, or the result of a pathologized and developmentally disordered puberty.

Today’s racialized disparities in trans healthcare access, which determine who has medical insurance to cover gender affirming treatment and who doesn’t, who is believed when they tell clinicians they’re trans and who isn’t, who gets access to top tier treatments and who is used to trial unproven treatments on, are directly derived from nineteenth and twentieth century medical worlds “that categorized life as either normal or pathological, [under which] people of the African diaspora were continually condemned to the category of pathological, their “abnormal” skin color serving as a foil for “normal” white skin” (Kapsalis 1997, 41). Contemporary medicine continues to frame black genders and sexualities, specifically black women’s sexuality and gender,⁵² as

⁵¹ For examples see Trystan T. Cotten’s segment in Bahrapour 2018.

⁵² Which was structured in the nineteenth century through such forms as J.J. Virey’s widely cited *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales* (1819), Georges Cuvier’s anatomical studies of black women’s genitalia (1817), and James Marion Sims’ gynaecological experiments on enslaved black women (1885), and in the twentieth

dangerously outside of norms, with black trans people therefore often registering to doctors as either ineligible for the treatments they reserve for those who fit norms, or urgently in need of the medical correction they visit on bodies deemed unruly. In this way, inventions like the Tanner scale, which today function as the new administrative apparatus for regulating sexual plasticity and sex development belong to a long history and ongoing continuum of pathologizing black sexuality and gender.

Another present day legacy of trans medicine's history of extraction and resource theft from nonwhite people has been the proliferation of a racialized medical tourism industry predicated on the fetishization of ethnicized care workers, sustained through colonial and neocolonial architectures. As Aizura observes, "Gender transition, affirmation, or reassignment [...] is often articulated in English-language trans culture as a "journey" (Aizura 2018, 2).⁵³ When Christine Jorgensen returned to the United States from Denmark in 1953 to a "massive media storm, her narrative of traveling [...] to obtain surgery" became both well-known and "instantly iconic" (Meyerowitz 2004, 153). This was partly because stories like this digest, for the lay public, everything that seems disruptive, disarranging, and unnatural about transition as a movement across the borders of gender-conformity and through gendered indeterminacy into a less disturbing narrative about going away to an exoticized elsewhere, undergoing a deep psychic and somatic transformation, before returning, in proper order, to a properly ordered home. Jorgensen's medical travel narrative also became definitive because it has inspired a great many trans people since to

century was continued through the work of sexologists and endocrinologists like Eugen Steinach and Hugh Hampton Young, who believed that black people possessed less sexual plasticity than white people (Steinach and Kammerer. 1920; Young 1937).

⁵³ As Aizura notes, "Representations of transnational mobility, in particular, appear in English-language trans historical narratives, autobiographies, novels, and films as metaphors for gender transformation," 2018, 2. For example see Fallowell 1982; Morris 1974; Griggs 1996; Prosser 1998; James 2021.

seek out clinicians who could serve their needs more cheaply, more completely, and with less clinical gatekeeping overseas (Meyerowitz 2004, 153). Indeed, from the early 1950s onward, Benjamin took detailed notes in order to “track [...] the places to which his patients who had the means travelled in hopes of undergoing “the conversion operation”; primarily Morocco and Mexico, but also Denmark and Italy (Meyerowitz 2004, 153). More recently, particular locations, such as Bangkok, Thailand, and Casablanca, Morocco have achieved renown among white trans US and European citizens as travel hubs for gender affirming surgery (Aizura 2018, 8). In 2011, Aizura conducted an ethnographic study of Thai gender reassignment clinics, and found that, in Thailand alone, a handful of about 6 clinics provide care to hundreds of patients per year, 95% of whom are white US and European tourists (Aizura 2018, 175). The small minority of local trans of colour people to obtain surgery at these clinics report experiencing worse clinical outcomes and a noticeably lower standard of care than white patients (Aizura 2018, 176). Som, a Thai trans woman who visited the Preecha Aesthetic Institute for vaginoplasty reports,

Dr. ———, I didn’t like. He doesn’t even care about the Thais [...] Dr. ———’s staff [at the clinic] too. When I come to meet them, they will be very nice to foreigners. But they forget about Thais [...] because they think foreigners have lots of money, more than Thai. But we all pay the same price! So we should deserve to have the same service. (Aizura 2018, 176)

As with much of the booming medical travel culture across Southeast Asia, white trans women patients are attracted to Thai clinics because a long-established orientalist discourse locates the east as an exoticized space of transformation, and Southeast Asian women as ideal care workers and female archetypes; deferent, kind, proficient, beautiful, and modest. As Edward Said explains, features attributed to the “Orient” include “romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences” (Said 1978, 63). To this, Rosalind Morris adds,

orientalizing imaginaries typify Thailand as both a “place of [...] order and [...] beauty” and, simultaneously, “a place where anything goes,” whose spaces and people are “responsive to all desire” (Morris 1997, 61; Aizura 2018, 187). This fantasy is always racialized and gendered, and, as Aizura and Morris observe, “often iconized in the image of the responsive Thai woman,” (Morris 1997, 61; Aizura 2018, 187). Aizura demonstrates how the affective labour of racialized subjects forms an important part of the care package to which white patients feel entitled (Aizura 2018, 175). Aizura amply demonstrates, through interviews with white trans women patients at Thai clinics and analysis of the marketing materials produced by the clinics themselves, the prevalence of expectations that self-orientalizing social exchanges performed by Thai nurses, caregivers, and assistants should form part of the enhanced patient experience. One brochure reads:

Patients are welcomed as “guests” and made to feel at home in unfamiliar surroundings. The reception is gracious and courteous. Medical staff consistently provide superior service, often surpassing expectations. Spa operators likewise report that guests are charmed by the traditional wai—a courteous greeting gesture that conveys profound respect, infinite warmth, hospitality, and friendliness. Visitors perceive the wai to be uniquely and distinctively Thai. The magic is taking hold. (quoted in Aizura 2018, 188)

In particular, the racialized affective labour of the nurses and caregivers at Thai GRS clinics is enlisted in “the production of ideal feminine gender through an exoticization of otherness that [...] facilitates [...] self-transformation for the Euro-American subject” (Aizura 2018, 187). Trans women patients Aizura interviewed for his study repeatedly outline their opinions that the Thai women who cared for them modelled an exemplary femininity, and felt they had benefitted psychically and somatically as women from their social exchanges with these care workers; they reported learning stereotypically feminine behaviours, social graces, and rituals of friendship from their interactions with the Thai women who staffed the clinics (Aizura 2018, 183). Aizura explains how Thai nurses and caregivers function for some white trans women patients as “the potential

vehicle of their [...] self-transformation,” where identification with the orientalized and hyperfeminine traits some white trans women project onto Thai women enables their own deepening understanding of themselves as femmes (Aizura 2018, 190).⁵⁴ A key reason that GRS is such big business in Thailand and other non-Western countries is that narratives of ease, comfort, and luxury – associated with transnational mobility across borders into exoticized elsewhere – consolidates and structures white trans subjects’ social identity and citizenship status. In short, both whiteness and white transness are supplemented, affirmed, and articulated against and through the self-orientalizing social exchanges into which medical tourism folds racialized subjects and ethnicized workers.

In this way, the advent of a global medical tourism industry – in which Euro-American subjects travel to non-Western nations for trans healthcare – is predicated on a long history in medicine that appraises nonwhite bodies and assigns them value based solely on what can be extracted from them to benefit white people. The emotional and affective labour of the ethnicized worker produces new possibilities for white motility and mobility; economically and racially stratified marketing and care work reiterates the ideal transgender subject as an implicitly white, global citizen. In this way, historical architectures of colonialism articulate white trans becoming as a “journey” that displaces the unsettling gender indeterminacy of early transition to an exoticized geographic

⁵⁴ While it may seem that Aizura felt critical of the white patients whose affective connections with Thai caregivers supplemented their own experience of their femininity, and while he pays close attention to moments when hyperbole and overidentification give way to exoticization and fetishization, he is careful not to disregard his informant’s “experience of surgery or of traveling in Thailand as meaningless or insignificant [...] Neither do I intend to disregard or discount the personal significance of my informants’ experiences. Their affective connection with Thailand as a location is as valid as the sense of connection I experienced there, both as a tourist and a researcher, and in other locations that are not my home.” He contends that it is possible to “acknowledge the depth or truth-value of an affective experience” without naturalizing it “as somehow existing outside discourse, quarantined from critical consideration,” Aizura 2018, 193.

elsewhere, and associates the “return home” to a normative body with national belonging and proper citizenship. Aizura’s study of the globalization of biomedicine asks,

when gender reassignment somatechnologies are freely available to anyone who can meet the financial cost, which trans and gender nonconforming bodies carry more value than others? [...] which racialized subjects constitute the ideal to whom the labors of care and respect are made available, and which subjects fall outside of that sphere of care and respect? (Aizura 2018, 179)

In asking this question, Aizura demonstrates how one present day legacy of trans medicine’s obsessive pursuit of racialized plasticity has been the concatenation of medical narratives that dehumanize nonwhite bodies, historical architectures of colonialism, and contemporary patterns of global consumption and labour. Importantly, as Aizura observes, the ways in which medical epistemes of racialized plasticity circulate today reflect changing relationships between economic and somatic forms of capacity, extraction, and value. The expansion of the economic domain to include human capital, a shift which we associate with neoliberalism, is deeply relevant to contemporary discourse of plasticity (Foucault 2008; Lemke 2001; Harvey 2005). Analysis of plasticity and the ways it is still made and remade from intersex, trans, and nonwhite bodies provides necessary insights about contemporary biocapital. Today’s discourse of plasticity is at its most visible in the context of rhetorical work that continues to exceptionalize the white trans body and its capacity to moulded, refined, and improved.

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From its inception in the late-nineteenth century to our present day, the medical theory of knowledge that locates trans and intersex bodies as reservoirs of plasticity has attempted to

evacuate the trans bodies it instrumentalizes of personhood. We have seen how the harsh reality of the gender clinic is that doctors were, and are, “perfectly willing to diagnose, evaluate, and study trans patients in detail for the benefit of their own research,” before “brusquely rejecting their actual requests” (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 135). We have seen that the clinical assemblage of trans medicine is, and has always been, hostile to trans life. However, trans people have never cooperated with the material or discursive demands made by the clinic, and our own practices of record-keeping, meaning-making, agency, self-determination, and commitment to loving and recognising one another easily disrupt “medicine’s pretension to have played a causal role in defining trans life” (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 132). Trans people have never been trans medicine’s passive objects, and the traces we leave in the medical archive – of opportunism, humour, unruliness, determination, scorn, joy, and indifference – demonstrate again and again our capacity to leverage a clinical project designed to eradicate us. These traces express our ability to squeeze resources, utility, and value from a medical assemblage engineered to withhold them, and our commitment to turn away from the model of scarcity on which trans medicine, and its correlate, trans citizenship, is predicated, embracing an alternative model of abundance, redistribution, and commitment to seeing one another thrive. Over the next two chapters of this thesis, I trace assemblages of these trans capacities and commitments through examples of trans cultural production.

Chapter Four

Trans Agency, Trans Care, and Trans Protest in *Confessions of the Fox*

Our lives fall in the gaps between institutions and conventional familial structures. Those gaps are worlds, and those worlds don't function without care work.

Hil Malatino, *Trans Care*

I love storytelling that reminds me I chose this moment to be alive not because I need to fix a broken world but because there is so much possibility for even greater transformation.

Tourmaline

The previous chapter arguably paints a somewhat grim picture of what living a trans life is like, but, as Hil Malatino has said, “this is not the only synopsis I could provide;” it’s just that cis people only ever want to hear about trans crises (Malatino 2020, 2-3). Trans people are undoubtedly and overwhelmingly dealt instrumentalization, neglect, and precarity by the institutions that have made trans lives the political wedge issue of our times. However, demands made of trans people to continually engage in the work of enumerating trans suffering feel equally deleterious, primarily because trans people’s reluctant engagement in the kind of “identity politics necessary to gain speaking positions” is rarely received in good faith; but also because such demands are acutely reductive in scope, and because there is so much more to trans life (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 3).

The genre of political discourse which asks trans subjects to recapitulate the harms and injuries they've experienced but stops short of asking them about their joys, loves, feelings, and hopes produces an account which looks something like this:

Trans women of color are being MURDERED! They are THE MOST OPPRESSED, so we have to CENTER them. But they are also SO STRONG AND RESILIENT, every breath they take is A REVOLUTION. Smash the gender binary! (Gill-Peterson, 2021b)

Such narratives quite clearly the reduce messy, storied, vibrant lives of trans subjects' into a partial account, repeatedly reminding us that the most important thing we can do for progressive discourse if we are white is to kill ourselves, or if we are black or brown, to be murdered:

she so badly wants to live [...] because suicide as a trans girl leads to a mortifying posthumous stripping away of all that you cherished by friends and strangers alike [...] the clumsiest of your semi-acquaintances will scoop up all that was once you and simmer it down to a single mawkish narrative, plucking out all that is inconveniently irreducible, and inserting in its place all that is trite and politically serviceable. (Peters 2020, 209)

The prevalence of this genre also lays the groundwork for the similarly reductive expectation that there should be a fully knowable account of violence and its resolution, which is not at all how trans people experience harm in an antitrans world:

who knows what will happen at a trans funeral? Will some queer make a political speech instead of a eulogy [...] will some nice white cis person remind the assembled mourners [...] that everyone must do more to save trans women of colour, who are being murdered (*murdered!*). (Peters 2020, 210)

As Jules Gill-Peterson observes, a lot of what passes for progressive discourse today actively tries to evacuate trans subjects of personhood in order to traffic in black and brown trans femmes as cultural and political signifiers:

what the fuck kind of knowledge is this? We haven't learned a single thing about [...] trans women of color, we've merely proclaimed that I am simultaneously the motive for other people's political action and the guarantor of their activism's righteousness—or critical analysis, or cultural capital. (Gill-Peterson 2021b)

Perhaps most importantly, this kind of narrative – which is increasingly prevalent in the culture at large, but more specifically in internet activist enclaves, and in the rhetoric of “progressive” institutions – dismisses the lifesaving forms of agency and care that trans people practice, cultivate, and cherish. Popular myths of so-called political liberalism position trans people as in need of forms of security and restitution bestowed by a progressive rescuer, and overlook the ways that we have always been saving one another, over and over again, in ways that are variously affective, material, fiscal, practical, frivolous, quotidian, earnest, commiserative, minute, and momentous.

Unlike popular romances of insurrectionary subjecthood, which sell us the same individualism on which capitalism is premised, albeit in a slightly different package, trans forms of agency and care divest from atomistic models of self-possession, recognising “the ability to conjure oneself into such an “I” is always a product of privilege” (Malatino 2020, 35). Similarly, unlike progressivist and neoliberal frames of articulating maldistribution, harm, and injustice, which focus on formalizing grievance, restitution, and punishing the harm-doer, and are characterized by both anxiety at resource-scarcity, and impractical, “what if” utopian thinking, trans methods cultivate postscarcity in real terms, creating “methods of collective survival that aren't just guided by an imaginary of abundance but bring such abundance to bear in the present” (Malatino 2020, 33-34). To be sure, violence and inequality leave painful marks in trans lives all the time, and admittedly, some of what binds us to each other as trans people “is directly tied to the [...] disinvestment of the people and institutions we've needed — or been forced — to rely upon for survival,” but we

have gladly “learned to care for one another in the aftermath of these refusals” (Malatino 2020, 2-3). In short, out of what we’ve needed, we have made something that we choose.

In this chapter I read Jordy Rosenberg’s excellent speculative historical novel, *Confessions of the Fox*, for trans arts of survival, attending in particular to the ways in which care, agency, and subject interwovenness are recognised and practiced by the characters. In *Confessions*, I argue, trans characters produce and exert forms of agency, unpredictability, and unruliness which upend institutional attempts to constrain and produce meaning from trans bodies. The trans characters of *Confessions* show us what care actually looks like in trans lives; they show us how we show up for each other, and why that is sometimes so hard to do; they show us practices of living otherwise that enable liberatory forms of trans existence; they show us that metastasizing conditions of austerity and ethnonationalism cannot prevent trans resistance and flourishing; and most importantly, they intimately recognise that the boundaries between who is a carer and who is a recipient of care are both radically blurred and beside the point in a world where we hope everybody makes it. In *Confessions*, trans characters approach an ethic of care which grapples “with the fact that the forms of family and kinship that are invoked in much of the feminist literature on [...] care ethics are steeped in forms of domesticity and intimacy that are both White and Eurocentered” (Malatino 2020, 7). They therefore recognise that our ability to thrive depends on types of care that outstrip “the mythic purported providential reach of the family,” and instead cultivate other nebulous, nonsecular, and fabulous forms of kinship and interdependence with companions and co-conspirators of all kinds (Malatino 2020, 6).

I pair my reading of *Confessions* with analysis of accounts of some historical trans people whose experiences flesh out the archive in ways that the producers of institutional knowledge about trans people never intended them to. In these fragmentary offerings and archival scraps, the sense of irreducibly complex lives overflow and exceed the idioms of clinicality, hostility, and indifference through which they are frequently articulated, to prove that trans lives are liveable and joyful precisely because they've been lived and enjoyed.

*

One aspect of *Confessions*, which is set partly in the eighteenth century, describes the entanglement of a young trans man, Jack, with a doctor who is interested in trans phenomena, as well as Jack's attempts to resist medicalization and modify his body on his own terms. The novel is also partly set in our neoliberal present, and the narrative about Jack finds a contemporary foil in Dr Voth, a trans masculine academic at an undisclosed US university. In an "editor's foreword," Voth describes how he found what he believes is the lost memoir of Jack Sheppard, notorious eighteenth century British thief and jailbreaker, at a university library book sale (Rosenberg 2018, xi). The main body of the text takes the form of the "lost Sheppard memoir," and through marginalia it becomes apparent that Voth has undertaken a project to transcribe and edit the manuscript for publication.

The Sheppard story of the memoir, presented (at least initially) as the authentic confessions of Jack Sheppard, is in many ways similar to the Sheppard biography depicted by historical sources. However, the Jack Sheppard of Rosenberg's *Confessions* differs in some key ways from the

established biography. For example, Rosenberg's Jack Sheppard is a trans man. Jack is disowned by his mother, who calls him a sexual chimera, and taken to a local furniture-maker, to work there as an indentured labourer (Rosenberg 2018, 130). After escaping the workshop, Jack becomes romantically involved with Bess Khan, to whom he discloses that he is trans (Rosenberg 2018, 109). Also unprecedentedly, in the manuscript, Bess is a sex worker of lascar descent, radicalised by the violence visited on her family by the British state and the East India company. The significance of the fact that Sheppard's memoir as found by Voth differs in key ways from the established Sheppard biography is not lost on Voth, whose annotations express his surprise and interest at descriptions of what would be historical firsts, or very early examples of certain things (Rosenberg 2018, 12; 146-147). Some of the historical firsts detailed by the *Confessions* manuscript include Jack's top surgery, the existence of a doctor explicitly interested in studying trans bodies, and the extraction of hormones from imprisoned people (Rosenberg 2018, 147; 137; 300). All of these things have happened, but none of them happened in the eighteenth century.⁵⁵

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about *Confessions* is the way that Rosenberg uses formal elements, as well as the interplay of narrative temporalities, to comment on the history of the medicalization of trans phenomena, and how that has been informed and shaped by histories of capital, racialization, privatization, and the management of waste and surplus. *Confessions* is set across two time periods, taking form as a conversation between the eighteenth century "manuscript" form of the main text and Voth's twenty-first century marginalia. In Jack Sheppard's eighteenth-century London, the unfolding of the clinical episteme for managing trans bodies,

⁵⁵ Voth proposes that he did not know of any top surgery procedure or top surgery adjacent procedure taking place before 1812, that he does not know of the doctor mentioned in the memoir, and that he knows of no projects for extracting hormones from imprisoned people prior to 1913 (Rosenberg 2018, 147; 137; 300).

referred to in chapter three as trans medicine, has yet to occur. In the other, Dr Voth's twenty-first-century US, it has already happened. In Jack's timeline, there is nothing like the institutional medical apparatus that emerges in the nineteenth century and professionalizes close to the twentieth century, whereas in Voth's timeline, a medical industrial complex invested in the management of trans bodies is well-established (Rosenberg 2018, 51-52; 119-122). In this way, the novel, set in two different time periods, bookends the time during which trans medicine emerged from nineteenth century European and US eugenics movements, and consolidated as a system of gender clinics and diagnostic and treatment protocols in the twentieth century. Through this narrative device, Jack, who has no idea what will happen over the next few centuries, observes important biopolitical shifts happening around him, while Voth is able to contextualize this information. In Jack's narrative, one such shift is in the way that the state begins to leverage value from unvalued populations by looking at what can be extracted from their bodies. Jack and Bess foil a collaborative project between the "Thief-Catcher General" of the "Office for the Recovery of Lost and Stolen Property," Jonathan Wild, the Dutch economist Bernard Mandeville, and surgeons at Leiden University (Rosenberg 2018, 60; 170-175; 294-298). These carceral, economic, and medical agents have been conspiring to build a dissection chamber to remove the testicles of criminals in order to extract and market what they call "Granulated Strength Elixir [...] Vitality For Sale," in short, testosterone for HRT (Rosenberg 2018, 294).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ This is another intentional anachronism that aims to "highlight the history of nefarious collaboration between the medical and penal institutions": there have been experiments to extract testosterone from executed prisoners, where the testosterone that was extracted was administered to living prisoners to observe the effects (it was speculated that effects might include rejuvenation and reduced recidivism), but these experiments took place at San Quentin prison in the twentieth century (Rosenberg 2018, 300; Blue 2009).

