

ABOLISH CISNESS: ABOLISH STASIS

BY

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“Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.”¹ The irony of beginning my thesis with a quote from philosophers I am largely dedicated to critiquing is not lost on me, but such is the nature of the queer disinheritance which grounds my writing. The ideas, interventions, and reformulations proposed in the following pages are not proprietary expressions of a single author but attempts to represent the cohabitation of my (un)conscious. This thesis was written in conversation with a series of formal and informal interlocutors – friends, mentors, and lovers – some of which are transient yet enduring, others of which gently shattered preconceptions I once held. For anyone who has spoken with me about transness, theology, Black Feminism, Native Feminism, political economy, psychoanalysis, or Rhetoric: thank you. Your touch is felt and not forgotten.

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¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3.

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, it seems, trans life is always up for debate. Ricocheting everywhere from casual deliberations in bars to zealous religious sermons, from niche digital enclaves to legislative chambers across the globe—the ‘trans debate’ issues a call and demands a response. Yet, beyond the thinly veiled pretenses offered to drape objections to trans life, the ‘trans debate’ is not actually about keeping bathrooms safe, ensuring equity in sports, resisting medical predation, making prisons non-violent, securing academic freedom, or protecting ‘the’ children. Instead, I argue that the ‘trans debate’ emerges to secure *cisness as whiteness as stasis* through inventing a public nascently threatened by unnaturally sex/ual Others. I examine moments typically unthought of as debate in order to complicate the way both transness and debate are classically operationalized, producing a way to respond to the ‘trans debate’ without acceding to its terms of rejoinder.

INTRODUCTION: *Civil Society and Trans-(ant)agonism*

On June 6th, 2023, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) announced a “state of emergency for LGBTQ+ people in the United States.”² In just six months, over 525 ‘anti-LGBTQ+’ bills had been introduced in state legislatures while 75 passed—over double the amount in 2022. Following this “unprecedented and dangerous spike in anti-LGBTQ+ legislative assaults,”³ the HRC issued its declaration—a first in the organization’s history—on the basis that such laws are preventing “people from being able to participate in public life.”⁴ Though earnestly attempting to elicit solidarity, the HRC’s warning simultaneously calls to ‘Make Being LGBTQ+ Great Again.’ Faith in a prior universal, or publicly available, ‘good life’ newly jeopardized by ‘anti-LGBTQ+’ animus simultaneously racinates trans/queer life as white while presupposing both property-accumulating capacities and desires; that is, in order for the HRC to suggest that LGBTQ+ people deserve to have their previously uninterrupted access to public life restored, they must

² Human Rights Campaign, “For the First Time Ever, Human Rights Campaign Officially Declares ‘State of Emergency’ for LGBTQ+ Americans; Issues National Warning and Guidebook to Ensure Safety for LGBTQ+ Residents and Travelers,” *Human Rights Campaign*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/for-the-first-time-ever-human-rights-campaign-officially-declares-state-of-emergency-for-lgbtq-americans-issues-national-warning-and-guidebook-to-ensure-safety-for-lgbtq-residents-and-travelers>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Human Rights Campaign, “LGBTQ+ Americans Fight Back: a Guidebook for Action,” *Human Rights Campaign*, June 6, 2023, <https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/LGBTQ-Guidebook-for-Action.pdf>.

already assume LGBTQ+ people to be white, property-bearing citizens nascently excluded from civil society. In announcing a state of emergency for LGBTQ+ people, the HRC thus collapses gender and sexuality into “singularized, which is to say homogenized,”⁵ possessions unmoored from the afterlife of slavery and conquest. In doing so, they echo “the endless disavowal that what we are threatened with is *civil war* and not *race war*.”⁶

And it is race war that coheres not just the polity now demanding to be saved from itself, but also the sexual and gendered infrastructure that subtends the very call to eradicate queer and trans life from public space. Because race war is not an event but an epoch that names the endurance of anti-blackness and colonialism as contemporary forms of siege, so-called “gender wars”⁷ cannot be extricated from the conditions of possibility for their emergence. That is, the seemingly amplified cultures of sex panic and transphobia are unthinkable without their conceptual scaffolding in the European gender binary. Yet, demonstrating the folly of splicing gender and race into siloed identities, activists have begun warning of a looming ‘trans genocide’ - a charge levied on the basis that the vast majority of the anti-LGBTQ+ bills being entertained explicitly or implicitly target trans people. As far back as 2007, scholars have invoked the frame of genocide to describe the nature of anti-trans violence, going so far as to identify trans people as “the

⁵ Marquis Bey, “Trouble Genders: ‘LGBT’ Collapse and Trans Fundamentality” *Hypatia*, 36, No. 1 (2021), 191-206 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2020.52>.

⁶ Amber Kelsie, “Blackened Debate at the End of the World.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 52, no. 1 (2019): 63-70. 10.5325/philrhet.52.1.0063.

⁷ “Gender Wars: Can the Trans Debate be Civil?,” Times Radio, filmed May 30, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4mN4ccx7t0>.

next strange fruit”⁸ – a “ruse of analogy”⁹ that falsely equates anti-trans violence with lynching and thus expunges the intersection—or indeed, collision—of blackness and transness.

Such alarm bells echo white nationalism in their attempted repudiation, disavowing the percolation of lynch law into the present while mobilizing the spectacle of anti-black violence to compel sympathy for newly liveable—which, under a judicial account of humanity, is also to say killable—(white) trans life. No matter how well-intentioned such calls may be, those preaching caution about a looming ‘trans genocide’ extract “metaphorical and theoretical elasticity from the discursive genocide of Indigenous”¹⁰ and Black peoples, expressing fear that the genocidal violence constitutive of modernity may be returned to ‘we moderns’ in the form of a white genocide. Announcing/denouncing the emergence of a trans genocide, thus, in the process of enunciation, renders unthought those for whom genocide never stopped, mobilizing and disavowing the bloody referent of conquest in order to signify whiteness as the only form of humanity worth saving.

In describing this moment as a ‘gender war’ we risk sublimating race war; yet, what is meant to be captured by such a designation is not the similarity of two separate

⁸ Jeremy D. Kidd and Tarynn M. Witten, “Transgender and Transsexual Identities: the Next Strange Fruit—Hate Crimes, Violence and Genocide Against the Global Trans-Communities,” *Hate and Gender* 6, no. 1 (2007): 31-63.

<https://jhs.press.gonzaga.edu/articles/10.33972/jhs.47>.

⁹ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 37.

¹⁰ Tiffany L. King, “Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 162-185.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jcritethnstud.3.1.0162?typeAccessWorkflow=login>.

wars but rather how seemingly nascent sexual and gendered conflicts function as but one battle within a larger antagonism.¹¹ In an interview entitled “Gender wars: can the trans debate be civil?” Kathleen Stock, a trans-exclusionary radical feminist, lays out the stakes accordingly: the trans debate “is not about trans people’s existence”¹² but “the form the[ir] legal protection takes and whether it interacts with legal protections for biological sex and the female sex in particular.”¹³ Taking her assessment at face value, I argue that the contemporary trans-fixation with how trans life ought to be lived is not exclusively, or even primarily, about individual trans people. Instead, the trans debate might better be understood as a civilizing endeavor to preserve stasis in the face of *cistem failure*.¹⁴

Beyond the thinly veiled pretenses offered to drape objections to trans life, the trans debate is not actually about keeping bathrooms safe, ensuring equity in sports, resisting medical predation, making prisons non-violent, securing academic freedom, or protecting ‘the’ children; for, indeed, such ambitions, if earnestly pursued, would require a deeper reckoning than the narrow frame offered by the trans debate—which entertains only the yes/no question of whether trans people deserve civic inclusion (leaving unasked what is meant by civic, inclusion, trans, or people). Instead, the trans debate emerges to secure a sex/ual state of nature against the breakdown of cisness as ontologically given and referentially stable; it works to produce an account of civil society as worthy of saving through inventing an outside that it must be saved from, rebranding bathrooms, sports, healthcare, prisons, academia, and childhood as otherwise ungendered – which is

¹¹ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

¹² “Gender Wars,” 3:15-3:17.

¹³ “Gender Wars,” 2:55-3:03

¹⁴ Marquis Bey, *Cistem Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023).

actually to say normatively gendered – and therefore secure domains, but “it is precisely this security that is denied in an anti-Black world.”¹⁵ The ‘trans debate’ therefore functions not simply to regulate trans life, but to secure civil society by establishing a metonymic chain in which *cisness is whiteness is stasis*.

Indeed, “the neologism ‘cisgender’ has long been associated with a kind of stasis based on the Latin root ‘cis-,’ which prefixes things that stay put or do not change property.”¹⁶ Yet, what affixes cisness as humanity’s stasis is its cathexis: whiteness. In other words, “what you think is gender is really race.”¹⁷ And just as cisness and whiteness are onto-epistemic inventions rather than stationary biological forms, stasis marks a state of equilibrium achieved through the sublimation of (ant)agonisms. In rhetorical theory, stasis is understood as the precondition for the discursive formation called debate – that prior consensus from which dissensus may proceed. As I argue in this thesis, stasis is also a way to theorize gender’s discursivity and, more specifically, the calcification of gender performance through feigned consensus regarding the ontological properties of men and women (cisness).

The aporic fusion of cisness, whiteness, and stasis serves as the animating condition for both the calls of and responses to the ‘trans debate.’ Trans (ant)agonists and advocates alike ground their positions in a prior reduction of transness to a possession

¹⁵ David Chandler and Farai Chipato, “A call for abolition: The disavowal and displacement of race in critical security studies,” *Security Dialogue* 52, no.1 (2021): 60-68, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/09670106211024413>.

¹⁶ A. Finn Enke, “The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Disciplining of Opposing Bodies,” in *Transfeminist Perspectives in and Beyond Transgender and Gender Studies* ed. A. Finn Enke (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012), 60.

¹⁷ Jules Gill-Peterson, “Communist Christine Jorgensen and the MILFs,” *Sad Brown Girl* (blog), 12 February, 2021, <https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/communist-christine-jorgensen-and>.

indexed in the bodies of trans people. Sequestered to the private realm of identity, transness takes on an ontological meaning by designating subjects in contradistinction to cisness. But regardless of whether transness is assumed to be an object of critique or a subject of defense, discourse that proceeds as if transness and cisness are ontologically coherent categories ricochets in the echo chamber of “white solipsism”¹⁸ by disavowing gender’s racial augmentation. Inventing a schema in which cisness automatically marks a privileged and conforming relation to gender while transness signifies its subversion/deprivation reaffirms “the coherency, binary, hierarchy, and regulation inherent to cisness” by conceding its ontological salience, which is in turn measured by the degree to which one is already “proximate to whiteness.”¹⁹ Attempts to codify trans personhood against the existential denial that grounds the ‘trans debate’ thus recuperate the metonymic construction of cisness through whiteness in appealing to the logic of stasis, responding to calls for our elimination with cries for assimilation: civil society is worth saving and so are we. Both the calls of and responses to the ‘trans debate’ therefore function to displace a more fundamental question: should the world exist?

The title of this thesis – *abolish cisness: abolish stasis* – illustrates not simply gender’s irreducible rhetoricity but also the necessity of bringing together different strains of abolition. That is, there can be no abolition of cisness without the abolition of whiteness and—what is perhaps more unsettling—there can be no abolition of whiteness without the end of the world. Heeding the call for non-Black Trans scholars to “attune to frequencies of resistance that destabilize trans compatibility with anti-Black paradigms of

¹⁸ Bey, *Cistem Failure*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

safety, security and stasis,”²⁰ I sit with Black Feminist critiques of cisness as a deracinated analytic and stasis as a civilizing force to forward an abolitionist critique of the ‘trans debate.’ Connected to the work of abolition not simply as “the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society,”²¹ I ask not simply what the abolition of cisness, whiteness, and stasis requires we do away with but also what might emerge in their wake?

As the ‘trans debate’ lacks the agonistic qualities debate is traditionally understood to possess, I do not hold out faith in the possibility of synthesis. I do not offer arguments in hope that they may be used to win ‘the trans debate’ but rather seek to unearth its aporias and examine the conditions of possibility for its emergence, studying moments typically unthought of as debate to understand how rhetorical (im)possibility and incommunicability might require we “rethink the cherished terms of rhetoric itself.”²² Refusing stasis and its perfunctory assumptions of intersubjectivity provides a way of responding to the ‘trans debate’ without acceding to the terms of rejoinder - clarifying the historical developments that enable the present marriage of ‘trans’ and ‘debate’ not in hopes of resolution but abolition. This thesis, therefore, is not so much an exercise in

²⁰ Beau Larsen, “Indebted: The Compounding Politics of Black and Trans Argumentation in Intercollegiate Policy Debate,” *Contemporary Argumentation and Debate* 38, no. 1 (2023), 39-78, <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cad/vol38/iss1/5/>.

