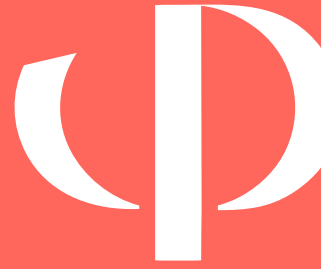


# LGBTQ Philosophy



FALL 2023

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# LGBTQ Philosophy

AMY MARVIN, EDITOR

VOLUME 23 | NUMBER 1 | FALL 2023

## FROM THE EDITOR

Amy Marvin

LAFAYETTE COLLEGE

When I last wrote to you, I explained that though this journal has changed its designation from Newsletter to Studies, I plan to carry forward the tradition of the LGBTQ newsletter format. Hence, I will open this Introduction with a general update before directly introducing the following interview and essays. My previous letter to you was from a historical home surrounded by an infamous battlefield, and this letter finds me writing from the mountains of northeast Pennsylvania. I ended my previous Introduction emphasizing contingency, which remains the case for me, as it remains for you. Currently, the New College of Florida is planning to officially remove their Gender Studies program under a rising tide of lucrative anti-LGBTQ sentiment across the US. In June, a professor and two students were stabbed during a philosophy course focused on Gender Issues. Though the Philosophy Department at West Virginia University has not yet been eliminated like other departments, it will be subject to further review. Meanwhile, faculty are increasingly placed in contingent positions at institutions where tenure still means job security. In a situation of anti-LGBTQ legislation, violence, and rising austerity in higher education and beyond, it remains important to have venues like this journal that center LGBTQ work and thought.

The issue opens on the timely theme of anti-LGBTQ and specifically anti-trans backlash. In 2022 Loren Cannon published his book *The Politicization of Trans Identity: An Analysis of Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling from Obergefell to Bostock* to analyze the origin and mechanics of an increasingly hostile political climate focused on trans identity. Now, a year later, Jacki Alvarez and Loren Cannon share a conversation about the book, the institution of marriage, the concept of harm, the causality of backlash, and further work that can be done to address the contemporary politics of anti-trans hostility.

Following the interview, the issue includes three essays that use methods of autotheory to think about identity, violence, and love. In "Better Word: Queer Time Travel, Intersexuality, and Autoethnography," Maren Behrensen bridges autoethnography and philosophy of time to reflect on coercive medicine, compulsory heterosexuality, trauma, and identity. Next, in "Political Economy of Passing: A Trans Genre Meditation on Queerness," Eric Maroney brings together autotheory, feminist and queer Marxist scholarship, and poetry to critique the imperative to pass

as non-trans across its racialized and classed dynamics. Finally, Cavar concludes the issue through a meditation on trans love titled "Loving Trans into Possible: t4t As Transpollinatory Praxis." Like the preceding essays, Cavar draws from autotheory and poetics, challenging dominant narratives of trans corruption by introducing a praxis of pollination in conversation with queercrip, transfeminist, and new materialist frameworks. Each of these essays is engaged with how to think LGBTQIA lives in the context of misinformation, neglect, violence, epistemic injustice, and rampant public backlash.

Moving forward, I am hoping that this issue will provide an excellent example of what LGBTQIA philosophy work can look like across disciplines, genres, and methods. I hope that even in a context of public violence and austerity LGBTQIA philosophy continues to creatively thrive within and without the academy.

## CONVERSATION

### *Interview on The Politicization of Trans Identity: An Analysis of Backlash, Scapegoating, and Dog-Whistling from Obergefell to Bostock*

Jacki Alvarez

MERCED COLLEGE

Loren Cannon

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

**JACKI:** Loren, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to come across and read your book. The book serves excellently as a precise and intense account of the harms faced by people living outside of narrow gender stereotypes, those who have gender expansive notions of identity. The burdens placed on transgender individuals to satisfy the expectations of the public, of total strangers, of potential dates, of government agents are extremely high. The expectations and burdens are unsustainable and inappropriate, and yet our so-called failures to meet them become catalysts for violence. Your book helps expose these burdens for what they are and exposes how sometimes transgender people get used for others' political ends while we are still seeking our own freedom.

I sincerely hope this book reaches a wide audience, especially philosophers whose conceptions of identity are biologically essentialist or those who are stuck in a two-gender system. Academics unfamiliar with the historical and ongoing harms experienced by our community should read the book too. But I wonder who your target audience is, or if you thought about who might read it. Is it for transgender people like us? Are you writing to cis people? It's clearly an academic book, but are you aiming for an audience of a wider academic community beyond philosophy?

**LC:** Well, first, Jacki, thank you so much for participating in the APA session last spring of the Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World and being open to engage with me about the book. Thanks too for those whose labor produces this publication, the *APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy*. This publication has done so much to advance LGBTQ philosophy for so many years. This work is so vital not only for our discipline but also for our intersecting communities, and those of us who are looking to find a professional home in this field.

To answer your question, though, I didn't have any specific audience in mind for the book, especially at the beginning. Instead, I found myself, like so many others, witnessing the national politicization of trans and gender non-conforming identities and experiences, and realized that this phenomenon was morally, politically, socially, and legally significant. I wondered why the wave upon wave of anti-transgender legislation was not being seen as a national tragedy; as something so obviously morally abhorrent and unacceptable. I started with the ideas of "backlash," "scapegoating," and "dog whistling" and wanted to investigate to what extent these ideas were relevant to the present circumstances. After doing some conceptual work to adequately characterize these ideas, I argue that they are relevant here, and as such, provide a meaningful way to discuss our present circumstances. Meaningful, in the sense of being morally and conceptually meaningful. Targeting trans and gender non-conforming folks is not just "another Wednesday" of political sparring, but has real ramifications for those that are targeted, and those that transgress gender in various ways regardless of their identities.

So, I was motivated by engaging in the analysis itself, I wasn't really thinking about readership. I hope, though, that many folks of different experiences will consider reading the book.

**JACKI:** Agreed. I hope that a wider audience reads your book, especially those who aren't transgender will read this book because I suspect other people leading transgender lives might feel some of the same pain I felt while reading it. And we need more people to know of this pain so they might be more compelled to stop it, to intervene against it. Some of the narratives and examples bring forward an ever-present fear about the violence that I might sustain in my own life. They are reminders of the violence my community and I have experienced. Particularly, the sections on bathroom bills, transgender folks that are incarcerated, and the pervasive rhetoric in the public consciousness regarding transgender folks and accusations of sexual predation.

**LC:** I do recognize that it can be difficult to read at times. I was worried, as related to your original question, that many would believe that backlash, scapegoating, and dog whistling were *not* relevant terms in this context. For that reason, this book has lots of *stories*, about real people, experiencing discrimination, violence, and other forms of intersectionality applied and experienced oppression and contemporary evidence about those that are actively marginalizing our communities. My own view of philosophy, especially social philosophy and ethics, is that our theorizing should *stick close to lived experience*. We need not always abstract to the realm of fiction when what is happening right now affects ourselves, our chosen families, colleagues, and communities.

**JACKI:** The careful attention paid to identifying not only progress but also backlash and dog-whistling is so important lest we forget or let down our guard as we keep fighting injustices that our community continues to experience. One thing I worry about is that if it's all scapegoating and dog whistling, then shouldn't we try to ignore what's going on and not get distracted? How do we protect ourselves and our community while also being in charge of the narratives of our lives where our gender, and our genital status, just isn't what is most important about us?

**LC:** That is a good question. Many, many years ago I would regularly teach an essay on the moral obligation to stay informed, written by Carlo Filice. It was written before most of us carried computers in our pockets and became bombarded with information of all kinds. Contemporarily, many realize that watching/reading the news incessantly leads not to empowerment but more likely to depression and hopelessness.

We live in a complicated time. It is one in which taking care of our mental, emotional, and spiritual health requires that we sometimes disengage. That said, the politicization of trans and gender non-conforming identities and experiences is something that is crucially important to pay attention to and to think carefully about. Threatening to put gender-affirming parents in jail, prohibiting updates to legal documents, life-sustaining health care, the use of public restroom facilities, participation in sports, and to be paradoxically blamed both for Trump's election win and his loss, are all serious claims that lead to violence and discrimination. The legislative and social assault can barely be underestimated in its importance. Historically, scapegoating has led to serious harm and the beginning stages of this scapegoating can't be ignored.

**JACKI:** In addition to the painful memories and the sadness and anger I felt while reading, there were also experiences of pride, validation, and solidarity. I felt a part of a beautiful, though violently oppressed, community. And we have plenty of history from the feminist movement, among other fights for civil rights, to know that we need to know what is happening to others and need to work together, and have allies, to make change. The book is doing powerful consciousness-raising work, through careful observation, research, and philosophical analysis that brings us together to notice what is really happening. Have you also considered what

the right responses ought to be or where best to act in resistance?

**LC:** Thank you. As far as your question, I tend to think that any characterization of apt responses is context dependent. Appropriate responses start with an understanding of our present circumstances (what I hoped to contribute to illuminating), and active reflection, empathy, and engagement. This may look different for different people differently positioned in our world. The response of a national politician (either democrat or republican) is going to be different than that of a PTA member, a philosopher, or a twenty-year-old college student. There is sufficient good work to be had for everyone, and I believe that context shapes what that work looks like.

**JACKI:** Let's get into some of the details of the book. I was really hoping you would reject marriage as an institution. Why defend an institution that is still separate and unequal? I am underwhelmed by, even skeptical of, the *Obergefell* decision, a bit more so than you seem to be in the book. Sure, a byproduct of the case is that many gay and lesbian people can marry, though you reveal how it was more a technical trick of law than a welcoming of LGBTQ+ people into full rights. And still, it can be difficult for some transgender people whose identifications don't match their account of themselves and who cannot get them to match through the tangle of laws and government offices with different rules. So even where the extension of rights includes some people, it still leaves out others.

**LC:** Yes, I recall you bringing this up in the APA session for the Association of Philosophy in the Contemporary World. In Chapter One of my book, I do a close review of the *Obergefell* decision and am critical of much of the reasoning of the Supreme Court on this issue. Additionally, I explicate the arguments from others that conclude that emphasizing the legality of same-sex marriage either constituted a move towards unacceptable assimilation or was simply a misplaced priority. I agree with you and many others that any codification of rights through the participation of socially traditional (or nearly so) relationships is distasteful. Additionally, I have been much influenced by thinkers like Dean Spade who argue that marriage, an institution that simply creates a slightly broader privileged class, is not a goal that should have been prioritized over efforts to develop a more just society in which housing, health care, respect, and a dignified and meaningful life are open to all.

The first chapter of the book lays out the context of this debate. While I certainly nod to some views more than others, I don't take an explicit stand on the issue. This is mostly due to the fact that the project of the book really doesn't involve taking a stance on the political prioritization of same-sex marriage, but how the *Obergefell* ruling is related to the backlash that followed that SCOTUS ruling. The *Obergefell* ruling was the beginning of two different eras that are crucially relevant to LGBTQ+ lives, the legalization of same-sex marriage and the politicization of trans and gender non-binary identities.

**JACKI:** Fair enough, but after reading your book, it made me want to reject marriage. I was persuaded by you. And,

as someone who teaches Applied Ethics, I am always struck by the strangeness that the very salience of people's identities is up for debate or are considered as moral dilemmas. Deciding whether, or how much, to donate to those far away living in extreme poverty is a conversation about moral obligation. Discussing the legitimacy of people's gender is not. Why does the salience or ontology of marginalized peoples' identities get discussed as if the eradication of the identity itself is up for debate? I remember gay marriage as a topic in my first ever ethics course as an undergraduate. Even then I asked why we weren't discussing the morality of marriage full stop. Why is it a reasonable question to consider only the marriage rights of a particular group of marginalized people already without social power? Your book does some real work to look at marriage as a whole. And it does well to lay out how transgender people are targeted specifically because of their vulnerability, so that was a connection that I made to my own experience. Still, given all of the backlash, scapegoating, and dog whistling that is happening to our community since the *Obergefell* case, wouldn't rejecting the byproduct or minimal advantage help the most vulnerable facing the harm (and a non-ideal solution)?