Through Voth, the text invites the reader to reflect upon how ways of privatizing, pathologizing, and profiting from the bodies of unvalued populations, already emerging in the eighteenth century, were necessary and foundational to the emergence of the racial categories and pathologizing practices that would be used by medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Rosenberg 2018, 80; 104). For example, when Jack is imprisoned at Newgate and visited by Wild, who mentions the “prison doctor,” Voth’s notes in the margin suggest his excitement that the manuscript is a “unique early document of the biopolitical management/control of populations” (Rosenberg 2018, 80). Voth explains that “what we have here is thus potentially a fucking miraculous find” because “prison quackery, (aka “Correctional Medicine”) did not officially begin until the prison reform movement of the later nineteenth century” (Rosenberg 2018, 80). In this way, Rosenberg uses the Voth character’s “noticing” of anachronisms, historical firsts, and early examples of biopolitical population improvement projects more typical of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to direct our attention to a possible prehistory for the conditions of the emergence of trans medicine. In the nonfictional 2015 essay “Trans/War Boy/Gender: The Primitive Accumulation of T,” Rosenberg explains the significant historical links between eighteenth century vivisectionism and the development of nineteenth and twentieth century medical epistemes for the alterability of the sexed body (Rosenberg 2015). In his words,

“the pre-history – of testosterone is the pre-history of the extraction of the corpse, its juices, its parts; and the simultaneous abstraction of labour on the model of that dissection [...] The institutions of this dissection are the surgeons, the state, and the prison.” (Rosenberg 2015)

In this way, Rosenberg’s decision to set a trans love story about trying to escape the state’s grotesque, acquisitive demands for access to the bodies of people whose lives it does not value,

not in trans medicine's twentieth century heyday, but in the eighteenth century, becomes clear. *Confessions* demonstrates how developments and biopolitical innovations in the eighteenth century (from the Murder Act of 1751 to the public health and economic policies advocated for by Bernard Mandeville) directly laid foundations for the logics which subtend trans medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁷ The ways in which trans, racialized, and imprisoned bodies are instrumentalized in *Confessions* prefigures how unvalued and criminalized bodies were transformed into the raw material of knowledge production in nineteenth and twentieth century medicine. *Confessions* uses the story of Jack Sheppard, a trans jailbreaker whose body and body parts are sought after by state actors, to literalize how this is true not just because the eighteenth century is when the property form takes root, but “because that’s when a certain formulation of the body takes root, one acutely illustrated in a very grisly set of debates that had to do with the utility of incarcerated bodies” (Rosenberg 2015).

From Dr Evans, a physician, and regular john at the brothel where Bess works, she obtains what claims to be an encyclopaedia of the science of sexual difference, which she shares with Jack. The encyclopaedia dehumanizes gender non-conforming bodies, and Jack is disturbed by the way he half recognizes himself in its pages (Rosenberg 2018, 134). He decides to question Evans about it, and quickly deduces the doctor is eager to make Jack’s body his object of study. Bess and Jack hatch a plan to get Evans to do Jack’s top surgery for him. The plan is a little desperate, and somewhat unappealing, because it is premised on Jack successfully leveraging Evans’ prurient

⁵⁷ The Murder Act of 1751 mandated that the bodies of prisoners executed for murder should be dissected rather than buried, while many of Mandeville’s propositions also advocated the dissection of prisoners on the grounds that the debts owed by poor and criminalized populations to the state and society could be recovered from their body parts (Mandeville 1964). These eighteenth century ideas about extracting medical knowledge from unvalued populations laid foundations for the ways in which sexological sciences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would instrumentalize the bodies of racialised people.

interest in his transness to get access to what he wants: a flat chest. Like many trans people across history and now, Jack recognises this ability to capitalize on doctors' interest in his body as a trans art of survival.

Again, Rosenberg uses intentional anachronisms as a way of interpreting the prehistory of nineteenth and twentieth century trans medicine. For example, although in the previous chapter I demonstrated how the concept of plasticity first became important to the medical management of the sexed body in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Rosenberg's medical doctor character, Evans, often speaks to Jack about his transness in ways that, while not using the term "plasticity" directly, foreshadow and anticipate nineteenth century paradigms. For example, Evans suggests that Jack's trans embodiment is the result of a certain impressability that has caused his body to develop in unpredictable and disorderly ways. Thankfully, Evans reasons, the same capacity to receive impressions to which Jack is prone will ensure that through surgical manipulation, the correct morphological characteristics can be induced:

"I've been labouring on an Idea. Combining the classical Greek attitude towards luxuriance with the newest methods in scientific Management of the body."

"Management?"

"Management." Evans nodded. "I regard chimeraness, frankly, as a kind of hurricane – a weather system of extremes. My research has demonstrated that a chimera is a thing of both misery and shocking pleasure. A thing of intensities. I believe we can [...] *accelerate, emphasise* – certain of those intensities. (Rosenberg 2018, 138)

Evans likewise asserts the importance of normalizing the trans body in now familiar ways. He will consent to performing Jack's top surgery because he believes that he is normalizing an aberration. To Evans, Jack's "chimeraness" is something which warrants a cure, a cure for which Jack is

eligible on account of his whiteness. Jack's whiteness guarantees the possibility of being recuperated into normative forms of citizenship:

Evans cleared his throat. "I'm writing a lengthy Disquisition on Sexual Chimeras [...] Some—like Diemberbroeck—believe chimeras to be monsters. I, however, believe them to be an Illusion. A category of creature, quite frankly"—here he narrow'd his eyes at Jack—"that does not, strictly speaking, exist. My view is that chimeras are [...] the result of morbidity or disease. And my goal—against earlier theorists—is to support the possibility of disease-correction. (Rosenberg 2018, 137)

Evans claims to feel at least nominally sympathetic toward his trans patients:

my experience doesn't accord with this fiction, nor do my Affections resonate with the sentiment of fear 'roused in some hearts by the mere suggestion of a chimera in proximity. (Rosenberg 2018, 136-137)

And yet, instead of responding to Jack's needs in real terms, or relating to him as an equal, Evans interacts in ways which consolidate his position as expert, professional, and gatekeeper, and frame Jack as nonexpert, passive participant, and raw material: "he spoke as if he was writing a decree. It was off-putting" (Rosenberg 2018, 136).

As with many of the clinicians discussed in the previous chapter, it is clear that Evans does not really think of Jack as a person, he is more interested in what might be gained from Jack's body as an object of study: "Evans had become a kind of bureaucratic Husk [...] The Gleam he had in his eye—the thrill of scientific experiment" (Rosenberg 2018, 140). Jack notices a "Gulf [...] opening between himself on one hand and [...] Evans on the other. Evans bloating with power" (Rosenberg 2018, 140-141). Indeed, the kindest thing Evans seems to be able to do for Jack is pity him:

“I can help you.”

“H-how did you —”

Evans look’d at him pityingly. “Really, it’s quite obvious.” (Rosenberg 2018, 138)

Evans’ pity of Jack belies his disgust and embarrassment that Jack can bear to appear as he does in public; he presumes that Jack is simply not self-aware enough to feel the proper shame at his body. Evans’ pity of Jack does not recognise that Jack has agency; he pities Jack because Jack’s response, “H-how did you [know?]” discloses Jack’s fragile hope that it had not been obvious to Evans that Jack was the “chimera” they were talking about. For Evans, it seems, self-possession and self-awareness are critically important to the preservation and integrity of the self. Evans can clearly not imagine what it would be like to live in such a way that failing at an earnest attempt, and being witnessed doing so, did not threaten his own deeply Lockean, proprietary sense of self. Jack on the other hand, seems to live otherwise, acknowledging that whatever self he is, is neither inviolable nor hermetic, nor even something that he himself owns, but something that was given over from the start to a world of others. Jack seems to readily accept his exquisite vulnerability to others – the vulnerability of being seen to be absurd, of being seen to fail – as the cost of living hopefully.

What Evans does not seem to be able to do is conceive that it could be possible that Jack has a choice in all this, that Jack is exerting his influence on Evans too, that Jack could, in fact, be more in control of the situation than Evans himself, that Jack and his co-conspirators might see Evans as a resource to be exploited just as he sees Jack as a resource to be exploited. Throughout the episode with Evans, Jack demonstrates recourse to different forms of agency, ways of thinking his transness as nonpathological, and ways of bringing what he needs into being. Prior to the surgery Jack imagines how rich, vigorous, and easy his life will be afterward. His internal monologue is

characterised not by refusals to think of his transness in clinical idioms of pathology, lack, and cure, but by the clear sense that it has not even occurred to him to think trans in any terms other than abundance: “he told himself the operation would intensify the *luxuriant* parts of him” (Rosenberg 2018, 140). While elaborating his medical theory of transness, Evans gives a colourful and exoticized history of gender non-conformity:

“while the Romans decreed that all chimeras be placed into tiny coffins at birth [...] and thrown into the Sea, the Greeks thought them a charmed species. Simply a human of both sexes, although often with one part more luxuriant than the other.” (Rosenberg 2018, 138)

Jack, disinterested in Evans’ pontification, sifts through what he is hearing for something that can be of use to his own theory of himself; he alights on the word luxuriant: “Luxuriant. His something – Jack thought – was luxuriant” (Rosenberg 2018, 138). In this way, using his powers of filtration, Jack distils useful, audacious knowledge from a medical discourse that pathologizes trans lives. As Malatino notes, the practiced ability to hear selectively – often dismissively thought of as trans people’s obstinacy, contrariness, or lack of access to the kind of education that would make fuller participation in a conversation possible – is a form of agency and survival that trans people engage in constantly. He says:

I lived [...] with an omnipresent worry that when and where I appeared in public, I would be subject to stares and extemporaneous speechifying about [...] whether I was a boy or a girl [...] what I did do [...] was develop the ability to *completely tune out* the conversations of strangers. (Malatino 2020, 48-49)

Jack likewise protects and shields himself, recognising that Evans’ words hold nothing good for him, and can therefore be utterly disregarded. In among the clutter of Evans’ dull speech, one word – luxuriance – shines brightly and irresistibly like a gemstone; Evans has clearly not recognised it

for what it is, so Jack takes it and wears it proudly. Jack has stolen something of value from Evans, who will not realise until it is too late; we as trans people do this all the time.

Jack has a wealth of practical techniques, resources, and tactics for dealing with Evans, which range from simply ignoring him: “Jack allowed Evans’ voice to dim to a blur of sound”; to informed bargaining and compromise:

once it was done—he reasoned—he would never have to see Evans again. Never have to hear him discoursing further about chimeras. But what he had to get through first. (Rosenberg 2018, 138-141)

Conventional accounts of power and powerlessness might suppose that Jack’s bargaining tactics represent his slow coming to terms with Evans’ position of authority in their relationship. Indeed, in economics, supply and demand describes a model of price determination in a market. If a seller – Evans – has a monopoly on selling a good or service for which there is a high demand, he can charge more or less what he likes for his service. As there is no one else to whom Jack can turn to get his top surgery, Jack needs Evans’ surgical skill; it would therefore be easy to frame Evans as the decisive figure in this scenario. In a different, but equally true account of the situation, Jack has not only observed that Evans’ conducts social interactions according to an economic calculus of benefit to cost; he has also noticed that his body is every bit as desirable to Evans as Evans’ surgical skill is to him. Jack’s bargaining tactics therefore represent a shrewd assessment of the market in which his relationship to Evans exists. Jack’s impulse toward negotiation here discloses his astute ability to both recognise the transactional idiom through which Evans operates and put it to use, acknowledging that Evans’ commodification of his transness is something upon which he can capitalize. Jack is frank with himself, he is afraid of Evans, and he is not so naive as to think

he will walk out of this devil's bargain unscathed, but this practice of strategic negotiation nevertheless discloses his ability to exercise agency under exigent and compromised circumstances, something which trans medicine, in its totalizing claims about trans life, would never concede.

Jack has many ways of bringing what he needs toward him; some of which are tangible, others less so. In escaping indentured labour Jack demonstrates his determination to live as though he is already free; in finding Bess, his unerring ability to bring friends, lovers, companions, and conspirators into his life; in meeting Evans and his encyclopaedia, his resources for leveraging a precarious situation to his advantage. His dreams, often terrifying, show him visions of what a liveable, sensuous, and free life would feel like, and moreover that such a life is more than possible:

At night he dreamt he was stripped bare, strapp'd to the saddle of a cantering horse, paraded through the town under the blazing sun [...] something cut the golden light in two. A flash of steel, and a white-hot pain flew through his chest [...] he told her of his dream – the hot feel of his own Blood pouring over his ribs [...] it had been a terrible dream, but then, on waking, it had oddly left him with a Light Feeling where his breasts were – some anticipation of – *something*. (Rosenberg 2018, 139)

He uses these prophetic dreams to orientate himself toward survival in the present. Most importantly, Jack has his own self-knowledge to rely on. Institutional forms of knowledge production about trans life have repeatedly discounted trans people's self-knowledge, failing to recognise the ways, "however fragile and short-lived," in which "trans [people] engage their own lives on terms not wholly captured by medicine" (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 132). Medicine's disregard of trans self-knowledge has rebounded on the clinic in many instances, where the waywardness and freeness of ordinary trans lives has inadvertently disclosed "the weakness of medicine's pretension to have played a causal role in defining trans life" (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 132). In this

way, what Evans claims to know about trans people doesn't matter to Jack, because he already knows that "his Somethingness was nothing like this list of examples" (Rosenberg 2018, 140). Ultimately, in a theatrical passage the reader could choose to interpret as literal or metaphorical, the clinician's inability to make either Jack or his body conform to medicine's expectations of them costs him his life; Evans is vanquished, smothered to death by Jack's freshly bleeding chest (Rosenberg 2018, 145-148).

Jack's experiences with Evans have been mirrored by many historical trans people, who have found their own unruly, unexpected, and oblique ways to meet their needs. While significant scholarly and historiographical attention has been paid to trans agency in the context of activist movements and organized social justice work, most trans people's exercises of agency do not take such rational, structured form. Trans agency's true texture is better understood not as a self-transparent political agenda, but an array of imperfect ways of living as though we are free. Despite rarely taking the form of intentional, directed, or politically motivated resistance, everyday, isolated, and often self-interested acts of survival by trans people form an indelible, if frequently dismissed, archive of trans agency. Acts of trans agency, directed more often by urgent need for resources, shelter, and security, than by politically-motivated insurrection, have nevertheless threatened the epistemological edifice upon which trans medicine rests. Such acts have repeatedly subverted and disrupted the business of the clinic, mystified and bewildered clinicians, and seriously contested the coherence of trans life as an object of knowledge.

Much has been made of the case of Agnes, a young woman who presented to the department of psychiatry at UCLA in 1958 with "hermaphroditism," and who has been credited with raising no

small amount of hell for the clinicians who worked there. At UCLA, Agnes was treated by Robert Stoller, Harold Garfinkel, and Alexander Rosen; a psychiatrist, sociologist, and psychologist, respectively. Agnes explained that she had been born with a penis and testes but that she had begun to develop breasts during puberty; she told the doctors that she lived as a woman and wished to continue doing so (Garfinkel 1967, 123). The medical register describes her in the following terms:

Her appearance is convincing. She is tall, slender and shaped like a woman [...] Her body displays male genital organs and a normally developed penis as well as secondary sexual characteristics of the female sex: breasts of average size, no facial or body hair. (Garfinkel 1967, 120-123)

After thirty hours of extensive interrogation, her clinicians agreed that she showed no signs of “sexual deviance, transvestism or homosexuality” (Garfinkel 1967, 120-123). They agreed that

nothing could differentiate her from a young woman of her age. She has a high voice, doesn’t wear clothes that are exhibitionistic or in bad taste like those characteristic of transvestites or men with sexual identity problems. (Garfinkel 1967, 120-123)

The clinicians coupled these findings with an endocrinological analysis – which revealed high levels of oestrogen – and eventually diagnosed Agnes as a case of “genuine hermaphroditism”; they concluded that Agnes had an (unprecedented) intersex condition in which the testes produce elevated quantities of oestrogen (Garfinkel 1967, 120-123). Having established Agnes’ need to be “genuine,” her clinicians agreed she should be allowed a full gender reassignment, including a vaginoplasty, which she received in 1959. Agnes changed her name and obtained new identity documents, and was subsequently discharged from UCLA, her transition complete. Some years later, Agnes returned to UCLA, presenting to a doctor with a gynaecological problem, but the account she gave of herself at this time was very different from the once she had initially given:

A few years after her vaginoplasty, Agnes [...] introduces herself as a young boy of anatomically male sex who at the start of adolescence began secretly taking estrogen-based Stilbestrol, which had been prescribed to treat her mother following her hysterectomy. (Preciado 2008, 385)

In this new version of the story, it all began

when her elder sister began to take the pill, Agnes, who was still a child at the time, decided to do the same thing and took her mother's hormones. Agnes had always wanted to be a girl, and thanks to the estrogen, her breasts began to grow, while certain undesirable signs of puberty (such as facial fuzz) grew milder. The boy began by stealing one or two pills from his mother, now and then. Then it became whole boxes of them. (Preciado 2008, 385)

It transpired also that Agnes had strategically omitted certain details about herself in interviews with Stoller:

for example, she avoids references to her relationships with women, which could suggest the possibility of a lesbian orientation after the sex change. On the other hand, her story emphasizes the tropes that belong to the script of an intersexual diagnosis: her desire to wear skirts, her sensitivity, her love of nature. (Preciado 2008, 386)

It seems clear that Agnes, assigned male at birth, had known from a young age that she was a girl, and had begun taking her mother's prescription oestrogen at thirteen in the hopes of inducing the morphological changes she desired. Upon reaching adulthood, she began searching for a doctor through whom to access gender confirmation surgery, which is how she ended up at Stoller's UCLA clinic. Agnes had probably heard – because it was common knowledge among transsexuals at the time – that clinicians were far more amenable to approving medical sex reassignment in cases of intersexuality, which they believed could be cured through medical normalization, than in cases of transsexuality, which they worried destabilized the project of installing binary sex, and preferred to treat psychotherapeutically (Meyerowitz 2004, 100; Downing, Morland, and Sullivan 2014). Agnes likely decided to withhold the information about taking her mother's Stilbestrol,

recognising that her best chance of receiving a diagnosis of hermaphroditism lay in allowing the UCLA team to believe her gonads produced high amounts of oestrogen. Agnes' case had "greatly excited Stoller as the beginning of a definitive endocrine theory that would legitimate and clarify the new field of medicine" (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 137-138). When it transpired that Agnes' testes had never produced oestrogen, and that her endocrine profile was actually the result of her secret Stilbestrol use, those who had followed the case eagerly – Stoller, the UCLA team, Harry Benjamin, and other prominent sexologists – were sorely disappointed. By all accounts, Agnes made a lifelong enemy of Stoller, who reportedly felt professionally embarrassed by the episode, and who subsequently redoubled his attitude of suspicion toward transsexuals thereafter (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 144; Preciado 2008, 380-388).