²¹ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, (London: Minor Compositions), 42.

²² Kelsie, “Blackened Debate.”

rhetorical criticism as it is a criticism of rhetoric, posing problems of thought for classical precepts of debate and their racialized and gendered inflections.

In Chapter 1, “Deadly Assemblages and the Sociogenetic Principle of Transphobia” I use the Club Q Shooting itself as a rhetorical artifact, asking: if “the medium is the message,”²³ what does a spray of bullets communicate? I read the Club Q shooting – which took place at a drag show held on the eve of the Transgender Day of Remembrance – along a historical continuum of anti-black and colonial violence. Building upon Sylvia Wynter, I argue that the Club Q shooting demonstrates the sociogenetic principle of transphobia, revealing how anti-blackness cathects transphobia to produce a pre-subjective fear of the unnaturally sex/ual body. Indeed, the shooter not only attempted to livestream²⁴ the massacre to the neo-nazi ‘free-speech forum’ they hosted - they were also found to be in close contact with the Buffalo shooter,²⁵ who killed ten Black people outside of a supermarket in New York. Refusing the allure of contingency—a comforting but dangerous maneuver which explains away the constancy and connectivity of violence by translating it into a singular event available for critique—I offer the heuristic of Deadly Assemblages to chart the relationship between seemingly

²³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 7.

²⁴ Josh Halliday, “UK far-right teenager inspired us gay nightclub shooting suspect, judge told” *The Guardian*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/26/uk-far-right-teenager-inspired-us-gay-nightclub-shooting-suspect-judge-told>.

²⁵ Liam Barnes, “Daniel Harris: UK teen sentenced over videos linked to us shootings” *BBC News*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-derbyshire-6442607>.

disparate forms of violence, toggling between scene and system to think beyond the constraints of contingency.

In Chapter 2, “Trans-fixed: Stasis and the Visual Economy of the Trans Debate,” I examine a conspiracy theory in the Qanon mediasphere referred to by believers as Elite Gender Inversion and critics as Transvestigations, which claims that most (if not all) celebrities are secretly trans, having sold their soul (and gender) to the devil in exchange for power and wealth. I argue that transvestigations are an elemental feature of the ‘trans debate’ demarcating who is trans and thus (un)fit for civil inclusion. In this process, interpolation supplants interlocution by affixing the Other into a state of incommunicability, positioning one not as a subject of communication, but subject to communication: the debate is settled, I know what you are. I argue that the conversion of transness into a floating signifier of racial and sex/ual pathology complicates the transformative potential of debate by mooting the affordances rejoinder is typically thought to offer, producing a self insulated from the affectability of the Other. Ultimately, I argue that transphobia must not be understood as a consciously avowed prejudice that can be reasoned with but rather a pre-subjective fear of the unnaturally sex/ual body enabled by the anti-black and colonial precept of the European gender binary or: stasis.

In Chapter 3, “Trans Apophasis, Apophatic Transness,” I begin with an autotheoretical sketch of trans theology. I then applied it as a rhetorical theory by turning to an interview²⁶ conducted by the Associated Press and several trans people regarding

²⁶ Hannah Schoenbaum and Summer Ballentine, “When States Limit Care, Some Trans People Do It Themselves,” *AP News*, April 30, 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/transgender-health-missouri-hormone-stockpile-4376cac68eecd22df9d3ad86825c18d3> (Accessed May 4, 2023).

D.I.Y. hormone therapy. As an illicit practice, I argue that D.I.Y. healthcare's capacity to be presented in (counter)publics is vexed by a crisis of representation. I position the willingness to partake in such an interview as a tactical intervention into the trans debate, yet I describe it as a strategically erroneous form of Compulsory Interlocution premised on a misguided attempt to render transness commensurate with stasis. Instead of seeking to correct the condition of incommunicability with appeals to a publicly endowed trans voice²⁷ - which necessarily inhere other forms of voicelessness - I elaborate on the generative affordances of being incommunicable. Re-working rhetorical and theological applications of Apophasis, I approach transness as a negative theology - neither a form of being nor becoming but believing. That is, transness is not something one possesses, but something one is possessed by; its incisiveness lies not in its capacity to offer some new form or essence, but in the way it deforms and discoheres the essence of form and the form of essence. Ultimately, I argue that moving towards a trans conception of apophasis as well as an apophatic account of transness offers the possibility of accounting for transness amidst the shifting discursive terrain of the 'trans debate' without recourse to a narrowly defined trans-normative subject by refusing the project of trans legibility in favor an abolitionist faith in the unknowable.

²⁷ Eric K. Watts, "'Voice' and 'voicelessness' in rhetorical studies," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87, no. 2 (2001): 179-196.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00335630109384328>.

CHAPTER ONE: *Deadly Assemblages and the Sociogenetic Principle of Transphobia*

On November 19th, 2022, at a drag show held on the eve of the Transgender Day of Remembrance, Anderson Lee Aldrich walked into just one of two gay bars in Colorado Springs, Colorado and shot over half the people in attendance.²⁸ According to the arrest affidavit, Aldrich entered Club Q and "opened fire indiscriminately,"²⁹ an archival procedure which replicates the faulty discursive framing of mass shootings as senseless, inexplicable slaughter. Against singularized accounts of the event—which position the shooting as an aberration revealing only the pathologies of a single mind—I argue that anti-trans violence does, in fact, possess a sensibility and that examining the Club Q shooting as part of the rhetorical ecosphere of the ‘trans debate’ clarifies the animating forces of anti-trans violence writ large. Rather than attempt to excavate the killer’s intent—an ambition constrained by the faulty presumption of a consciously organized psyche, the absence of a confession or manifesto, and the irreducibility of the

²⁸ Colorado Peoples Press (@colpeoplespress). “Focus on the family vandalized in response to the club q shooting.” *Instagram*, November 25, 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIZz8Ondhv/?igsh=MTdwd29hODNsMmF3Yw==>

²⁹ District Court, El Paso Country Colorado. *The People of the State of Colorado v. Anderson Lee Aldrich*. 22CR6008, Colorado Springs, Colorado, https://www.courts.state.co.us/userfiles/file/Court_Probation/04th_Judicial_District/El_Paso/2CR6008/22CR6008%20-%20Aldrich%20-%20PC%20Affidavit_Redacted.p

event—I take the shooting itself as a text, asking: if “the medium is the message,”³⁰ what does a spray of bullets communicate?

Although the gunfire lasted only 45 seconds,³¹ the shooting neither began when Aldrich entered Club Q nor did it end when three patrons restrained them against the floor. To assume otherwise is to mystify the nature of premeditated violence. Yet, it also does not suffice to say that the decision to plot and carry out this public execution was consciously motivated as if all relevant actors could be brought to account for the roles they played in facilitating trans death. Indeed, the juridical burden of proof buries such diffuse linkages through the law of causality—its fixation on both agents and events sublimates repetitious, systemic violence into individual acts that can be partitioned from civil society, explained away as an aberration, dissolved through legal alchemy. Cleaved to juridical categories of thought, the very frame of complicity functions to disavow the “atmosphere of violence”³² that both precedes and exceeds the enactment of anti-trans violence by translating it into a contingent phenomenon available for critique. Yet one could not, for example, blame the shooting on ‘gun culture’ without contextualizing the emergence of such lethal technology in conquest, where muskets facilitated America’s first mass shooting—more accurately described as the joint projects of colonization and slavery. Nor could one attribute the shooting to transphobia without understanding its emergence through the anti-black and colonial precept of the European gender binary—

³⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 7.

³¹ Benjamin Hall, interview with Rich Fierro. “A Question of Fight or Flight,” *Searching for Heroes* (podcast), December 10, 2023, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://radio.foxnews.com/2023/12/10/a-question-of-fight-or-flight/>.

³² Eric Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021)

which provides conceptual scaffolding for a racial-sexual matrix that establishes *cisness as whiteness as stasis*.

Far from an incidental feature of modernity, anti-trans violence matriculates from genocidal and anti-black infrastructure that “precedes even the point from which to begin speaking.”³³ That is, transphobia is *a priori* - a judgement cast on flesh that precedes the body³⁴ (and is, in fact, necessary to produce it) by delimiting the racial and sexual properties necessary for one to come “into being through and as gendered embodiment precisely in order to come into being at all.”³⁵ Transphobia emerges not in a chain-reaction ignited by the nascent visibility of trans people but through historically curated mores that pre-determine the nature of sex/ual embodiment, such that transphobia paradoxically pre-dates the nominalization of trans people. Anti-trans violence therefore cannot be examined as a series of contingent events, but a structuring logic of modernity propelled by a series of drives in excess of the bodies manifest in a particular time and space. In highlighting the limitations of post-positivist critique, I neither issue a fatalist call to abandon inquiry into the granularity of anti-trans violence nor suggest a move towards abstraction that is ultimately divorced from the lives and deaths of trans people. Instead, I offer the heuristic of Deadly Assemblages as a way to attend to the scene of anti-trans violence without reducing the system that precipitates it.

³³ Kelsie, “Blackened Debate.”

³⁴ Here I am drawing on the body/flesh distinction developed by Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: an American Grammar Book.” I do so not to flatten the distinctions between anti-trans violence and the violence of chattel slavery but as part of my larger effort to trace the incubation of transphobia in the long *durée* of anti-blackness and conquest.

³⁵ Bey, *Cistem Failure*, xiv.

Abandoning assumptions of singularity and separability, *Deadly Assemblages* looks beyond the agent/event of anti-trans violence in order to probe the atmosphere of violence that precedes and exceeds the moment of slaughter. Unlike the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy of affirmation, *Deadly Assemblages* works not to chart possibility but its opposite: the connective tissue of seemingly disparate forms of violence. Though Deleuze and Guattari do not offer a formal definition of assemblage, Thomas Nail positions “the assemblage as the ‘general logic’ at work in *A Thousand Plateaus*,” whose central tenets orbit around “the rejection of unity in favor of multiplicity, and the rejection of essence in favor of events.”³⁶ For Deleuze and Guattari, to suppose that there exists an answer to the question “what is” forecloses what something “might possibly become or what relations it may enter into” by assuming “the finished product of what we are inquiring into.”³⁷ But what of those for whom possibility registers only as impossibility?

Heeding Tiffany King’s precaution that “lines of flight are only possible as a form of white self-actualizing posthumanism,”³⁸ *Deadly Assemblages* eschews both essence and the event as frames of inquiry in favor of mapping the production of stasis. Here stasis refers to the series of *a priori* determinations regarding the ontological properties of agents and events assumed both as the precondition for discursive analysis and gender’s constitution. Mapping stasis demonstrates how the very capacity to narrativize anti-trans violence as an event relies on Man’s spatio-temporal categories to produce a distinction

³⁶ Thomas Nail, “What is an Assemblage?,” *SubStance* 46, no. 1 (2017): 21-37.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/650026/summary>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ King, “Humans Involved.”

between sanctuary and siege, scene and system, complicity and immunity, cis and trans. Instead, *Deadly Assemblages* offers a way of reading anti-trans violence's machinic repetition, attending to its granularity without exceptionalizing either the agent or event by acknowledging that such enactments *could* have been carried out by *anyone*, *anywhere*; such is the violence of potentiality: the entropy of trans death.

Unearthing the diffuse roots of anti-trans violence requires thinking beyond the scene of its enactment. While this chapter takes the Club Q shooting as its central exigency, it does not proceed in a classical narrative form. Instead, I interlay my analysis of the shooting with forays into analytic and continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, and grand history in order to disturb the spatio-temporal category of event and its implied logic of contingency. I also make frequent use of passive voice and indirect interpellations as part of my commitment to thinking beyond the agent of anti-trans violence in accounting for its entropic nature. The non-linear account of the Club Q shooting rendered through my analysis of *Deadly Assemblages* imitates the events own irreducibility. In theorizing the larger conditions of possibility for anti-trans violence, I offer a reading in excess of itself, illustrating what is *pre* pre-meditation in order to corral the histories, logics, and systems that coalesce to produce anti-trans violence as both conscionable and desirable.