**LC:** Yes. Like some relationships, "it's complicated." I see this issue as one of "competing oughts." What do we do when there are competing options in our efforts to create a more just, compassionate, and ethical society? In such cases, do we go for change that seems more socially and politically attainable given the context (prioritize same-sex marriage) or do we organize for the broader and more foundational goals that more meaningfully reduce the barriers to flourishing for all? The first option often involves problematic forms of reasoning (Who deserves to be included?), and too often privileges the already relatively privileged. This is obviously criticizable. Does it matter that attaining the first goal has some very obvious benefits in terms of the well-being of many and the social acceptance of LGBTQ people generally? Does it matter that the second goal is a much heavier political lift? These are questions of both ethics and timing. I believe the important political focus now needs to be to continue the work in its various forms. We need to make sure that "marriage equality" includes those who are disabled and for whom marriage is coupled with increased economic insecurity, we need to attend to social, legal, and political forces that are targeting folks and join the work that so many are doing in various social justice arenas.

**JACKI:** Though the book offers a detailed look at current conditions for a specific class of people, I read it offering a general theory of harm as well. You essentially prove how current treatment—socially, politically, and legally—of transgender people meet each criterion (backlash, scapegoating, and dog whistling) and each sub-criterion (including being blamed unjustly and disproportionately, biased irrational thinking without any antecedent, transgressive of sexual norms, ostracism, and marginalization to name a few) [p. 138]. The argument you make is that we must look at all the three concepts—backlash, scapegoating, and dog whistling—and their interdependence to fully understand the harm. Each has its own structure, but to look at only one or to isolate them

from each other would lead to error. Some people might be able to dismiss one or another abuse, but to see them all intersecting and overlapping shows undeniably the reality of the politicization of trans identity and the willful attack on the freedoms and equality of trans people.

**LC:** Yes, I think these are important connections. When I first started thinking of the book topic, I thought it would be an analysis of whether “backlash,” “scapegoating,” or “dog whistling” were the best descriptors. When I started thinking that backlash is a form of a directed response, I realized that all of these ideas helpfully describe the present political context. Directed backlash employs scapegoating, scapegoating employs dog-whistling, and this entire constellation of practices is for the benefit of those who have, or wish to gain, political power.

**JACKI:** Maybe loosely analogous to the interdependence of the harms is also the necessity of intersectional analysis for holistic analysis. You are careful in the book to highlight ways that trans people aren’t all the same, but that race and class and other differences matter in how these oppressions are experienced.

**LC:** Yes, I believed that an intersectional approach was crucial to this project. Even now, when intersectional analysis is in no way a new way of thinking, too often those who discuss LGBTQ+ rights or trans rights are either 1) talking about these rights for white, middle-class, able-bodied folks or 2) thought to be discussing the rights of white, middle-class, able-bodied folks. The first is especially likely to occur if the theorist is white, like myself. Creating a social context where trans and gender non-conforming people thrive must involve acknowledging and eventually eradicating racism, sexism, ableism, and other systemic systems of oppression. To work for the betterment of lives for trans and gender non-binary persons and not also be anti-racist is only to be concerned for *white* trans and gender non-binary persons and to invisibilize the communities of Black, Indigenous and People of Color and trivialize the harms that are daily experienced. As I explain, I believe that anti-trans animus is a tool of racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, just as racism (and other systemically created harms) are tools for anti-trans animus.

**JACKI:** I typically teach logic and critical thinking, and I presented a paper at the last APA about how inductive reasoning is the difficult type. Symbolic logic is far easier because there is an answer. When students think inductive arguments are easy, or futile for that matter, I explain that they should take a closer look. It’s a matter of degree, and the reception of the argument tends to be a mixed bag. Sorry, that was a long introduction to say that your book makes one of the strongest causal arguments I’ve read. You make it so difficult to object because of the examples, not just the sheer number of them but how poignant and relative they are to each corresponding concept. Your argument isn’t a causal claim simply because these things happened in time and space that are correlative but a succinct account of the descriptions of the status of transgender people in society coupled with the plethora of anti-trans bills. I tried to imagine how someone would object, where or how they would given your argument about the politicization that

ensued after the decision in 2015. I imagine someone might say it’s a slippery slope fallacy or false cause, but then why did all of the anti-trans bills arise? Maybe someone could say that as visibility increases, so do the bills. Looking to the Trans Legislations Tracker, we can see that in 2015, mostly bills concerning restrooms arise. Then as gender-affirming care rises, so do the bills against the care. Things slow a bit during the pandemic, and then in 2021 the number of bills doubles (“144 bills were introduced in 37 states”). Then in 2022, we see the gender-affirming care bills (“174 bills, were introduced and 26 passed”). In 2023, we see bills blocking teachers, students, health care, and an attempt to delegitimize birth certificates. I think that the data is consistent with your causal claim even if there are other causes, surely *Obergefell* was a cause. Did you intend to make a causal claim argument?

**LC:** I believe that the *Obergefell* ruling and the anti-trans backlash are causally connected. Like you, I see these kinds of arguments, especially in the messy context of human society, really difficult to make. Can we imagine a world in which a court case made same-sex marriage legal, and we *didn’t* have a backlash against transgender and gender non-binary people? Absolutely! There is no necessary connection here. Still, it is more than just temporal proximity that links these two events. (No fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*!) What I believe is the crucial element that ties the two events is not that folks would “naturally” have negative feelings about trans folks based on the passing of *Obergefell*, but that the frustration and even fear that some felt about the new legality of same-sex marriage was exploited to produce political and economic gain.

**JACKI:** We started this discussion with you sharing your motivations for writing this book, notably that you couldn’t look away from everything you were seeing happening around us. So I wonder also what is next for you. Are you writing more about trans lives? I recall that you noted in the book that you don’t want to write about trans identity because you are interested in so many other topics and that your original attention was on collective responsibility. I relate to that since I find myself making similar decisions, wishing I could be an Arendt scholar but writing more about identity and living authentic lives. There’s also risks to writing about trans identity, especially for trans persons. The backlash you write about in wide-scale legal moves also happens to individuals in their private and professional lives. So maybe the place of trans identity in your current writing has shifted after this book. What are you working on?

**LC:** Maybe like many in our field, I have a notebook in which I keep a long list of essay topics and ideas that I’d love to spend time exploring. Currently, I am looking at how expression, as an expression of belief, of gender, of religion, is being legally conceptualized in recent court cases and what this means for those of us against whom some claim their expression of belief is inhibited by our expression of self. I am also working on an essay involving investigating different kinds of barriers to Maria Lugones’s idea of “World Traveling” and how these barriers are relevant to different contexts including those of our present environmental crisis and the challenges of creating a just university under the burden of neo-liberal ideology.



Lastly, I think it important to acknowledge that politicizing trans and gender non-binary identities politicizes our work on these issues. I have gotten hate mail as a result of this book and have been put on the “Professor Watch List” for the group *Turning Point USA*. (An action that basically proves the point of the book.) Having such lists, especially in this political climate, is very worrisome. This needs to be a time of increased solidarity between those of us in higher education and those who teach K-12. There are so many of us, including those that teach the truth about our country’s racial history, that are under intense scrutiny, or worse.

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## ARTICLES

### *Better Word: Queer Time Travel, Intersexuality,<sup>1</sup> and Autoethnography<sup>2</sup>*

Maren Behrens  
UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE

I imagine that when I was born, there were two of me. Twins sharing the same body, although you wouldn’t notice at first glance. At a second glance, doctors decided that they couldn’t leave us like this, so they attempted to separate us. My twin was supposed to become medical waste, but they couldn’t get it all out.

For thirteen years, I didn’t know that my twin was alive. For another sixteen years, I feared him as an evil brother; someone who was trying to break through my thin skin with his dark stubble, and ruin my charade. For another thirteen years, I tried to befriend him. Now, I don’t think of my sibling as another half anymore. I think of them as a time traveler.

Unlike me, they skip back and forth through time. If time were a map, then my path would resemble a straight road, with my body as a car, and my mind in the driver’s seat.<sup>3</sup> My sibling doesn’t have a path, nor a road, nor a car. Their location on time’s map would appear as scattered dots and wiggly lines. I follow my road as if time were a straight line. My body appears to move from past to future at a steady pace. My sibling’s dots and wiggly lines would hardly have any connections between them.<sup>4</sup> But in some places, their lines would cross my path and some of their dots would be visible from my road; porchlights in the distance, or fireflies in the shrubs. I can squint at them until they become a message from another time; not my future and past, exactly, but a future and past that might still tell me something about my place on time’s arrow.

*When I was born, homosexuality was still partially criminalized, and would be for another fourteen years. Gay marriage was nothing more than a joke. I would become an adult before it approached the realm of the possible, and I would approach middle age before it became a reality. In my year of birth, even the most rudimentary legal recognition for trans persons was still a year away. The law that was drafted then still remains in force, even though it can no longer be applied consistently, since most of its*

*sections have been found unconstitutional. The birth of intersex children was treated as a medical emergency.<sup>5</sup> I was treated as a medical emergency, and moved from a regional hospital to the university hospital in Hamburg within days of my birth.*

“Are you a lesbian girl or a gay boy?” I put effort into casually leaning against the wall of this Viennese dive bar, sipping a drink that’s far too sweet for my taste. My company for the evening, the other queer person at work, is charming his way out of the advances of a French couple. I’m talking to a younger man; he’d been waiting tables at the restaurant where we began our Friday night out. I enjoy the attention implied by his question; the question itself exasperates me.

I don’t remember anymore what I replied.

“Why can’t you just have fun?” A whole group of us is going to a lesbian bowling night in Jamaica Plain. Everyone is enjoying themselves, but my skin is crawling on the inside, so on the outside, I sulk. I don’t belong here, but I can’t tell anyone why, least of all myself.

I don’t think anymore that I just needed to build confidence.

“You get that she’s a lesbian, right?” A college friend is getting married. We’ve made it through the dinner conversation and the games, the point of one of which was to make it obvious to everyone who among the wedding guests was still, tragically, single. Now I’m sitting outside with one of the groom’s friends. He’d introduced himself with a snide comment about gays, my friends went back inside. But I’m still there, first lecturing him, then debating him, then just having a conversation with him. Another one of the singles, exposed earlier. When it’s time for my friends and me to leave, I hug him. Then I kiss him, shyly. He responds with a much more assertive kiss.

I don’t think anymore that I was just drunk and confused.

*Like everyone else, I was relentlessly groomed into heterosexuality; in school, by the books I read, the music I listened to, and the television I watched. None of the conceptual tools on offer allowed me to understand my desires, nor my body, and how and why it responded to these desires. I remained a black box to myself. When the first homosexual characters appeared in the books I read, the music I listened to, and the television I watched, I latched onto them to regroom myself.<sup>6</sup>*

“Where’s this from?” I’m seven, maybe eight years old, asking my mother about the long scar across my belly. “You had a hernia when you were an infant,” she tells me. I don’t know yet that hernias don’t leave scars like that. It’ll be a long time before I learn that.