As it is typically conceived, exercising one's agency is equated with achieving something, triumphing in some way, or bringing about a hoped-for outcome. It is possible – perhaps too easy – to interpret Agnes' story in such terms: the David and Goliath case of the self-assured, opportunistic young woman who outwitted the conceited technocrats, to their perpetual chagrin. Many historiographic interpretations of Agnes' life likely overstate the extent of her ambitions in the UCLA interviews, reading them as part of a wide-reaching transsexual agenda of formal resistance to medicalization.⁵⁸ Indeed, Agnes has been hailed as sowing "the seeds of a rebellion to come, a future politics [...] that will infiltrate the pharmacopornographic order" (Preciado 2008, 380-388). In this riff on the story, Agnes is cast as a romantic bioterrorist; she strung her doctors along in a virtuoso act of "biodrag" in order to enliven new possibilities of dissident subjecthood (Preciado 2008, 380-388). Similarly, Agnes has been described as offering "a critique," as

⁵⁸ See discussion of the case in Hausman 1995; Denzin 1990; 1991; Rogers 1992; and Zimmerman 1992.

“pushing the notion of camp to its very limits,” and as “put[ting] an end to the traditional metaphysical oppositions that [...] produce so many problems in performative theory”; all plaudits which not only frame Agnes’ actions as self-transparent, politically motivated, and intentionally rebellious, but also equate her viability as a social actor with the daring and success of her gambit (Preciado 2008, 380-388).

Such accounts of Agnes’ intentions – which frame her in categorical terms as an activist and revolutionary – risk obscuring the more subtle and conditional forms of agency and joy she may have exercised and experienced. For example, though Agnes’ ability to conjure a convincingly heterosexual persona was absolutely vital for her access to gender conformation surgery, in the sense that disclosing a lesbian orientation would have disqualified her from treatment, it nonetheless seems like she was able to leverage moments of gender affirmation and pleasure from this mandatory performance of heterosexuality. Garfinkel’s entries in the medical record are repeatedly derailed by digressive passages about how attractive she is. Garfinkel observes, for example, that Agnes is “a typical girl of her class and age”; that there is “no hint of poor taste” in her style; and that her “voice was [...] soft” (Garfinkel 1967, 128-133). Garfinkel goes as far as to say “Agnes was the coy, sexually innocent, fun-loving, passive, receptive, ‘young thing’” (Garfinkel 1967, 129). In fact, the entire corpus of subsequent scholarship about Agnes to have been produced by cis scholars seems utterly charmed by her; in this literature, written by people who never met or saw her, she is routinely described as “an attractive female,” by scholars who have been “taken in by her femininity” (Denzin 1990, 196-216). In Garfinkel’s account of Agnes’ case, his obvious sexual interest in Agnes is framed as a calculated and insincere attempt to secure

her trust; he protests (perhaps too strenuously) that he is not attracted to Agnes, merely that flattering her vanity is the most apropos method to win over the object of his study:

there were many occasions when my attentions flattered her with respect to her femininity: for example, holding her arm while I guided her across the street; having lunch with her [...] offering to hang up her coat; relieving her of her handbag; holding the automobile door for her while she entered; being solicitous for her comfort before I closed the auto door and took my own seat behind the wheel. (Garfinkel 1967, 133)

Garfinkel's reassurances to his reader – of flirting with Agnes but not really meaning it – are hard to take seriously. As with so many practices of medical inscription about transsexuality, Garfinkel's notes constitute a clear archive of chaser desire, badly disguised as research. It is at this point well established that many of our clinicians rationalize their attraction to trans people as purely scientific, passing off evenings spent hanging out at chaser bars as “ethnography,” dating trans people in private and denying them basic healthcare in public.⁵⁹ One way of dealing with this is to foreground the types of harm, ethical breach, and power imbalance inherent to the clinician's prurient and fetishizing gaze. Another is to query what, if anything, can be salvaged from these relations. Garfinkel concludes:

at times like this her behavior reminded me that being female for her was like having been given a wonderful gift [...] At such times she acted like a recent and enthusiastic initiate into the sorority of her heart's desire. (Garfinkel 1967, 133)

Is it possible that Agnes could have experienced fleeting moments of affirmation and pleasure in the eroticised, hyperfeminine role Garfinkel created for her? What could the rituals of heterosexual manners rehearsed between Agnes and Garfinkel have yielded for her? Did she experience the ability to disarm him with her performances of impulsive girlishness as capacitive? How did it feel

⁵⁹ See Bailey 2003, for example.

to be offered Garfinkel's arm to cross the street; his hand to assist her inside a vehicle? I turn here to trans femme autotheory, which frequently elaborates a productive, joyful, and unquestionably hot "bimbo" epistemology of self-making.

Bimbo theory maps the undeniable pleasure and perhaps limitless potential for gender affirmation to be had in the performance of "high femme camp antics" (Gill-Peterson 2021b; Davis, 2020). Examples include Hannah Baer's tongue-in-cheek self-characterization as a "ketamine princess," a "party girl," and a "bimbo trap with a shopping addiction," as well as Gill-Peterson's description of femme icon Jessica Rabbit; a "transsexual bombshell married to the titular neurosis-incarnate Roger [...] an at-least-six-foot-tall femme fatale who has eyes for no one else and yet still routinely brings all men to their knees, without a second thought because *she's just that hot*" (Baer 2020, 68-73; Gill-Peterson 2021b). Under such terms, and even within constrained scenes of apparent passivity and fetishization, being "just that hot," bringing "all the men to their knees," vamping it up, engaging in elaborate, vintage performances of powerlessness, and thrilling to the "sheer pleasure of [being] a high femme tease" foster radical and liberatory experiences of gender euphoria (Gill-Peterson 2021b; Feinberg 1993). At the heart of some modes of both femme and trans affective and aesthetic sensibility is an unflinching commitment to doing a bit: "it [...] has to do with desire [...] that is, wanting the thing so badly you don't mind humiliating or abjecting yourself for it" (Gill-Peterson 2021b). Femme is, or can be, a cultivated receptivity to the pleasure to be had from "a wish that wishes so hard that it fails [...] because of its own unwieldiness, its own excess of desire, its own desire so big and raw and exposed that it can't be satiated, but instead must get performed" (Davis 2020). Femme and trans go together well; both are able to "offer up failure as a subversive, if counterintuitive, form of resistance" (Davis 2020). As Gill-Peterson

astutely puts it, “going from a life where the joke’s on me and I have no control, to one where I choose to make the joke on me? That’s being trans, baby” (Gill-Peterson 2021c). Agnes used femme registers – vulnerability, girlishness, powerlessness – to navigate through the precarious and restrictive relations in which she found herself, perhaps even extracting novel pleasures from these exigent circumstances. The episode between Agnes and Garfinkel speaks, at the very least, to the underlying porosity of sexology’s relations to its research subjects, something categorically denied by sexology itself, and perhaps also gestures to unexpected desires, registers, and capacitations emerging from the feeling of “being studied”.⁶⁰

While I think it is fair to say that in revising her account of her transition after she had taken what she needed from the clinic, Agnes made it abundantly clear how risible trans medicine’s claims of jurisdiction over trans life are, some scholarship rehearses this narrative without considering the ways in which Agnes’ agency would still be worth attending to and learning from if she had not succeeded in getting what she wanted. Trans agency is not always about winning, often looks more like failure than triumph, and is rarely even legible as resistance work. As Hartman observes,

every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known [...] and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor. (Hartman 2019, xiii)

There are many trans people in the archive whose practices of expressing themselves and living freely were met with hostility, censure, and indifference, or worse, criminalization, pathologization, and incarceration, and it is vital that our historiographic efforts recognise the

⁶⁰ See Lubin (forthcoming).

agency and vibrancy of these ordinary trans lives with as much enthusiasm as they do the apparently insurgent ground of lives like Agnes’.

In the case of one teenage trans girl from Ohio, her expressivity and presence are disclosed through her letters to Benjamin and Leo Wollman’s New York clinic, in which she asks to be referred for hormones. In one letter, she may have tried to approximate the specialist language used by clinicians, perhaps hoping that rehearsing medical narratives of transsexuality would make her seem more adult and knowledgeable, and her need for treatment more genuine. Whatever the case, her lack of expertise and sometimes childish turns of phrase result in “flashes of fascinating digression,” elliptical reasoning, and inadvertent disregard for everything that trans medicine holds critical and relevant (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 153). In her sprawling, repetitious letter, the tangential, anecdotal, and nonserious jostle for space alongside the serious, earnest, and faux-scientific; perhaps a child’s best guess at a persuasive, formal register:

I would rather have a girl for a best friend than a boy. A lot of the girls like me. Sharon, Cindy, Patty, Linda, Colleen, Connie, Patty, Linda, Dixie, Sherry, Toni, Yvonne, Dianna, Cindy, Sheila, and Debbie, but the one I like most is Paula. She’s fab! Only a few of the boys like me. Some of them are just jealous because I’m smarter than them.⁶¹

The girl was turned away from Benjamin’s clinic, and we will never know if she was successful in obtaining gender-affirming care elsewhere. While such letters “tended to work carefully to stick to the parameters of transsexuality,” their distinctive, esoteric style results in moments which unexpectedly rupture the “discursive veneer” of trans medicine, and threaten to upend its claims to know all there is to know about trans phenomena (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 153).

⁶¹ See “YC” to Leo Wollman, December 1968, Box 6, Series II-C, HB [Cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 153].

Gill-Peterson's research has similarly unearthed a 1978 letter from a Kentucky psychologist (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 187). He wrote to John Money for advice about a fifteen year-old black trans girl; he wanted to know whether she should be referred for hormones. The letter takes the form of a standard patient history and clinical evaluation, but a strange digression halfway through sets the narrative on an unexpected course. The evaluating clinician, Dr Neill, begins by describing the girl's hairstyle in slightly unusual terms; it is "long [and] frosted [...] (a la [her] heroine Stevie Nix [sic])."⁶² Dr Neill goes on to explain that he tasked the girl with a story-writing exercise, designed as part of her psychological evaluation. The girl, he says, "told the story of Rhiannon," a "character from a Fleetwood Mac album."⁶³ Dr Neill expands:

The Rhiannon of [her] story is a young, beautiful devil worshipper who is lonely but wants to be loved for herself. She has many lovers but none who love her for herself, so she finally remains alone and learns not to care and 'thinks about what she thinks.'⁶⁴

The girl's story, despite being rendered in the uncomprehending and indifferent prose of this clinician, is nevertheless evocative and discomposing. It is something like Roland Barthes' evocation of the punctum – the sensory, deeply subjective effect of a photograph on a viewer; it is "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes 1981, 27). It produces a vivid, moving portrait of a black trans girlhood spent listening to rock music in rural Kentucky, and describes something specific and indelible about this girl's life and experiences of the world. She understood something from Nicks' lyrics about a sensitive, powerful, misunderstood young woman which she found profoundly resonant. Though the girl's identification with Rhiannon is heavily pathologized in the clinician's account – Neill diagnoses

⁶² T. Kerby Neill to John Money, October 26, 1978, Box 7, JMK [Cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 187].

⁶³ T. Kerby Neill to John Money, October 26, 1978, Box 7, JMK, 3 [Cited in Gill-Peterson 2018b, 187].

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Rhiannon as a “schizophrenic Welsh Witch” – following Hartman, my endeavour here is to offer an account which “break[s] open archival documents so they might yield a richer picture” of the ways that subjects whose actions are frequently dismissed as perverse, insane, or criminal have made living an art and a pleasure (Hartman 2019, xiv). Rhiannon’s refrain in the song, “will you ever win?” may well prompt us to pause and consider what agency might have actually felt or looked like to a black trans girl in 1978. We will never know whether the story she wrote about Rhiannon worked in her favour or not. Could it have made her seem trans enough, girl enough, lucid enough to secure her some form of access to the highly ambivalent shelter of the clinic? Perhaps it was read as evidence of instability, pathology, and perversity; it would not have been unusual if it had led to further psychiatric diagnoses, foreclosure from the gender clinic, and institutionalization – these were common consequences for black trans children.⁶⁵ As Gill-Peterson explains,

we are left to wonder whether she was able to find in her own life the same capacity that her imagined Rhiannon possessed, the ability to find within a situation of enforced vulnerability and confinement the space to “think about what she thinks” as an assertion of black trans personhood. (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 187)

Despite our lingering questions about whether these girls’ exercises of waywardness and agency actually resulted in access to hormones and surgery like they may have hoped, such moments – in which we catch shockingly intimate glimpses of trans girlhoods spent hopefully writing letters from bedrooms in the Midwest and listening to Fleetwood Mac in the Southeast – query the entire epistemological project of trans medicine, revealing the boundless, uncontrollable, unknowable contours of innumerable trans lives. Few, then and now, have recognized trans people, especially

⁶⁵ As Gill-Peterson demonstrates, psychiatric diagnoses and institutionalization have been common consequences when black trans people seek access to gender affirming care, 2018b, 159-161.

young black women, as living fulfilling lives, as having agency, as being “sexual modernists, free lovers, radicals and anarchists” (Hartman 2019, xv). They have been “credited with nothing,” and deemed “unfit for history” (Hartman 2019, xv). However, detailed attention to what, on first glance, seem no more than austere administrative instruments – the case file, the intake letter, the patient history – discloses the revolutionary ideals of “waywardness, refusal, mutual aid [...] radical imagination and everyday anarchy” that have always animated ordinary trans lives (Hartman 2019, xv).

*

Trans people’s ability to care for and about one another is made possible through forms of care work, kinship, mutual aid, and attachment that are more or less invisible to conventional analyses of labour and care ethics. Indeed, the forms of family and kinship that are invoked in much feminist literature on care labour are “steeped in forms of domesticity [...] that are [...] grounded in the colonial/modern gender system,” and which structure cis- and repronormative expectations of what desirable, functional intimacy looks like (Malatino 2020, 7). As trans people, whatever our relationship to family – “the word, the construct, the ongoing practice of building one – it’s [...] obvious that our ability to flourish is reliant on forms of care that outstrip the [...] family” and its reach (Malatino 2020, 6). In this way, understanding what care really looks like in trans lives means “decentering the family and beginning, instead, from the many-gendered, radically inventive [...] weavers of our webs of care” (Malatino 2020, 7).

In *Confessions*, characters cultivate methods of support, kinship, connectivity, and aid that move beyond unsustainable and conditional forms of care, which as they know and have experienced,

can quickly unravel into fatigue and neglect. The care webs that they weave recognise the primacy of the hermetic familial unit which structures conventional carer/cared for relations as inadequate to the forms of intimacy and flourishing they are dedicated to elaborating. The characters of *Confessions* similarly recognise other affects endemic to neoliberalized care ethics – compassion, sympathy, burnout, vicarious trauma, and self-care – as a partial and unsatisfying way of describing how they care for one another’s precious lives.

Importantly, given the prevalence of (medical, administrative, scientific, state-proctored) accounts which constitute trans phenomena as knowable, quantifiable, and positivist, characters in *Confessions* repeatedly elaborate complexly nonsecular, irrational, and fabulous forms of attachment and care. These modes are moments of irruptive possibility which undercut institutional knowledge production about trans lives in unexpected ways. Instead of engaging accounts of coalition work with plant life, nonhuman animals, and magical powers as merely the sites of “subjugated knowledges” – a reading that negates the agency of nonhuman and nonsecular beings and analyses them only as the effects of human belief – *Confessions* ratifies care work between humans and a profusion of other forms of life (Foucault 2003, 7-8). With this, it is able to consider the political capacitations and life-sustaining care webs afforded by trans collaborations with other-than-human agencies. Here, trans, BIPOC, and outlaw characters are supported in their survival by magical, hauntological, nonsecular, and nonhuman conspirators and collaborators, and they are richer for it. In *Confessions*, a trans care ethic of postscarcity is cultivated in real terms from attachments that range from the cosmic and fantastical to the durable and practical.

Jack begins *Confessions* uncared for, with no home, lovers, friends, conspirators, or kin. His “mum made clear she’d had enough of Jack the day she brought him to [...] Kneebone’s doorstep” (Rosenberg 2018, 12). Jack believes that he is alone in the world, and resolves that no one can be relied on but himself: “*better just to imagine Mum dead*” (Rosenberg 2018, 16-17). Bess, Jack’s future lover and conspirator, begins *Confessions* similarly alone. Unlike Jack, Bess’ beloved parents are actually dead, freedom fighters murdered by the British state (Rosenberg 2018, 194). After her parents’ death, Bess is forced to leave the embattled fenlands in which she was raised. She makes her way to London, relying on carefully guarded reserves of streetwise cunning to get by: “I had to leave [...] to make my way to the only place left for a girl with no means to make any kind of a life” (Rosenberg 2018, 198).

Jack, who has internalized his mother’s disgust at his transness, lives a solitary and desolate double life until a chance encounter with Bess leads them to recognise that the self-sufficiency to which both have turned is inadequate to their needs, especially when compared to the possibilities offered by sustainable forms of interwovenness and care:

Jack lived one life during the days he went to market. More and more the brims of the streets took him for a boy [...] at the Kneebones’, he lived another life [...] it was as if he had been born with a spike between his vertebrae. And, with each failed attemp’d full breath, some Demon hanging just over his shoulder nailed it deeper [...] Anyone else looking through his eyes would have known how to remove this Torment. *Flee the house, and the spike will work itself loose*. Even an animal will seek out relief. But Jack mistook his Suffering for subjecthood. And consequently, he *desired* the doubleness to which he had been forc’d to resort as a form of survival. (Rosenberg 2018, 32-33)

Bess and Jack fear intimacy, dependency, and vulnerability. Jack numbs himself, afraid at his subconsciously growing need to live with and among others; he imagines a

door inside him between his waking life and [...] something lying close-packed like a bomb at his core, poised to shiver into a coruscated, glinting shower of – of what, he knew not. But there was *Something* just beyond the door inside him. (Rosenberg 2018, 33)

Then, one day, Jack catches Bess' eye on the street and she recognises him as male; "the woman held his gaze [...] he re-heard what the doxy had uttered as he'd passed: *Handsome Boy*" (Rosenberg 2018, 35). This simple moment of being seen and desired has a profound effect on Jack, who, in its wake, finally resolves to escape captivity at Kneebone's and begin living as though he is free:

there are moments that do not arise as the result of Conscious determination [...] such moments alter a being in ways that plotting, synthesizing, and future-izing can never do [...] and so, unwilled and unbidden, Jack found himself seizing on his Liberation [...] truly Free – he rampag'd across the roofs [...] towards [...] Bess Khan. (Rosenberg 2018, 38-39)

Jack and Bess' chance meeting allows both to appreciate that they had been treading water, believing the best they can hope for from the world is a bare life of privation, scarcity, and survival, not realising that they can thrive, grow, share, love and be loved: "It's been sweet" – Bess' voice was soft – "sharing this room with you [...] but I was so truly lonely here before you came" (Rosenberg 2018, 200).

Together, Bess and Jack find ways to negotiate precarity and upheaval, cultivating "arts of living that make us possible in a culture that is alternately, depending on where you're at and who you are, either thinly accommodating or devastatingly hostile" (Malatino 2020, 5). They mutually and continually bring each other into being in the "vacuum of care left by overlapping economies of abandonment" (Malatino 2020, 71). They keep each other alive, make space for one another's becoming, protect each other from harm, and celebrate together. As Malatino observes, queer and

trans care webs have no center, but in some significant ways, they emerge because of the ways in which the presumed, normative, and familial centres of a life have fallen out, as they have for Jack and Bess, or “never were accessible to or desired by us in the first place” (Malatino 2020, 2).

Bess and Jack learn that surviving “means committing to forms of healing that are unthinkable, indeed impossible, without care webs” (Malatino 2020, 3). They meet and form attachments with others – ghosts, highwaymen, sex workers, freedom fighters – living precarious lives; such practices expand their care web and bring them security and abundance in real terms. On the day that Bess’ parents are killed fighting government surveyors in the fens, an apparition appears and saves Bess from harm:

A girl stood above me [...] she look’d *like* me. I did not know if she was an Emanation or a sprite [...] the girl was saying, *Dig*. Behind the girl, Surveyors advanced toward us. But the girl stood in front of me, hiding me [...] I believ’d she was some kind of fen-angel. The angel was whispering *Dig* [...] I dug until I could lie in the dark Hollow and pour soil back over myself [...] and I pray’d [...] I held tight to the girl [...] even now I don’t know who she was or why she saved me. (Rosenberg 2018, 195-197)

Bess’ saviour and conspirator in this instance is some kind of hauntological, spiritual, or magical being. Moments such as this repeatedly punctuate *Confessions*, and urge scholars to consider how attachments with “subaltern” agentive forces have become important to precarious communities’ efforts to negotiate the diminishing and differential chances for life afforded by a neoliberal world.