Deadly Assemblages does not simply suggest that a more complex series of linkages precedes the actual agents/events of anti-trans violence, such that rhetoric in the 'trans debate' causally produces acts of anti-trans violence. Indeed, the murder of trans people is not the byproduct of inflammatory rhetoric manifest in and as the 'trans debate,' as if words were being plugged into some entropic formula that scatters and plots trans

death. The diagnosis of such events as stochastic terrorism³⁹ is as frequent as it is mystifying, because it positions anti-trans violence as an extension of nascently erected publics, collapsing its structural, historical, and libidinal components into the more digestible register of prejudice so that anti-trans violence can be compartmentalized and individuated. What *Deadly Assemblages* makes clear is that the contemporary marriage of ‘trans’ and ‘debate’ is made possible by centuries of preceding violence necessary to secure cisness and stasis as the ontological ground wire of sovereignty. Indeed, the ‘trans debate’ moves from pen to paper to pistol not as linear escalation but machinic necessity because it emerges from and therefore must return to a “stasis that is itself a death.”⁴⁰

Atmospheres of Violence: Family Values and the (Anti)social Contract

“Atmospheres envelop. Held by gravity, the layers of vapor that constitute them are the conditions of breathing life but also the possibility of that life’s rendition...atmospheres describe not simply the assemblages of gendered and racialized force and their contestation but the thick hang of fog that allows us to know little else...an atmospheric constant whose consistency must be fundamentally disturbed if we are to survive.”⁴¹

³⁹ JP Leskovich, “The Club Q Shooting Was an Act of Terror That Must Be Resisted,” *Jurist*, December 1, 2022 <https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2022/12/jp-leskovich-club-shooting-act-of-terror/> (Accessed March 21, 2024).

⁴⁰ Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 190.

⁴¹ Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*, 16.

Two months before the Club Q shooting, Focus on the Family - the premier media company of the Evangelical Right - published a review of Sophie Lewis' book *Abolish the Family: a Manifesto for Care and Liberation*. Such a "silly idea," they write, "only make[s] sense if one goes along with the mistaken assumption that family is merely a modern, Western, white, Christianized ideal."⁴² Instead, "it is a universal, not because a particular religion or political scheme imposes it, but because nature does."⁴³ The sex/ual state of nature, however, is not natural but naturalized through a series of regulatory devices that disappear evidence to the contrary: histories of genocide and slavery testifying to the violent invention of cisness repressed through bans on 'critical race theory,' exhibits of trans-queer life expunged from the public light via legislative and militant endeavors to shut down drag shows, police bathrooms, and forcibly detransition trans children and adults. Popularly conceived of as siloed campaigns, the contemporary attempts to deracinate and degender public life must actually be seen as a concerted effort to secure the white domestic, which serves as the imago organizing intelligible modes of social reproduction into the nation as family and family as nation.

Focus on the Family, which is headquartered just 8 miles down the road from Club Q, is notorious for platforming and circulating anti-trans rhetoric. Just days after the Club Q shooting, the organization published several "blog posts accusing transgender people of 'gender madness' and distorting 'God's clear, intended design.'"⁴⁴ Yet, it is not

⁴² Daily Citizen Staff. "New Book Says Abolishing the Family Will Improve Humanity. Really?" *Daily Citizen*, September 27, 2022, <https://dailycitizen.focusonthefamily.com/new-book-says-abolishing-the-family-will-improve-humanity-really/> (Accessed March 22, 2024).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Beckler, "Preached at."

that Focus on the Family espouses eugenic rhetoric that is, in turn, taken up by individual actors like Aldrich. Instead, the Family Policy Alliance - the lobbyist arm of Focus on the Family - has funneled millions into campaigns seeking to ban transgender athletes, outlaw trans healthcare, restrict bathroom use, limit drag shows, criminalize abortion, and censor Critical Race Theory from the classroom⁴⁵—laying bare the manner by which racial and sexual pathologies fuse in the defense of ‘family values’ such that the public to which the ‘trans debate’ speaks is not only cisheterosexual, but white. Calls to save the family-nation from its corruption and decomposition by trans people therefore cannot be understood singularly but must be contextualized alongside the consortium of imagined threats to the purity of the family-nation.

Despite over three decades of targeted campaigns against trans/queer people and the fact that they are located in the same town as Club Q, Focus on the Family maintained that Aldrich could not have been inspired to commit the shooting by their organization because there was no proof that Aldrich had consumed any of their teachings. Violence, they suppose, is like a tumor in the ‘trans debate,’ a deformed cell that once excised restores the body politic to its otherwise healthy state. Yet, the relationship between Focus on the Family and Aldrich’s stances in the trans debate can be glimpsed not by way of some empirically notated linkages, but in their complementary functions. While Aldrich’s actions are but a logical extension of Focus on the Family’s eugenic demagoguery, they also vouchsafe rhetorical formations (such as Focus on the Family’s)

⁴⁵ Steve Rabey. “Focus on the Family affiliate is the unifying force behind campaign to restrict transgender rights,” *Baptist News Global*, May 30, 2023. <https://baptistnews.com/article/focus-on-the-family-affiliate-is-the-unifying-force-behind-campaign-to-restrict-transgender-rights/> (Accessed March 22, 2024).

that nonetheless encode trans death by rendering them civil by comparison. Indeed, Focus on the Family might never release a press statement calling for the public execution of trans people because they do not need to. Loudly sponsoring a series of campaigns working to “exclude trans people not so much from citizenship as public life”⁴⁶ is equally, if not more, horrifying in its diffuse magnitude. Both the Club Q shooting and the campaigns funded by Focus on the Family reveal the constitutive function of the ‘trans debate’ as forms of “gender bashing,” a term Vivian Namaste coins to describe violence that secures “culturally sanctioned gender identities” in “defense of the ‘public,’”⁴⁷ which is always-already imagined to be cisheterosexual and white. Indeed:

North Carolina’s infamous 2016 bathroom bill, which was the first time “biological sex” was written into US law, had an obvious outcome: if you can’t ever use the bathroom in public, it’s hard to participate in life outside of the private sphere. It’s no coincidence that restrooms, schools, and eligibility for state benefits, three zones where the US state has ample experience at racial segregation, have remained central in anti-trans politicking. If trans youth and adults lose access to public education, healthcare, restrooms, and legal recognition of their gender, there is essentially no way for them to participate in public life. They are not so much legally disenfranchised as in losing the right to vote or hold

⁴⁶ Jules Gill-Peterson. “The Cis State,” *Sad Brown Girl*, April 14, 2021.

<https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/the-cis-state> (Accessed March 22, 2024).

⁴⁷ Vivian K. Namaste. “Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space” in *The Transgender Studies Reader* ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2006), 589.

citizenship as they are *expelled from the public sphere, exempt from care and support, as well as vulnerable to policing and violence.*⁴⁸

The ‘family values’ subtending anti-trans violence are chartered in the “(anti)social contract,”⁴⁹ which commissions the brutal disavowal of those who refuse its biological crest. The “(anti)social contract” is a modernizing principle that binds citizens to the demos through the “democratization of sovereignty,”⁵⁰ erecting Leviathans to stave off the state of nature as war by securing the sex/ual state of nature. As Rousseau admits: “the most ancient of all societies, and the only natural one, is the society of the family” which serves as “the prime model,”⁵¹ or oedipal template, for sovereignty. Proceeding “as though gender identity, sexual orientation, and psychological needs were essentially *natural* and therefore politically neutral,”⁵² the (anti)social contract delimits the ontological properties of a state’s citizens through an expectation not only to produce but reproduce—thus, blood *and* soil. In this schema, patriarchal authority legitimizes sovereign power as “the ruler corresponds to the father, and the people to the children,”⁵³ such that allegiance to the father becomes training for allegiance to the state. Left unsaid in Rousseau’s formulation, however, is the role of the Mother—an omission which, in

⁴⁸ Gill-Peterson, “The Cis State.”

⁴⁹ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *All Incomplete* (London: Minor Compositions, 2021), 32.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jean Jacques Rousseau. *The Social Contract*. Translated by Jonathan Bennett. 2017, 1-2.

⁵² Luce deLire. “Full Queerocracy Now! Pink Totalitarianism and the Industrialization of Libidinal Agriculture,” *E-flux* no. 117 (April 2021). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/117/386679/full-queerocracy-now-pink-totalitarianism-and-the-industrialization-of-libidinal-agriculture/>.

⁵³ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 2.

turn, resembles the hidden economic function of the family for civil society—offsetting the public provision of welfare with a privatized ethic of survival. Yet, it is not just that Rousseau discounts the feminized labor necessary to create the household and thus the nation but also—and perhaps more importantly—that by presenting ‘the family’ as a natural feature of humanity, he elides its racial history.

Birthered in the halls of functional sociology and political philosophy, the family went nuclear not because its formal conceptualization held any relation to the white-picket fences of the Atomic Age but because it was assumed to possess a cellular function as the nucleus of civilization. Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish-British anthropologist popularly credited with coining the term ‘nuclear family,’ sought to disprove Freud’s Oedipal complex by demonstrating the family’s simultaneous variability and constancy across cultures; through ethnographic studies of Trobriand Islanders in Papua New Guinea, he concluded that though there exists “multiple nuclear family complexes,” the nuclear family remains “the fundamental unit of social life”⁵⁴ - a sentiment Moynihan infamously echoes half a century later in his diatribe against Black families and that Focus on the Family repeats to rationalize its mission to conserve the family. The recursive trope of ‘family values’ (as a metonym for the white domestic) demonstrates how the project of securing ‘the family’ licenses the destruction of the family’s others and therefore other families - betraying its promises of multiculturalism, or perhaps, revealing what they always-already were. Leveraged in calls to strengthen the prison-industrial complex, borders, the military, punitive welfare regimes, and the

⁵⁴ Brian Connolly. “The Nuclear Family: How a Complex Became a Norm,” *Parapraxis* no. 1 (2013). <https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/the-nuclear-family>.

cultural hegemony of white evangelicals - ‘family values’ mobilize the (anti)social contract as enthymeme to rationalize the dispossession of its others, whose lives come to appear as quite literally unimaginable.

The family, as a sociological unit, is indebted to normative assumptions about not only gender but race because the very properties of femininity and masculinity are imagined through the symbolic and cultural ascendance of White Being.⁵⁵ Contrary to the Fordist household through which Marxist-Feminists often rehearse their critiques of the family, colonial plantations serve as the originary site through which the family (and its corresponding racial/sexual mores) are invented. Essential characteristics of womanhood, such as sexual propriety, were afforded to white women precisely because they were denied to Black women, who were conscripted to birth the nation at the same time as they were juridically and symbolically denied the status of motherhood; as Saidiya Hartman writes, for enslaved Black women “the mother’s only claim—to transfer her dispossession to her child.”⁵⁶ The housewife is thus always-already white. Men as heads of house, were in turn distinguished by their property-bearing capacities; the original breadwinners - the template from which modern entrepreneurial and managerial classes are derived - were colonizers and slavers. The Patriarch is, therefore, always-already white.

⁵⁵ By White Being, I am referring to the work of Dylan Rodriguez in *White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logics of Genocide* (New York City, New York: Fordham University Press, 2020) where he coins White Being to source and particularize what are often taken as universal inheritances.

⁵⁶ Saidiya Hartman. “The Belly of the World: a Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls: a Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18:1 (2016): 166-173. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596>

And it is ‘family values’ that shape the past and present of Colorado Springs. Once a fringe frontier settlement, Colorado Springs became a formal municipality amidst the Gold Rush of the mid-19th century. As the American economy buckled in the Great Depression and the looming specter of a second world war haunted private industry, the town of Colorado Springs struck a deal with the federal government, donating land to the War Department to construct the Army’s Fort Carson, the Air Force Academy, and eventually the North American Aerospace Defense Command in hopes of revitalizing the local economy—fusing the economic unit of the family and nation through militarizing the domestic.⁵⁷ Yet, as the end of the Cold War came with “cutbacks in federal defense spending,”⁵⁸ politicians in Colorado Springs were faced once again with the task of revitalizing its economy through recruiting a new industry. In the same year that the Soviet Union dissolved, the city of Colorado Springs subsidized the relocation of “evangelical ministries to fill the tens of thousands of square foot of office space left vacant”⁵⁹ by the nascent decline of the military-industrial complex.