*When I was a child, cutting was considered a kindness, and the cutting of intersex children was to be done as early as possible; in my case, before my first birthday. Any “adequate” surgical result, even if it left visible scars, damaged healthy tissue, destroyed reproductive capacity, or necessitated follow-up surgeries, was considered better than leaving things as they were.<sup>7</sup>*

I'm having a barrage of tests at my family's general practitioner and the hospital that first treated me. I don't remember how much of this was explained to me, but what sticks is the German word my mother uses when she finally tells me what this is about. It means freak, something that shouldn't have been brought into existence; it means protecting myself against exposure at utterly unreasonable costs. This much I already understand. In response to this understanding, I cry violently. My mother doesn't know how to stop it, other than by telling me to stop.

*I cannot remember any direct expression of love, pride, or affection from my parents toward me when I was a child, nor can I remember that they comforted me when I was in distress. This may seem unusual, even cruel, but I now know that this made us an ordinary German family.<sup>8</sup> The avoidance of difficult emotions has been our collective second nature for a long, long time.*

I'm waiting for the puberty that's been announced and explained to me. I've been told about sex in school, and I've seen pornography, but I notice that what I've been told and what I've seen doesn't quite apply to me. I don't know how to phrase that as a question someone would respond to with useful information. I can't bleed, but when it's time for girls to get their periods, I pretend; and my mother plays along with it for a few weeks until I drop the topic.

She tries to talk about it once, when another letter from the hospital arrives. Asks me whether I would want to get more surgery, so I can sleep with boys. Terrified by the suggestion, I can only say that I don't want that, but I can't say what I want. Not to my mother, not to any of the girls I've been interested in. The conversation is much shorter in my memory than it was in reality.

*The treatment protocol for intersex children that informed medical practice in most of the "Western" world for half a century was premised on lies and secrecy.<sup>9</sup> The cutting was to be done early, so that the child would never have to experience any doubts about its gender identity, or develop any abnormal desires.*

We don't know yet that my father is dying of lung cancer. After decades of heavy drinking, he finally tries to stop, goes to rehab. I've only known him as an alcoholic, and I've always either feared or despised him. We visit him in the rehab facility; it's a grey, late winter Sunday. On the desk in his drab room, I spot a piece of cardboard. It's an exercise from his therapy sessions: "List the happiest moments of your life," and on his list he wrote: "the birth of my daughter." I wonder whether one of the reasons that my father needed to drink so much was that I wasn't quite his daughter, and never would be.

*Self-loathing is a common response to trauma.<sup>10</sup>*

"You should cry," my mother says. It's been days since my father died and I still just sit there, dry, barren, and silent. I can't cry at the appropriate times and I can't bleed; but I can make myself bleed. Cut up my arms, pour hot wax on the wounds: to impress a girl, and scare her boyfriend.

We are twelve years old, maybe thirteen; on the brink of adolescence, but the birthday parties still happen on Saturday afternoons. We have one glass of champagne each, we watch *Fried Green Tomatoes*: The most romantic thing you can do for another woman is to slay the bad men in her life; but that still doesn't mean that you will get to be with her the way you want to.

*Regrooming yourself into homosexuality can be just as confusing and painful as being groomed into heterosexuality.*

Find a part to play. Pick a role and a costume to go with it: cloak and armor. A strange armor it is, made of defiance and ignorance. I get to perform my strangeness, all obscure and shot through with suffering that seems to reach to the core of the earth. But this is all surface; this is a half-man's performance. It's infuriating and it's comfortable: I never need to get naked.

Falling in love, but unable to see myself being loved in return, never noticing how she looks at me. Never venturing near the library stacks where they keep the books about the freaks. It dawns on me that I've picked an imagined community<sup>11</sup> I can't participate in: What's underneath my armor remains. This square face, these large hands, these broad shoulders, and this flat chest; all visible in spite of how I disguise myself. Make up, lip gloss, nice hair, a nice skirt; all useless against the reflection in the mirror.

*Self-compassion is commonly regarded as a crucial step in coming to terms with trauma. Proper self-compassion is impossible when you hate yourself so much that you cannot even bear to look at yourself.*

"This is the ladies' room." A cleaner at work, a drunk woman in a bar. They're not aggressive, they're just asserting their space, doing their job. "I know," I say with as much confidence as I can muster, and when they hear my voice they realize their mistake, but now I'm standing in front of myself exposed, and I wonder: "Did they actually make a mistake?"

"Mommy, is that a boy or a girl?" A small child in the seat in front of me on the train, stares at me, pokes the mother, stares at me. The mother shushes the child, makes a point of not looking at me. My shield falls to the ground with a loud "clang!" I quietly pick it up, embarrassed by the commotion, wishing I had the courage and the patience to explain to the child that some people are both.

*Understanding that gender is performative<sup>12</sup> does not help as long as the flawed performance is still a failure, and not a message. Performance cannot outrun the silence inscribed on the body; and the domesticated and trimmed body is not a parody, but a sigil of submission. When most have the privilege to never think about their gender, never question the spoken and unspoken rules, never feel out of place, there is little difference between parody and submission.*

"If I didn't have a boyfriend, I would kiss you now." She didn't kiss me, and I didn't dare, but I noticed how she looked at me. And there will be a first kiss, seven years

later. It's the last summer before I leave the country, and we won't be lovers, but we still love each other.

I need to settle down in another language before I can put a name to what I see in the mirror. Learn that putting a name to it would not be the end of things, but their beginning. "What's your stake in writing about this?" My friend in Boston as we're about to get on the 47 bus; my friend in Vienna as we're getting ready for our farewell party. My interests are academic now, I've read the books about the freaks, so I don't need to answer that question.

*"There is no straight line through trauma."<sup>13</sup> You might have to draw wide circles around the source of the pain for years, and you might have to put it all into another language in order to soften the blow of the words.*

The learning is terrifying. A soft fire on my lips, crawls from the neck down my spine, icy cold. On my arms, a slow knife across the skin; it leaves a mark, but this time the skin doesn't break. Across my chest, drawing a line downwards, downwards; and there you may go, and how quickly I've dropped my armor, but you mustn't speak about what you find.

"Why do you never talk about it?" Because as long as we don't speak about it, I can pretend that you pretend that you haven't seen anything, felt anything. That by your touch, I could still change into something pure and desirable; but if we called things by their proper, foreign names that possibility would disappear forever. Because I wouldn't know what to make of it if your desire were because of this body and not in spite of it. Because that means I'd never get my armor back.

*Shame is a curious and overwhelming force. And sometimes, love and care are utterly powerless against it.<sup>14</sup>*

"I don't open this door with women anymore." A fast-growing feeling suddenly exits my body; a tall, slender tree with shallow roots, felled by the storm, leaving a muddy wound in the grey clay. I try much too hard and too early to patch it with friendship. I wanted to object: "But I'm not a woman." This wouldn't have changed a thing about her feelings, or how she expresses them. But it might have changed a thing or two about how I regard myself.

"You were just you." I couldn't believe them any more than I believed myself. I couldn't believe them when they told me they found me beautiful. So I assumed that they were just as confused as I was, and made up reasons to be something other than what I was. I couldn't believe that the pronouns, clothes, and haircuts I'd been trying on weren't just another daydream.

*If you have not been given opportunities to experience external affirmation, you will eventually withhold it from yourself. It is a pre-emptive strike against the mere possibility that others might not like or understand you, and against the probability that love, once granted, will end, or change. From the outside, this looks like a set of entirely irrational fears. From the inside, it is self-denial as a necessary element of survival.<sup>15</sup>*

I imagine that my sibling's ability to skip back and forth in time allowed them to learn from the past while not having to live it. They always had access to a better future. They always saw what it could be like. From my place, in the car, on the road along time's arrow, there are three fundamental responses to their freedom: jealousy, grief, or relief. Two of these end with death, one ends with life.

I will never be as free as the version of me that wasn't mutilated as an infant, didn't grow up in a dysfunctional family, wasn't smothered with shame and secrecy, and never allowed themselves to look for community as an adult. I will never have as much agency as someone reaching adolescence and adulthood with access to information and connections to others like them, thanks to changing mores and communication technology. But I still have a choice: I could begrudge their agency and freedom, further limiting my own. Or I could be happy for them.

## NOTES

1. "Intersexuality" and "intersex" are considered outdated as medical terms. What they refer to is usually described as "disorders" or—without the gratuitous pathologization—"differences of sexual development" (DSD) today. During my own childhood and adolescence, the even more outdated term "hermaphroditism" was still de rigueur, and I use "intersexuality" with purpose here, because it was the first term I encountered that helped me move away from the stigma of being a "hermaphrodite." See Joris A. Gregor, *Constructing Intersex: Intergeschlechtlichkeit als soziale Kategorie*, transcript 2015.
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## Political Economy of Passing: A Trans Genre Meditation on Queerness

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### I. FURTIVITY

2012, eight years before millions of protesters rise in anti-racist rebellion to proclaim *Black Trans Lives (also) Matter*, CeCe McDonald—a Black trans woman is sentenced to three and a half years in prison. McDonald, just twenty-three at the time, pleads guilty to manslaughter for defending her own life against a white supremacist who, statistics project, would have killed her if given the chance. Writing from a men's prison, where she would ultimately serve nineteen months, McDonald represents the asymmetry of law. Too often weaponized judiciary statutes categorize and contain queer life, poor life, Black and Brown life. McDonald fits all three.

Like CeCe, transgender and gender-nonconforming people are often caught within a web of carceral logics. Trans people experience significantly "high rates of poverty, homelessness, and discrimination in schools and the workplace," which, in turn, leads to "disproportionate contacts with the justice system, leading to higher levels of incarceration."<sup>1</sup> A 2018 report by The National Center for Trans Equality documents "A history of bias, abuse, and profiling towards LGBTQ people by law enforcement," and notes that 47 percent of Black transgender people report having been incarcerated at some point in their lives.

A year following CeCe's January 2014 release, I attend Haymarket Books' annual Socialism Conference, a gathering of authors and organizers, artists, and academics who will shape my thinking for years to come. Standing in a hotel conference room located inside the downtown Chicago Loop, I fidget with a notebook that will remain empty when I walk out of the conference room doors. Inside, the room is cramped; it is humid, and at its front, CeCe McDonald recounts the moments that lead to her incarceration. At her story's crescendo, the room surges with emotion: "As I got closer," she tells us, "I start to hear all types of epithets, you know faggots, chicks-with-dicks. You dress like that

because you want to rape men, trick men."<sup>2</sup> Her attackers' virulent transmisogyny is laced with anti-Blackness. "African baby," she is told, "go back to Africa" just moments before her attackers slice into her face with broken glass. The conference hall is standing room only; we lean shoulder against shoulder, separated only by the thin cotton of T-shirts, listening as CeCe speaks. We are silent; we know what comes next.

Fumbling for a pair of scissors in her handbag, CeCe will stab her attacker resulting in his death, and though she is acting in self-defense, CeCe will be handcuffed, arraigned, and ultimately found guilty; "What is considered a crime and who is considered a criminal" is determined always by social constructions.<sup>3</sup> CeCe is attacked and incarcerated because CeCe can be seen; she can be recognized, and because her corporeality evades binary categorization, she is reconstituted as deviant, as criminal.

Years later, when I read Imani Perry for the first time, I think of CeCe and her refusal to die. This refusal, in itself, is a radical undertaking as Perry reminds readers of the "juridical foundations of modern patriarchy," the "coercive power of legal words," and the social identity constructions that legalese entreats. "Nonpersons" Perry writes, "those who lie outside the citizenship and the gender binary had [and continue to have] distinct rules applied to them, which are often mechanisms for violent domination."<sup>4</sup> This domination might be legislative; it might be carceral, or it might be intimate and extralegal. For many, for me, it is in this context that passing earns its appeal.