In *Confessions*, starlight, plants, objects, apparitions, and landscapes exert powerful forces, and are capable of giving care and being cared for. *Confessions* demonstrates “remarkable sensitivity to the irreducible presences of enchanted and otherworldly forces,” and is committedly reluctant to describe such powers as merely the effects of human belief; refusing, for instance, “to treat

enchantment as phenomenology [or to] distil accounts of the extraordinary as symbolic or “subjective” truths” (Lewis 2017, 205-206). In moments like these, *Confessions* turns its attention to the affectivities *between* trans humans and other-than-human entities. In rendering enchanted, nonhuman, and nonsecular presences integral to trans care, attachment, and survival, *Confessions* proffers “trans” as a form of being with “distinct capacities for reciprocity with agencies that dominant historiographies struggle to ratify” (Lewis 2017, 205-206). In this way, *Confessions* specifically vexes the ontological hierarchies of secular humanism in order to evoke trans history as one forged through care and attachment between “subaltern” agentive entities – that is, beings and forces that dominant ontologies do not recognize as intentional, agentic, or as “viable objects of human sociality” (Lewis 2017, 205-206).

In *Confessions*, a group of mutineers escape captivity on a British East India Company ship. The mutineers build the wreckage of the company vessel into a sprawling flotilla, which they declare a “Maroon Society of Freebooters” (Rosenberg 2018, 214). Like the real historical maroons – displaced and fugitive people who escaped plantation colonies to form communities across the US and the Caribbean – the mutineers of *Confessions* are under constant attack from colonial forces. They seek recourse to forms of survival, nourishment, and concealment that are predicated on their ability to conscientiously maintain companionships with the nonhuman animals, plants, and entities for whom they care:

They were rich in livestock [...] Everything was held in common and every soul Valu’d and loved [...] Some of the pirates had become eager amateur Scientists. Their experience with roots and herbs for shipboard health form’d the basis for many gentle Experiments with the animals and plants they had collected from the Company ships. (Rosenberg 2018, 214)

In one of their experiments, they create a DIY recipe for testosterone. The recipe itself is magical:

the pirates devis'd a kind of Concoction [...] They found that if they distill'd the urine of the swine for weeks in the sun and mix'd it with fruit pectin, they'd arrive at a stiff jelly that could be granulat'd in the manner of cane [...] The pirates admired the swine, which seem'd possessed of an especial Meatiness, and they wished to thicken similarly. They conjectur'd that the urine might hold a key [...] they determined on a [...] Subtle process—applying to the gel'd urine a complex combination of herbs, fruits, mashing Techniques, and an ineffable Something else: exposure to certain strains of Starlight. The serum, when completed, emboldened and thickened them as hoped. (Rosenberg 2018, 215)

It depends on “an ineffable Something else” to work; something in excess of, but still like, a situated knowledge, learned through collective struggle, of manifesting what is needed to thrive:

And what of the mutineer recipe?” Jack cut in. The Lion-Man shrugg'd. “There are certain forms of knowledge develop'd collectively that can't be translated into a simple recipe. (Rosenberg 2018, 215-219)

The magical recipe again urges consideration of how trans people's anti-rational commitments can be both real and lifesaving, in ways that are frequently missed and dismissed under our dominant politics of secularism. Despite the recent popularity of the posthuman turn in feminist materialist theory, and the detailed attention to nonhuman agency such scholarly work has entailed, much posthuman thought maintains a carefully distanced relationship from nonhuman agencies that are religious or magical. Work in the anthropological and social sciences has been troubled by a related interpretive problem, in which human encounters with the supernatural are routinely recoded in the scholarship as “symbolic (rather than literal) interactions, thereby rendering those relationships commensurate with a secular modern civil order” (Lewis 2017, 207; Langford 2013, 229). Outside of the Western context, “anthro-decentrizing scholarship has been much more decisively involved with the magical and supernatural” (Lewis 2017, 207). Subaltern studies has repeatedly offered

critiques of secular humanism, resisting the trend for reading divinities only as “social facts,” and instead asserting the need to reckon with the human-independent agency of the dead, gods, spirits, demons and magical beings (Chakrabarty 2000, 16). Recently, more concerted efforts are being made to posit animism as a “relational ontology” that acknowledges “the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human” (Graham Harvey 2005, xi). Anthropological scholarship emerging from indigenous and subaltern studies refuses to interpret enchantment only in anthropocentric terms, contesting that divinities are merely effects of human belief. As it is increasingly read, animism

is not a property of [humans] imaginatively projected onto things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded [...] it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. (Ingold 2006, 10)

While in anthropological scholarship, new animism has typically been applied through rereading non-Western antiquity, there is clear potential for its application to Western modernity. Specifically, as Lewis observes, a new animist approach “can also enable [...] assessments of episodes in transgender history that have been subjected to [...] anthropocentric and secularizing hermeneutics” (Lewis 2017, 207). A new animist approach to the archival traces left by historical trans people allows us to perceive personhood more broadly, and facilitates the recognition of forms of trans agency, care, and attachment that have been neglected in most scholarship because of their invocation of the occult, nonsensical, and nonsecular. In her book *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, Carolyn E. Fick writes, “despite rigid prohibitions [by French colonists], voodoo was indeed one of the few areas of totally autonomous activity for the African slaves. As a religion and a vital spiritual force, it was a source of psychological liberation in that it enabled them to express and reaffirm that self-existence they objectively

recognized through their own labor” (Fick 1991, 44). In *Confessions*, the mutineers’ cultivation of insights gleaned from magical sources furnishes them with conditions of psychic and somatic liberation and affords lateral, interspecies, and inter-animistic possibilities for pursuing political change.

The mutineers grow what they need, everyone working according to their capacity and skills. They weave a resilient care web which coheres “through consistently foregrounding the realities of [...] the gendered, raced, and classed dynamics that result in the differential distribution of care – for those receiving it as well as those giving it” (Malatino 2020, 2). They know that a “care web works when the work that composes it isn’t exploitative, appropriative, or alienated” (Malatino 2020, 2). The testosterone brings them the freedom, libidinalization, and joy that they desire in abundance, enlivening new possibilities for caring for one another:

Over the course of time, they came to resemble grizzled coves in ways that surpris’d and delight’d them [...] This ‘gravel,’ as the mutineers called it, was easily integrated into the Maroon society. Some said it made those who took it exceptionally [...] Free and Liberated with each other. Though others said they had been quite Free and Liberated with each other all along. (Rosenberg 2018, 215)

Trans care webs have emerged from a communal history of redress in the wake of denials. Just as the trans care webs of the present involve commiseration, affirmation, legal advice, crowdfunding, DIY HRT recipes, and social media groups in which knowledge is shared about finding supportive medical care, navigating the side effects of exogenous hormones, and clinical bureaucracy, the care praxis elaborated by Jack and Bess is constituted from an ensemble of practices which range from the durable and material to the ephemeral and affective. The novel concludes when Bess, Jack, and their friends leave London, the magical recipe for homemade testosterone in hand, to

return to the fenlands where Bess grew up, there to “live with what’s left of the Fen-Tigers – if there are any [...] and make a thieftopia in what remains” (Rosenberg 2018, 313). They plan to “share the elixir-secrets [the testosterone recipe]” with other outlaws, maroons, and fugitives, “experiment together,” and grow old together, knowing “there is no utopia [...] save the one we make ourselves” (Rosenberg 2018, 313).

The “utopia” Bess and Jack cultivate is characterised not by wishful thinking, but by the imperative to bring about post-scarcity in real terms. Bess and Jack reflect that it is more than possible to live in a world where everyone’s needs are met. Clutch Fleischmann, in *Time is the Thing a Body Moves Through*, writes about an art project they collaborated on with a friend:

Benjy and I have placed a mirror [...] in the flat bit of his front yard. The mirror shows sky [...] we dump all our prescription drugs onto the reflective surface, bottle after bottle. The pills are tan, light yellow, two shades of blue, one of red, a pale pink, and a paler pink with a purple hue. When they are all mixed together they look like pills, generically, unlike when they are in the bottles and seem direct references to our survival [...] We are here to shape the pills into letters [...] thousands and thousands of dollars worth of medication, they are the most expensive material we have used to make an image. Another in a long series of changes to Benjy’s HIV treatment plan and insurance access [...] means that most of these pills are not pills he is taking but pills he has taken. They are pills that worked, pills he can’t access anymore [...] I contribute only three varieties to the mirror, synthetic estrogen and two kinds of testosterone blockers. These pills, too, have been rendered different with the sudden announcement that there’s a shortage of injectable estrogen in the United States [...] sometimes I mail people pills, just as sometimes friends sent pills to me when I ran out [...] Benjy and I use maybe one hundred pills. *Post-scarcity*, they spell out [...] Benjy positions the camera [...] the images show only pills and sky, and it appears as though the word is floating above us. *Post-scarcity*, it says, composed of more than one body like all bodies are. (Fleischmann 2019, 58-59)

Fleischmann and Benjy made this image in a moment when in the United States oestrogen became temporarily unavailable, and in which the CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals (manufacturer of AIDS medication) hiked the price of Daraprim from \$13.50 to \$750 per pill. As Malatino recalls, “the

medications we rely upon to stay alive seemed to be becoming rapidly unavailable, though they were already deeply inaccessible to many” (Malatino 2020, 34). Although oestrogen has since come back in stock, future shortages, price hikes, discontinuations, and proliferating conditions of unavailability are inevitable. A post-scarcity vision guides trans people’s practices of care in this ongoing moment, where, increasingly, “folks are sharing hormones, subsidising each other’s medical care, crowdsourcing money for rent, for transition, for bail” (Malatino 2020, 34). In situations of “ever-tightening austerity, dispossession, and deprivation” trans agency is the cultivation of methods of collective survival that are not just directed by an imaginary of future post-scarcity, but realise post-scarcity in the present (Malatino 2020, 34). In the following chapter, I pursue these concerns through an analysis of the tensions between trans embodiment and the figure of the cyborg, tracing the dynamics of trans care that emerge from within violent abstractions of trans lives.

Chapter Five

Love in the Time of Cyborgs: On Trans Writing and Refusing to Be Abstracted

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs [...] The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world [...] the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the “West’s” escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency.

Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*

T4T is an ideal, I guess, and we fall short of it most of the time. But that’s better than before. All it took was the end of the world to make that happen.

Torrey Peters, *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*

A cyborg – a contraction of cybernetic organism – describes a being with both organic and biomechatronic body parts; an organism with a body that has both organically and technologically produced elements, organs, capacities, and functions. The term *cyborg* was coined by two research scientists, Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, and first used in their 1960 article *Cyborgs and Space*, which approached “the task of adapting man’s body to any environment he may choose,” by making “biochemical, physiological, and electronic modifications” to the body (Clynes and Kline 1960, 26). The cyborg concept they outline is, at its most simple, the creation of a body capable of adjusting its “functions to suit different environments” as needed, through the use of technologies (Clynes and Kline 1960, 26). Many discrete instances and artefacts that could be described as “cyborg technology” have emerged in the intervening years since *Cyborgs and Space*; ranging from microelectronic implants, cochlear implants, pacemakers, gene editing technologies

such as CRISPR, Bluetooth wearables, injectable endocrinological and narcotic technologies, assisted reproductive technologies, and prosthetics from bionic limbs to dildos. In addition, the cyborg has come to function in the mainstream as a powerful cypher for hybridity, alterity, and the blending of natural/cultural signifiers; inaugurating a wealth of narratives which express cultural anxiety at how and why corporealities are formed and transformed.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given cultural perceptions that the operating theatre is where the transsexual is “made,” trans people are often called cyborgs by transphobes, doctors, pundits, and in polemic across the political spectrum. In an incoherent but entertaining interview, Alex Jones claims to “get to what the whole trans movement’s about,” suggesting that trans lives are symptomatic of an imminent future in which “the most protected class are going to be augmented humans—cyborgs” (Ring 2017). Men and women will allegedly be replaced by “humanoids [with sex] chromosomes splicing together” (Ring 2017). A similar 2019 interview between Fox News host Laura Ingraham and Paul Nathanson contends that “trans people have taken it one step further [...] using medical and other technologies to develop a new species [...] part human and part machine” (Ring 2019).

Many science fiction narratives feature technological advancements which permit the hybridization of human and machinic, cybernetic, and animal characteristics in order to pose questions about metamorphic possibilities. As Donna Haraway observes, “contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (Haraway 2016, 6). The “potentiality of the body to morph, shift, change, and become fluid is a powerful fantasy,” and science fiction narratives with trans-coded

plots are everywhere in mainstream culture, especially in prose and cinema (Halberstam 2005, 127). Citing “the image of surgically removable faces,” in John Woo’s *Face/Off* (1997), the “the liquid-mercury type of slinkiness of the Terminator” in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron 1991), and “the virtual bodies” of *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999), to which we could add *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii 1995), *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), and others, Jack Halberstam explains that “the body in transition indelibly marks late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century [...] fantasy” and speculative fiction (Halberstam 2005, 127-128).

Although few of these movies have explicitly trans characters, they all abstract trans experience by substituting trans bodies for cyborg bodies in order to make metaphorical gambits about shape-shifting, identity-morphing, and mobility: “gender metamorphosis [...] is also used as a metaphor for other kinds of mobility or immobility” (Halberstam 2005, 128). Often, a reductive, universalized trans subjectivity is invoked to gesture to the trans/cyborg body’s supposed availability for open-ended self-making. This entrenches an ahistorical and deracinated synonymy between trans and fluidity that bears little relation to the precarity under which most trans lives are lived. As Halberstam notes, even in explicitly trans films from this cultural moment, such as *The Crying Game* (Jordan 1992) and *Boys Don’t Cry* (Peirce 1999), trans lives and bodies are treated as the metaphorical stuff through which theoretical claims about materiality can be made. In this chapter I confront the ways in which literary and theoretical abstraction flattens the texture of trans lives, while also considering the work of trans writers who resist abstraction to write with specificity about trans experiences.

In response to the ways in which contemporary science fiction narratives have presumed the ready availability of trans bodies for metaphorization, trans writers working with cyborg imaginaries have retooled genre fiction to materialize and make visible the real texture of trans agencies. Examples of trans science fiction include Yoon Ha Lee's *Ninefox Gambit* trilogy (2016), Joss Lake's *Future Feeling* (2021), and Topside Press' anthology of science fiction and fantasy by trans writers, *Meanwhile, Elsewhere* (Fitzpatrick and Plett 2017). Torrey Peters' speculative fiction novella *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* explores an imminent future in which everyone, cis and trans, has been forced to depend on exogenous sex hormones to live. The provocation at the heart of *Infect* is "what if we were all cyborgs and none of us could deny it?" Would the world change? Would it be better? Or worse? The novella is narrated by a trans woman, a grim survivalist, who explains how this "world where everyone has to choose their gender" has failed to deliver on its utopian promise; even under conditions where everyone must confront the ways in which their body is technologically dependent, trans bodies continue to provoke revulsion and inspire violence (Peters 2016, 29). Peters and her characters explore why this is true, even as they try to make a life together in what remains of the world.

Unlike fiction about trans lives that promises unmediated access to trans subjectivities, Peters' novella acknowledges the impossibility of assuming a trans point of view, there being no such thing, monolithically. She instead focusses on the multiplicity of shifting vantage points, the opacity, the divisiveness, and the messiness that exist between us as trans people. She isn't doing this to portray trans people as conflict-oriented, but in order to pay sustained attention to what living in community with other trans people actually feels like, and the ways in which realizing you depend on those others chafes as much as it saves you. Dominant cyborg narratives often

aspire to “an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency,” and claim the cyborg as a beautiful, shimmering, independent, chimeric creature in a postgender world (Haraway 2016, 8). Against these tropes, *Infect* is a love story about needing others, about how gender matters deeply and how we rely on our loved ones to give us care by recognizing and giving us our gender. Set against the backdrop of a hormone apocalypse, Peters’ novella is about the ways in which we can hurt each other while loving each other, the ways in which we bring one another into being, and the ways we allow one another to make mistakes.

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Infect is a revenger’s tragedy; in our present day Seattle, trans women, led by the charismatic ideologue and trans separatist Lexi, decide to take their revenge on the world for its careless transphobic hostility. It is partly that they have been injured and want payback, and partly that they hope to galvanise conditions under which they are no longer harmed for being perceived as different. Like *The Revenger’s Tragedy* however, acts of revenge have unintended consequences, become unwieldy, and refuse to live up to their promise (Middleton 1996).

The narrator recounts how it began; the girls spend evenings entertaining each other by dreaming up vindictive ironies – ways to give cis people a taste of their own medicine. Much like the videos on Natalie Wynn’s YouTube channel, in which she lovingly bathes an effigy of Jordan Peterson in milk, the girls of *Infect* concoct elaborate forced feminization fantasies which unblinkingly return the fetishistic gaze of clinicians who claim to produce insights about transsexual

phenomena.⁶⁶ They think it would be funny if cis people – so used to thinking of themselves as independent, of their bodies as their property, and their genders as natural – were made reliant on supplemental sex hormones. Then they would know what it feels like to work hard to make others recognise you as the gender you are, how easily your gender can be taken from you by those who refuse to ratify it, and how much every one of us relies on the grace of others to be seen as that which we are. The sissification of J. Michael Bailey is of course a high point in their storytelling game: “Raleen, Lexi, and I spent the night [...] plotting [...] I liked the joke of making Bailey into some sort of hormone-reliant pseudo-trans. I still like it as a joke” (Peters 2016, 19-20). In the future they imagine, hope for, and dream of, “everyone will be trans [...] we’re all gonna be on hormones. Even the cis [...] especially the cissies” (Peters 2016, 26). They imagine it would be instructive and equalizing for these essentialists to come to their genders like we do, as supplicants.⁶⁷ They joke about how funny it would be if the armchair biologists, sworn to their supposedly unindictable totems of natural sex difference, had to confront the ways in which the epistemological framework to which they cleave is actually a hyperconstructivist medical industry in which dimorphic gender is artificially engineered toward the nationalist imperatives of whiteness and heteroreproductivity (Preciado 2013, 99-104).

At some point, though, for Lexi, it stops being a joke, and becomes something more consuming. All her life, she has been left out in the cold, turned away from, and told she is difficult. The narrator, Lexi’s first trans friend, can barely stand to be around her, cringing from her brittle manner, from the deep loneliness it conceals, and from the burden of responsibility she imagines Lexi’s vulnerability asks of her. Lexi dreams of evening the score for the harm that has been visited

⁶⁶ See Wynn 2018.

⁶⁷ See Wark 2019.

on her, and the ways in which she has been abandoned and treated as disposable. A kind of trans scorched-earth tactics; a way of making cis lives difficult in precisely the ways trans lives are difficult. Helped by a molecular biologist friend, Raleen, Lexi engineers a potent virus with which she plans to infect the world. In an immune response, the body of a person infected by the concoction attacks any sex hormones it produces, rendering it reliant on supplemental hormones from external sources forever (Peters 2016, 26-30). The virus they engineer is incredibly contagious, and once unleashed, it will reshape the world in ways that are scarcely imaginable.

The narrator, the virus' unwilling patient zero, runs home, post-infection, furious with Lexi and determined to quarantine until she is no longer infectious, preventing the virus from spreading further. However, on her journey home, she is waylaid by drunk frat boys who clock and attack her. She initially means to resolve the situation quickly and peacefully, but then thinks, "I'm so tired of this shit. I want them to know how I suffer. I want them to suffer" (Peters 2016, 70-71). She opens her mouth "to say something [...]" but no voice comes out. Instead, an elated, vengeful sprite rises up from my lungs, ascends through the passage of my throat, and announces itself to the world as I cough right in his face" (Peters 2016, 71).

The viral contagion that follows this defiant, destructive act completely restructures the contemporary US. In the wake of free market collapse, states are dissolved, militia cabals hoard resources, and currency is replaced by a cashless barter economy in which services and goods are traded at negotiated rates. Crucially, in this hormone apocalypse, synthetic versions of the sex hormones testosterone, oestrogen, and progesterone have become the most valuable of commodities, in whose names wars are waged. The means of large-scale pharmaceutical

production is under paramilitary control, and, driven by an “aging, dwindling” population preoccupied by virility, fertility, and reproductivity, and haunted by the instability of gender signifiers, costs associated with the acquisition of quality synthetic hormones spiral out of control (Peters 2016, 26-30). Decent testosterone is reserved for militia, while decent oestrogens are reserved for fertile cis women. Demand and competition for the small supply of hormones is so great that people who thought of themselves as cis before the ground zero of contagion are forced to “become trans,” loading up on hormones they never imagined themselves taking, adapting their bodies and their genders to get by in this new cruel world.