Heeding promises of cheap land and low taxes, Focus on the Family – “the best-known evangelical ministry in the United States in the 1980s”⁶⁰ relocated its headquarters from Southern California to Colorado Springs in 1991, triggering “a rush of other ministries to the city.”⁶¹ By 1992, this ensemble of Evangelical organizations had forged a coalition called “Colorado for Family Values”⁶² (CFV) and began its infamous

⁵⁷ William Schultz. “Garden of the Gods: Colorado Springs and the Fate of the Culture Wars,” Ph.D diss., (Princeton University, 2017).

⁵⁸ Ibid, 30.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 60.

⁶¹ Ibid, 62.

⁶² Ibid, 2.

campaign for Amendment 2—a ballot initiative that would amend Colorado’s state constitution to outlaw attempts to “prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.”⁶³ In the same year, Amendment 2 passed with a 53% majority due to heavily funded media coverage from Focus on the Family, without which “Amendment 2 could not have succeeded.”⁶⁴ Though the Supreme Court would eventually strike down Amendment 2 in 1996, the coalition that formed at its precipice has endured, united by a common enemy: the “militant gay movement.”⁶⁵

Recording their efforts so that future campaigns could model its successes, the CFV composed a 200-page manual called “The Colorado Model”⁶⁶ which outlined the rhetorical tactics they used in their crusade against queer life. To prevent the media from depicting them as “targeting the civil-rights of a group on abstract intellectual grounds,”⁶⁷ Amendment 2 was presented not “as an attack on the rights of homosexuals but as a defense of the rights of others.”⁶⁸ For to permit ‘gay rights’ would be “unfair to all those who privately, civilly disapprove of homosexuality.”⁶⁹ ‘The Colorado Model,’ beyond serving as a field guide for the Evangelical Right, emerged as a rhetorical strategy designed to distance anti-queer advocacy from anti-queer outcomes by draping eugenic desires in the language of cordiality and religious freedom. This technique has since been parroted many times over, allowing politicians, pastors, and pundits to disassociate their

⁶³ Ibid, 81.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 77.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 126.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 152-3.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 152.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 153.

own anti-queer sentiments from people like the Club Q shooter by framing their vigilantism as incongruent with their own civility qua stasis.

Sheathing trans-(ant)agonism in existential denial and the presumptive certitude of Evangelical theology - Focus on the Family recalibrates the Colorado Model for the ‘trans debate.’ In the wake of the Club Q Shooting, Jim Daly, Focus on the Family’s sitting president, decried the shooting as evidence of “the evil and wickedness inside the human heart,” calling for attention to be directed towards law enforcement as they work to uncover “the motive behind this senseless violence.”⁷⁰ Narrativizing the shooting as the senseless product of humanity’s ontological proclivity for sin, Daly condemned the shooting while disavowing his own role in conditioning the public to view trans/queer life only through the lens of pathology. Insisting on their innocence with the trite retort that Christians could never commit nor condone murder, Focus on the Family has nonetheless maintained that:

- “There is no such thing as a ‘trans kid’”
- “There is no such thing as ‘anti-LGBTQ’ legislation”
- “There’s no such thing as a transgender athlete”
- “There is no such thing as the ‘LGBT community’”
- “There is no such thing as an ‘LGBTQ+ community’”
- “There is no such thing as a nonbinary or genderless person”

⁷⁰ Jim Daly. “Jim Daly Statement on Colorado Springs Shooting,” *Daily Focus*, November 20, 2022. <https://jimdaly.focusonthefamily.com/jim-daly-statement-in-colorado-springs-shooting/> (Accessed March 22, 2024).

- “There is no such thing as ‘cis woman,’ ‘trans men,’ or ‘non-binary people’ in nature.”⁷¹

The Club Q shooting, then, must not be understood as the byproduct of anti-trans rhetoric platformed by organizations like Focus on the Family, but revelatory of the Deadly Assemblages that provision the trans debate’s stasis. The disequilibrium of anti-trans violence, as it slips between legislative crusades to public executions, compromises classical theorizations of stasis as the existential denial that grounds trans-(ant)agonism voids the intersubjective affordances debate is traditionally understood to possess. The capacity for consensus, dissensus, and affectability presumes a Self that is already recognized by the Other; but subjects of debate cannot become subjects of debate. Given the only stasis of the ‘trans debate’ is its own disavowed call for elimination, how might we approach the ‘trans debate’ without acceding to its terms of rejoinder?

To understand ‘the trans debate’ in light of “end of the state of debate”⁷² means acknowledging that just as the state is “a war against its own condition”⁷³ so too is stasis. Today, debate is understood as the essential to democracy’s (anti)social contract, its decomposition entailing the eruption of ‘civil war’ but “it is interesting because the Greeks referred to civil war as ‘stasis’”⁷⁴ and because civil war has always been a misnomer for race war. For Rousseau, “long debates, dissensions and tumult proclaim...the decline of the state”⁷⁵ through fracturing its general will. The general will

⁷¹ Rabey, “Focus on the Family affiliate.”

⁷² Kelsie, “Blackened Debate.”

⁷³ Moten and Harney, *All Incomplete*, 46.

⁷⁴ Kelsie, “Blackened Debate.”

⁷⁵ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 55.

is said to bind the body politic together through prior consent to and consensus on civil society as humanity's evolutionary destiny. Here, stasis takes form not simply as a rhetorical theory but a juridical logic that legitimizes domestic war through inventing the body politic's general will (or collective unconscious) *prior* to (and thus in place of) debate. The (anti)social contract thus paradoxically marks deliberation not as an appropriate exercise of popular sovereignty but an extension of war that civil society failed to sublimate into its collective unconscious. Dissent comes to signify not a robust and engaged citizenry but its unmaking, legally encoded in the image of the criminal who, in breaching civil society's (anti)social contract, "stops being a member of it—he even makes war on it."⁷⁶ Though the body politic's sovereign homogeneity is secured through and as war, the (anti)social contract misattributes the initiation of this war to the criminal (and not criminalization) to provision an alibi for the state's monopoly on violence. Here, the inversion of Clausewitz falls short: "politics, colonialism, settlement, capitalism, ecological destruction, racism, and misogynies are not wars by other means—they are war."⁷⁷ Stasis thus "secures the parameters of debate as the dialectical and agonistic contestation of the possible"⁷⁸ through disavowing the prior war of position necessary to construct a deliberative re/public in the first place. In other words, stasis is produced as the law is enforced: in reaction to the anoriginal force of blackness, out of which warring parties of the (anti)social contract are formed.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 17.

⁷⁷ Jairus Grove. *Savage Ecology: War and Geopolitics at the End of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 61.

⁷⁸ Kelsie, "Blackened Debate."

It should therefore come as no surprise that race war invents gender war.

Recounting his mood on the night of the shooting in an interview with the New York Times, Richard Fierro - a veteran lionized by the media for ending Aldrich's killing spree - said he "was not thinking of war at all"⁷⁹ until the shooting started. Such an admission is telling - not because it authenticates the Club Q shooting as an exceptional display of martial logics, but because his faith in a prior state of peace mystifies the ongoing conditions of war integral to the very domestic he had sworn to protect. The battlefield he was thrust into that night was intelligible to him as war because it bore the markings of its juridical form: declared conflict and visible carnage—an event which could be digested as exceptional and singularly authored. The Club Q shooting, however, is not war-like, it is war—an extension of the protracted battle to secure *cisness as whiteness as stasis*. To see the 'trans debate' as simultaneously a refraction and instantiation of war is to understand that the machinic repetition of trans death cannot be unmoored from seemingly polite deliberations over the conceptual veracity of 'trans rights' because such debates remain animated by an unannounced question (which if posed already implies the answer): should trans people exist?

The Sociogenetic Principle of Transphobia

⁷⁹ Dave Phillips. "Army Veteran Went Into 'Combat Mode' to Disarm the Club Q Guman," *The New York Times*. November 21, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/21/us/colorado-springs-shooting-club-q-hero.html> (Accessed March 22, 2024).

Unlike other infamous massacres at gay bars like the Pulse nightclub shooting, the Club Q shooter was both a recurring patron of the club and trans.⁸⁰ The shooting, therefore, cannot be accounted for via colloquial diagnosis of transphobia, which reduces transphobia to a consciously avowed prejudice held against nominally trans people. Instead, the Club Q shooting must be understood in light of the Deadly Assemblages that precede and exceed the enactment of anti-trans violence: the sociogenetic principle rendering anti-trans violence a species imperative for white humanity.

A little over two hours before they would open fire at Club Q, the assailant told their mother to “get ready to have the best night ever!”⁸¹ The two had plans to see a movie at 10pm, but Aldrich told their mother they had to run an errand first, assuring her that it would only take 15 minutes.⁸² At 11:56pm, a 9-1-1 call reported an active shooter

⁸⁰ Although Aldrich's non-binary status has been publicly disputed, I refuse to litigate the veracity of their transness because I find there is nothing to gain from delineating an authentically trans subject before the law. Moreover, such accusations are oft-levied in a way that equates trans/queerness with innocence, as if a "real" trans person would have never committed the shooting. My point, however, is that trans people routinely commit anti-trans violence because of their own investments in whiteness, reflected in reactionary pundits like Caitlyn Jenner, Buck Angel, and Blaire White as well as liberal trans advocacy which, for example, seeks to correct the wrongful imprisonment of trans women in male's prison with their rightful imprisonment in women's prison--strengthening carceral authority opposed to abolishing it altogether.

⁸¹ Carol McKinley, “Anderson Lee Aldrich: A history of family travail, personal violence,” *Denver Gazette*, December 4, 2022 https://denvergazette.com/continuing-coverage/club-q-shooting/anderson-lee-aldrich-a-history-of-family-travail-personal-violence/article_f668d004-728d-11ed-8ae6-eb5e9062514f.html (Accessed March 21, 2024).

⁸² Aya Elamroussi and Raja Razek, “Suspect in Colorado Springs LGBTQ nightclub mass shooting told medical staff ‘he was sorry,’ court document says,” *CNN*, December 8, 2022 <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/08/us/club-q-shooting-arrest-affidavit-unsealed/index.html> (Accessed March 22, 2024).

at Club Q; by 12:02am, the shooter had been detained—but not before they had shot 23 people, killing five.⁸³ Though one might intuit Aldrich’s caustic glee as evidence of the jouissance derived from trans/queer death, doing so merely repeats myopic descriptions of the shooting as a senseless tragedy. Instead, enactments of anti-trans violence, such as the Club Q shooting, might more accurately be described as both generated by and productive of a pleasure *with* principle. Sylvia Wynter, in extending Fanon’s work on sociogeny, terms the “sociogenetic principle” to describe how “each subject has been socialized into a specific mode of being human” via a “culturally programmed” but neurochemically encoded “opioid reward and punishment system.”⁸⁴ That is,

the "socialized" normal subject of each order must, like the organism, also know and classify the world in terms that are of adaptive advantage to its "artificial" or culturally constructed "sense of self," rather than in terms of the veridical truth of what that world empirically is outside its own viewpoint... the stable reproduction of the sociogenic principle... can continue to be so only through the mediation of what the individual human subject feels to be to its own adaptive advantage (i.e. to be "good" and bad for itself), as it interacts with both its physical and its sociohuman environments or "worlds." This is to say, the individual must filter the

⁸³ District Court, El Paso Country Colorado, “The People.”

⁸⁴ Sylvia Wynter. “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like To Be ‘Black’.” In *National Identities and Socio-Political changes in Latin America* ed. by Antonio Gomez-Moriana and Mercedes Duran-Cogan (London, UK: Routledge Press, 2001), 59.

external through the mediation of what he/she is socialized to experience with reference to his/her culture-specific identity as "good" or "bad."⁸⁵

The sociogenetic principle of transphobia is codified in the (anti)social contract, rendering anti-trans violence a species imperative for white humanity. Transphobia, far from mere ignorance or prejudice, is cathected to the fantasy of white racial (re)production which marks transness—not simply trans people—as antagonistic to its own culturally invented conception of life.⁸⁶ White Being comports itself through logics of blood and soil, or progeny and property, such that sex/ual propriety and productive capacity become markers of racial pathology displaced through the metonymic function of transphobia. Perhaps this might explain what compels a trans person to kill both cis and trans people because of their transness; the prepositional ambiguity, here, is intentional as it captures not only the para-ontological drift of transness beyond nominally trans people, but also how trans people come to disavow transness in appealing to whiteness.