To pass is the opposite of failure.<sup>5</sup> It is also to move or to proceed—as in CeCe passed through the prison walls and back into the world. Passing can refer to the transfer, control, or custodianship of property—as in CeCe was passed from the police to the courts, to corrections. To pass is to "go uncensored, unchallenged, seemingly unnoticed"—as in, there is a direct correlation between the violence trans people experience and the degree to which they can pass—a constant furtivity.<sup>6</sup> In *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Julia Serano explains, "the problem is that words like 'pass' or 'passing' are active verbs. So when we say that a transsexual [sic] is passing it gives the false impression that they are the only active participant in this scenario."<sup>7</sup> However, from moment to moment trans people are interpellated through relationality; we are read as real or unreal, as belonging or unbelonging. Through a mix of signs and significations that precede our arrival, our queer bodies animate, arouse, and quicken the materiality of the street corner, the bar, the courtroom, the classroom. The decision to pass is never a simple one. While at its core passing remains an assimilationist practice, at times in my life, it has also been necessary for survival.

*Closets are Dangerous Places.*

Pressed against the slatted bifold doors,  
a person's vision becomes distorted;  
slices of light  
narrow the field of expectations.  
An older millennial,

my queer trans experience  
taut between two anchors.  
On one end, a generation  
who felt furtivity was a given;  
on the other, a generation  
who packed gender  
with c-4 demolition blocks,  
and set the world on fire.

## II. DISCIPLINE

The authority of the State in moderating and disciplining gender remains unparalleled. On the one hand, the State coerces trans bodies into passing as their cisgender correlative. On the other, the State erects classed and racialized legislative barriers that prevent trans people from access to physical and social transition. Violence is central to this project. As a young radical, I must have read Lenin's *State and Revolution* at least a dozen times—the pages of my copy crowded with notes and yellowed with coffee stains. Though I have since moved away from some of the text's argument, this still rings true: In its unadorned essence, the state is violence; it "is an organ of class rule. . . ; it is a creation of 'order' that legalizes and perpetuates oppression."<sup>8</sup> With its prisons and its "special bodies of armed men," state power terrorizes; state power coerces; state power compels.<sup>9</sup> To compel requires categorization; it requires the sorting and evaluation of bodies, so that some bodies become nobody, and other bodies become somebody.<sup>10</sup> The recent wave of anti-trans legislation is intimately concerned with who those nobodies are, how those nobodies move; how those nobodies labor, and where and how those nobodies receive care. And when legal coercion becomes insufficient, vigilantism takes its place.

On March 12, 2023, I wake up to horrifying images of white supremacists and neo-Nazis outside a drag story hour event in Akron, Ohio. Hundreds of Proud Boys, Patriot Front, and "White Lives Matter" protestors descend on Wadsworth Memorial Park to disrupt a charity event for survivors of the mass shooting at Club Q, an LGBTQ bar in Colorado Springs where five people were murdered and twenty-five were injured in November of last year. Cellphone footage of the drag charity event captures right-wing protestors waving swastika flags, chanting "pedophiles get the rope," and "Weimar conditions, Weimar solutions"—a reference to Nazi ascendancy over the Weimar reform period in Germany.<sup>11</sup> A friend who attends a counter-protest event reaches out through a Discord channel and asks, *What can anti-fascist organizing look like in a period of escalating violence?* This is a fitting question. The far-Right is more dangerously emboldened than at any other period in my lifetime; nevertheless, extralegal violence has always been central to the containment and castigation of black bodies, brown bodies, queer bodies, nobodies. Like the masked protestors in Akron, when CeCe's attacker lunged at her eleven years ago, he was also decorated in Nazi iconography—a four-inch swastika tattooed across his chest.

Reflecting on these scenes, I am reminded that extralegal violence has been foundational to American settler colonialism—that pioneer vigilantes sought to impose order

on newly settled frontier lands; that post-civil war vigilantes sought to reestablish de facto property rights over newly emancipated slaves, and that animated by anxieties over neoliberal decline, twenty-first-century vigilantes seek to rehabilitate the supremacy of the white and white adjacent American family. In "The History of Vigilantism in America," Richard Maxwell Brown notes that vigilantes are concerned with policing both geographic and behavioral boundaries, often using extralegal violence to do so.<sup>12</sup> Queer bodies know this all too well. According to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, "LGBT people are nearly four times more likely . . . to experience violent victimization, including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated or simple assault."<sup>13</sup> Queer people are also more likely to experience both intimate violence and stranger violence.<sup>14</sup> As these statistics make clear when CeCe is attacked, it is because her Blackness and her queerness transgress the boundaries of post-colonial acceptability, or as CeCe puts it, "I guess [my] presence kind of offended them."<sup>15</sup>

### *Archives of Discipline*

No one can interpellate like the state.  
No other institution or entity  
can manufacture identity,  
can codify one's  
seemingly immutable being;  
birth certificates,  
marriage licenses,  
tax returns,  
all make legible  
the corporeal misdemeanors  
of those who don't belong  
or who sometimes belong.

## III. INTIMATE DISCIPLINE

The euphemism *intimate violence* lends a tenderness to the brutality of gender discipline that occurs between those known to one another. And yet, like vigilantism, it seeks to reimpose boundaries around acceptable gender-based behaviors resulting in both epistemic and physical violence. Here is a story I cannot stop telling: Just months before Ricky dies, he is caught. Noticed by the swish of his hips, the flick of his wrist; shadows follow his wake. On a warm evening, he emerges from behind the yellowed windows of a night class, and he is attacked for the first time. His ribs buckle, his eyes swell, and in the days that follow, protest sweeps the campus. It is a May afternoon when students gather on the grassy lawn outside of Buley Library. Some hold signs that read *hate is not welcome here*; others gather in small groups to hold hands. Across the quad, a collection of police officers looks on. Long wooden batons dangle from their utility belts, and Ricky slips decisively through the tension, a bruise spreading beneath one eye. He takes the megaphone in his palms. *No Justice*, he calls. *No Peace*, we answer.

Later that summer, Ricky is attacked a second time. Driving home from the nursing home where I work as a prep cook, a past professor calls me. I pick up the phone as I drive, sticky, hot, and covered in the sour smell of old food. She tells me, between sobs, that Ricky has gone. At the time, I am nineteen years old and just at the beginning of a

gender transition. Same-sex marriage is illegal in forty-nine states, and *Obergefell v. Hodges* will not appear before the Supreme Court for another nine years. *Time* magazine's "Transgender Tipping Point" is almost a decade in the future, and it is only six years since Mathew Shepard was tied to a barbed wire fence, beaten, and left to die in the cool Wyoming air.

The night that Ricky dies, he wears a halter top and miniskirt; local papers describe his assailant bashing his head against the steering wheel before throwing his body from the car. Witnesses tell of a dark green Honda pulling into Christ Temple Church before returning to the scene, where gunshots flash into the dawn.<sup>16</sup> It is 2004 and still possible to use fear of gay and trans people as a legal defense against murder in all fifty states.<sup>17</sup> Ricky's assailant, who has a documented "hatred for gay people" and who is later celebrated as "a faggot killer," is ultimately set free.<sup>18</sup> In life, I didn't know Ricky well. We shared a single class together and had he survived, he likely would have graduated the following year. But decades have passed and telling his story still ties me in knots. Bearing witness to the speed at which a queer life, a Black queer life, could be undone alters my worldview, sending me to search for new kinds of justice.

Aren Z. Aizura writes, trans citizenship requires "fading into the population . . . but also the imperative to be 'proper' in the eyes of the state: to reproduce, to find proper employment; to reorient one's different body into the flow of nationalized aspirations."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, comparing trans bodies to disabled bodies, Jasbir Puar writes, "Neoliberal mandates regarding productive, capacitated bodies entrain the trans body to recreate an abled body not only in terms of gender and sexuality but also in terms of economic productivity and economic development of national economy."<sup>20</sup> This kind of assimilation asks the trans body to bend into its cisgender correlative in exchange for a limited and precarious promise of safety—a safety Ricky was ultimately denied. For seventeen years I have pushed syringes full of testosterone into my thighs, the skin welting beneath. In 2010, I had my breasts removed during a summer spent drinking whiskey sodas from plastic straws to dull the pain. Six months ago, as the governor of Texas began defining gender-affirming care as a form of child abuse, a surgeon cut open my gums to fit masculinizing prosthetics against my chin and my cheeks. But I have been lucky; I have been passing.

#### IV. A WORLD ON FIRE

Ricky's story reminds me that the promise of neoliberal freedom runs only as far as the body can bend. Thus, while trans peoples' desire to pass must be respected and facilitated through access to robust gender-affirming care, the very logics of passing must also be decentered and destabilized, for to leave them intact allows the origins of harm to remain unabated. Writing about the medical technologies and resulting surveillance that make passing possible, Toby Beauchamp notes, "Concealing gender deviance is about much more than simply erasing transgender status . . . the primary purpose of medical transition is to rid oneself of any vestiges of non-normative gender: to withstand and evade any surveillance (whether

visual, auditory, social, or legal) that would reveal one's trans status."<sup>21</sup> The current wave of anti-trans legislation and escalation of vigilante violence present a context in which evading surveillance gains an urgent appeal, and yet a closeted life cannot guarantee refuge from such violence.

In celebration of the queer poet Susy Shock's affirmation "I claim: my right to be a monster/ let other be normal," Joseph Peirce insists on an alternative trajectory—one that acknowledges the limitations of multicultural inclusion and posits that an aesthetic and corporeal refusal "to adhere to normative parameters of multicultural inclusion and neoliberal sexual citizenship" become central to a queer resistance.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Susan Stryker's gender manifesto, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein" leans into the grotesque insisting, "I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face and redefine a life worth living."<sup>23</sup> In both invocations, monsterring refuses authorization through medical violence and medical surveillance; however, to resist the limitations afforded through neoliberal inclusion requires more than an aesthetic noncompliance. In other words, neither passing nor the refusal to pass offer a sufficient means of resisting the constellations of violence that discipline both Ricky and CeCe as they attempt to move through public space. In "Passing as Privileged" Daniel Silvermint offers, "The moral status of passing as privileged is complex . . . since passing allows victims to escape certain oppressive burdens."<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Jasbir Puar establishes the limitations of aesthetic refusal offering that resistance to passing often takes the form of "piecing," which in effect establishes an alternative and exaggerated trans aesthetic, one that might be considered equally commodified and neoliberalized. Importantly, Puar reminds readers that "The transnormative body of futurity that reflects neoliberal celebrations of flexibility and piecing remains an elusive reality for many."<sup>25</sup> Taken as a whole, these observations highlight the complexities that accompany the construction of the trans self, which further complicates the act of coming out.

Popular representation of the transgender narrative often centers on the moment of self-disclosure, but this reductive trope rests on the notion that there is a before and now an after. In a linguistic formulation that concedes ground to biological essentialists, trans subjects are "born into the wrong body" and as a corrective, they transition in an act that supplants the cisgender self with the transgender self. The self is reborn or made anew, severing the "dead-named" former self from its present embodiment. And yet, this simplification erases the dialectical unfolding of being. There is no before just as there is no after. The self composes in present perfect: I have not come out, but I have been coming out. I have not transitioned, but I have been transitioning. Passing is not passive. The choice to move against it must continually be renewed. In transitioning, I learn to speak in a language that was kept from me at birth, to conjugate new forms of myself, and to code as male. The right constellation of signs enables me to move about undetected, and yet this constellation shines too dimly to reveal my trans multiplicity.