Infect uses the provocation of a viral epidemic which makes the population dependent on exogenous sex hormones to disclose what trans people have always known: that trans medicine’s rationale for pathologizing trans bodies obscures the indistinguishable conditions of technological making which produce cis bodies, too. In the novella, cis people continue to pathologize and hate trans people just as much as they do in our current moment, even though, in Peters’ world, trans and cis bodies share much common ground. In *Infect*, trans people are so hated that it is almost impossible for them to get hold of hormones: “A trans woman? [...] Even if we came out of hiding, there’s no bribe large enough to get us estrogen” (Peters 2016, 11). Our narrator explains that she is used to inspiring disgust, that in this world, trans women are hunted down and violently harmed (Peters 2016, 49). When the narrator is poisoned by an “intentionally contaminated” shot of oestrogen, her cis traveling companion tells her “the poison was God’s retribution” (Peters 2016, 48-49). The novella posits that cis people continue to differentiate themselves from trans people even after contagion has made their embodied circumstances identical because they are unwilling

to confront the idea that their bodies are neither natural, nor something that they have absolute agency over.

As Haraway has observed, the field of contemporary medicine has been one of the primary forums into which anxiety about the cyborg has erupted: “modern medicine is [...] full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine” (Haraway 2016, 6). Due to persistent cultural perceptions that trans bodies require technological intervention, the clinic has come to function as a flashpoint for narratives which contest the humanity of gender non-conforming people. Citing the role played by medical technologies in the production of trans bodies and subjectivities, when cis people describe trans embodiment through the lens of cyborg ontology they normally mean to contrast their ostensibly natural bodies to the modified bodies of trans people (Sullivan 2014, 187-190). As trans people, we are generally cognizant that “the transsexual body is an unnatural body” (Stryker 1994, 238). We know that the body we have “is the product of medical science,” that “it is a technological construction,” that “it is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (Stryker 1994, 238). In fact, we are hyperaware of the ways in which these things mean for us; “at this point, cyborgian transsexualism is almost passé. Yes, we’ve all read Donna Haraway, and we all over-identify with Pris in *Blade Runner*” (Page, 2020). More to the point, ratifying and avowing the cyborgian nature of our trans ontology is something we often get to experience as capacitive, joyful, and enabling. We “have done the hard work of constituting ourselves on our own terms, against the natural order,” and there is much to love about the wounds we bore to become (Stryker 1994, 251). As Morgan Page puts it, “is there anything more emotionally and, if we’re being honest, erotically compelling than surgical scars? Evidence of a body fought for, of a life decided [...] to bear them is to say that this was important enough to

me that I had to take grievous action on my own body to manifest it” (Stryker 1994, 251; Page 2020).

Something else that we as trans people are acutely aware of are the ways in which cis bodies and cis genders are brought into being through technologies just as much as our own are. For instance, a “cis-male can self-administer a testosterone based hormonal complex to increase his athletic efficiency, and a teenager can have an implant placed under her skin that releases a composite of estrogens and progesterone for three years, acting as a contraceptive” (Preciado 2013, 126). As Paul Preciado comprehensively demonstrates in *Testo Junkie*, following the epistemological crisis John Money and other sexologists inadvertently created in the mid-century, in which they effectively proved the instability of supposedly “natural” gender signifiers and the nonexistence of sexual dimorphism, biotechnologies have been increasingly recruited toward the political management of the living through the production of cisgender sexual subjectivities. He explains that when “medical, biological, and political discourses were confronted with an infinite variability of bodies [...] that could not be subsumed within the disciplinary imperative of heterosexual reproduction,” they “decided to directly intervene within the structures of living beings to artificially construct sexual dimorphism using surgical, prosthetic, and hormonal techniques” (Preciado 2013, 104-106). In this way, when the “possibility of the technical construction of sexual difference is recognized as a point of departure, nature and identity are brought to the level of a somatic parody” (Preciado 2013, 105-106). Cis people augment and modify their genders all the time through IVF, the Pill, plastic surgeries, circumcision, HRT, Viagra, Cialis etc; “but of course their participation in the pharmacopornographic regime doesn’t attract the same fascination and revulsion” (Page 2020). As Preciado puts it, gender – according medical epistemes which yoke the

alterability of the sexed body to the highly racialized concept of plasticity – is “synthetic, malleable, variable, open to transformation, and imitable, as well as produced and reproduced technically,” such that “male and female are terms without empirical content beyond the technologies that produce them” (Preciado 2013, 101-106).

Infect is populated by cyborgs of many kinds; demonstrating the ways in which all bodies, and not just trans bodies, are the product of processes of technological cultivation, adaption, and optimisation. In the novella, we encounter “ugly mutant pigs,” who are “genetically modified to over-produce bio-identical hormones to humans” (Peters 2016, 12). These pigs, “porcine tanks” that weigh over 600lbs and have “inch-long razors for teeth,” are cultivated to overproduce testosterone and oestrogen (Peters 2016, 12). Their hormones are then extracted, monetized, and sold to those infected by the contagion for exogenous application. This may sound implausible and unconvincing, a science-fiction stretch too far, but in fact Peters’ trans-species (“transimal”) bodies analogise real world use of animal-derived HRT such as Premarin (Kelley 2014, 226-228). Premarin (PREgnant MAREs’ urINe) is a widely prescribed oestrogen manufactured “from the urine of female horses that are gestating fetuses” (Hayward 2014, 256). Premarin is used by cis women for the “treatment of postmenopausal and post-hysterectomy symptoms,” and by trans women for hormonal feminization (Hayward 2014, 256). Haraway notes that the “yoking together” of “molecules and species to each other in consequential ways” is fundamentally constitutive of Premarin (Haraway 2012, 307). *Infect* uses such trans-species entanglements as a commentary on cyborg corporeality, conceptualizing how “the singular – for instance, subject, species, or woman – is necessarily conjoined [...] with the multiple through corporeal involvements that place demands on the social” (Hayward 2014, 256). Noting that, in the case of Premarin, “the cultivation

and exploitation of equines has been built into the biopolitics of transwomen,” Eva Hayward observes that “kinship, relationality, and affect are always already “naturecultural,” and that trans-species entanglements can be taken as a point of departure to imagine broad networks of corporeal “filiations and accountabilities” (Hayward 2014, 256).⁶⁸

In *Infect*, we are introduced to the bodies of “women of promising fertility” and their foils, infertile and postmenopausal women who cannot get hold of oestrogen: “the provisional government allots the good estrogen for women of promising fertility. An older woman would have to have a relative in government [...] to get on the ration list” (Peters 2016, 10-11). If these women are lucky or well-connected they can bribe officials for access to second-rate oestrogens, but if they are poor, Peters implies, they may have to make tentative forays into gendered indeterminacy, dabbling in whatever hormones are available, including testosterone. We meet cis women who have found paid work as mercenary fighters and who use testosterone to leverage a professional advantage. One such woman is Digna, Lexi’s ex-girlfriend. Digna is attached to her identity as a cis woman but takes deluxe hyperpotent testosterone “to stay sharp and strong” (Peters 2016, 61).

Cis men have similarly been forced to adapt; we meet the “auntie-boys”; men “who couldn’t afford testosterone during the Rift Wars and who began to inject poor-quality estrogen” (Peters 2017, 11). The auntie-boys have found a lucrative niche for themselves in post-contagion libidinal economies, relying on sex work to get by: “he pulls from his pocket a little baggie with ten 5ml

⁶⁸ These themes are also taken up in *Confessions*. The DIY testosterone manufactured by the maroon characters involves the use of pigs’ urine; unlike the pigs in *Infect*, these animals are treated as companions. In a mirror image of this caring transspecies interaction, in the neoliberal present of Dr Voth’s narration, a pharmaceutical company asks him to assist in setting up production of a premium brand of organic testosterone at the university, harvested from cattle. Rosenberg 2018.

glass vials inside. ‘This here’s pure [...] probably even make an auntie-boy like you preggo’ [...] a jibe about how auntie-boys were said to have survived the war” (Peters 2016, 10-13). Auntie-boys are about as close as cis people get in *Infect* to tolerating trans people. Auntie-boys are generally understood to be trans in some important ways, but because they “became trans” through exigent circumstances, rather than electively, they are still afforded some measure of humanity, unlike the trans women who were trans before the contagion. Our narrator notes that there is conditional safety and occasionally lifesaving opacity in allowing others to believe that she is an auntie-boy; “he doesn’t have any idea that before the contagion spread, I was already trans, already injecting estrogen. He just figures I’m another auntie-boy” (Peters 2016, 10). We are also introduced to the T Slabs through the figure of Keith, a hormone trader. Keith flaunts his wealth and superior social status by injecting supraphysiological amounts of testosterone. Side-effects of steroid use that carry social stigma in the real world, such as gynecomastia, carry an aesthetic premium in *Infect*: “I’m able to observe from up close how he’s wearing a pair of old Carhart coveralls unbuttoned down the front to show off his hairy bitch tits. He’s so proud of them [...] a bit of conspicuous consumption [...] I’m so flush with testosterone that I overinject. How about that, you lowcount ration-dependent weaklings?” (Peters 2016, 10-11)

Cis people, both in real life and in *Infect*, are not used to thinking of their bodies as unnatural. Lexi and Raleen, the saboteurs who engineered the virus, hope initially that the population’s new reliance on exogenous sex hormones might prompt cisgender people to reflect on the charge so often put to gender non-conforming lives; that they represent something about the technologization of the somatic which troubles the supposedly natural teleology of the body’s development. Lexi and Raleen hope that the virus will unmask the co-constitutive role played by natural/cultural

signifiers in the construction of the body, destabilize contemporary endocrinology's persistent misinformation that sex development has a coherent and reliable developmental teleology, and additionally stage the provocation that no body can be described as natural, unaltered, or able to exist in the world independently. As Hil Malatino observes, the deployment of the trans cyborg body, "in its circuitous and widespread reiterations, bears a certain pedagogical and ontological value, as it demonstrates the stitched-together, intra-active constitution of all embodiment" (Malatino 2020, 39). Lexi and Raleen's hopes are dashed, however, when all the contagion seems to achieve is a deeper entrenchment of transmisogyny.

In her essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix", Susan Stryker develops an instructive and astute reading of why the cyborgian nature of her transsexual embodiment – rather than prompting cis people to recognise that all bodies and subjectivities are necessarily both cooperatively and technologically produced – instead provokes their abjection and rage. She explains how trans people continue to experience harm at the hands of cis people because trans bodies literalize the abstract violence of the gendering process in ways that prompt "revelation of the constructedness of the natural order" (Stryker 1994, 250). *Infect*'s cis subjects struggle to acknowledge their ontological similarities to trans people because confronting the implications of bodily-constructedness "can summon up all the violation, loss, and separation inflicted by the gendering process that sustains the illusion of naturalness" (Stryker 1994, 250). As "the bearers of this disquieting news, we transsexuals" are often made to "suffer for the pain of others" (Stryker 1994, 250).

One might speculate that becoming dependent on exogenous hormone sources and other cyborg technologies would prompt greater tolerance of trans lives by cis people, but in fact, the cis subjects of *Infect* hatred of trans people deepens in direct correlation to their increasingly undeniable similarity to other “unnatural” bodies. In “My Words”, Stryker uses Victor Frankenstein’s fear of the creature to imagine and respond critically to cis people’s reactions to trans bodies. A creature, she notes, “in the dominant tradition of Western European culture, is nothing other than a created being, a made thing” (Stryker 1994, 240). Observing that “Frankenstein’s monster is [...] the alien Other he constructs and upon which he projects all he cannot accept in himself,” Stryker contends that Frankenstein’s revulsion at his creature stems from what confronting its technologically-produced existence implies about his own ontological unnaturalness (Stryker 1994, 238). That is, Frankenstein’s violent hatred and dehumanization of the monster is famously premised on his feelings that the monster’s existence indicts and destabilizes the supposedly self-apparent truths on which his own fragile personhood is premised: “begone [...] you reproach me with your creation” (Shelley 1965, 95). Stryker wagers that “the affront you humans take at being called a ‘creature’ results from the threat the term poses to your status [...] being called a ‘creature’ suggests the lack or loss of a superior personhood” (Stryker 1994, 250).

In *Infect*, the trans body’s avowal of its own technological production, its unnaturalness, and its debts to the other bodies, subjectivities and worlds in relation to which it is engendered destabilizes the fiction of the autonomous individual upon which cisness is premised. Enlightenment humanist traditions of subject formation avow a white anthropocentrism from which cisgender people benefit both materially and discursively. Under this dominant paradigm of determinist materialism, the body of a proper (i.e. white) subject is read as already constituted; a natural, biological entity

that, as Nikki Sullivan puts it, “simply *is* prior to its regulation” (Sullivan 2014, 189). The bodies of proper subjects are similarly read as “the fleshly shell of a soul, a self, and/or a mind that is superior to it”; where this cerebral, individuated self is importantly coded as not technologically produced. In addition, under white anthropocentrism’s instrumentalist rationalities, technology is an object “external to and manipulable by the subject” (Sullivan 2014, 189). Given its “status as both prison and property, the brute matter of the body [...] is constituted [...] as that which the subject must transcend, transform, master, and/or shape” through the use of technology (Sullivan 2014, 189). Under white anthropocentrism, intending subjects make use of technologies to further their own entrepreneurialisation; “whether those ends be a sense of bodily integrity, the fulfilment of a religious obligation, the construction of the self as altruistic, appropriately professional, morally responsible, or whatever” (Sullivan 2014, 189). As Sullivan observes, the use of technology under such paradigms is subtended by a will to mastery (Sullivan 2014, 189). In other words, “the primary focus of discussions of particular technologies tends to be on whether, how, and to what extent they might be used to enhance life, to achieve integrity, to enable one to realize one’s true self” (Sullivan 2014, 189). In this way, dominant imaginaries of technological body-making are intimately bound up with capitalistic yearnings for self-transparent, independent, self-optimising subjects: “by the late twentieth century, our time, [...] the cyborg is a creature in a postgender world [...] the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the ‘West’s’ escalating dominations of abstract individuation” (Haraway 2016, 8). For the cisgender people who have been infected by the contagion, recognizing their own bodies as technologically produced troubles their criteria for proper subjecthood, prompting them to confront the ways in which they may not qualify as ontological people on their own terms. Moreover, the notion of technology acting on and producing their bodies in a way that they interpret as alienated from their motive will,

intentions, and autonomy punctures and destabilizes the fiction of the autonomous individual that gives epistemological coherence to life under white anthropocentrism. They are unused to confronting the ways in which they depend on technologies to survive, preferring instead to think of technologies as helpful tools at their disposal. They are unused to thinking self-fashioning as a relational act, and equally unused to thinking that the ways in which they produce themselves might increase their exposure to constraint, harm, and precarity, preferring instead to imagine becoming as an endless series of opportunities for growth, improvement, and self-realization. What emerges from *Infect* is the “chiasmatic interdependence of *soma* and *techné*: of bodily being (or corporealities) as always already technologized and technologies (which are never simply “machinic”) as always already enfleshed” (Sullivan 2014, 188). Instead of confronting the reality with which they are faced, cis characters prefer to associate the trans body with dissidence, monstrosity, abjection, alterity, and a disturbing, corrupting hybridity.

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Dominant cyborg imaginaries abstract trans experiences in ways that harm actual trans people by subordinating their material existence to theoretical ends. As Emmett Harsin Drager observes, “the transsexual body is the battleground for [...] how body modification is taken up in theory” (Chu and Harsin Drager 2019, 111). That is, the trans body is wielded as a tool of discourse by anyone with an apparent stake in theory of materialism to stage possibilities of bodily being and becoming. This is done in the academy, by the state, and by the clinic, largely without acknowledgement that being instrumentalised in this way exacts a huge material toll on trans lives (Chu and Harsin Drager 2019, 111). Trans bodies represent the precise site of incompatibility between conflicting accounts

of cyborg ontology. Depending on who you ask, the trans body can represent an ideal “metaphor for flexible subjecthood”; a figure for intransigent insistence on attachment to gendered norms; an anarchic and utopian being whose very existence destabilizes capitalist subject formation; or the consummate neoliberal entrepreneurial subject (Halberstam 2005, 127). In turn, these conflicting accounts incubate deeply consequential claims about embodiment, materialism, relationality, and the limits of human ontology, in the name of which, extensive harm is waged on bodies articulated as inhuman and unproductive. We are often misappropriated for other people’s theories of gender in ways that evacuate us of agency and incorrectly assume our bodies and perspectives are ready and available for access. As Halberstam illustrates, the trans body in contemporary culture is abstracted as “a symbol par excellence for flexibility,” a figure who, on failing to live up to the fantasy of open-ended self-making, “may well be punished” (Halberstam 2005, 127).

In one powerful imaginary of cyborgian ontology to traffic in trans bodies as abstract referents, the state attempts to neutralise the epistemological threat transsexuality poses to individualism by proposing state-sanctioned ways of becoming a cyborg. As Preciado observes, in the wake of Clynes and Kline’s 1960 article, “the cyborg named a new techno-organic condition [...] subjected to new forms of political control” (Preciado 2013 31). He explains how, from the earliest days in which the term cyborg began to circulate, state, corporate, and military interests have manoeuvred for control over definition of what and how cyborg ontology means: “during the 1960s, as part of a military investigation program, Arpanet was created; it was the predecessor of the global Internet, the first “net of nets” of interconnected computers capable of transmitting Information” (Preciado 2013, 31). Clynes and Kline foresaw the first uses of cyborg technology to be in the exploration and colonisation of space, and as the idea of cyborg technology became more popular and more

feasible, some of its main proponents were state actors, who recognised the ways in which militaristic and capitalistic projects could be buttressed with information, communication, and surveillance technologies. Such interests have usually concluded that acceptable cyborg subjects are primarily governable citizens who, through utilisation of state-proctored technologies, adapt their embodiment in order to become better suited to an environment or role. Clynes and Kline's article attempts to naturalize assumptions about the role and purpose of cyborg technology, concealing corresponding assumptions about improper uses of cyborg technology and improper categories of cyborg subject.

For Clynes and Kline, cyborg technology is a form of instrumentation which addresses "the task of adapting man's body to any environment he may choose" (Clynes and Kline 1960, 26). In their formulation, cyborg technology does not create a new class of subjects; it allows an existing class of human subjects to augment, improve, and govern the terms of their embodiment. It is important for Clynes and Kline that to become a user of cyborg technology, one must already be intelligible to the state as an enfranchised subject (and not in a body already marked by exclusion from human ontology). For a human, Clynes and Kline's article suggests, instrumentalising cyborg technology to augment the body is a good, appropriate, and entrepreneurial investment in the self, as well as an important resource for ensuring the longevity of the state, and expanding its frontiers across new territories. Indeed, and importantly, the use of technology under such paradigms is subtended by a will to mastery that is entirely compatible with neoliberal governmentality's expectations of the entrepreneurialised self (Foucault 2003; 2008). For Clynes and Kline, the cyborg is a human subject who makes use of technological elements, going as far as to incorporate them bodily, in

order to optimize their availability for colonial activity on new and hostile frontiers in the service of the state.

Increasingly, trans bodies are instrumentalized to illustrate metaphors for how dissident subjectivities can be rescued for normativity; “conversations on ‘transgender health’ can also function to reassert neoliberal norms of bodily capacity and debility” (Puar 2015, 53). That is, neoliberal governmentality finds ways to theoretically fold trans people into proper citizenship through articulation of transgender subjectivities as complicit with individualist self-making. Neoliberalism makes racially conditional bids to redirect trans bodies toward normativity by framing trans subjectivity and embodiment as the result of aspirational processes of individualisation, self-transparency, and self-improvement, facilitated by state proctored and clinically managed technologies of medicalisation. Trans medicine tries to give reality to the fiction that in seeking gender affirming healthcare, gender non-conforming people subscribe to and participate in the idea that a person can intentionally direct their own self-making, fully regulate their own embodiment, control how they are interpellated, can choose how and when technology acts on their body. Neoliberal instrumentalist logics attempt to neutralize the epistemological threat posed by trans becoming, claiming that trans ontology is not a deeply relational assemblage of interdependent bodies bringing one another into being, which exists always in excess of clinical manageability, but an inherently individual journey of self-modification and self-improvement, undertaken on one’s own terms. In this narration of cyborg ontology, trans people, by virtue of their apparent self-transparency, autonomy, intentionality, will to technological mastery, and plastic, mobile bodies, are articulated as the consummate neoliberal subjects; endlessly available to adapt, become, and improve. As Halberstam explains, “identity

politics in the late twentieth century has mutated in some cases from a necessary and strategic critique of universalism into a stymied and myopic politics of self” (Halberstam 2005, 40). Indeed, the emergence of this “neo-liberal notion of ‘uniqueness as radical style’ in hip queer urban settings must be considered alongside the transmutations of capitalism in late postmodernity” (Halberstam 2005, 40). As Lisa Duggan claims: “new neoliberal sexual politics [...] is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 2003, 179).