Understanding the sociogenetic principle of transphobia is important because it clarifies that enactments of anti-trans violence (like the Club Q shooting) are neither senseless tragedies nor modern inventions but extensions of the world's founding violence. The Club Q shooting, which occurred at a drag show celebrating the

⁸⁵ Ibid, 49.

⁸⁶ Here I am not suggesting the possibility of trans-raciality - that white trans people may lose their whiteness in acquiring transness - but rather emphasizing that the phobia in transphobia is rooted in pre-subjective fear of unnaturally sex/ual flesh established through the anti-black and colonial precept of the European gender binary—codified as the sex/ual state of nature under the (anti)social contract.

Transgender Day of Remembrance, is about more than trans people; it is about transness, a mark grafted onto all the non-trans people in attendance at the club that night. Here, I say non-trans and not cis because imputing gender into the deracinated schema of cis/trans identity mystifies more than it clarifies. The fact is: Aldrich shot 23 people that night because their own transness was predicated on ascendance towards White Being which, in turn, compelled them to kill people whose transness was measured not through the neat parameters of a self-determined identity but immersive proximity.

When Thomas James, the patron who first charged at Aldrich, said that he “wanted to save the family I found,”⁸⁷ it reveals much not only about the family-nation’s others but also other families. Alternative family forms (black, queer, non-western) have long served as sites of reprieve from the relentless forms of siege authorized in the name of securing the white domestic. Gay bars are one such iteration. Though they by no means possess some intrinsically radical essence, many have historically served as (and thus all come to symbolize) a mode of social reproduction beyond the blood and soil logics of the nuclear family. And because they signify (regardless of whether they actually facilitate) the decomposition of the sex/ual state of nature, gay bars are seen as a breach in the (anti)social contract. Both transphobia and counter-insurgency are predicated on such constitutive misrecognitions because ultimately, neither care if one is *actually* trans or *actually* insurgent because they operate preemptively to regulate what a body *can* do. Indeed, perhaps it is the absence of intrinsic transgressive capacity among trans people and gay bars that makes digesting such violence so difficult because it requires rethinking

⁸⁷ Associated Press. “Colorado Shooting Victim ‘wanted to save the family I found,’” *AP News*, November 27, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/shootings-colorado-gay-rights-springs-us-navy-0d9b3067d789faaa7e742da38f3b26da> (Accessed March 22 2024).

the nature of political repression not as an attempt to shut down actualized insurgency but an attempt to contain its potentiality. In other words: *before Stonewall was a riot, it was a bar.*

Though many have sought to distinguish alternative family forms (black, queer, non-western) from the hegemonic imago of the cisheterosexual, white family, doing so reifies the functionalist conception of the family as a variable yet universal social system. Such wounded attachments to the filial as the only intelligible mode of social reproduction creates more eligible signatories for the (anti)social contract but fails to interrupt its fundamental calculus, which employs the family as both an incubator and indicator of sovereign capacity. In doing so, it is assumed that peace can be brokered amidst conditions of war, tempering the horizon of abolition via the promise of reform while severely underestimating the extent to which violence maintains ‘the family’ as a social institution. An abolitionist critique of the family proceeds dialectically with the recognition that in order for ‘the family’ to exist, others cannot. Despite the inherent danger of reforming the family, suggesting that the family must be abolished raises suspicion from both the left and the right. Indeed, it may appear callous to suggest that the family be abolished in the face of relentless colonial violence against Black and Brown families. Further, it may seem dismissive of those who spent years struggling to find their chosen family to imply that such pursuits must be redirected. Yet, such concerns are predicated on the misplaced assumption that it is possible, let alone desirable, to conserve the family. An abolitionist critique of ‘the family’ does not affirm the state-sanctioned destruction of families but clarifies the conditions under which calls to ‘save the family’ come to rationalize the expulsion, dispossession, and elimination of

the family's others which in turn hinders their capacity to form families of their own. In fact, it might proceed under the paradoxical recognition that one may pursue family abolition precisely in the name of their loved ones.⁸⁸

In the evidence packet submitted by the prosecution, a legal pad belonging to Aldrich reads: “please relieve me of my own fate, I’m drowning in my wake. How long must I wait for you to rid me of this hate.”⁸⁹ Though it is impossible to confirm the precise meaning of this transcription - because Aldrich never confessed to a motive nor did they release a manifesto - reading their desire for catharsis in light of their ultimate decision to plot and carry out a public execution demonstrates how the sociogenetic principle of transphobia is culturally programmed and neurochemically encoded in a manner that exceeds the assumed parameters of a rationally organized conscious. To the chagrin of bioessentialists, neurobiology has long offered respite from transphobic pseudoscience⁹⁰ by suggesting that trans people are born with the right brains but the wrong body—while trans people’s secondary sex characteristics might not match their professed gender, their brains display signs of sexual dimorphism that do. I say this not because I believe in the necessity of offering scientific proofs for trans life, but because it

⁸⁸ Sophie Lewis. *Abolish the Family: a Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2022).

⁸⁹ District Court, El Paso Country Colorado. *The People of the State of Colorado v. Anderson Lee Aldrich*. People’s Preliminary Exhibit #64, Colorado Springs, Colorado. https://www.courts.state.co.us/Courts/County/Case_Details.cfm?Case_ID=4928

⁹⁰ Maite Arraiza Zabalegui. “After the *trans brain*: a critique of the neurobiological accounts of embodied trans* identities.” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 46:10 (2024). <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40656-023-00602-6#:~:text=While%20the%20neurobiological%20theory%20about,t%20postulate%20a%20distinctive%20neurobiological.>

clarifies what being trans *feels* like - a gut feeling, a conviction, a fate. Aldrich, who was raised Mormon but here flirts with Calvinism, resigns themselves to predestination - a fate they cannot alter, only beckon to be released from. Yet, what Nietzsche might call a weak will to power - that incubator of resentment which inevitably culminates in life-denying lashouts against the self and other - might more accurately be described as the reactionary and suicidal impulses of whiteness. Aldrich's internal affliction does not simply underscore the imperative of *amor fati* but measures the relation between the atmosphere of violence that installs the sociogenetic principle of transphobia and the choked breath through which trans people digest the necessity of their own non-existence against the impulses of their own body-mind: drowning.

To suggest that anti-trans violence contains both pleasure *and* principle that even trans people are not exempt from pursuing is to say that it is derived from a series of socio-historically produced sensibilities which appear as intractable as the lungs need for air. Yet, the sex/ual state of nature which engenders whiteness also unengenders blackness as the condition of possibility for its gendered-racial status: cisness as whiteness as stasis. Anti-trans violence must therefore be seen as part of the iteratively enacted violence necessary to secure gender's outside, a process integral to one's self-actualization as white men, women, and people.

In the wake of the Club Q shooting, the Department of Homeland Security issued a bulletin warning of a citational chain in which "domestic violent extremists" source inspiration from one another, noting that they had "observed actors on forums known to post racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist content praising the alleged

attacker.”⁹¹ Yet, it is unsurprising to discover that Aldrich made explicit bedfellows with white supremacists because they were themselves a white supremacist. Over the course of the FBI investigation, it was revealed that Aldrich had not only hosted a Neo-Nazi website but was also in close contact with Payton Gendron—who livestreamed himself killing ten Black people outside of a supermarket in Buffalo, New York—as well as Daniel Harris, a UK based white supremacist convicted of inspiring both shootings.⁹² In his videos, Harris called for the “total extermination of subhumans.”⁹³ He also praised white supremacist killing sprees like the 2019 Christchurch massacre, in which a gunman livestreamed himself killing 51 people in a New Zealand mosque.⁹⁴ The investigation confirmed that Aldrich had not only watched Harris’ favorable coverage of the shooting⁹⁵ but had also re-posted his videos on a website featuring clips showing “Aldrich preparing to carry out the attacks.”⁹⁶ Characterized as a “free-speech forum,” the home page of Aldrich’s site featured a video titled “Wrong Targets” which advocated for “killing civilians as part of a larger effort to... ‘cleanse’ society”⁹⁷ noting that “anything other

⁹¹ Department of Homeland Security, “Summary of Terrorism Threat to the United States,” November 30, 2022. <https://www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/national-terrorism-advisory-system-bulletin-november-30-2022> (Accessed March 22, 2024).

⁹² Liam Barnes, “Daniel Harris: UK teen sentenced over videos linked to us shootings” *BBC News*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-derbyshire-6442607>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Josh Halliday, “UK far-right teenager inspired us gay nightclub shooting suspect, judge told” *The Guardian*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/26/uk-far-right-teenager-inspired-us-gay-nightclub-shooting-suspect-judge-told>.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Barnes, “Daniel Harris.”

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

than mass eradication is a waste of time.”⁹⁸ The webpage also “linked out to a ‘brother site’”⁹⁹ featuring clips of the Buffalo and Christchurch shootings. On the night of the Club Q shooting, all footage on the ‘brother site’ was taken down and replaced with four videos labelled “streamtest,” posted “just minutes before the police say Aldrich entered Club Q.”¹⁰⁰

Evidenced by the shooters attempt to livestream the event, the Club Q shooting cannot be divorced from the rhetorical landscape of the ‘trans debate’ because it is itself apart of it. For Aldrich, murder is an expression of free speech that corrects a deficit in the existing publics of the ‘trans debate’ (deemed ‘a waste of time’ by Aldrich and their interlocuters) by simultaneously delivering and enacting the fundamental message of the trans debate: “don’t exist.”¹⁰¹ Laid bare here is not an exceptional rupture in otherwise civil discourse, but the naked form of the ‘trans debate’ in which trans people are neither audience nor interlocuter but evidence. Indeed, Aldrich did not enter Club Q to persuade its patrons but to make them the medium of their message: signaling to their counter-publics that the task remains unfinished and warning other trans people of the cost of living (dying).

⁹⁸ Hannah Beckler, “Preached at, spat on, threatened, Colorado Springs' transgender community grapples with the Club Q attack” *Insider*, December 30, 2022, <https://www.insider.com/anderson-aldrich-suspected-club-q-shooter-steeped-in-homophobic-rhetoric-2022-12>.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Eva Hayward, “Don’t Exist.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2, (2017): 191–194. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3814985>

After Cisness, After Stasis

If stasis is ill-suited to mount a defense of trans life, if both it and cisness must be abolished, what rhetorical theories and praxis might offer a path forward? Here, the abolition of cisness refers not to a process of transferring trans-antagonism into cis-antagonism. Nor does it involve the forceful trans-ing of cis people. Instead, the abolition of cisness entails the undoing of cisness as a social class. It runs parallel to a host of abolitionist calls where, for Marx the worker strives towards their abolition as such, for Stefano Harney the task of all white communities is self-abolition,¹⁰² for Sophie Lewis the project of family abolition emerges precisely out of one's love for their family.¹⁰³ The call to abolish cisness then is premised on a recognition of its inherent strictures—that nobody is born cis, but brutally made so. Indeed,

the structure of gender under capitalism is formed through violence *in all cases*. Trans people are not distinguished by our victimhood. It is in cases of cisgender identification that this coercion has been most effective. Through internalisation of cisgender models, enacted experiences, and lessons learned through direct tuition, all gendered subjects establish

¹⁰² Stefano Harney, Michael Schapira, and Jesse Montgomery. “Stefano Harney (Part 2),” *Full-Stop*, August 10, 2017. <https://www.full-stop.net/2017/08/10/interviews/michael-schapira-and-jesse-montgomery/stefano-harney-part-2/> (Accessed March 22, 2024).

¹⁰³ Lewis, *Abolish the Family*.

internal standards for social behaviour. Everyone attached to a given gender has learned to police themselves according to those standards.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, the abolition of stasis is not as simple as academic divestment from classical rhetorical theory; decentering the Greeks from the syllabi of (under)graduate courses and abandoning antiquated modes of inquiry in academic writing are necessary but wholly insufficient confrontations with stasis, which plays an enthymematic role in the invention of civil society and the calcification of the body. The abolition of stasis is therefore a necessarily enfolded praxis, one that is beyond ‘the discursive’ as a realm which can be partitioned from ‘the material’ and—crucially—one that is beyond the figure of the individual, whose perfunctory assumption of intersubjectivity grounds the aporetic function of debate for civil society—where conflicting interests serve both as its animating condition and the source of its own impossibility. The abolition of stasis, in envisioning a response to the ‘trans debate’ that does not accede to its terms of rejoinder, scandalizes the protocols of debate not through a refusal to engage but through tactical dis/engagement. That is, the abolition of cisness and stasis proceeds not through ‘winning’ the trans debate once and for all, but in forging new audiences and provisioning new evidence—activating forms of interlocution incoherent to the very register of the ‘trans debate.’