\* \* \*

2019, fifteen years after Ricky loses his life and eight years after CeCe saves her own, I come out (again)—this time in the form of an open letter. I choose this form because written words approximate a permanence that verbal disclosure cannot. The letter, addressed to my former high school students, is posted to a social media account on the tenth annual Trans Day of Visibility. “It is my wish,” I confess, “that you see me and accept me not in spite of my transgender identity but also because of it. At the same time, I challenge myself to more fully see you. It is only through this mutual acknowledgment and affirmation that any hope for a better world is possible.”<sup>26</sup> I sign off, “Your teacher, your friend,” and hold my breath for what may come. In the days that follow, I receive hundreds of public messages in support and thanks. However, despite this encouragement, fear takes hold. There is a long history of queer erasure from the classroom and though I no longer work in a K-12 setting, the city, where I taught twelfth-grade English for just shy of a decade and where I now teach community college, has long been my home.

A few days after my public disclosure, I find myself stretched over a weight bench in a big box gym not far from the high school where I used to work. Brightly colored fans pump overhead and the smell of sweat mingles with the air. I rack the bar loading 45 lb. plates on either end and lie across the bench squinting up at the fluorescent lights. I arch my back, tighten my grip, and lift off. Breathing in, I lower the bar to my chest. Breathing out, I press it into the air. When the set is complete, I re-rack the bar overhead, and, in my periphery, I feel the presence of a body that is not my own. From where I lie two former students tower over me crowding out the lights overhead. In comparison, my small stature is clownish. Breath catches in my throat. This is it, I think, the anticipated moment of judgment. I steel myself for the invasive questions that may follow. No doubt, the boys have seen the post as hundreds of their classmates shared comments in response. After a beat, a hand reaches for mine. I grasp it and pivot to a seated position. “Can we work out with you?” they ask, offering knuckles to bump.

On either side of me, benches remain unoccupied, but I nod in agreement and the three of us enter into a kind of masculinized communion. Often, boys love quietly; still, the meaning is felt. We talk about form and athleticism and where we feel the tension in our bodies—getting close but never invoking my recent disclosure. The whirl of the motorized fans churns overhead, and when Ty places his hand between my shoulder blades to instruct my posture, the touch of his palm tells me that nothing of consequence has changed. In fact, my disclosure has opened the door for a kind of sacramental affection. In *Cruising Utopia*, Jose Estaban Munoz writes, “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”<sup>27</sup> This moment, in this gym, with these boys exceeds warm illumination, and for this instant, we are better versions of ourselves. Queerness is a relationality; it is a refusal of the atomized neoliberal constructions that ask us to distrust those not immediately like ourselves. To move queerly is to unbutton capitalism’s expectations, which in itself, is a revolutionary gesture.

## V. FELLOWSHIP AND RESISTANCE

While wistful imaginings of queer futurity may unbutton capitalism’s expectations, these imaginings are neither enough to unravel capitalism itself nor enough to undo its prevailing harms; consequently, we must learn to move from gesture to embodiment. The stakes are enormous. Our moment is one of accumulated trauma. Even in the American context, the very center of post-colonial imperialism and Western hegemony, generalized want runs deep: food insecurity, homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health crises abound. All of these crises have been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting years of economic instability. Yet even before the pandemic, decades of neoliberal disinvestment from public goods has placed an untenable strain on the family, and this reality combined with aging workforce demographics is forcing an impasse. Neoliberal logics, having already cut to the bone, cannot offer a solution through restructuring and privatization. At the same time, prevailing wisdom is yet to accept that sustaining working families will require greater financial investment by the state. It is at this impasse that the regimenting of gender becomes all the more necessary based on the logics of capital and its increased need for both the productive and reproductive laboring of racialized and gendered bodies.

This crisis of productive and social reproductive capacity requires that capitalist logics attempt to assert greater control over our bodies generally, and this has resulted in a reissuing or tightening of definitions around what kinds of bodies fit into what kinds of categories. Renewed attacks on access to reproductive health care have attempted to redefine the pregnant body. This is evidenced by the 2022 explosion of state restrictions to abortion access, which ultimately preceded the direct overturning of *Roe*. Similarly, an attempt to redefine the child’s body is underway. Efforts to shift its legal categorization from eighteen to twenty-one to twenty-five seek to prevent trans youth from accessing gender-affirming care. Historically, Black and Brown children have experienced this redefinition in relation to sentencing laws, as youth of color are often sentenced using adult criteria. In fact, according to the Campaign for Youth Justice, “In 2014, Black youth were 14% of the youth population nationally, but 52.5% of the youth transferred to adult court by juvenile court judges.”<sup>28</sup> That the present moment insists on a renewal of boundaries to contain citizen bodies, gendered bodies, athletic bodies, becomes a process by which each of our bodies risks classification as a criminal body. In this context, what methods to reclaim the validity of our skin, our hair, our sex remain?

Listening to the words of Angela Davis, I am reminded that the present political reaction in response to transgender-affirming care is not only compelled by backlash to a human rights framework but is also concerned with creating and sustaining the conditions for criminality. As such, our resistance to the backlash must operate in a register both in and beyond that of liberal human rights. Again, trans access to social and physical transitions must not only be protected but also expanded. At the same time if we are to understand the origins of trans oppression as situated within a broader matrix of exploitative logics, then we must widen our emancipatory visions. When Davis observes



that “the trans community is showing us the way” and “if it is possible to challenge the gender binary, then we can certainly, effectively, resist prisons and jails, and police” she seemingly anticipates the profound political reaction to both the George Floyd uprisings and the social and cultural advances made by queer and trans people over the past several decades.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, if our opponents recognize this queer and abolitionist kinship, so must we.

I have come to understand that abolitionist praxis begins in the material now, seeking to undo present harms while also reserving space for the imaginative work of conjuring Black, Brown, poor, and queer futures. Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us that criminality is manufactured and that the presence “of vital systems of support” renders criminality obsolete. Without criminality the process of categorization loses its coercive power, allowing new forms of the self to fall within our reach. Gilmore notes that “abolitionists ask how we resolve inequalities and get people the resources they need.”<sup>30</sup> Echoing Gilmore’s call for systems of vital support, transgender Marxist Jules Joanne Gleeson insists that “Neither a legalistic nor reform-minded approach can achieve full trans liberation” because “the intense suffering faced by trans women [and trans people generally] does not find its origins in civic disempowerment or social “illegibility alone.”<sup>31</sup> Gleeson warns that although trans “networks of mutual support and solidarity” often provide life-saving care work, these networks “reach their [emancipatory] limit” in that they usually “serve to supplant the work done by the heterosexual family, not replace it.”<sup>32</sup> And while care work cannot be replaced altogether, it can be supported through state-funded welfare programs and the support for public goods. Taking Gilmore and Gleeson’s lead, I want to assert that resistance to the legislative, carceral, intimate, and extralegal violences that queer and trans people experience requires a commitment to a wider liberatory trans praxis—one that not only invokes queer liberation, but also centers progressive tax reform, state-funded health care, childcare, and eldercare. These vital systems of support necessarily precede the bodily sovereignty of all people, trans and cis-bodied people alike. But wresting these resources from the state, and ultimately from the wealthy class, requires a political power we do not yet hold. Building this power necessitates that we embrace a brave new solidarity. Could it be that Ricky’s invocation of call and response; CeCe’s refusal of victimization; two teenage boys’ gestures of beauty suggest that in places, we are already on the way?

Let’s hope  
Together;  
The alternative,  
is ugly.

My brother is six or seven, younger maybe. Dark hair hangs evenly across his face; bangs cut square over beady eyes—narrow and comical. We are in the driveway spinning in circles. He has pressed himself into the tulle-lined ballerina costume my mother purchased for a dance recital decades before doctors helped me change my sex and I became male. The dress is teal blue. It is the blue of artificial flavoring, soft drinks, cotton candy, the shade of the sky in a child’s drawing. We are spinning, spinning, spinning. Our arms stretch overhead and we laugh at the sky. Silver

sequins are sewn into the breast of the garment; they glitter in the afternoon light and illuminate my brother’s smile. How sure we are of ourselves; how noble we are in our play, but nobility lacks permanence and childhood gives way.

When the garage door groans open, a neighbor, a teenage boy, steps out into the sunlight and calls my brother *faggot*, we each feel a shame neither of us knew existed.

But this shame can be resisted. Indeed, discriminatory legislation can be resisted; both state violence and intimate violence can be resisted; prisons, jails, and police can be resisted. If we come to view our queer bodies through a political economic lens instead of a human rights grievance, we become better positioned to respond to the backlash and to reach for new kinds of justice.

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## Loving Trans into Possible: t4t As Transpollinatory Praxis

Cavar  
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### ENCOUNTER

September, 2020. A new friend and I sit on opposite edges of a park bench in Davis, California. We both face forward as we speak to each other, squinting into smoky air. We try not to cross breaths. A week prior, I had posted to several dating apps that I was searching for friends in the area. For several hours, despite the smoke, we speak a small space of public intimacy.

Our space is once, briefly, punctured: a young man laughs, asks "which is which?" (I reply: "take your pick!"), and for several minutes pontificates (it seems) on the coming Rapture and assured existence of aliens, before bidding us an amiable goodbye.

Though we laugh as he wanders off, we're startled. I am aware of who we appear to be: queers on a date, though neither of us used this language to describe our encounter. Yet, here we are, on a trajectory without a simple name, one animated and undergirded by the place our genders touch. When Sam and I finally rise and express our shared longing to hug goodbye, we each carry with us something of the other. I carry the seed of these words.

We took a risk in meeting. Our encounter was public and it was intimate; we were strangers to each other whose shared *trans*—a thing held between our bodyminds and masked mouths—necessarily deestranged us. We spoke as loudly and unreservedly about our shared *trans* as picnicking students nearby did about the perils of Zoom. We talked about sex. Genitals. Surgeries. Even our parents. In our speech and in our silences, too, we engaged in a shared act of *witnessing*—from the moment Sam and I swiped right on each other (her bio: "trans; neuroqueer," mine: "genderless; disability justice and Mad studies" to the awkward, masked, two-way scavenger hunt we performed—all in the name of "t4t," an erotic configuration that emerged with and through the "trans technology" of Craigslist.<sup>1</sup>

In *Future Fatigue: Trans Intimacies and Trans Presents* (or *How to Survive the Interregnum*) Hil Malatino aims "to develop relational ways of witnessing and perceiving trans and gender-variant bodies regardless of their relation to, positioning within, or investment in medicalized teleologies of transition."<sup>2</sup> That is, trans subjectivity is divorced from an imagined state of individualized, exceptional, and pathological gender crisis. Following Crawford's (2008) and Sullivan's (2006) trans engagements with Deleuze and Guattari's *becoming*, Malatino illustrates the possibility of inherently conflictual, temporally tousel, and queerly heterogeneous trans communities. Such communities, Malatino argues, provide a means of attending to trans difference without recourse to transnormative logics of "post-transition ease."<sup>3</sup> Malatino resists "trans folk" a static, "abstract and overcoded monolith," one whose racial, geographic, class, and other particularities are routinely obscured, in favor of a "t4t praxis of love."<sup>4</sup> Like Lorde's (1984) conception of the erotic as a shared *sensational* project, one of feeling with- and across recognized difference that subsumes and destabilizes typical understandings of "solidarity," Malatino's t4t praxis also refuses "a frictionless and easeful understanding of trans relationality" in favor of "small [and, implicitly, *plural* in form and genre] acts of love."<sup>5</sup> When Malatino and Lorde speak of love, they speak of movement(s), intimacies beyond dyadic engagement, beyond platonic/romantic binaries, and toward community with similarly different others. It catches and catches-on.