Jasbir Puar argues that white trans people are increasingly solicited for forms of neoliberal subjecthood which value plasticity. Neoliberal governmentality makes virtues of the apparent self-transparency of white trans subjects, which is articulated as individualist; their self-fashioning, which is articulated as entrepreneurial; and their “piecing” practices of body modification, which are articulated as an adaptable, flexible economy of alienated parts. This new “transnormative citizen” is “predicated not on passing but on ‘piecing,’ galvanized through mobility, transformation, regeneration, flexibility, and the creative concocting of the body” (Puar 2015, 54).

Regarding “piecing” as an elemental aspect of “neoliberal biomedical approaches to bodies,” Snyder and Mitchell narrate this body as “a multi-sectional market”:

we are now perpetual members of an audience encouraged to experience our bodies in pieces [...] Whereas disabled people were trained to recognize their disabled parts as definitely inferior, late capitalism trains everyone to separate their good from bad — a form of alienation that feeds the market’s penchant for “treating” our parts separately. The body becomes a terrain of definable localities, each colonized by its particular pathologies dictated by the medicalized marketplace. (Snyder and Mitchell 2010, 190-191; Puar 2015, 54)

This piecing is “not only about [...] extracting value [...] from bodies, [...] body parts and particles,” but also about theorizing the ability to piece as a productive capacity in and of itself, given the demonstrable utility of plastic, adaptive subjects to neoliberal capital accumulation (Puar 2015, 54). The high value placed on the plasticity of trans bodies, which has been well established in medical fields since Hugh Hampton Young’s first experiments on intersex children, is once again renewed, as “piecing becomes a prized capacity” of neoliberal market relations and contemporary biocapital (Puar 2015, 54). Puar contends that “this suturing of trans to exceptional futurity and the potential that the future offers” constitutes a new type of ‘transnormative body’; enlivened by “the commodification [...] of plasticity” (Puar 2015, 54). In this way, potentially dissident, monstrous, corrupting subjects are sutured back into flows of “nationalized aspiration for possessions, property [and] wealth” through counternarratives of cyborg ontology which align transness with individualist accounts of personhood and instrumentalist paradigms of technology (Aizura 2006, 295).

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Trans people have reclaimed cyborg for themselves, revelling in the cyborg’s capacity to make itself anew. Though we find joy in this, sometimes trans articulations of the ability to self-make in apparently open-ended ways overlook the histories of instrumentalization of racialized bodies through which exogenous hormones have become available to us. Moreover, even trans theorizations of the cyborg which celebrate flexibility as a prized bodily capacity risk entrenching abstract and reductive understandings of trans being that bear little relation to the actual textures and specificities of trans lives.

Halberstam contends, “postmodern gender theory has largely been (wrongly) interpreted as both a description of and a call for greater degrees of flexibility and fluidity,” but, in an era in which flexibility is coded as the hallmark of neoliberal productivity by market economies, “it is not enough [...] to celebrate gender flexibility as simply another sign of progress and liberation” (Halberstam 2005, 39). He argues that many trans people, especially those living in white metropolitan centres, now “think of themselves as part of a ‘post-gender’ world and for them the idea of ‘labeling’ becomes a sign of an oppression they have happily cast off in order to move into a pluralistic world of infinite diversity” (Halberstam 2005, 39).

In elite trans spaces, flexibility is often invoked as a desirable and inherently transgressive capacity, apparently without recognition that unencumbered, plastic corporeality is only approximable by those whose whiteness marks them out as legible human subjects to dominant power structures. As Harsin Drager observes,

moral judgements about body modification run rampant in queer and trans studies, all in the name of antinormativity politics [...] If your body modification looks too much like the original “transsexual medical genre,” your queer cred is toast. (Chu and Harsin Drager 2019, 111)

Some trans academics have emphasised the similarity of gender-affirming surgeries to other, nonpathologized practices of body-modification such as tattooing, piercing, and branding:

we [should] consider what we’re now calling transsexual surgery as cosmetic surgery. In and through such a conceptual shift maybe we would take the stigma [of transsexual surgery] away. Maybe we wouldn’t see it as the complete, pathological rearrangement of identity [...] Maybe we’d begin to see it as a way of organizing your body to suit your image of yourself. (Halberstam 1996, 55-6)

They argue that understanding trans embodiment through the lens of body-modification would depathologize trans bodies and restore the agency of trans subjects by framing their embodiment as a choice, rather than as a surgical “corrective” to a problem. Sullivan sounds a note of caution on this line of reasoning, arguing that while it may be possible to identify similarities between practices of body-modification and “trans’ bodies and/or subjectivities [...] it is nevertheless crucial that we pay close critical attention to the differences between such practices, the bodies they transform or inform, and the ways in which these are interpreted, evaluated, situated, and lived” (Sullivan 2006, 553). Sullivan is particularly interested in how, in critical and academic contexts, body modifications that supposedly mark an intentionally antithetical relationship to the dominant culture are celebrated, while other types of procedure, articulated as “normalizing,” are condemned. Surveying how proscriptions emanating from within both critical and conventional moralities play out in the context of trans body modification practices, Sullivan explores the ways in which negative, essentializing associations adhere to the term “transsexual,” and inversely, how positive, countercultural associations adhere to the term “transgender” in academic spaces and discourse:

something that seems common to much of the current work done in this area is the tendency to set up a dichotomy [...] the assumption seems to be that forms of body modification that do not explicitly set themselves up in opposition to so-called “normative” ideals and ways of being are politically suspect. (Sullivan 2006, 553)

The logic which subtends the abstract celebration of flexibility as a prized capacity is also one which valorises the intentional subject, Sullivan argues, and perpetuates moral judgments about “good” and “bad” practices of self-making, which disproportionately harm trans people of colour.

The idea circulating in queer academic spaces “that a practice is radical if it is consciously undertaken by a self-transparent and seemingly autonomous subject who explicitly defines his or her transformation in these terms” substantially overlaps with neoliberal scripts for articulating personhood and further entrenches the dehumanization of black and brown trans people (Sullivan 2006, 556). Jin Haritaworn and C. Riley Snorton point out that, under the sign of the institutionalization of the term transgender, white trans bodies become rescuable for neoliberal governmentality through uninterrogated and deepening complicity in individualism, while black and brown trans people continue to be dehumanized as trans medicines raw material for extracting bodily plasticity, circling us back to my discussions in chapter one (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 67). They argue that “the uneven institutionalization of [...] trans politics” produces a white transnormative subject, “whose universal trajectory of [...] self-actualization” remains “uninterrogated in its complicities and convergences with biomedical, neoliberal, racist, and imperialist projects” (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 67). Puar too, cautions us “about overinvesting in gender fluidity as transgressive capacity,” returning to the question of “which transgender body (bodies?) is actually understood as “futurity itself”? (Puar 2015, 54). As has been amply demonstrated, trans people’s access both to a future at all, and to medical technologies of body-modification, is conferred according to a “geopolitics of the production of biocommodities,” which differentially capacitates and debilitates trans subjects along racialized lines (Rosenberg 2014; Abu El-Haj 2012; Roberts 2012; Rose 2007; Tallbear 2013).

It is critical to attend to the ways in which the distinction logics of trans-being-as-transgressive-flexibility draw between “conformity and transgression” is “founded on the notion of intent” (Sullivan 2006, 556). Such logics encode the assumption that an intentional subject is a politicized

subject, while a self-opaque subject is a demobilized subject. As I have argued throughout this thesis, to dismiss practices that fail to register as self-conscious, intentional, or transgressive is to overlook a vast and politically significant corpus of trans practices of internality and interiority, fugitivity, deauthorized activism, strategic invisibility and absence, and unofficial, quotidian dissidence which, perhaps more than the clear acts of autonomy and official protest that register as such in the archives, disclose the real texture of our resistance, politics, and agency. Which is to say that as trans people, we go through phases of unreason, impulsivity, self-delusion, and self-opacity, during which times our motives are unclear to us. More to the point, we may prefer to avow the ways in which we are helped, cared for, and loved into being by those who want to see us flourish. Fictions of independent self-making hold little resonance for the many trans people who have attempted to exert some minimal agency over the scene of their gender only to learn that they are in no way in control of their social reception, and rely wholly on others for the conferral of their gender. Most trans people, but in particular those raised outside of Western contexts that prize independence, individualism, and self-optimization, fail to consistently live up to the self-transparency and intentionality required to be articulated as a successful, flexible subject. As Jordy Rosenberg urges, it is important to remember that simply getting hold of and using HRT to change our bodies, as sexy as it might seem, does not constitute a dissident or politically useful action in and of itself. He challenges the received wisdom of self-styled “gender hackers,” who imagine the application of exogenous hormones as “gender bioterrorism on a molecular scale,” arguing that “cells, enzymes, and genes” cannot by themselves “offer a resistance to the genecentric and reductionist approaches taken by the biotech and pharmaceutical industries” (Preciado 2013, 12-55; Thacker 2005, Kindle Location 2808). He contends that to ascribe a “determinate trajectory to the autonomization of cellular life” is to “eliminate questions of confrontation, contingency,

[and] collectivization (not to mention passion) from the thinking of resistance” (Rosenberg 2014). He rightly locates the lifeblood of trans being and becoming in care, mutual aid, and interdependency, and not in individual narratives of self-fashioning that are facilitated through racially and economically mediated access to technologies of body-modification.

As this imaginary of unencumbered and capacitive trans cyborg ontology continues to thrive in elite trans spaces, it is increasingly taken up as a prompt for other disciplines in the academy, which typically read the polymorphism that the trans/cyborg body supposedly incubates as a grammar with which to contest biological determinisms. In particular, the recent popularity of new materialist theory has renewed interest in the mobility and radical plasticity the trans cyborg has come to represent. New materialism endeavours to disengage from social constructionist accounts of ontology, and its primary tactic is to recognise the vitality of matter, in the hope of responding with nuance to matter inside and outside of bodies, and between the social and environmental conditions in which bodies exist (Coole and Frost 2010; Braidotti 2013; Fausto-Sterling 2012). Although new materialists embrace a plurality of methodologies, they all affirm the centrality of a non-essentializing approach to the matter of the body. Many have begun to transplant transgender grammars of open-ended self-fashioning into new materialist discourse, in order to affirm the neo-vitalist argument of posthuman subjectivity’s immanent potential for self-assembly along transversals (Agamben 1995; Braidotti 2013; Barad 2006; 2012).

New materialist theorists have found trans to be a useful prompt for demonstrating material agencies and the tendency of all living matter to form associations with other material systems. Trans/cyborgian becoming appears to speak eloquently to matter’s possibilities of reconfiguration;

transformation, transubstantiation, transversality, transitivity etc. (Barad 2015, 411, 399). However, this emerging trend for applying a grammar of trans being borrowed from cyborgian idioms to new materialisms establishes an ahistorical and deracinated synonymy between trans and ease that bears little relation to the precarity under which most trans lives are lived. New materialisms frequently cite ‘trans’ as a provocation to imagine matter’s inherent plasticity. Under such paradigms, ‘trans’ rarely, if ever, registers as stasis, waiting, awkwardness, or decapacitation, despite the fact that these things are endemic to trans experience. New materialist grammars of transness metaphorize trans lives in order to imagine material relations of ease, fluidity, capacitation, agency, and mobility, but they rarely reflect on the ways in which most trans lives are inscribed by difficulty passing through physical and administrative barriers of entry, passing safely through the world, and passing constantly backward and forward in loops of fetishization and disposability. As Malatino notes, “trans bodies are routinely theorized as a prompt for cis folks to reconsider the ‘nature of nature’ and, by extension, the nature of embodiment,” but new materialisms “have not thought very much, or very carefully, about whether and what form of an ethics might spring from such a reconsideration. In other words, it matters deeply both how we care and who cares for these assemblages we are (Malatino 2020, 40; Barad 2015, 392).

This is a trap into which *Infect* steadfastly refuses to fall. There is nothing easy about living as a cyborg in the post-contagion world; every day is a battle for survival. There is no shimmering, no floating, no transcending the constraints of the body or its need for sustenance, warmth, shelter, and care. The narrator has to grow what she needs to survive famine conditions in small patches of fertile soil by a highway. Her seeds are her livelihood, and she plans whole seasons ahead to ensure there will be enough to eat (Peters 2016, 47-48). When she is accosted by scavengers and

asked ““What have you got?”” she answers: “a stab of despair comes over me [...] ‘I’ve got nothing”” (Peters 2016, 47-48). Bodies are neither unencumbered, mobile, nor immune from material harm; on the contrary, they must trudge with painstaking slowness through sucking mud; they are constantly made to defer to the vagaries of extreme weather; they are made to wait; they are beaten, scarred, depleted, exhausted, and marred.

Our narrator began the novel by navigating the world in an embattled state; she was guided by her fear of scarcity and her impulsion to compete for access to the small pool of resources begrudged to high-performing trans people by cis people: “I am getting a doctorate at Dartmouth and have a fellowship. I live with my girlfriend of eight years in an apartment attached to a stately New England house that belongs to a professor of medieval literature” (Peters 2016, 23). The novella illustrates the ways in which the narrator used to aspire to an independent, individualised, self-transparent trans subjectivity, and the ways in which she distanced herself from trans people who failed to fit self-entrepreneurialising moulds of rationality, emotional self-regulation, and stable attachment. Her relations with other trans people were paranoid, guided by her hypervigilant awareness of the ways in which their transness impinged on her own and attenuated her ability to move fluidly through the world: “I remember how I used to be before the contagion. Embarrassed to be seen with another trans woman, for fear that her transness would reveal my transness and we’d both get clocked” (Peters 2016, 54-55). Especially with Lexi, the narrator fears their points of commonality and their implications; “we are both trans, we are both newly on hormones, and we are both lonely as fuck” (Peters 2016, 24). In her internal monologue, she says “I don’t want to be categorized with Lexi [...] I’m not like that” (Peters 2016, 41).

Honestly, you can't blame her; well, you can, but we've all been her. The internalized transphobia we've inherited from the world forms the ground on which we walk, and working through it is a raw process in which your fuck-ups are humiliatingly made in front of a trans public who has seen it all before. It's well-known in trans culture that early transition entails a lot of carelessness, finger-pointing, emotional reactionism, and behaving destructively to others as you try (not always successfully) to unlearn the impulse to distance yourself from other trans people. As Peters puts it in the soon-to-be paradigmatic elephant metaphor from her recent novel *Detransition, Baby*; "trans women are juvenile elephants [...] we can destroy each other with ease. But we are a lost generation. We have no elders, no stable groups, no one to teach us to countenance pain" (Peters 2020, 101). In passages in *Infect* that are both relatable and touching, our narrator shows us that she has both been in pain and seen enough people in pain since the contagion to allow her to relax into a more capacious and generous ability to meet others where they're at. Post-contagion, she is no longer fearful that Lexi's transness is a referendum on her own, or that Lexi's loneliness will divulge her own secret loneliness, and she is able to offer Lexi better care. In an early scene in the novella, pre-contagion, the narrator and Lexi meet for an ill-fated hookup at Lexi's New Hampshire cabin. Lexi longs for intimacy and recognition, and she shows the narrator the scars which mark her body: "Lexi and I are in her bed, and she is showing me her scars. She has many" (Peters 2016, 21). The narrator is "repelled by the life on display in this little house" because she can't face up to the ways in which their transness binds them together. At the end of the novella, they are lying in another cabin, and everything is different and everything is the same, and the narrator is allowing Lexi to see and probe her scars: "she is examining my scars. I have many" (Peters 2016, 61). At the end of the novella, the narrator reflects on the fateful day on which Lexi infected her by stabbing her with an epipen:

Laying together fully clothed on the couch is our first touch in all these weeks, all these years – our only touch, I suspect, likely the limit of the comfort we can handle from each other. “Your last attempt on me didn’t even scar.” I hold up my arm for her inspection, one of the few places with skin still smooth and immaculate. (Peters 2016, 62)

She means this literally, but in a way she is also talking about how the contagion and its aftershocks have led her down paths of interiority that she has not experienced as traumatic. If it would be glib to characterize the contagion as having a silver lining, I think the narrator at least wants Lexi to know that it has not scarred her in all the ways she thought it would.

Infect stages what is missing from new materialist instrumentalizations of trans as a provocation to imagine fluid subjectivity. New materialisms decontextualise trans experience in order to make claims about how trans materiality can enact transformation and ease of movement, but this theoretical formulation fails to consider the lived messiness of trans everyday worlds. That is, trans people’s actual access to capacitive flexibility is always mediated by everyday conditions, which frequently include our subjective paranoias about scarcity. Those orientations unevenly limit possibilities for individual bodily transformation, but also opportunities for collective care. *Infect* offers sustained consideration of the ways in which bodily and epistemological transformations are less important in and of themselves than the ways in which they are mediated and conditioned by other types of relation. Peters uses the narrator/protagonist’s psychodrama to stage this; for her, the effect of the contagion that most drastically rearranges her life is not the world’s eschatological confrontation of its technicity, but her own transformation of a paranoid orientation into a reparative one. The attrition of her ability to feel collectively, structured through her deeply internalized transphobia, gradually unspools into participation and collective readiness to care for others, and “all it took was the end of the world to make that happen” (Peters 2016, 55). As

Malatino observes, new materialisms have tended “to approach the relation between trans experience and assemblage thinking through a focus on how our bodies are naturalcultural entities engaged [...] in projects of biotechnical alteration” (Malatino 2020, 39). Noting that “articulations of trans-embodiment-as-assemblage have focused intensively” on the “interface of trans embodiment with the medical-industrial complex,” to produce dominant imaginaries of unencumbered cyborg corporeality, Malatino wagers that “what gets overlooked in this scholarship [...] are the ways in which everyday acts of interpersonal recognition are the crucible through which such assemblages come into (il)legibility” (Malatino 2020, 39).

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Infect seeks to recuperate its trans cyborg protagonists from acquisition by neoliberal desires for productive and infinitely substitutable bodies. Peters instead looks to the cyborg as a fugitive, a survivalist, and a composite of deeply relational commitments. In the novella, the trans-body-as-assemblage is not marked by the ease with which it transforms its body and moves between states, but by its commitment to ratifying the relations through which being and becoming are made possible, and its cognizance that corporealities are continuously engendered “in relation to others and to a world” (Sullivan 2014, 188). *Infect* demonstrates how “it is not enough [...] to claim that one’s actions simply signify what one intends them to signify, or, by extension, that one’s identity is self-defining” (Sullivan 2006, 556). Peters focusses instead on naming the ways in which the characters depend on one another, and how they both do and don’t live up to what they require from each other.

The novella concludes when the narrator, who has been surviving alone in the wilderness of the scarred earth, is found by a woman whose face feels like coming home:

the tall woman moves toward me carefully [...] she pulls up close, looks me in the eye, but with curiosity [...] her hands roam my body, searching my clothes [...] I brace myself as her hands go to my crotch. She pats me, pauses a moment, and then carries on as if she were expecting it [...] She's got her gaze right on my face, her lips lifted into a faint smile. A memory tickles, something familiar, but I can't grab it. (Peters 2016, 51)

Back in the woman's car, "she begins to talk, and when I hear more of her voice, I realize why she seems so familiar. She's trans. Not auntie-boy trans. Trans trans" (Peters 2016, 52). The stranger, Zoey, drives her to a scrubby patch of land with a compound on it. The land is farmed and tended by a group of trans women, who all call this place home. This small space of reprieve and community is also where Lexi has washed up after all these years, and she and the narrator are reconciled, confronting the legacies of hurt they have caused themselves and each other. The women try to look out for one another, acknowledging that they are nevertheless bound, in ways that cannot be anticipated, to disappoint and be disappointed by each other. Zoey "pushes up her sleeve. On her wrist, a simple stick and poke tattoo: the letters t4t" (Peters 2016, 51). She reiterates: "'Tee-Four-Tee. Like the letter T and the number 4,' which startles me [...] of course I remember the phrase, but it's all so bound up in my memory with Lexi, bound up with contagion day so long ago" (Peters 2016, 53). Our narrator is rattled, the whole premise of t4t reopens old wounds and reminds her of the ways in which she and Lexi failed to hold one another; she tells Zoey: "'the only t4t I know [...] is the old Craigslist thing.' 'That's right, that's it [...] it's kind of a joke. Trans girls fucking trans girls. But really, it's an ethos. Trans girls loving trans girls, above all else'" (Peters 2016, 54). Malatino describes t4t as a "praxis of love," that takes many forms. It is "an ideal, a promise, an identifier, a way of flagging an ethic of being" (Malatino 2020, 44). In his

formulation, as in *Infect*, “it is antiutopian, guiding a praxis of solidarity [...] it is about small acts guided by a commitment to trans love, small acts that make life more livable in and through difficult circumstances” (Malatino 2020, 44).