On November 25th 2022, 5 days after the Club Q shooting, the Front Range Queer Community (FRQC) vandalized Focus on the Family’s headquarters, spray painting the

¹⁰⁴ Noah Zazanis, “Social Reproduction and Social Cognition: Theorizing (Trans)gender Identity Development in Community Context” in *Transgender Marxism*, ed. by Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O’Rourke, (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

following in large black letters: Their Blood Is On Your Hands. Five Lives Taken.¹⁰⁵ Documenting their action through the Colorado People’s Press, the anonymous group also released a statement addressed to “those fighting for the queer community.” Clarifying that their intent was to speak not with trans-(ant)agonists like Focus on the Family but those immersed in the fight—or war—over queer life (and noticeably not queer rights), the FRQC intervenes in the ‘trans debate’ by removing its presumed audience from the conversation. That is, they are not interested in proving to Focus on the Family (or those in its surrounding rhetorical ecosphere) that blood truly is on their hands, but in illuminating the “atmosphere of violence” that precedes and exceeds the enactment of anti-trans violence. The letter continues: “it is no accident that this happened in Colorado Springs, a city steeped in homophobia, transphobia, and white supremacy. It is no surprise that someone did this in the city that is home to such a hateful organization as Focus on the Family.” By “returning the bodies to the scene of their mystification, or...to the house of their executioner,”¹⁰⁶ the direct action taken by the FRQC in the wake of the Club Q shooting demonstrates an alternative way of approaching the ‘trans debate,’ rendering its commitments to cisness and stasis inoperable by clarifying the Deadly Assemblages that serve as their conditions of possibility.

In this chapter, I develop the concept of Deadly Assemblages as a heuristic to map the irreducibility and historicity of anti-trans violence. As a rhetorical methodology, Deadly Assemblages offers a way for scholars to toggle the relation between scenes and systems of violence by mapping the invention of stasis, a way to think rhetorically

¹⁰⁵ Colorado People’s Press, “The Club q shooting.”

¹⁰⁶ Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*, 65.

without relying on “the contingent as its necessary presupposition.”¹⁰⁷ As an exercise in trans-abolitionist critique, I juxtapose classical theories of assemblage and stasis to probe their racial and gendered inflections, deploying them as units of analysis precisely because it clarifies them as investments in and manifestations of anti-blackness and transphobia. *Deadly Assemblages* thus returns to Deleuze not to brand him ultimately as a theorist of negativity, but as a form of queer disinheritance that reconsiders his work in light of criticisms posed by Black and Native Feminists. I stage this unfaithful return not to excise the true meaning of his work—for indeed, the author is always-already dead—but as an exercise in trans-abolitionist critique that pressures the capacity for a philosophy of affirmation to effectively comprehend anti-trans violence and in turn as an invitation to theorize the affordances of trans rhetorical (im)possibility.

¹⁰⁷ Kelsie, “Blackened Debate.”

CHAPTER TWO: *Trans-fixed: Erotic Speculation and the 'Trans Debate'*

To be marked as trans is to be frozen in time and space for breaching gender's supposed stasis. Shoulders too wide or too slim, torso too boxy or round, hands too large or small, an adam's apple or its absence, a voice off pitch in either direction: each signifiers of a body's (non)normativity in relation to the bio-essentialist codification of sexual difference as ontological truth. Gender's stasis is not given but constantly and brutally maintained by circumscribing the body's proper form in a matrix of scientific and cultural hegemony. Such norms are produced within the context of white supremacy – where the body was first measured through instruments of race science – governed by the patriarchal mandate of gender essentialism, and haunted by the specter of disability as the denotation of pathology. Yet race, gender, and disability collide not merely in the production of prejudicial and stigmatizing discourses that compound on the body but in extracting and manufacturing a normative conception of the body (and maxims about how it ought to be used) from the flesh that precedes it.

It is said that we do not yet know what a body *can do*, but many of us remain brutally aware of what it *cannot*—how we move, what we say, the space we take up are not our choice alone. While much literature has taken up the question of trans (in)visibility and the stakes of (mis)representation for gender non-conforming people, scant attention has been paid to transness as a form of rhetoric beyond attending to the

fact that “trans people are speaking.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, the rhetoricity of transness is manifest not simply through the agential register of speech nor is it indexed exclusively in the bodies of trans people. The resurgent era of sex panic, which was never truly dormant, is increasingly characterized by an anxiety that trans people may escape punishment through being misrecognized as cis (passing) which has in turn spawned a dogged commitment to unmasking trans people masquerading as cis - a process dubbed ‘trans-vestigation.’¹⁰⁹ Such efforts to identify trans people hiding in plain sight circulate everywhere from niche digital enclaves to popular social media accounts, such as Libs of Tiktok, and its targets range from celebrities and politicians to everyday people encountered by transvestigators.

Yet, far from being reducible to its self-avowed practitioners, every segment of the ‘trans debate’ (bathrooms, healthcare, sports, etc.) is preceded and enabled by the surveillant techne of transvestigations to determine who *is* trans and thus (un)deserving of civic inclusion. Transness thus emerges tropologically as a “style of accusation,”¹¹⁰ a floating signifier of sex/ual pathology percolating beyond the bodies of trans people.

¹⁰⁸ Gpat Patterson, “Because Trans People Are Speaking: Notes on Our Field’s First Special Issue on Transgender Rhetorics” *Peitho* 22, no. 4, (Summer 2020). <https://cfshrc.org/article/because-trans-people-are-speaking-notes-on-our-fields-first-special-issue-on-transgender-rhetorics/>

¹⁰⁹ Miles Klee, “Unhinged ‘Transvestigators’ Think They’re the Only Cis People Left,” *Mel Magazine*, <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/transvestigator-celebrity-conspiracy-theories> (Accessed May 5th, 2023).

¹¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, “An Affinity of Hammers.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2, (2016): 22-34. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334151>

Here, the rhetoricity of transness takes form not merely in the interlocutory disclosure of a trans identity (coming out) but the interpellative thrust of ideology which, in turn, supplants dialogic capacity: *the debate is settled, I know what you are*. Transphobia, in delimiting the body's properties through an *a priori* fear of unnaturally sex/ual flesh, reveals its own suicidal logic as it paradoxically requires the collapse of 'cis' and 'trans' as stable signifiers—such that non-trans people become collateral damage in the endeavor to secure the sex/ual state of nature, or *cisness as whiteness as stasis*. While it should take no more than the horror of anti-trans violence hitting its intended target to compel one into a position of solidarity, I expand on this para-ontological conception of transness to demonstrate how the stasis of the 'trans debate' is not trans people but cisness, and that cisness, which operates metonymically *as whiteness as stasis*, must be abolished because it “is killing you, too, however much more softly”¹¹¹ (or harshly). This chapter therefore explores the cultural phenomenon of transvestigations not as an obscure profession but the naked form of cispatriarchal and anti-black desire, tracing its formalization as a conspiracy theory in order to sketch out how the visual economy of transphobia is operationalized writ large.

Gender as Conspiracy: Transphobia and Ungendering

Transvestigations emerge as a formal conspiracy in the QAnon mediasphere, which began in 2017 when an anonymous source claiming “to be a high-level

¹¹¹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe New York Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 140-141.

government official with ‘Q’ clearance” leaked the details of “an alleged secret cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic and pedophilic” elites harvesting adrenochrome - a violet compound of oxidized adrenaline – from children to maintain their immortality.¹¹²

Transvestigators supplement QAnon’s core ideology with a theory called ‘Elite Gender Inversion,’¹¹³ hypothesizing that all those with power and wealth secured their status via a Satanic pact requiring they ‘invert’ the gender they were assigned at birth. Though nowadays one could likely find a transvestigation on anyone, its mythos did begin with one person: former First Lady Michelle Obama. The day after officiating an impromptu same-sex wedding, the late comedian Joan Rivers was asked by a reporter “do you think the United States will see the first gay president?” to which she replied “we already have it with Obama... you know Michelle is a tranny.”¹¹⁴ While Rivers was neither the first or last person to launch suspicion at the authenticity of a Black woman’s gender, her words were taken as prophesy by some as she would die just weeks later in a routine medical procedure,¹¹⁵ ostensible proof that the Obamas had her killed for revealing their secret.

¹¹² Sheila Flynn, “‘Q’ returns with first new post in 18 months for far-right QAnon conspiracy theorists,” *Independent UK*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/qanon-conspiracy-theory-trump-right-b2109369.html>.

¹¹³ Hayden Vernon, “The Conspiracy Theorists Who Think All Celebrities Are Secretly Trans,” *Vice News*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3ak5wk/conspiracy-theorists-believe-all-celebrities-are-secretly-trans>.

¹¹⁴ Meridiana Notizie, “Joan Rivers: Obama è gay e Michelle un trans,” YouTube video, 0:00-0:49, September 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al_Wa-haozo.

¹¹⁵ Alan Duke, “Joan Rivers died from 'therapeutic complications,' medical examiner says” *CNN*, October 16, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/10/16/showbiz/joan-rivers-cause-of-death/index.html>.

While it remains unlikely that Rivers had either the intention or foresight to know that one sound bite would become the grounding event for an anti-black and transphobic conspiracy theory, the flippancy with which she regards Black and trans life illuminates how easily free speech slides into ontological assault. Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, reporting on similar commentary circulating online, argues that portraying Michelle Obama as a man in disguise is tethered to the broader “vilification”¹¹⁶ of Black women. Noah Berlatsky claims that it taps into long-standing tropes of Black women as “masculine and deformed.”¹¹⁷ Tyah-Amoy Roberts who, writing in the context of Megan Thee Stallion,¹¹⁸ contends that the rise in cis Black women being troped as trans stems from a process of ungendering rooted in the afterlife of slavery. While “it is easy to see these things and classify them only as transphobia” ultimately “there is more at work here”¹¹⁹ because trans pathology is not being leveraged against trans people but rather mobilized to deny the capacity for cis people to claim cisness. Rather than a nascent phenomenon, ungendering stems from the long duree of anti-black misogynoir in which Black women are positioned outside the European gender binary—a result of slavery’s production of ungendered flesh and the centrality of whiteness and patriarchy in defining

¹¹⁶ Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, “Under Cuvier’s Microscope: The Dissection of Michelle Obama in the Twenty-First Century” in *Representation and Black Womanhood*, ed. by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230339262_11

¹¹⁷ Noah Berlatsky, “Michelle Obama Trans-Truthers Reveal Persisting Prejudices,” *Pacific Standard*, June 4th, 2017, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/michelle-obama-trans-truthers-reveal-persisting-prejudices-92320> (accessed May 6, 2023).

¹¹⁸ Tyah-Amoy Roberts, “Black Woman Ungendered: How Society Failed Megan Thee Stallion,” *The Word: Tha Stanford Journal of Student Hiphop Research* 2, no. 1 (June 9, 2021): 4–15.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

the parameters of womanhood. Though it originates under conditions of chattel slavery, Roberts argues that “ungendering has been adapted to lean heavily on transphobia because it can no longer rely on the belief that Black women are property instead of human beings with gender” and so “transphobia is used to perpetuate misogyny”¹²⁰ by casting cis Black women as improperly gendered. Yet, the frequency with which cis Black women are typecasted as trans demonstrates not simply how ungendering supersedes transphobia, but how ungendering *structures* transphobia by establishing the original template through which gendered self-determination is denied by the Other.

In the few weeks between her noxious commentary and death, Rivers addressed the backlash she received for her remarks by claiming she meant no harm: “I think it’s a compliment...The most gorgeous women are transgender.”¹²¹ While I remain skeptical of anyone who claims they deployed a transphobic slur endearingly, whether she actually meant it as a compliment or not is irrelevant because transphobia does not operate merely through a linear process of abjection but a twinned project of *philia* and *phobia*. After all, Alex Jones – one of the pundits charged with popularizing rumors that Michelle Obama is trans – was caught watching trans porn on his talk show.¹²² The same people who work

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Lisa Respers, “Joan Rivers jokes Obama is gay, first lady is transgender,” *CNN*, October 20th, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/07/04/showbiz/celebrity-news-gossip/joan-rivers-michelle-obama-gay-transgender/index.html> (Accessed May 5th, 2023).