During those minutes in the park, we bore shared witness, shared fear, through a dozen tiny looks and gestures. I sensed with her the acute, heightened fear not only of verbal harassment but of transmisogynistic physical violence. I was conscious that she likely would not have been "clocked" at all in the absence of my own ambiguous presentation, but that we were nonetheless in danger when placed side by side. We were not discrete trans individuals engaging, but instead emerging, *trans*, from a relationality

and proximity. We might be considered nodes engaging *amidst* a shared becoming-trans.<sup>6</sup> Assemblage rather than event; relation, rather than content alone: our bodyminds do not independently bring “trans” to the proverbial table, but *tranifest*<sup>7</sup> in concert.<sup>8</sup> We became visibly-trans in each other’s presence. We co-emerged as trans in our *t4t intra-action*,<sup>9</sup> our little two-person (en)counter slipping evermore toward its -public.

New materialist theorists like Rosi Braidotti have argued for an understanding of subjectivity that refuses the discrete, individual bodymind in favor of “assemblages that flow across and displace . . . binaries.”<sup>10</sup> This framing illuminates contemporary and historical fears of queer, and particularly trans, social contagion discourse, whose gatekeeping, censorious impacts, and possibilities for reclamation I will address later in this article. If “distinct entities do not precede [their] relations, but rather emerge through their intra-action,”<sup>11</sup> we might understand both a given gendered status, and/as one’s status as a trans person, is not an inevitable embodyable truth but the result of nature, through continued acts of witnessing, “making itself known.”<sup>12</sup> *To witness*, an infinitive. A verb is process to be shared-in, and conjugation necessitates more-than-one, of recognizing multiple perspectives, knowledges, and experiences. Witnessing, as Lugones notes, is part and parcel of the project of “world”-traveling.<sup>13</sup> Here, we share intimacies not by spectating on others’ realities, but by entering<sup>14</sup> them: the lines between loving, seeing, and becoming(-like) fuzz and blur.

I collect these messy movements under the term *pollination*,<sup>15</sup> a concept I trace both to grassroots organizing and tie with developments in New Materialisms,<sup>16</sup> neuroqueer epistemologies and *cripistemologies*,<sup>17</sup> and transfeminisms.<sup>18</sup> I borrow the term itself from Bay Area organization The Pollinators, whose core mission is inter-community social and skill-exchange, “straddl[ing]” divides between queer community and mainstream culture.<sup>19</sup> This is not an argument for the ecological process of pollination as *inherently* trans. Rather, I am grounding my analysis in the definition provided in “The Pollinator’s Toolbox” by Cleo Woelfle-Erskine and Andrea Maybelline Danger:

1. [A]ny insect or animal that deposits pollen gathered from the stamen of a plant to the pistil (often of another plant), fertilizing the flower in the process; 2. any person, of the queer variety, who travels from place to place depositing information gathered from previous locales, fertilizing ideas as it goes.<sup>20</sup>

A pollinator is not only a world-maker but a coalition-realizer; I refer here to Edelman’s understanding of coalitions as dynamically producing (in this case, trans) political projects through collective labor, rather than simply facilitating care between pre-existing subjects.<sup>21</sup> So too is a pollinator a skilled user of love as relational-innovation—love as a verb that *makes* trans happen. A pollinator seeds trans-temporally and cross-spatially, bringing information to the unlikely<sup>22</sup> (the Pollinators found themselves “enter[ing] the mainstream to share [queer and trans] survival skills”) and untimeliest (between the queer and the normative,

the past and the possible, they are perpetually precarious “straddlers” of spacetime).<sup>23</sup> Thus, the project of pollination does not only bring together like-minded others, familiar-strangers, but *makes* subjects in relation. Such a reconceptualization of queer and trans relationalities, routinely cast as unmanageable vectors of contagion, pollution, and even death, not only pays homage to the innovation of the Pollinators’ collective, but it describes a critical mode of *t4t* praxis. It acknowledges *trans* as a “crip feeling,”<sup>24</sup> an awakener of anxieties around threats to the normative bodymind—and Otherwise possibilities. It is in these quiet, *t4t* pockets—these quiet, shared opacities through which we trans—that we love our(shared)selves *into possible*.

*Trans catches*. We carry it, locating the best grounds for “transplant[ation].”<sup>25</sup> Below, I follow<sup>26</sup> and pair Barad’s concept of *intra-action* with *t4t*, at first an initialism borrowed from the since-shuttered *Personals* section of craigslist, a long-derided “queer counterpublic” bathed in familiar rhetorics of risk, illegality, and dis(/)ease.<sup>27</sup> While directed at least somewhat specifically at *Personals* (at the notion of finding a sexual partner anonymously, and online), the language of contagion has commenced its own sinister circulation among anti-trans reactionaries, many of whom explicitly take up the tired “social-contagion” models of anorexia, suicide, and self-injury of moral panics past. In the wake of growing medical, legal, and interpersonal attacks on trans life, I argue, the accusation of “contagion” is particularly open to retheorization. That is, I refuse to disavow the sheer catchiness of *t* out of a vain (in both senses of the word) bid for respectability. I have shared *t*’s irresistible taste with many a lover. I anticipate many more. Trans is a thing we make together; we make each other / trans. No one is immune.

## THE AD

haha being nonbinary isnt a contagious disease  
silly haha anyway **come closer**

– Irvu, 2020 [emphasis in original]<sup>28</sup>

Originating on craigslist in the early 2000s, the initialism *t4t* originally signified a trans person explicitly, and usually anonymously, looking for a trans sexual partner.<sup>29</sup> While *t4t* relationships and personal ads, yet-unnamed as such, long predate the Internet, the arrival of the online ad and widening circulation of trans terminology quickly conferred a visible link between them. Today’s ad-induced panics resemble the well-worn tropes of social and physiological contagion that rendered HIV-positive people as deadly threats to the individual and national body, targeting queer(ed), racialized, poor, and disabled bodyminds as stigmatized Others to be barred from social life.<sup>30</sup> This stigma, Lingel notes in *An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of craigslist*, is cyclical: “with quirky, kinky, or queer desires getting significant attention, reinforcing craigslist’s reputation as a hub for sensational ads and deviant people.”<sup>31</sup> It has been recycled and amplified with the emergence of SESA/FOSTA and crackdowns on sex workers by PayPal and Venmo.<sup>32</sup> Talk of contamination, linked to the specter of dangerous sexuality in a new

and hard-to-govern virtual space, coalesced around “t”-related posts.<sup>33</sup> More than individually soliciting sex, these posts indicated larger sexual counterpublics,<sup>34</sup> whose queerness included not only LGBTQ+ people but others queerly rendered beneath a white supremacist, anti-sex worker, cisheteronormative regime.<sup>35</sup> Emergent and risky cyberspaces, to paraphrase Bornstein, posed a *queer and pleasant danger* to the unsuspecting browser, a familiar threat to white feminized virtue invoked by reactionary radical feminists and their allies on the Christian Right<sup>36</sup> and came to symbolize both container and substance of contagion.

As awareness of the ads increased, news coverage of craigslist grew saturated with contamination-discourse: as one headline put it, the site needed a “clean-up.”<sup>37</sup> News coverage stoked fears of “sexual depravity and financial fraud” even after the passing of SESA/FOSTA and subsequent removal of its “Adult Services” section.<sup>38</sup> In a telling 2013 Slate article, *Why Is Craigslist So Popular Among Creepy Murderers?* Justin Peters partially attributes craigslist crime (whose preponderance of nonsexual financial scams he does not attend to) to its “mostly free to use . . . mostly anonymous” setup. Weaponizing the “normalizing gaze of journalism,”<sup>39</sup> Peters instead links unrelated crime and sexual predation to prove craigslist a “creepy,” “dangerous” platform.<sup>40</sup> He invokes an example of the admittedly rare craigslist homicide (itself also not the result of an ad soliciting sex) to warn readers that anonymous sex ads constitute “catnip for the aspiring psychopath [and] spell trouble for the *aspiring libertine*” [emphasis mine], a term that, particularly post-AIDS crisis, carries antigay connotations.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of intention, such articles invoke long-held notions of sickness as “endemic to the queer [and trans]<sup>42</sup> body,”<sup>43</sup> and of libertine *degeneracy* as a contagion—whether online or in a public restroom—and threat to “good clean fun.”<sup>44</sup>

Trans and gender non-conforming bodyminds have long proven, and continue to prove, fodder for moral panics,<sup>45</sup> particularly given growing transnormative perceptions of trans subjectivity as diagnosable and even “curable”—shapeable into legible, productive, sane, and abled national citizen—through biomedical intervention.<sup>46</sup> “Curable” cases are framed as few and definite, casting those qualified as “truly” trans in contrast to *trenders*, whose identities are—to use craigslist’s terminology—*unvetted*, and who are frequently themselves figured as disabled or Mad so as to disqualify them from true-trans identity.<sup>47</sup> Refusal to recognize certain genres of transness—and fears of the spectral “faker,” who Fisher suggests participates in a secondary counterpublic against both cis and normative trans communities<sup>48</sup>—are rooted in anxieties over autonomy in trans-declaration and trans-practice, particularly (though not exclusively) among youth.<sup>49</sup> In such autonomy rests the possibility that one’s trans might defy, non-comply, and roguely replicate itself, spawning new shapes. And indeed, despite the potentially unwanted homogeneity conjured by “t,” the term provided a generous, generative alcove under which users could reinvent themselves through a shared *sense*<sup>50</sup> of trans. While the original initialism *t4t* may have presupposed an existing “t” subject, it left a window open. The trans pollinator (mis)fits<sup>51</sup> through the crack, seeding as

they go, expanding possibilities beyond those designed by and for cis people. Counterpublics like craigslist are venues of mutual recognition, a kind of digital “trap door” through which we can fall, into relationships and toward newfound ways of knowing and being.<sup>52</sup>

Today, works like Littman’s<sup>53</sup> widely discredited article on “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” name *trans* as a “psychic epidemic” afflicting youth predisposed to “mental illness,”<sup>54</sup> both a physiological threat and a viral media contagion. Littman cites “excessive use” of Tumblr<sup>55</sup> and YouTube, both of which have raised scholarly interest as sites of trans-affirming public scholarship, as primary sources of illicit gender exploration, as well as political coming-to-consciousness.<sup>56</sup> Central among the “behaviors” Littman attributes to trans youth are withdrawal from, and identification of transphobia among, their parents, as well as “defend[ing] the practice of lying to or *withholding information from* therapists or doctors in order to obtain hormones for transition more quickly” [emphasis mine].<sup>57</sup> This is a thread common to discourses of trans sex, access to biomedical transition, and other forms of trans connectivity: *t* is difficult for cis eyes to detect until “too late.” As in the case of anxieties around public/digital sexuality, the unauthorized practice of *trans* is in itself pathological, especially in the presence of real or figurative Children, impressionable by a “dangerous” queerness.<sup>58</sup> Amid demands to evidence our legitimacy through body parts, narratives, and/or medical records, the “true” trans bodymind has long been *made by the cis gaze*.<sup>59</sup> Given demands to evidence ourselves to cis gatekeepers in order to earn trans legitimacy, to publicly make oneself / trans, and to facilitate *t* in others is only further evidence of danger.

“Contamination” discourses were not animated by a litany of known risks and consequences, isolable to individual trans bodies or objects. Rather, following Barad’s intervention in “Posthuman Performativity,” (*t*)*rans* is unknowable and infinitely possible until it comes into being through reinventive intra-actions, “infections” that, in this case, are local to the internet and often anonymous.<sup>60</sup> Forums like craigslist became worthy of fear as venues of emergent trans possibility, signs, as in the case of the HIV/AIDS crisis, of a queerness perpetually in need of surveillance and containment so as to avert a murderous, future-foreclosing, and anonymous spread.<sup>61</sup> Identificatory and presentational fluidity indicate riskiness, with reporter Jackson West<sup>62</sup> describing post-crackdown sex workers, a large number of whom are affected by transmisogyny<sup>63</sup> as “just putting on a new coat of makeup” before returning to the job. This has only been reenforced by the use of “trans panic” defenses (banned in eleven states, with more pending as of 2020, according to the Movement Advancement Project) by murderers of trans women.<sup>64</sup> Trans(/)sexuality becomes illicit unless seen, named, and supervised by parent, doctor, or website admin—specifically, until its performative possibilities could be prefigured through a cisnormative framework, its ontological unruliness managed. Anonymous sexual connections—connections that so happened to be queer and queered—are (web) sites with infectious potential, especially if left unwatched; indeed, sites are agents in their own right, part of a dynamic



assemblage in which it can “generate *transformations*” [emphasis mine].<sup>65</sup> I think t4t along these uncertainties, embracing generative trans possibility as pollination, not contagion.