In a 2018 interview with Harron Walker, Peters explains, “I love trans women, but they drive me fucking crazy [...] trans women are fucked up and flawed, and I’m very interested in the ways in which trans women are fucked up and flawed” (Walker 2018). Part of what is so compelling about Peters’ writing is her commitment to providing a textured and realistic account of the ways in which we as trans people continually fall short of our own aspirations to love and uncritically accept one another. Far more than any sanitized, abstract, or more politically tolerable account of being in community with other trans people, Peters’ writing allows the deep, durable, abiding generosity which subtends trans relationalities to shine through clearly. In fact, by focussing on moments of conflict, in-fighting, bitterness, and resolution, she captures the ways in which the feeling of being in community with other trans people is difficult and laborious, but it is labour that we see as indispensable and valuable, and choose to do anew every day. As Walker observes about Peters’ writing, her stories

feature trans women who sell out their trans friends. They don’t shy away from the fact that a lot of us used to be sissies and crossdressers and faggots and men before we paired an all-caps “TRANS WOMEN ARE WOMEN” caption with a Women’s March selfie. When we elide these truths, there’s something there that we fail to reckon with. Something is lost. Torrey’s work seems to say that airing our dirty laundry is a vital practice. If we don’t, we lie to ourselves. By only presenting the most palatable trans narratives to the world, we lie to each other. By not telling each other how we used to live, we don’t tell each other how to live in the present. We’re the only ones who’ll do that, because we’re the only ones who rely on that knowledge being shared. (Walker 2018)

T4t explicitly acknowledges the likelihood and inevitability of trans people annoying one another, being wrong, being selfish, and occasionally throwing each other under the bus. It's not ok, but it happens, and when it does the best we can do is apologize, take responsibility, and extend each other a little grace. Our narrator, who is uncomfortably familiar with the kinds of intimate and excruciating betrayal trans people can visit on one another, seems sceptical: "that sounds like some kind of trans girl utopia" (Peters 2016, 54). She knows how much deeper it cuts when someone who is meant to have your back lets you down. Zoey replies:

Please. You've met a trans woman before, right? Do you think the words trans women and utopia ever go together in the same sentence? Even when we're not starved for hormones, we're still bitches. Crabs in a barrel. Fucking utopia, my ass." She glances at me [...] "Here's what it is," she says, a little more gently, "We aim high, trying to love each other and then we take what we can get. We settle for looking out for each other. And even if we don't all love each other, we mostly all respect each other [...] T4T is an ideal, I guess, and we fall short of it most of the time. But that's better than before. (Peters 2016, 54-55)

Malatino talks about how irritation and jealousy undeniably constitute trans social worlds, but how they are also tempered by patience, expansiveness, and optimism. He describes seeing a photo in a newspaper of teenage trans mascs in Fall Out Boy t-shirts, and explains "sometimes young trans guys annoy me in precisely the ways that Fall Out Boy annoys me" (Malatino 2020, 18). He elaborates similarities between Fall Out Boy fandom and some of the complacencies and carelessnesses that characterize white transmasculine teenagerhood:

the boy at the center of a Fall Out Boy track is gamely and selfishly working his way through minor emotional devastations, centering his sexuality [...] and being [...] narcissistic [...] He's stationed directly at the center of a completely solipsistic universe. No matter how insufferable this kind of guy is in reality, I would have killed for a fraction of his swaggering self-confidence as a kid. (Malatino 2020, 18)

He expands, “I do my best to empathize [...] [with] how that band might speak to transmasculine fantasies and desires, even if I find them politically and ethically suspect” (Malatino 2020, 18). Despite his exasperation at white transmasculinity’s self-congratulating postures, Malatino wants the young mascs in the photo “to have their clueless and self-involved boyhoods,” because “this too is care” (Malatino 2020 18). He wants “them to be able to take the long road through navigating toxic masculinity, to sloppily grapple with it the way that other boys get to do” (Malatino 2020, 18). Unlike the neoliberal forms of conditional care evinced by both the mainstream political right and left, t4t “doesn’t prioritize theoretical rightness over the well-being of actually existing human beings” (Malatino 2020, 13). The idea, Peters tells us, although maybe not the practice, “is that a girl could be your worst enemy, the girl you wouldn’t piss on to put out a fire, but if she’s trans, you’re gonna offer her your bed, you’re gonna share your last hormone shot” (Peters 2016, 54).

T4t commits to investing in sustainable ways of caring for and about one another, for which being right, likeable, and able to reciprocate aren’t preconditions. If Peters describes t4t as an ethos, it is a conception of ethical behaviour that is radically estranged from norms that center a “moral agent who has maximal agency and unmitigated choice in the actions they take” (Malatino 2020, 40). In *Infect*, t4t foregrounds “networks of mutual aid and emotional support developed by trans femme communities” in order to reply to the question “when we show up in public, when we plug our assembled bodies into an assembled public, what’s the ethos?” (Malatino 2020, 40). Peters offers “communization of care” as a possible answer (Aizura 2017). Communization of care is a practice of reworking care so that it doesn’t depend on an idealized or abstracted idea of community like the family as its locus of distribution, but “instead organizes care around those with whom we are

socially consubstantial, all those folks with whom we're interdependent, many of whom we may not know intimately or at all" (Malatino 2020, 43; Aizura 2017).

Part of the care that the women in *Infect* give each other is recognition that, despite the fact that they have all surgically and hormonally altered the terms of their embodiment toward a gender presentation that feels comfortable to them, they ultimately rely on one another to be seen as that which they are. Gender recognition is a gift only others can really bestow; "though we tell others what pronouns to use, what names, how to refer to us" we're not really in control of what happens after that (Malatino 2020, 35). As Malatino explains, "assemblage thinking comes easily to trans folks. Most of us find Eurocentric myths of maximal agency, atomistic selfhood, and radical self-possession a really hard sell" because we "lack the privilege of having an uncomplicated 'I'" (Malatino 2020, 35). In Hannah Baer's formulation,

your gender is not something you experience only in isolation, but something that is reflected back to you by other people, that gender is what leaks out in the eyes of cis people clocking us in public bathrooms or our family members making assumptions about us, and the ways the leakage bounces back and ricochets and echoes – in dressing rooms and the lines at nightclubs, and at airport security and in the line at Walgreens when you look like a girl and you're buying condoms and enemas – and then also that is held up or shone upon us by other queer people, by our trans sisters and siblings, by other gender variant friends and familiars. (Baer 2020, 47)

A 2019 interview between Andrea Long Chu and McKenzie Wark addresses the ways in which our relationships and our genders are structured through our indebtedness to others. Wark says "the way I read it, the way you're thinking about gender, is that it's always in the gift of the other. It's not "mine." I rely on the gift of the other to have it at all [...] that implies an ethics" (Wark 2019). She expands; "a me and a you [...] one starts as a supplicant, requiring that the other give

gender back to me. And for us, for trans people, it's in the way we are asking; in that, for us to be free to be ourselves is to insist that others give recognition to our gender" (Wark 2019).

The t4t women of *Infect* know that the true revolutionary provocation of the cyborg is not the way it can help us exert our (minimal) individual agency as independent beings through the technical augmentation of the gendered visual, auditory, and linguistic cues we send out into the world, but instead the ways in which it proves we are the co-constitutors of each other's bodies and selves, that we have no choice but to be shaped by and through one another, and that we depend on each other for survival. As trans people, we all carry the memories of the times that we have been refused recognition and declined care; they are memories we will carry for a long time even after such refusals no longer shape our everyday experience moving through the world. They are hard to forget, and harder to forgive. Lexi tells the narrator some of these memories:

that night, when you came over to my cabin, I couldn't sleep, I was so excited to have met you. I got up, and I laid out all the equipment to go ice fishing. I wanted to take you out on the ice the next day. But in the morning you just wanted to leave [...] You always found a way to reject me. (Peters 2016, 65)

It is harder still to apologize for the times at which we have ourselves been the person to let someone down at the scene of their need for recognition. In the concluding scene of *Infect*, the narrator apologizes:

"I'm sorry, Lexi. I'm really so sorry [...] I was never t4t." "Fuck t4t. I'm surrounded by trans women. Have been for years. I have lots of t4t. I wanted you to be t4me." "Yeah, that's what I'm sorry about. I was never t4Lexi." A court of law, if a just one still exists or ever existed, might convict Lexi for her actions, but mine have been the thought-crimes: the cuts that no one could see or feel but Lexi. She had always known what I wouldn't admit: [...] I had thought of myself as too pretty, too highclass and educated, too smart to be stuck with her, except for during my moments of weakness, neediness, or loneliness. I

had been ashamed of the ways that I was like her, ashamed of the ways our transness made us sisters, if not lovers. (Peters 2016, 62-67)

We come to gender as supplicants, all of us. And as Malatino offers,

we also understand, intimately, that the concept of autonomy [...] can't hold. Gender recognition is sustained by a web of forces that we don't control. Because we rely on others for recognition, we understand how selfhood is given through such forms of recognition [...] we exert agency in determining our forms of life and flesh, but that agency is always only one part of a much broader assembly into which our flesh—and its possibilities—are grafted. (Malatino 2020, 38-39)

Coda

Trans Madness/Trans Magic

The more I try to explain, to list the tiny grievances that added up to an intolerable day in my life, the more I sound unhinged.

Torrey Peters, *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*

I feel the feeling of “I can’t wait to go “crazy.” I can’t wait for my mental health to become more gelatinous and my emotions to drip down my face and tits when I start estrogen [...] I also feel scared of being “crazy.”

Hannah Baer, *Trans Girl Suicide Museum*

As a child of about seven, and already exhibiting some disturbing signs of transness that I was both too maladroit and too hopeful to conceal (I drew myself with a large red beard for a class portrait project on my first day of real school), my mother shared an anecdote with me. She had visited two friends from law school, an urbane, wealthy, professional gay couple, who had been telling her about their social scene. I’ve gratefully repressed the first part of the anecdote, which must have gone something like “being gay in London is so fun, the people so interesting and heterogenous.” I remember the punchline though: “except we don’t hang out with trannies,” they told her, “they’re just so unhappy and so crazy, you know?” The anecdote was presumably related as a cautionary tale for why I should reconsider my proto-transsexual ways. When my mother finished speaking, she looked at me to gauge my response, and her look of appraisal seemed to say “see? This is what I’ve been telling you,” – it was true, she had – “it’s the way they’re always

clownishly overwrought at some perceived injustice, making a scene, soliciting ridicule. If you won't take it from me, at least believe my gay friends, *I mean, they would know.*"

I felt an echo of this memorably awful and instructive episode recently, while reading Hannah Baer's memoir, *Trans Girl Suicide Museum* (2020). The author's father asks her, "if transitioning is supposed to be about finding your true identity and coming into yourself, then why are you and all your friends so down in the dumps?" (Baer 2020, 98). He wants to know why she and her friends would transition if they weren't even going to be happy afterwards. He thinks that to be sad, to long for something, to get it, and to continue to be sad is definitionally crazy behaviour. Baer replies with a brave salvo about how "the idea that queerness is about discovering your personal truth and therein being healed is part of a capitalist conspiracy that centers personal identity over solidarity or collective power or broader cultural and societal justice movements," which of course makes her sound crazy (Baer 2020, 98).

Trans craziness in the cis imagination is a condition of absurdity structured by a simultaneous perception that at the times we're meant to be happy and satisfied with our representation, or our transitions, we're engaged in myopic dramas of victimhood and the cultivation of politically useless, histrionic rage, alongside the feeling that at the times we're meant to be doing serious self-representational work, we're M.I.A., too busy obsessing over unimportant details like bodies and clothes to actually show up for ourselves and invest in the kinds of political and social work that would alleviate the injustices we're always complaining about. "I can't go out and do activism

today, my hands are too clocky!”⁶⁹ Trans craziness’ aesthetic posture is trying conspicuously and effortfully hard in ways others wish we’d realise are inappropriate:

I’m about to travel to see my family and can’t stop thinking [...] how if I get anything wrong, like need help with my clothes, or attract too much attention with my makeup, or do anything that doesn’t feel authentic to them [...] I’ll be so humiliated, because I won’t even be doing a good job of my charade. I won’t even be a convincing fake. (Baer 2020, 97-98)

Often trans craziness registers as the inability to be happy, even when we should be. Like Baer’s father, cis people want to know why we sometimes choose things that bring us sadness; why, for instance, do some trans people run the gauntlet of medical transition for a body they know they’ll always be unhappy with? Baer writes,

I don’t know [...] if I will be a weepy introspective bitch when I’m 50, taking my friends’ kids out to the movies and silently crying about cis-normative messaging in the film, or about which bathroom to use, or the way the teenage movie theater cashier looks at my gigantic tits that maybe I will have when I’m 50. (Baer 2020, 44)

In an article for the *New York Times*, Andrea Long Chu speaks to the affects that surround needing and wanting something you know is also bound to disappoint you in ways that can’t be prepared for: “next Thursday, I will get a vagina. The procedure will last around six hours, and I will be in recovery for at least three months [...] This is what I want, but there is no guarantee it will make me happier. In fact, I don’t expect it to” (Chu 2018). Chu explains that since she started hormones, she has actually felt awful; she is sadder than before she transitioned:

I feel demonstrably worse since I started on hormones [...] Like many of my trans friends, I’ve watched my dysphoria balloon since I began transition. I now feel very strongly about the length of my index fingers — enough that I will sometimes shyly unthread my hand

⁶⁹ See Baer 2020, 72.

from my girlfriend's as we walk down the street. When she tells me I'm beautiful, I resent it. I've been outside. I know what beautiful looks like. Don't patronize me. (Chu 2018)

Without directly referencing it, Chu's figuration of desire here conjures the deeply ambivalent genres for desiring the good life explored in Lauren Berlant's work. In their books *The Female Complaint* and *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant writes about how genres for attaching oneself to the fantasy of the good life often enfold anticipated disappointments. They note "maintaining devotion to forms of optimistic attachment requires convoluted bargains with practices of social obligation, insincerity, and sexual self-alienation" (Berlant 2008, 173). Desire is therefore comprised of self-deluding optimisms, welcome disappointments, bargaining, calibration, and adaptation. Heteronormative economies of desire are likewise structured by disarrangement, disappointment, self-opacity, and strange, wavering intensities, but they are also contradictorily subtended by the expectation that sensible, self-preserving subjects can be trusted to act in their own best interests, and that successful actors will desire the things that will bring them happiness. However, Chu contends, we know that "left to their own devices, people will rarely pursue what makes them feel good in the long term" (Chu 2018). She observes that "desire and happiness are independent agents," and argues that "surgery's only prerequisite should be a simple demonstration of want. Beyond this, no amount of pain, anticipated or continuing, justifies its withholding" (Chu 2018). In a clarification to a 2018 interview by Harron Walker, Chu writes, "in my work I take dissociation or self-loathing as desires just as rich and tender as any. Desire can be small, unambitious, acquiescent, iffy, stuck, bad. As a writer, I always side with forms of wanting which have been found wanting" (Walker 2018). Chu's formulation of anticipating the sadness that transition will bring and wanting it anyway acknowledges "ambivalence as an inevitable component of desire," and encounters the strangeness, intermittence, and unpredictability of one's

attachments not as a problem which must be overcome, but as a necessary and inescapable part of being drawn toward the world and the things in it.

Trans craziness, a charge more often levelled at femmes than trans men, is imagined as an almost comical inability to put minor harms into perspective. Torrey Peters' *Infect* stages an encounter between a transnormative transmasculine subject who is irritated by his trans girl date's perceived misidentification of nuisances as forms of oppression:

he wants to know why all the trans girls in Seattle are so angry, act so traumatized [...] He asserts that even when something nice happens, like a free drink, trans girls get triggered [...] they so confuse micro-aggressions for deep violence that they walk around with knives in their boots. (Peters 2016, 40-41)

As the narrator lists the things that make her life difficult – “A man hissed at me on the bus [...] The cashier at Whole Foods smirkingly called me ‘bro’” – her date registers her trans craziness as a perceived excess of emotionality (Peters 2016, 44). He doesn't agree that these instances amount to real harm; he concedes that they are transphobic, but not that they could be traumatic. To him, the narrator's experience of them as traumatic is indicative of her commitment to feeling injured at all cost:

And now, I get irritated at one thing: a free drink, and I sound crazy complaining about that, right? [...] My crush sighs and pulls out an ace. He knows people that have actually been raped, have actually been beaten [...] and they aren't paralyzed with anger, convinced they're constantly persecuted. (Peters 2016, 44-45)

As much as it's anything else, calling trans people crazy is a powerful tool for prophylactically generating distance from being associated with going after the good life in the wrong way yourself. Trans craziness has long been the convenient foil of homosexual respectability politics. As Emma

Heaney has demonstrated, from the very early twentieth century, arguments that “homosexuals were a class worthy of rights and protections” have been inscribed by attempts to create distance between normative homosexuals (as defined by their male object choice) and transfemininity (as defined by female gender presentation) (Heaney 2017, 28-29). Early gay rights texts suggested that “the survival of male homosexuals hinged on their dissociation from [...] debasement,” and that this “required the disappearance of trans femininity” (Heaney 2017, 30). Middle-class queers “blamed anti-gay hostility on the failure of fairies to abide by straight middle-class conventions of decorum in their dress and style” (Chauncey 1994, 105). Heaney demonstrates how early sexologists interwove “overt political claims for the abolition of sodomy laws and against the social ostracism of inverts” with the strategic “pathologizing of trans femininity and colonized people” as a way “to soften the blow of the arguments for homogenic men” (Heaney 2017, 29).

More recently, the removal of homosexuality from the 1973 edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders paved the way for its replacement in the next edition with entries for “transsexualism” and “gender identity disorder of childhood” (Gill-Peterson 2021a). Homosexual craziness was successfully substituted by trans craziness, affording white, professional-class gays and lesbians a chance to assimilate into political respectability. Jules Gill-Peterson observes that “the gay and lesbian movement found it profitable to sell out trans folks by insisting on their gender normativity and leaving those they had rejected after Stonewall to bear the brunt of psychiatric power and social stigma” (Gill-Peterson 2021a). As Aaron Devor and Nicholas Matte explain, “bull daggers and drag queens, transgendered and transsexual people, were largely treated as embarrassments in the ‘legitimate’ fight for tolerance, acceptance, and equal rights” (Devor and Matte 2004, 180). They explain how “several incidents in the 1970s and

1990s were flash points for the smoldering tensions between homosexual people trying to attain social and political weight for themselves and others who hoped to achieve equal rights for all” (Devor and Matte 2004, 180-181). These incidents “illustrated the perception of some in the homosexual population that transgendered and transsexed people presented too great a challenge to mainstream society and thus discredited the endeavors of more ‘acceptable’ gays and lesbians” (Devor and Matte 2004, 180-181).

For example, the year that the mainstream gay liberation movement celebrated the removal of homosexuality from the DSM was also the year that Sylvia Rivera was barred from the stage at the 1973 Christopher Street Day parade due to perceptions among mainstream gay and lesbian organisers that she was too disruptive and aggressive to be allowed to speak. Rivera physically fought her way to the on-stage mic, fending off attacks from Jean O’Leary and the Lesbian Feminist Liberation. In the footage of Sylvia Rivera’s infamous address to the assembled crowd, she yells “Y’all better quiet down,” to a crescendo of boos and jeers (LoveTapesCollective 2019). As she stands there in her Puerto Rican transsexual finery, the crowd in the video derides her, cringing at her combativity, her polemic, pugnacious style, and her loud, hoarse voice. She tells them:

I’ve been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every motherfucking week and ask for your help, and you all don’t do a goddamn thing for them [...] do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all? (LoveTapesCollective 2019)

The crowd doesn't really care; they try to shepherd and pull her offstage, shouting insults. Rivera reportedly went home and tried to kill herself. In a world where dispassionate critique is presumed to be coextensive with objectivity or at least insight, Rivera's visible discomposure, her tears, her rage, her self-righteousness, and her perceived excesses of emotionality seem to structure the crowd's suspicion that she is neither an appropriate figurehead for their movement nor a stable person; they do not regard her as a viable social or political actor. "Trans madness" is held up as a truism and frequently circulated to undercut our agency, but what registers as insanity would be better understood as a measured and proportionate response to being told that the worlds we've brought into being are not real in any way that matters. If she was speaking to us today, Rivera might tell us that madness and rage were the only sane responses to the otherwise insane feeling of being brought up short by the crowd's sheer and blank detachment from her pain. During her Christopher Street Day speech, Rivera repeatedly tries to gain some purchase on the crowd's flat indifference; she asks them: "what the fuck's wrong with you all?" (LoveTapesCollective 2019) It's clear that she doesn't think she is acting any crazier than they are. To her what seems crazy is the crowd's inability to care; their disregard, their detachment, their shrug in the face of any and all harms experienced by people who don't look exactly like them.