¹²² Josh Jackman, “Anti-trans InfoWars host Alex Jones explains why transgender porn was on his phone” *Pink News*, August 29th, 2018, https://www.thepinknews.com/2018/08/29/transgender-porn-alex-jones-infowars-explains-phone/?_gl=1*17mwej4*_ga*OTY0ODMyODE3LjE2NzczODc2MzA.*_ga_BX9CRJ4BBP*MTY3NzM4NzY2Ny4xLjEuMTY3NzM4Nzc0Ny42MC4wLjA (Accessed May 5th, 2023).

tirelessly to eradicate trans people from existence also demand we remain available for consumption because what animates both transphobia and ungendering is the premise that the world and its inhabitants are mere surrogates for the proper(tied) subjects of civil society—whose ascendance is achieved through the economic, symbolic, and cultural hegemony of White Being. Transphobia, and the transphilia that closely follows it, cannot be explained through a scientific dissection of the political economy because it is a non-rational drive located in a libidinal economy structured by anti-blackness, which perverts the capacity to assign rhyme or reason. That is, transphobia does not follow a series of rational axioms nor is it animated by an internally consistent logic, evident in the way Alex Jones has, at different points, claimed that Michelle Obama is both a stealth trans woman and a closeted trans man.¹²³ Rather, transphobia and ungendering are entangled in the desire to maintain the proper(tied) subject as humanity's stasis, courting subservience with the roles anti-blackness and cisheteropatriarchy assign at birth.

For many transvestigators, the death of Joan Rivers was ground-zero for their awakening—indisputable proof that an elite cabal of trans people run the world. While the conspiracy began with the supposed outing of Michelle Obama, it has since branched out rhizomatically as this loose ensemble of reactionaries competes to prove that they are 'the only cis people left.'¹²⁴ Since they lack a grounding manifesto, Facebook groups,

¹²³ Chloe Farand, "Michelle Obama is transgender, we all know it': Alex Jones claims he has 'proof' the former First Lady is a man," *Independent*, August 25th, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/alex-jones-michelle-obama-man-proof-infowars-conspiracy-theorist-sandy-hook-a7911996.html> (Accessed May 5th, 2023).

¹²⁴ Klee, "Unhinged Transvestigators."

4chan threads, and Twitter accounts each yield different lists of “hidden transgenders”¹²⁵ they claim to have exposed, ranging from Gordon Ramsay to Niki Haley to LeBron James. Despite their internal differences, what remains true of all transvestigators is a paranoid concern with passing—rooting out trans people who they believe have, so far, evaded detection. Transphobia thus operates not merely through attempts to strip self-avowed trans people of their civic rights but also unmasking the trans people supposedly hiding in plain sight. By transforming the body into a text met with a hermeneutic of suspicion, transvestigators demonstrate how gender itself has become constitutively conspiratorial.

Here free speech not only guarantees the unfreedom of others but paradoxically reveals its own impossibility as the Other is reduced to a state of affectability without affective possibility—unable to speak freely or be heard fully. The body therefore becomes a site not of rhetorical or agential possibility but the means by which one is excluded from the demos through a prior determination that one has transgressed the stasis they are supposed to occupy. The consequences of being clocked as trans are not reducible to the act of linguistic (mis)recognition. Defying disciplinary assumptions of logocentrism, anti-trans rhetoric bleeds through language onto the body as interpellation supplants interlocution, communicating without the need for speech. As such, enactments of anti-trans violence are destined to exceed their mark because the (mis)recognition from which they proceed leaves no room for self-determination. Put otherwise, transphobia does not require its target actually *be* trans because it secures *cisness as whiteness as stasis* through viciously disavowing anyone positioned outside, crystallized in moments

¹²⁵ Purple-pill, “World Stage” February 9, 2021, purple-pill.net (Accessed May 5th, 2023).

where butch lesbians are removed from bathrooms for looking too manly,¹²⁶ where cis women are ‘wrongly’ placed in men’s prisons,¹²⁷ when Black women are assaulted for being perceived as trans¹²⁸, or when a man kills his cis wife because he believed she was secretly trans.¹²⁹ The visual economy of transphobia, which allots the punishments handed down by the ‘trans debate’, is carried out in accordance with the body’s own ideological construction in a matrix of racial and sexual hegemony. Anti-trans violence is necessarily trans-individual because its target is not individual trans people but what transness communicates: desire run loose, an erotic order breached.

Save the Child, Kill the Kid

¹²⁶ Ben Cusack, “Lesbian couple kicked out of women's toilet at cinema because security thought they were MEN” *Mirror*, January 14th, 2015, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/lesbian-couple-kicked-out-womens-4977298.amp?__twitter_impression=true (Accessed May 5th, 2023).

¹²⁷ Daily Mail, “Grandmother, 55, sues Miami prison after staff book her as a MAN despite strip search and lock her up in a male jail with 40 men who taunted and leered at her” December 1st, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6450005/Grandmother-visiting-Miami-55-mistakenly-booked-jail-MAN.html> (Accessed May 5th, 2023).

¹²⁸ Pocharapon Neammanee, “Woman Says Deli Clerk Assaulted Her After Mistaking Her as Transgender,” *Huffington Post*, October 13, 2023, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/staten-island-deli-trans-lawsuit-alleged-assault_n_65283212e4b03ea0c0045c37

¹²⁹ Terry Camp, “Attorney says insanity plea is right outcome, but Gratiot County man's son worried that he could be released,” *ABC*, February 8th, 2022, https://www.abc12.com/news/crime/attorney-says-insanity-plea-is-right-outcome-but-gratiot-county-mans-son-worried-that-he/article_17e4ece2-892b-11ec-aed9-cbf2e2b383f9.html (Accessed May 5th, 2023).

Trans(ant)agonists, in an appeal to rhetorical civility, profess themselves not as phobic crusaders bent on eradicating trans people but a vanguard of the oppressed singularly dedicated to protecting a marginalized social class: children. Children, so the story goes for transvestigators, are normatively protected by the nuclear family, but threatened by a ring of transgender, Satan-worshipping pedophiles performing blood rituals on child surrogates. Harkening white supremacist myths of blood libel and heteronormative anxieties about the threat trans/queer people pose to children, transvestigators suture the contradictions of civil society by presenting it as an otherwise well-functioning system—one in which children are normatively safe. Mystified here is the way capitalist social reproduction inherently relies on surrogacy: uncompensated labor in the domestic cohering the possibility of wage labor, progeny that is meant to accumulate property, and a free market premised on conditions of global unfreedom.

Calls to ‘save the children’ saturate the rhetorical landscape of the ‘trans debate.’ Chaya Raichik, who runs the previously anonymous social media account Libs of Tiktok, situates her introduction to politics in an interview conducted by Taylor Lorenz in 2024, the Washington Post journalist who originally ‘outed’ Raichik as the accounts owner in 2022. “COVID radicalized me,”¹³⁰ Raichik reports, and “I stumbled upon this whole movement and I was absolutely appalled by... the way that they come after our most innocent and vulnerable population, our kids.”¹³¹ Libs of Tiktok - which boasts its largest following on Twitter but also appears on Instagram, Facebook, Gab, and Gettr -

¹³⁰ Taylor Lorenz, “LibsofTikTok Chaya Raichik – Taylor Lorenz – FULL INTERVIEW,” Youtube Video, 1:20-1:22, February 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XL-40gDBRx0>.

¹³¹ Ibid, 1:51-2:16.

“amplifies and condemns”¹³² edited posts which confirm Raichik’s belief that the ‘LGBT community’ is merely a front for child grooming. From teachers vocalizing their support for queer kids, to doctors describing gender-affirming care for trans youth, to clips of drag shows - Libs of Tiktok collapses a diverse series of proofs into a unified conspiracy. But the nature of Raichik’s conspiracy does not conform to classical conspiratorial archetypes - characterized by meticulously crafted hypotheses and a reactionary theory of power. Instead, it works enthymematically by suggesting that *something* is going on - allowing viewers to fill in the blanks.

In *A Lot of People Are Saying: the New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russel Muirhead identify the emergence of “conspiracy *without* the theory.”¹³³ Tracing the differences between classical conspiracy theories (such as the belief that the Moon landing was faked) and its contemporary renditions (resembled by ‘birther’ conspiracies hurled at former President Barack Obama, claims that the 2020 election was stolen, and the rhizomatic mediasphere of QAnon) Rosenblum and Muirhead argue that what is ‘new’ about ‘new conspiracism’ is the way it achieves salience “not [with] evidence, but repetition.”¹³⁴ Although Libs of Tiktok certainly gains an affective stickiness through the recursive surveillance of trans/queer people, it is misguided to suggest that it is entirely absent of evidence, argument, or

¹³² Bonnie Kristian, “Out with Alex Jones-style conspiracy theorizing. In with Libs of Tiktok.” *The Week*, April 19, 2022, <https://theweek.com/conspiracy-theories/1012733/out-with-alex-jones-style-conspiracy-theorizing-in-with-libs-of-tiktok>.

¹³³ Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russel Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying: the New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 2-3.

theory. Indeed, Libs of Tiktok - rather than being siloed under the category of conspiracy (new or old) - might better be understood as an ideology.

For Louis Althusser, the “elementary ideological effect” is the invention of intersubjectivity: “the ‘obviousness’ that you and I are subjects” demonstrates the “peculiarity of ideology” in “that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’) obviousness as obviousness.”¹³⁵ Ideology, according to Althusser, “has no history.” Instead, it is a “function”: “‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects”¹³⁶ through the twinned forces of *recognition* and *misrecognition* (interpellation). Raichik, now a comfortable “face of anti-LGBTQ hate and extremism,”¹³⁷ has held off on clarifying her particular ideological investments, but has repeatedly accepted interviews with “QAnon adherents” and “neo-nazi hosts”¹³⁸ such as DeAnna Lorraine and Sebastian Gorka. Raichik’s ideology, however, need not be professed in order to be traced for ideology is not simply contained in the interiorized domain of consciousness but played out intersubjectively in acts of (mis)recognition that mark the Other as in/cognizable. The ideology anchoring trans(ant)agonists like Raichik is the recursive investment in *cisness as whiteness as stasis* mediated through the figure of ‘the child’ which denotes an inside that rationalizes the disavowal of its outside.

Making her public debut in an interview with Tucker Carlson, Raichik claims she was compelled to create Libs of Tiktok after realizing how “the LGBT community has

¹³⁵ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 1971, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Justin Horowitz, “Chaya Raichik’s far-right media tour,” *Media Matters*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.mediamatters.org/lib-s-tiktok/chaya-raichik-s-far-right-media-tour>.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

become this cult.”¹³⁹ In a review of *Irreversible Damage: the Transgender Craze Seducing our Daughters* - a proficient display of transphobic pseudoscience - Mary Eberstadt compares the ‘cult’ of QAnon to what she calls the “trans youth cult.”¹⁴⁰ For Eberstadt, “the difference is that QAnon never penetrated the medical establishment, elite and mainstream media, entertainment industry, academia, public schools, corporations, polite society, churches, all three branches of the federal government, and, increasingly, the American legal system. The other craze has.”¹⁴¹ While rebuking the conspiratorial posture of QAnon, Eberstadt simultaneously evokes its specter in ‘Elite Gender Inversion’ - suggesting the existence of an elite transgender cabal preying on children and demonstrating the Deadly Assemblages at play in the ‘trans debate.’ The downstream of formalized conspiracies into digestible public discourse - evidenced by Raichik and Eberstadt’s (dis)association with QAnon - demonstrates how the stasis of the ‘trans debate’ might more accurately be described as “metastasis.”¹⁴² Indeed, the “logical-propositional model” of stasis buckles in the face of such rhetorical (dis)association as the ruse of stasis is leveraged to conceal the “affective connections between audience and rhetor and the economy of desire that sustains them.”¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Alejandra Caraballo (@esqueer_), “Chaya Raichik went on Tucker Carlson,” Twitter, December 27, 2022, 9:15am, 0:10-0:14, https://twitter.com/Esqueer_/status/1607741993089892353?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1607741993089892353%7Ctwgr%5Edb0bdba4d2d214d05b0029b66a7b376efe632b1c%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.mediamatters.org%2Flibs-tiktok%2Flibs-tiktoks-chaya-raichik-appears-qanon-adherents-show-attack-lgbtq-community

¹⁴⁰ Mary Eberstadt, “Girls Will Be Boys,” *Claremont Review of Books* (Spring 2021), <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/girls-will-be-boys/>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.;1

¹⁴² Calum Matheson, “Stasis in the Net of Affect,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 52:1 (2019): 71-77. <https://doi.org/10.5325/philtrhet.52.1.0071>.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Concluding her review, Eberstadt urges all “individual Ls, Gs, Bs, and adult Ts who want no part of this experiment [to] repudiate the claim that they endorse it.”¹⁴⁴ By separating ‘T’ from the rest of the acronym in specifying her appeal to trans adults, Eberstadt demonstrates how the central exigency of contemporary sex panic is a crisis of representation regarding the ontological and referential stability of the (cis) child—who is only be imagined to be trans under conditions of violence, coercion, and duress. Raichik, gesturing towards the ‘trans youth cult’ imagined by Eberstadt, condemns its prescribed telos: “there’s nothing logical about it, there’s nothing logical about chopping off kid’s body parts, there’s nothing logical about giving kids porn in school. There’s two sexes and that’s it.”¹⁴⁵

In January 2024, Raichik was appointed to the “Oklahoma Library Media Advisory Committee” by district superintendent Ryan Walters, despite having “visited [Oklahoma] only once.”¹⁴⁶ Walters, less than a year prior, released a statement “describing transgender students as a ‘threat’ in schools” and recruited Raichik to aid his mission to protect “Oklahoma students from what he called ‘woke ideology.’”¹⁴⁷ Before her appointment, in August 2023, Raichik and Walters colluded in an exposé of a librarian at Union Public Schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Raichik uploaded a video of the

¹⁴⁴ Eberstadt, “Girls Will Be Boys.”