I subsequently depart from the spatial, temporal, and sexual specificity of craigslist and other online personal ads. That said, make no mistake: t4t first was, and remains, about fucking. It isn’t only about fucking gender, fucking convention, fucking (up) (d/c)iscourses, or fucking around with hyphens, backslashes, and parentheses. While I expand upon its possible usages below, I remain faithful to t4t as a site of sexual intimacy and pleasure for trans people (or, as we will discuss, people who via some enactment of t4t collectively realize *trans* into being), feeling neither need nor desire to remove the term from its sexual origins. t4t fucks us as only we know how. We map upon each other’s bodyminds a recognition that does not result from, but rather, itself *produces* t4t possibility. Without visceral acts of queer (re)creation, no part of this work (its author included) would exist. “Surely,” bell hooks writes in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, “our desire for radical social change is intimately linked to our ability to experience pleasure, erotic fulfillment, and a host of other passions.”<sup>66</sup> My conception of t4t as transpollinatory praxis highlights the necessity not just of bringing together “individual” pleasure and collective resistance, but considering them to be always-already entangled.

## RECOGNITION

im not cisphobic some of my best friends were cis  
when i met them

—@AuntieLumb, 2021<sup>67</sup>

My first relationship was t4t, though I didn’t know it at first. When we met, my then-partner, Elliot, who remains a beloved chosen-family member to this day, did not yet know they were trans.<sup>68</sup> We were sixteen. I was using the term “genderfluid” at the time, though only on social media, claiming my “t” digitally. After several months of friendship, we began dating long-distance. I eagerly shared information gleaned from an expansive network of trans Tumblr bloggers, and later, from scavenged academic sources I still struggled to comprehend.

Their curiosity grew personal. Soon, they switched to they/ them pronouns and tried several new names. We spoke, daily, for hours at a time; I felt seen in ways I had not felt before, accompanied in a rejection of the cisness I had known. I felt my trans sharpen in coalition, a word derived from the same root as “coalesce”: *coalescere*, or “grow together.”<sup>69</sup>

Elliot and I ultimately dated for two separate periods of time, until identity shifts moved our relationship to a different register. Where they had once felt uncomfortable with, and even unworthy of, membership to the category “trans,” they came to reject cisness wholeheartedly. I had moved toward lesbian identity; Elliot was no longer comfortable as an object of lesbian desire. Our orientations were formed and re-formed through these processes of gender-

transformation, our emergent trans selves taking shape with the manifestation of our desires.<sup>70</sup> As they *boyed*, my felt sense of connection with, and orientation toward, them shifted. Our shared access to trans knowledge—and to each other as conduits of this knowledge—influenced the queer paths our desire lines could take.<sup>71</sup> Equally, our orientations continuously changed and complicated with each day we lived our trans.

At first glance, I could frame our relationship this way: we learned to love each other in new ways, ways that upheld the veracity of our respective emergent identities. In this figuration, however, experiences of transness are framed as individual, taking place within our respective bodyminds and independent of our relationships to each other. Such an essentialist approach, necessarily bound to transnormative medico-legal discourse,<sup>72</sup> obfuscates fundamental aspects of our entangled histories and trans movements, movements “across” that, like queer, “[do] not reside in a body or object, and [are] dependent on the mutuality of support.”<sup>73</sup> As previously indicated, we were and are not *trans individuals*,<sup>74</sup> whose shared attraction was a mere matter of two people with discrete sexual identities. Rather, we are trans-in-relation, our *ts* collaborative links. Our trans forms in a process of *becoming with*, which Haraway links to the prepositional (“for”/“4”), the possible, and the queer against hegemonic understandings of gender.<sup>75</sup>

A transpollinatory praxis implies a transpollinatory epistemology, which works to deny authoritative bodies the privilege of our collaborative companionship, namely, because such institutional bodies seek not collaboration but control. A t4t alternative to institutional ways of knowing can be found in trans forms of *recognition*, which evade cis medical demands for both identificatory fixity and transparency. For Elliot and I, the process of trans pollination was one of recognition, of realizing and loving likeness. Our desires for each other were, equally, desires to share in the language-pollen we supplied each other in the process of “coming home,” and in sighting home we mapped lines of desire previously unavailable. Queercrip<sup>76</sup> scholars Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Ellery Russian describe this world-opening desire as the “lust of recognition.”<sup>77</sup> While Piepzna-Samarasinha and Russian use the term specifically in reference to connections between already-self-identified queercrips (a category which includes both Elliot and myself) such a lust can and does *inaugurate* new forms of similarity, in which tools of self-understanding, ever-multiplying, are passed along. Pollination, as The Pollinators note, loves queer (and/ as trans) into heretofore “straight” worlds, infusing them with the methodologies and aesthetics of transgression and (re)build ways of relating to one another.<sup>78</sup> As such, t4t pollination might be thought of not only as a relational praxis but also as a *cripistemological* approach: derived, as McRuer and Johnson<sup>79</sup> write, from the “backwoods” (in this case, increasingly censored queer digital spaces online<sup>80</sup> of knowledge-production, borne of a shared yearning for the trans publics we co-create.<sup>81</sup>

This model allows us to think through new technologies of what micha cárdenas calls *trans-realization*: a participatory, “empowering practice that can make life livable and

joyfully intensified.”<sup>82</sup> It also queers the relationships through which similar-difference, love, and lust can be realized. Through and in pursuit of trans counterpublics, I pollinated—relationally co-realized—Elliot’s trans without claiming authority over their identity, relational primacy, or consistent/normative romantic-sexual desire, or monopoly over their time. They, too, pollinated my growing understanding of what lesbianism looked like within my own genderless experience. To discuss such entanglements, we might engage language generated by the asexual and aromantic spectrum (a-spec) community, which constitutes a new, much-needed toolbox for realizing new genres of pollinatory desire and collaboration.<sup>83</sup> Rather than looking to the metaphoric violence of the “crush,” for example, we may turn to the “squish,” which trans, neuroqueer rhetorician M. Remi Yergeau describes as “a kind of leaning or longing [. . .] [that] might involve arousal, or fascination, or a kind of emotional or inter bodily turning toward—or none of these things at all.”<sup>84</sup> While there is not space here to elaborate on all possible intimacies between trans and a-spec politics, the squish is just one example of pollinatory recognition, reshapeable and eminently forgiving, that allow us to imagine new methods of loving trans into possible.

If “transness” is a matter of shared recognition amid mutual opacity, then a radical reclamation of trans, and of t4t, must involve a decision to recognize ourself/ves with and through our love for each other, and in and on our own terms. I have argued that it is with these acts of love that we can both affirm trans experience and inaugurate trans identification, wielding our warmth to fuck gender, to verb a “trans” between us. Not only this, but the process of pollinatory recognition constitutes a unique way of knowing, one always-already entangled with the practice of trans social and sexual life. As such, t4t confers the possibility not only of generating romantic-sexual-sensual pleasure between trans individuals, but serving as a gateway into trans (political, relational, erotic) alignment. The t4t poster seeks out their t; the t, hearing the call, comes.

## POLLINATION

trans love is so damn beautiful, we are all so different and together we can find such strength

—loyalmlm, 2021<sup>85</sup>

What am I talking about when I am talking about t4t? I am talking about long nights in bed, phone in hand; I’m talking about nighttime conversations on the floor of a friend’s dorm room; I’m talking about the genderwor(l)ds we make in these spaces of intimacy, where heretofore unspeakable questions become possible. I am talking about the internet, I am talking about the first time I saw a nonbinary person reach middle age. I am talking about my dining hall talks, multi-hour, coffee-laden events made of whispers and downward glances. *You don’t have to know what you are. But you do have to know that, even if you don’t know, you can be trans. You can be trans for any reason you want. In the meantime, I am with you.*

I am talking about pollination. The dandelion spoke to seed anew; the weed only grows from where another one had blown. I am talking about continuous movement, along lines of becoming, a collective, and literally *creative* process.<sup>86</sup> I also am talking about a project both generative and eminently resourceful: we generate trans possibilities out of what already matters / already-existing matter. We take the signifiers floating around us and, rather than capturing them with definitive names, view them together in a new light.

\* \* \*

At the time that I write this paragraph, the streets are turning yellow, both graveyards to their brittle leaves and repositories of fine, golden powder. I walk beside a pandemic-podmate, eagerly carving the contours of our respective childhoods, our journeys inside and outside and against and beyond gender. I listen as she recounts a litany of femme lesbian experiences that put the label “cis” to shame, and try—mask be damned—not to sneeze.

“It’s the season,” I tell my barista several days later, apologizing for my reddish eyes. Suppress a cough. “Everything’s blowing around.”

While chiefly concerned with The Pollinators’ definition of pollination, it is worth meditating for a moment on pollinators themselves. Critical to the growth of about 250,000 plant species, the category of “pollinator” can include animals, insects, water, wind, and gravity.<sup>87</sup> While some plants produce pollen light and dry enough to spread with the breeze I mention above, others’ pollen must be intentionally carried by pollinators like bees, who maintain often (though not always) mutualistic relationships—likened by some to marriages—with the flowers they visit.<sup>88</sup> Plants have evolved to possess traits (for example, a flower’s two bottom petals, called the keel), that facilitate pollinator interaction.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps most famous among these traits are the “deceptive” practices of the orchid:

[A] certain type of orchid, displaying similar physical and sensory characteristics to female wasps, lures male wasps into a strange sexual dance. The frustrated wasp moves from orchid to orchid, attempting copulation and, through this process, transfers pollen between plants. In this way, the wasp becomes part of the reproductive apparatus of the orchid and the orchid facilitates the sexual activity of the wasp.<sup>90</sup>

With the salutary “trickery” of the orchid in mind, I conclude with a return to the material reality of pollination to open up new avenues for becoming-trans.

T4t *becoming* is not only facilitated by, but made possible through, trans connection; that is, there is no t without its 4. Trans, as a “crip feeling,”<sup>91</sup> awakens collective anxieties around what heretofore-normative bodies can become; bodies becoming-trans remind us that no body has reached or will reach its final form, instead continuously, and oftentimes uncomfortably affecting and being affected, as was the case for Sam and I in the park. Elliot

and I fucked gender together, emerging into identities, worlds, and knowledges that necessarily exceeded and evaded cisnormative, transmedical restrictions: we were mutual pollinators, not patients. Having “caught” my t, they responded with their own, prompting my own gender-reconceptualization. We learned that if we had a desire to be transgender, we were transgender.<sup>92</sup> We co-constituted our identities within the context of our relationship, one grounded in love and continuous recognition, understanding trans not as a “thing” but a process, an art of love and act of becoming (only) possible together.