Rivera spoke often and candidly about her paranoia, her mental health struggles, her anger, and her suicidality; she avowed that she was sometimes not lucid and that this impacted her capacity to engage in activist work.⁷⁰ AJ Lewis offers a productive analytic through which to view accusations of trans madness, suggesting that when trans people are remembered as "mad," their madness is, more than anything else, "symptomatic of the destructive forces in which these [...]"

⁷⁰ See Duberman 1993, 66-70.

subjects were caught” (Lewis 2015, 150). He rightly observes that “claims that have been hailed by some as ‘delusion’ are by no means easily disentangled from accounts of living in a violently transphobic capitalist order” (Lewis 2015, 150). I read trans craziness partly as a response to the onset of neoliberal governmentality. Those trans people who, like Rivera, have been dismissed as angry, paranoid, and insane were engaged in the never-ending labour of navigating murderous systems of neglect, dispossession, and harm with virtually no resources. Historians have sometimes alleged that unorthodox and elliptical forms of trans activism have actively contributed to our precarity.⁷¹ However, far from being debilitating, harmful, or even unhelpful, trans people’s diverse ways of existing as, and insisting on, things that a secular state struggles to ratify, have helped expand possibilities for trans political thought and action during times of proliferating austerity and political retrenchment. It comes as no surprise to me that the communities making most use of disallowed strategies for social change are those with least access to mainstream reform structures and resources – queer and trans people of colour, informal economy labourers, poor, incarcerated, disabled, and undocumented people. Trans people’s appeals to deauthorized methods should be understood as survival responses to unnavigable political terrain. Such appeals continue to offer trans people agential capacities that they cannot secure through state-proctored structures.

Perhaps the paranoia and conspiracizing often attributed to trans lives is better understood as trans people’s embodied knowledge that the world at large does indeed, in ways that are detailed, vivid, and elaborate, fantasize about their death and violation. It is hard to dismiss the so-called conspiracy theories of trans people as mere paranoia; even passing familiarity with the history of

⁷¹ See Clendinen and Nagourney 1999.

sexology demonstrates how the trans medicine assemblage, in many of its permutations, functioned as a calculated and institutionally sanctioned attempt to eradicate trans life. Similarly, a brief glance over the obituaries of trans people that historiography has chosen to remember as paranoid and unstable reveals a catalogue of disappearances, untimely deaths, mysterious circumstances, and criminal neglect. Both Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson died young; Marsha was probably murdered. It is “shocking to say and impossible to prove that these women suffered early deaths because the battles around race, gender, and sexuality were being waged so directly through and on their bodies. Yet the names bear witness to this unknowable truth” (Hong 2008, 97).

For decades, the contributions of Rivera and other poor trans people of colour to queer movement building went unacknowledged in historiography, where their accomplishments were typically attributed to white gay and lesbian activists. As Devor and Matte put it, “during the last half century there [...] have been many examples of transgendered and transsexual people being shunned by gay and lesbian political organizations [and] having their histories expropriated” (Devor and Matte 2004, 180). Rivera only made her way back into the conversation in the early 1990s with the publication of Duberman’s comprehensive history of Stonewall (Duberman 1993). Archival work in the last decade by Tourmaline and other trans of colour historians and activists has also brought more attention to the radical practices of mutual aid elaborated by Rivera, Johnson, Bambi L’Amor, and other members of S.T.A.R (Tourmaline 2013). Tourmaline explains how her archival work on Rivera, Johnson, and S.T.A.R attempts to move beyond “uncomplicated stories of our history where they are only naming the times we were hurt or times we acted heroically” (Page 2014). She explains that her historiographical work is concerned with sharing “a fuller scope of our social history that extends beyond when we were simply only oppressed or acted incredibly

exceptionally. I wanted to tell something much more complex that challenged the hierarchy of intelligible history [...] that keeps our stories as trans and gender non-conforming people from ever surfacing in the first place” (Page 2014). Moving beyond questions like “who threw the first shot glass at the NYPD,” “who had a birthday party on what day,” and “who was present at what time and on what day during the days of the Stonewall rebellion,” Tourmaline’s historiographical work offers space “for the lives and relationships of people who have been treated as disposable when it comes to recounting history” (Page 2014). Her film about S.T.A.R, *Happy Birthday Marsha!*, therefore takes form as a narrative piece with documentary-like aspects (Tourmaline and Wortzel 2018). Incorporating elements of fiction and guesswork allowed Tourmaline to focus on the everyday intimacies, actions, and relationships that shaped Sylvia and Marsha’s organizing: “*Happy Birthday, Marsha!* takes place before [Stonewall] as an origin story of two legendary figures and as a story of people already navigating and surviving police violence, the film [shows] how this organizing came from everyday choices - whether staying inside to avoid encounters or throwing bottles at the police to fight back” (Page 2014).

Tourmaline’s work attempts to recognise and ratify trans subjects in all their contradiction and messiness. Unlike other scholarship which too frequently reduces Rivera’s subjectivity to that of “transgender Stonewall combatant”; in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* we see Sylvia Rivera as a poor Puerto Rican sex worker, as a hustler, as someone who was just trying to get by, and as someone who loved and cared deeply for her friends and chosen family (Gan 2007, 128). *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* allows us to avoid the pitfalls of “strategic essentialism,” wherein identity categories are reduced to “the most readily decipherable marker around which to mobilize,” thereby erasing meaningful specificities of experience (Rodriguez 2003, 10). Through scholarship and cultural

production like *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, we can hold the complex and situated subjectivities of trans actors without eliding their own avowals of their nonlucidity and mental health struggles. Framed in such terms, it becomes possible to recognise that affective experiences of confusion, paranoia, epiphany, and wonder did not diminish Marsha and Sylvia's capacity to act,⁷² but in fact contributed to their political capacities by furnishing them with an expansive vision of social justice, a deep sense of accountability to the people who depended on them, an inclusive and intuitive sense of loving care, and broad, nebulous political affinities.⁷³

Even with the careful work of Tourmaline and other historians, many historiographies of queer political movements struggle to reconcile a person's difficult, nonlucid, or confrontational personality with analysis of their real and meaningful work. Histories of queer activism continue to elaborate more fully on "Sylvia's angry and confrontational style," and the ways in which her personality was mediated by "alcohol and drugs" and their effects than on her political work (Cohen 2009, 96). An urgent question for trans scholarship in the wake of lives like Rivera's might be to consider how our work can become open to things that cannot be seen, how it can bear witness to archival presences in their real texture and complexity, and how it can acknowledge that a disorganized personality, or a self-inflicted death, or a set of politically intolerable beliefs do not have to spell an interpretive dilemma for trans history. Many other trans people have been dismissed and marginalized in a similar way to Sylvia Rivera by historiography that finds it hard to disaggregate a person's complicated personality from their political contributions, and which therefore perceives their political projects to have failed. Similarly, the traces left by many trans people in the archive are distorted by historiographical work that attempts to rescue them for

⁷² See Tourmaline 2018; Rivera 2002.

⁷³ See Gan 2007.

political viability by citing their weird and unorthodox projects parenthetically. Bracketing the weird and eccentric commitments of trans subjects from their more conventional, legible, sanctioned work misrepresents their avowed and dearly held interests as not of commensurate importance to their political activism, when in many cases, the subjects in question saw these things as co-constitutive.

Aaron Devor and Nicholas Matte give the example of Reed Erickson, a trans man, engineering magnate, and millionaire investor. In their words, “Reed Erickson was [...] one of [...] untold numbers of unsung transgendered and transsexual people who have given generously to a movement that has not always appreciated their gifts” (Devor and Matte 2004, 202). In 1964, Erickson launched the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF): an organisation which dispensed millions in philanthropic donations to causes of personal interest to him. One of Erickson’s key concerns was trans healthcare, and to that end the EEF “engaged in a wide variety of projects and approaches to address both the needs of trans people and professionals who wanted to work with them, as well as to fund research about transsexualism” (Devor and Matte 2007, 51). Erickson funded “peer support and professional networks, research publications, and international conferences” about transsexualism, and worked closely with Harry Benjamin and other prominent sexologists to create functional, accessible gender clinics (Devor and Matte 2007, 48-49). So great was Erickson’s influence on trans medicine in the second half of the twentieth century that his philanthropy has been described as informing “almost every aspect of work being done in the 1960s and 1970s in the field of transsexualism in the US and [...] in other countries” (Devor 2020). Despite Erickson’s hand in shaping the contemporary landscape of trans medicine, he remains sidelined by historiography. This is primarily because of his deep and abiding interest in New Age

spirituality: through the EEF, Erickson donated nearly as much to New Age movements as he did to homophile and transsexual organisations (Devor and Matte 2007, 47). He spent \$60,000 on producing the first hardback edition of *A Course in Miracles*, part-funded Robert Masters and Jean Houston's research into "non-drug-induced altered states of consciousness," and contributed to both Stanley Krippner's dream research and John Lilly's research into interspecies communication (Devor and Matte 2007, 47-48). Erickson's research interests in animal communication, supernaturalism, and psychedelia are frequently conflated in historiography with his ketamine addiction and criminal convictions in ways that portray him as a dysfunctional activist subject. Devor and Matte detail what has come to be the accepted narrative of Erickson's "tragic decline" into "mental instability" (Meyerowitz 2004, 258). They explain that while Erickson's early drug use "was purely recreational and did not interfere with his ability to conduct his business interests effectively," by the 1980's, "the cumulative effects of Erickson's drug use were profound" (Devor and Matte 2004, 196). They conclude that Erickson's drug addiction regrettably compromised his political efficacy: "he had become uncharacteristically inattentive [...] forgetful, and increasingly unreliable. This trend culminated in a series of arrests" (Devor and Matte 2004, 196). Devor and Matte's historiography is one of only a few pieces of scholarship to give Erickson's eccentricities serious consideration; most gloss over them as either faintly embarrassing, or irrelevant to his more important work on transsexualism. Despite the commonplaceness of craziness (in its many forms of superstition, anti-rationalism, self-opacity, and self-destruction) in trans people's lives and work, such elements are normally excluded from historiography. My guess is that this trend has occurred as part of efforts argue against stereotypes of trans people as absurd, tragic, and insane. However, craziness, unintelligibility, psychosis, obsession, and delusion can sometimes appear endemic to trans life both in the archive and the present, and I wonder what can be gained from an

account which endeavours to recognize them as a real and important object of our political history, as opposed to an account which merely laments – on highly individualized terms – their supposedly tragic effects on our lives.

While I don't necessarily disagree with Devor and Matte that Erickson's personality ("he was frequently difficult to deal with and was often highly distrustful and suspicious of others, particularly those closest to him") likely inflected his ability to do the kind of networking and self-representational work necessary to activist manoeuvres on the mainstream stage, I contend that his non-scientific research interests and other eccentricities need not automatically register as political failures (Devor and Matte 2004, 196). Historiography of trans lives, which often tries to correct for dominant narratives of trans people as delusional by privileging stories of rational subjects engaged in state-sanctioned political activity, sometimes misses out on the ways in which forms of madness have proven both life-sustaining and capacitive for trans subjects. I'm interested in looking at trans madness and trans magic as two sides of the same coin, where trans madness is a kind of magic for creating more liveable worlds. Trans people who have been dismissed as unviable actors can be reread not as unfortunate subjects offering flawed and malfunctioning epistemologies, but as agentic subjects offering compelling, whole, and accurate interpretations of being in the world. Many of the trans subjects about whom I write deferred the expectation to produce insights about their lives that are articulable through modes of verifiability, defensibility, criticality and rationalism, in order to feel and enact politics through forms of haptic and affective intensity, epiphany, wonder, intuition, gut feeling, and conviction.

Trans craziness has undeniably occasioned capacitive subaltern political methodologies. Some of these have taken the form of magic. An oft-cited example in trans circles is the Rampart Police Station levitation. In 1970, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) organised a tin can demo as a community response to police murders of queer and trans people in Los Angeles. The protest specifically memorialized three people; Howard Efland, Laverne Turner, and Ginny Gallegos. Efland reportedly died in 1969 “due to massive internal injuries, which the coroner ruled an excusable LAPD homicide,” while according to an article by Angela Douglas in *Come Out!* magazine, Laverne Turner and Ginny Gallegos were also both killed for resisting arrest, and in Laverne’s case for being dressed in “feminine attire” (Tourmaline 2012).⁷⁴

The organisers of the demo distributed flyers for the protest that read: “bring a small, empty tin-can and a pencil to beat it with. It will make an ominous and interesting sound.” (GLF 1970). They add,

during the demonstration we will attempt to raise (by Magyck) the Rampart Police Station several feet above the ground and hopefully cause it to disappear for two hours. If the GLF is successful in this effort we will alleviate a major source of homosexual oppression for at least those two hours. A large turnout might do the same thing for a longer period of time. Support this action with your presence. A Peaceful, Non-Violent Demonstration. (GLF 1970)

As Lewis points out, the flyer is not without shortcomings; there is a clear and racialized discrepancy in the mourning work it attempts to accomplish (Lewis 2017, 204). It makes no mention of Ginny Gallegos’ or Howard Efland’s race, but mourns them carefully, using familial language (they are recalled lovingly as a “gay sister” and “gay brother” respectively). In contrast, Laverne Turner is described simply as a “black street transvestite,” and remembered somewhat

⁷⁴ See Metcalfe 2021.

carelessly by her birth name, rather than her chosen name. Despite the flyer's failure to hold all the complexity of Laverne Turner's life, or to remember her as she might have liked to be remembered, the archival imprint left by the flyer holds on to its capacity to work transformatively for trans people, both in the past and the present.

Tourmaline writes:

I am so inspired by how Laverne, Howard and Ginny are honored as ancestors and are present in the action through a levitated & disappeared police station, ominous and interesting sounds and large turnouts of mourners. (Tourmaline 2012)

According to witnesses, "the station rose six feet after demonstrators chanted "Raise! Raise!" (Tourmaline 2012). Tourmaline notes,

how haunting this demonstration is, responding to the killings and ongoing threats of homophobic and transphobic violence from the state by organizing an action filled with accountability to the living, dead and unknown forces that are all fully involved in our struggle for liberation. (Tourmaline 2012)

She reflects that this tin can demo is "so outside the normalized organizing tactics preferred by the Non Profit Industrial Complex," that more than forty years later it is still evocative and energizing, staging as it does the potent forms of care, attachment, memorialization, resilience, and accountability to which trans people have recourse, even within scenes of tragedy, loss, and constraint: "this action [still] feels incredibly accountable to the unborn, the dead and the living present at the Rampart Police Station in 1970" (Tourmaline 2012). Tourmaline demonstrates how magical praxis can have real, transformative effects in trans lives: "this moment leaves me in awe, accounted for and curious" (Tourmaline 2012). As Fosburg, Kligler, and Samore avow "magic has and can be used as a tool of protest for which the state has no viable response [...] protesters are

making a statement about the existence of an arena of agency—magic, desire, collective willpower—over which the state has no control” (Fosburg et al. 2015). Tourmaline reads the demo not as evidence of the “hippie” counterculture’s demobilization and divestment from “real” political organizing; she instead considers the ways the tin can demo contests “orthodoxies of liberal and radical organizing alike” (Lewis 2017, 205). Tourmaline’s reading recognises the event as an exercise in the sociality of mourning, as a way of confronting the ineffability of personages and past lives that haunt us in ways that are loving, as a way of taking care of the ghosts who take care of us, and as a form of affective labour that resists empirical or political quantification.⁷⁵ Perhaps what is most compelling about the demo is that, although the flyer has a clear sense of humour and joy, the levitation by magic of the police precinct is not offered as a joke, but as a serious gambit.

In this regard it differs from the more famous “Pentagon levitation” of 1967. Organised by well-known Beats and hippies like Allen Ginsberg, Abbie Hoffman, and Gary Snyder, the Pentagon demo was never seriously intended to disappear the Pentagon; it was instead imagined as a form of political theatre. Keith Lampe, who co-organized the Pentagon levitation of 1967, has claimed “we didn’t expect the building to actually leave terra firma [...] it [was] merely [...] a witty media-project” (Manseau 2017). Contrastingly, as Lewis puts it, the activists present for the Rampart levitation

did not seek to alter conditions of oppression by *signifying* at the police; rather, they declared their intent to physically raise the station through the assistance of an unspecified and apparently inhuman force. (Lewis 2017, 205)

⁷⁵ See Malatino 2020, 7.

Both the flyer and Tourmaline's remarks ask us to take seriously the ways in which trans attachments, trans care, and trans movements for social change routinely call on agencies that are inadmissible to statist, anthropocentric, and secular ontological regimes to engage and alter our worlds.

In the present, trans people continue to turn to magic as a means to bring about change. A woman finds a sex-change spell she wrote as a 7 year old; she guesses it must have worked (Tannenbaum 2017). A woman casts a spell to raise surgery money, she figures it hasn't worked yet, but she's hopeful (Wallace 2017). A black trans person uses hoodoo to protect their community from police violence (Wallace 2017). In the present, they continue to call this crazy; "hormones [are] not magic wands" (Eyre et al. 2004, 147). Nonserious and nonrational modes are always at risk of being dismissed from accounts of meaningful care and resistance work. Tourmaline, writing about the Rampart levitation, says, "I love the levity that accompanied this action" (Tourmaline 2012). Perhaps most importantly, as well as meeting the basic requirements for survival, trans care webs and their deauthorized methods for social change are premised on pleasure, levity, enjoyment, capriciousness, and exuberance. They recognise that and how promiscuity, pageantry, pretence, play, humour, enchantment, and other tongue-in-cheek methods are both effectual and potent forms of resistance work, and also integral to living a fulfilling life. As Mitchell observes in the beloved fable-manifesto *The Faggots and their Friends Between Revolutions*:

the faggots have never been asked to join the vanguard. The faggots, it was noticed, do not know how to keep a straight face and the vanguard demands constantly straight faces. The faggots, it was noticed, want only to eat so they can play love play while the vanguard demands endless talk about the hunger of others and the seriousness of work. The faggots, it was noticed, are too quick to believe that the revolution had come and so too quick to celebrate. The vanguard demands that the revolution go on forever and so demands that the celebration only be planned, never enacted. (Mitchell and Asta 1988, 22)

Surely, if it is anything at all, then trans craziness/trans magic is the ability to look at a world we are told is inhospitable to us and nevertheless feel hopeful, take pleasure, find beauty, share resources, thrive, and bring one another into being. The more I think about this, the more I feel like what gets dismissed as crazy is a form of radical openness to possibility that often characterizes trans people's orientation toward the world. Our "visions of community are suffused with far more complexity and fluidity than a mere denunciation of certain people and a celebrating of others" (Gan 2007, 136). Our "articulations of kinship, family, and community exceed models of kinship built upon heterosexual reproduction" (Gan 2007, 136). Our lifelong attempts at building a "home" for ourselves and one another are unpredictable, impatient, generous, provisional, and welcoming. Making these things happen in real terms requires the ability to imagine, to pretend, to hope, and to ignore what is directly in front of your eyes, to see that what you want to be there can be there, not in some vague, deferred, future-oriented utopian imaginary, but materially in the present, manifested through a combination of unruliness, waywardness, and the care and grace extended to us by our lovers, mentors, friends, people from the internet, ghosts, and strangers with whom we are consubstantial. It is a prefigurative politics, a way of "building the new world in the shell of the old" (Malatino 2020, 71). It is about "a certain kind of faithfulness and a certain kind of obligation: about what we owe each other" (Malatino 2020, 72). Often we live, or try to live, as though we are already free, and are told that doing so entails making departures from reality that prove we are delusional about what is possible in the world. Sylvia Rivera avows the transformative potential of states of delusion, imagination, play, pretence, and storytelling; such things are emphatically not politically useless. She offers us this blessing and manifesto:

I just want to be me. I want to be Sylvia Rivera. I like pretending [...] I'm living the way Sylvia wants to live. I'm not living in the straight world; I'm not living in the gay world; I'm just living in my own world with Julia and my friends. (Rivera 2002, 77)

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