T4t was the tool with which we poked through the epistemological pavement of cisheterosexism, making space for hermeneutical justice<sup>93</sup> in an environment keen to mark trans subjectivity as artificial and grotesque, especially when chosen for reasons other than intolerable pain.<sup>94</sup> It also disrupts normative timelines of gender-discovery and “pre-” and “post-”transition (as I have attempted to do with the nonlinear narratives I present in this piece, which echo the nonlinearity with which I conceptualize my own trans<sup>95</sup>) emphasizing community entrance rather than individualized self-discovery. Such community entrance may or may not happen at the same time as one’s personal trans identification, meaning that the “overly-invested ally”—practitioner and receiver of t4t love—is always-already becoming-trans, even if not trans-identified themselves, just as the wasp is “becoming-orchid” and the orchid “becoming-wasp.”<sup>96</sup> In our coalitional counterpublics, perhaps encounterpublics, we agree to love and have-loved each other into possible, regardless of legibility to the cis gaze. Pollination is both a big-tent politic and a politic that blows out

from  
between  
the flaps.

In this article, I have encountered our collective impulse to frame the trans subject as unwilling victim—whether to dysphoria, social deception, or both—by framing trans subjects instead as beneficiaries of the epistemological and relational openings t provides. T4t comes to represent the openness and reciprocity such ways of knowing and relating offer: far from utopian or conflict-free, the transpollinatory praxis of t4t is nevertheless *generational*, creating worlds as it generates new desires, possibilities, and becomings. A pollinatory understanding of t4t facilitates community formation, affirming those already-t and “broaden[s] the joining,” for new ts.<sup>97</sup> Even by acknowledging that trans- catches, and framing its spread as pollination and not contagion, we may *disidentify*<sup>98</sup> with trans-as-viral &&&<sup>99</sup> pollinate new possibilities. These include understanding trans as an affinity and a creative project, albeit one rife with difficulties and unresolvable contradictions; a deliberate break with cis epistemologies and ways of life. Pollination isn’t a bug (but a feature!): it renders plural and open-ended trans ways-of-life rather than circumscribed results of individual or social pathology. As Laboria Cuboniks celebrates “contamination” as a “mutational driver” between lived realities (and in pursuit of new ones),<sup>100</sup> I celebrate contagion/pollination for its ability to t our lives.

Within cis fears of contagious dysphoria lies a truth of trans love: it is not limited to those deemed born-this-way, dysphoric-all-along, no-other-choice. A direction, orientation, and a becoming, trans life can be made anywhere, and made deliberately. What might these ways of life, attuned to internal difference with an eye toward solidarity, look like? Pollinatory methodology shows that t4t as a relational praxis is not simply broadened or sustained but *made* in the joining, in the process of bearing loving witness to another’s emergent community-identification. Just as the joining process is continuous, the new lifeways we embark on are ever in flux. The ways we, to paraphrase Malatino, *survive the interregnum*, grow more numerous as we do, evading the textual capture any quarterly journal promises. Instead, I suggest, we continue to live into the ways of life we so desperately seek to pin. By transmuting contagion to pollination, we might radically democratize access to “trans” as something we do /

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#### NOTES

1. Oliver L. Haimson, Avery Dame-Griff, Elias Capello, and Zahari Richter, “Tumblr Was a Trans Technology: The Meaning, Importance, History, and Future of Trans Technologies,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 3 (2021): 345–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1678505>.
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3. Malatino, “Future Fatigue,” 656.
4. Malatino, “Future Fatigue,” 656–57.
5. Malatino, “Future Fatigue,” 656.
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8. Jasbir Puar, “‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 49–66.
9. Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.
10. Rosi Braidotti, “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 36, no. 6 (2019): 31–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486>.
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12. Courtney Susalka, “Mattering Beyond the Binary: A Baradian Posthumanist Intervention to the Western Conceptualisation of Normative Transgender Embodiment,” (Thesis, Urtecht University, 2020), 29.
13. María Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19.

14. They knock on my dorm room door, tell me "it's she/they" now once I've closed it behind them. The gender talks are in our rooms by salt-lamp light, and occasionally in essay-length texts.
15. Throughout this piece, when referring to "pollination," I follow the definition provided by The Pollinators, which refers only to cross-pollination. Trans self-pollination is an area ripe for future scholarship.
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20. Woelfe-Erskine and Danger, "The Pollinators' Toolbox," 263.
21. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2004), 118–19.
22. That is not to discount the pollinators' intentionality of movement. "[I]f a bee cruises a flower it's no accident," wrote Willa Smart, on the question of unlikelyness, personal communication, 2021.
23. Woelfe-Erskine and Danger, "The Pollinators' Toolbox," 264; 272.
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25. Woelfe-Erskine and Danger, "The Pollinators' Toolbox," 269.
26. Susalka, "Mattering Beyond the Binary."
27. Jessa Lingel, *An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of Craigslist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Chelsea Reynolds, "'Craigslist Is Nothing More Than an Internet Brothel': Sex Work and Sex Trafficking in US Newspaper Coverage of Craigslist Sex Forums," *The Journal of Sex Research* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2020.1786662>.
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31. Lingel, *An Internet for the People*, 116–17.
32. Lala Holston-Zannell, "PayPal and Venmo are Shutting Out Sex Workers, Putting Lives and Livelihoods at Risk," *ACLU News and Commentary*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.aclu.org/news/lgbtq-rights/paypal-and-venmo-are-shutting-out-sex-workers-putting-lives-and-livelihoods-at-risk/>.
33. Lingel, *An Internet for the People*, 117.
34. Lingel, *An Internet for the People*.
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45. Koyama, *Transfeminism*, 23–25; Sally Hines, "Sex Wars and (Trans) Gender Panics: Identity and Body Politics in Contemporary UK Feminism," *The Sociological Review Monographs* 68, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120934684>.
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47. See Sarah Cavar and Alexandre Baril, "Blogging to Counter Epistemic Injustice: Trans Disabled Digital Micro-Resistance," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2021); Jake Pyne, "Autistic Disruptions, Trans Temporalities: A Narrative 'Trap Door' in Time," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021): 343–61; and Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*.
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56. Littman, "Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents and Young Adults," 2.
57. Littman, "Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents and Young Adults," 23.
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66. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 13.
67. (@Lumb\_PDX), "im not cisphobic some of my best friends were cis when I met them," *Twitter*, May 14, 2021.
68. I use "did not yet know" not to reinforce the "born this way" trope, but rather to signal an understanding of one's existence as trans for some period before the term was available. In contrast, when I refer to my own life, I use the phrase "was not yet" trans, to convey most accurately that my emergence as a trans person was not so much a coming-out but an identity-movement. Both of our respective conceptions of personal trans subjectivity can and do exist harmoniously, and among those of infinitely-many others.
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71. Ahmed, "Orientations," 570.
72. Dean Spade, "Resisting Medicine, Re/Modeling Gender," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 18 (2003): 15–37, <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38NK3645G>; Evan Vipond, "Resisting Transnormativity: Challenging the Medicalization and Regulation of Trans Bodies," *Theory in Action* 8, no. 2 (2015): 21–44, <https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.15008>.
73. Sara Ahmed [original author], *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 170, quoted in M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: Rhetorics of Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 182.
74. Willa Smart: "If the bee is the emblematic pollinator, it is appropriate that the beehive is as well an emblem of collectivity," personal communication, 2021.
75. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
76. See A. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
77. Mingus, *Crip Sex*.
78. Woelfle-Erskine and Danger, "The Pollinators' Toolbox," in *That's Revolting!* 269.
79. Johnson and McRuer, "Introduction: Cripistemologies and the Mas-turbating Girl," 128.
80. See Claire Goforth, "Why the Stop Internet Sexual Exploitation Act Could Be the End of Internet Porn," *Daily Dot*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/sisea-internet-porn/>; and Mia, "The Failures of SESTA/FOSTA."
81. hooks, *Yearning*, 13.
82. Zach Blas, "Reality Is Aesthetic and Political: Editor's Preface," in *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities*, ed. Zach Blas and Wolfgang Schirmacher (New York: Atropos Press, 2011), 16.
83. Though, as Ulysses Bougie notes, "a-spec language at least attempts to go beyond these a bit, as well, to try to find the erotic in a lack of any collaboration, romantic or sexual or platonic or otherwise," personal communication, 2021.
84. Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 188.
85. loyalmlm, *Tumblr*, July 9, 2021, <https://loyalmlm.tumblr.com/post/656251096540561408/>.
86. Stark and Laurie, "Deleuze and Transfeminism," 129.
87. Prashant Agrawal and Divya Tripathy, "Pollinators and Pollination," *International Journal of Modern Agriculture* 10, no. 2 (2021): 2030.
88. Agrawal and Tripathy, "Pollinators and Pollination," 2030–32; Bryan N. Danforth, Robert L. Minckley, and John L. Neff, *The Solitary Bees: Biology, Evolution, Conservation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 296; Casper J. van Der Kooij, Mario Vallejo-Marín, and Sara D. Leonhardt, "Mutualisms and (A) symmetry in Plant-Pollinator Interactions," *Current Biology* 31, no. 2 (2021): PR91–R99.
89. van der Kooij, Vallejo-Marín, and Leonhardt, "Mutualisms and (A) symmetry in Plant-Pollinator Interactions."
90. Stark and Laurie, "Deleuze and Transfeminism," 129.
91. Forrest, "Crip Feelings / Feeling Crip."
92. Paraphrased from a Tumblr thread by avon-vila, aaliyahbreux, cowboyslovingboys, aceofsquiddles, and accept-nothing. The original extract reads, "if u have a desire be a different gender ur transgender." See avon-vila, aaliyahbreux, cowboyslovingboys, aceofsquiddles, and accept-nothing, *Tumblr*, July 21, 2019, <https://avon-vila.tumblr.com/post/186445861196/>.
93. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
94. Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1, no. 3 (1994): 237–54, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>; Ben Vincent, "Not Trans Enough: The Relationship between Non-binary Gender Identities, Uncertainty and Legitimacy," in

*Non-Binary Genders: Navigating Communities, Identities, and Healthcare* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), 85.

95. This sentence itself has been added at the recommendation of Willa Smart, who helpfully noted that I "might introduce overlaps, simultaneities, delays into the narrative parts of this essay [...] [to] make concrete the political stakes of [my] claim."
96. Deleuze and Guattari, cited in Stark and Laurie, "Deleuze and Transfeminism," 129.
97. Ivan E. Coyote, *Tomboy Survival Guide* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016), 133.
98. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
99. A nod to years of personal contact with Elliot, my queer kin, intimate, and nominal "ex." For us, texting a string of ampersands is shorthand for a kind of open love-listening perhaps familiar to fellow pollinators.
100. Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (New York: Verso, 2018), 83.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

*APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy* invites members to submit papers, book reviews, and interviews, conversations, and more experimental writing formats for publication in the spring 2024 and fall 2024 editions. Submissions can address the areas of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, asexuality, gender, and sexuality studies, as well as issues of concern for LGBTQ people in the profession. The journal seeks quality paper submissions for review. Reviews and notes should address recent books, current events, or emerging trends. Members who give papers at APA divisional meetings, in particular, are encouraged to submit their work. Please pitch the editor before the deadline if you have an interview or more experimental proposal.

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The deadline for submission of manuscripts for a spring edition is December 15, 2023. The deadline for the fall edition is May 1, 2024. The editor may choose to move submissions from the spring edition to the fall edition depending on the amount of submissions received.

### FORMAT

Papers should be in the range of 5,000–6,000 words, with 7,500 words maximum permitted. Reviews and Notes should be in the range of 1,000–2,000 words, with 3,000 words maximum permitted. All submissions must use endnotes and should be prepared for anonymous review. Please contact the editor if you have plans for alternative formats such as interviews.

### CONTACT

Submit all manuscripts electronically (.doc or .docx format), and direct inquiries to Amy Marvin, Editor, *APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy*, [marvina@lafayette.edu](mailto:marvina@lafayette.edu).

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