¹⁴⁵ Lorenz, “LibsofTikTok.”

¹⁴⁶ Taylor Lorenz, “How Libs of Tiktok became a powerful presence in Oklahoma schools,” *The Washington Post*, February 24, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/02/24/libsof-tiktok-oklahoma-nonbinary-teen-death/>.

¹⁴⁷ Andy Weber, “Ryan Walters appoints Lib of Tiktok creator Chaya Raichik to state agency advisory committee,” *KOCO News*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.koco.com/article/oklahoma-ryan-walters-chaya-raichik-libsof-tiktok/46518260>.

librarian next to a book shelf with the caption “POV: teachers in your state are dropping like flies but you are still just not quite finished pushing your woke agenda at the public school” - a caption she inserted over the librarians original post, which reads: “My radical liberal agenda is teaching kids to love books and be kind - hbu??”¹⁴⁸ Walters shared the post, adding that “woke ideology is real and I am here to stop it.” A day later, “Union Public Schools was the target of bomb threats for six days.”¹⁴⁹ While both Walters and Raichik have denied any responsibility for the bomb threats with tepid condemnations of violence, elsewhere Raichik admits her perverse gratification: “they made up the term scholastic terrorist for us. So honestly, like that makes me feel really important.”¹⁵⁰

A month after Raichik joined the committee, Nex Benedict, a non-binary teenager and member of the Choctaw Nation, was assaulted in a bathroom at Owasso High School by three of his peers. After enduring over a year of relentless bullying for being openly trans, Nex “tipped water over three girls”¹⁵¹ who were harassing him—which they took as license to leave him bruised and bloodied against the bathroom floor. The next day, Nex died. The autopsy ruled Nex’s death a suicide, noting that he succumbed not to blunt

¹⁴⁸ Tyler Kingkade, “Democrats push for investigation of Ryan Walters, Oklahoma’s fireboard schools superintendent,” *NBC News*, August 29, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ryan-walters-oklahoma-schools-impeachment-investigation-democrats-rcna102407>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ari Drennen (@AriDrennen), “Libs of TikTok creator Chaya Raichik on January 24, 2023.” Twitter, February 20, 2024, 12:33pm, <https://twitter.com/AriDrennen/status/1759994589065380209>.

¹⁵¹ Bevan Hurley, “Nex Benedict’s family will privately investigate bullied non-binary student’s death after fight,” *The Independent*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/nex-benedict-death-cause-investigation-b2501551.html>.

force trauma but an overdose induced the night after the assault.¹⁵² Raichik took this as indisputable proof of her immunity, suggesting that it once and for all lays to rest the Left’s insistence “that I was somehow responsible for Nex’s death.”¹⁵³ Yet beyond the classically individuated accounts of suicide, “suicide signifies... the continuance of an anti-trans/queer social order that is not simply hostile towards so many but is built as hostility itself”¹⁵⁴:

Again, the stories are retold of troubled outcasts, unable to adjust to the demands of a social that cannot bear their beautiful disruption—a narrative insistence, played out as legal justification, on singularity and that singularity’s nonequivalence. This discursive cloistering locates the suicidal in the abjection of their own making...to cauterize suicidal ideation into an individual deficiency...To believe in the singularity of suicide relinquishes any claims to context—the conditions of unlivability—that so many are expected to survive...suicide is the wish fulfillment of a murderous culture that insists this “open season” never

¹⁵² Molly Hennessey-Fiske, “Nex Benedict autopsy lists head wounds but says suicide was cause of death,” *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/03/27/nex-benedict-nonbinary-oklahoma-bullying-death/>.

¹⁵³ Libs of TikTok (@Libsoftiktok), “BREAKING: The medical examiner just released Nex’s cause of death,” Twitter, March 13, 2024, 4:33pm, https://twitter.com/libsoftiktok/status/1768012414014861651?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1768012414014861651%7Ctwgr%5E2aa610d82ae1cbf7c57fa8d31735b932e47ecb79%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.oklahoman.com%2Fstory%2Fnews%2F2024%2F03%2F13%2Fnex-benedict-suicide-news-lgbtq-advocates-libs-of-tiktok-react-social-media%2F72962329007%2F

¹⁵⁴ Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*, 93.

ends. Suicide becomes murder by other means—perpetrator and victim fall into each other and the social is exonerated.¹⁵⁵

Whether Nex died from the assault or from his attempt to numb the lingering trauma does not change the fact that another trans child was stolen by the ‘atmosphere of violence’ that delimits our breath. Oklahoma state laws mandate students use the restroom corresponding to the sex listed on their birth certificate, ostensibly to protect them from assault, but when Nex entered the women’s restroom out of place as a transmasculine teen, he was sentenced to death for the crime of living as trans. And so, amidst a flurry of reasons why ‘trans people’ must be eliminated for the sake of ‘the children’ what remains unimagined is the ‘trans child’ who is understood as never having existed in the first place. What goes unsaid in the ‘trans debate’ (or what cannot be said in the first place) is as important as what is spoken, for every absence is a presence. Those who take up the ‘trans debate’ in order to ‘save the children’ have already announced their investment in a racial-gendered schematic of lives worth living not simply by disavowing trans children, but all those living beyond the protected status of childhood (which is always a refraction of white humanity). Indeed, the presumption that fastening children to the sex/ual state of nature would ‘save’ Black and Brown children living under conditions of siege renders anti-blackness and colonialism unenunciative as threats to children, revealing how the symbol of ‘the Child’ is merely an enthymeme for white futurity. The Child must then be scandalized as the same false universal many now

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 93-4.

understand the human to be, one that actually authorizes the abandonment of particular children in its name; save the child, kill the kid.¹⁵⁶

Towards the Trans Erotic

“What your run-of-the-mill homophobe responds to is not necessarily—without, perhaps, prior knowledge—what someone is doing sexually in the bedroom behind closed doors; rather, it is how they perceive nonheterosexual desire on and around the body: that is, meanings accrue in, say, the way a hand moves, the inflection of the voice, and the clothes worn, which are then taken as indices of sexuality.”¹⁵⁷

Sexual speculation haunts the discursivity of transness because transness is the specter conjured at every scene of sexual speculation. Indeed, it is “transantagonism that makes otherwise privatized sexualities (for example, L, G, B) legible as transgressions”¹⁵⁸ through indexing the flesh as a site of nonnormative desire and it is anti-blackness and colonialism that structures transantagonism through inventing the

¹⁵⁶ Jose Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), rebukes Lee Edelman’s deracinated critique of reproductive futurism by insisting that “all children are not the privileged white babies to whom contemporary society caters.” Heike Schotten, in *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (2018), reconciles Muñoz’s critique by offering a corrective for Edelman’s “universalist errors,” approaching ‘the Child’ not as a privileged social class but a rhetorical cudgel for European modernity. I extend this symbolic theorization of the child, juxtaposing it to the ‘kids’ it necessarily abandons.

¹⁵⁷ Marquis Bey, “Trouble Genders: ‘LGBT’ Collapse and Trans Fundamentality,” *Hypatia* 36:1 (2021): 191-206. doi:10.1017/hyp.2020.52

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

body as always already cis and white. The very enunciation of trans life, and particularly of the trans child, is measured as an erotic expression because it reveals how the European gender binary is itself predicated on grooming subjects to accept it as an organic mode of relation. *Cisness as whiteness as stasis* establishes the only natural expression of desire as the opportunity to become or serve a Patriarch—its principal formula which naturalizes the human as an organism that accumulates property and yields progeny.

Transness, as a paraontological “force of refusal”¹⁵⁹ not simply trans people, defies such stasis by breaching the psycho-sexual contract of white supremacy, reminding us that it is in fact *not* necessary to fall in line with the roles assigned to you at birth by cis patriarchy and white supremacy. The fact that one’s assignation as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ in fact ordains nothing, that our desires are not given but made, that we may jettison self-interest in their pursuit and still wind up living fuller than before, that precarity does not subsume joy threatens the conceptual enterprise of *cisness as whiteness as stasis* which relies on courting subjects into a fetish for sex/ual hegemony and the nuclear family. Against relentless pathologization, demands for sexual consumption, and calls for our elimination, we must think beyond appeals to juridicality. Appending transness to the figure of the rights-bearing subject is misguidedly cleaved to an individuated, rather than structural, account of transphobia and offers a defense of trans life only through the corrupted frame of autonomy. But insofar as transness is reduced to a choice, it will always be framed as a bad one—a privilege reserved for adults, a risk whose costs can outweigh its benefits.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Instead, moving towards the trans erotic offers a way of accounting for trans life without recourse to a narrowly defined trans-normative subject. Building off Audre Lorde, who characterizes the erotic as a “measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings,”¹⁶⁰ I situate a “trans-individual transness”¹⁶¹ as the erotic’s loci not to subsume all expressions of gender under the monolithic rubric of trans identity but because transness para-ontologically expresses “the desire to get out, to change something fundamentally and through the body,”¹⁶² given in the defiance of gender’s stasis. The trans-erotic is neither an index that allows us to calculate our level of fulfillment in the world-as-is nor does it measure the sex/ual impositions that trans people are subject to. Instead, it is an expression of what Marquis Bey calls ‘trans fundamentality,’ grounded in the recognition that “in the beginning is trans.”¹⁶³ That is, transness is not simply what comes after cisness - a linear cosmogony that naturalizes cisness as the ontological anchor of humanity - but what exists before it, the anoriginal flow of desire forcibly disavowed in the process of cis self-actualization (see Chapter 3). Transition, therefore, is not merely the announcement of an authentically gendered subject but “a material intervention into the conditions of the social arrangement, as well as the political field around it” demonstrating the malleability of gender and the social

¹⁶⁰ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power,” delivered at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, August 25, 1978. https://www.centraleurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/audre_lorde_cool-beans.pdf

¹⁶¹ Luce DeLire, “Full Queerocracy Now!: Pink Totalitarianism and the Industrialization of Libidinal Agriculture” *E-flux Journal* #117,” April 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/117/386679/full-queerocracy-now-pink-totalitarianism-and-the-industrialization-of-libidinal-agriculture/>.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Claire Colebrook, “What Is It Like to Be a Human?,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (May 1, 2015): 227–43, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2867472>.

arrangement of desire because “when you transition, so must everyone else around you.”¹⁶⁴

The so-called era of trans visibility is marked by the incorporation of trans subjects who proximate themselves to *cisness as whiteness as stasis* which channels, rather than upends, transantagonism into a generalized conspiracy dedicated to unveiling the truth of the gendered body. While there is no ‘correct’ way to respond to being interpellated as trans - for what proceeds from such acts of (mis)recognition is inflected by the gaze that casts it - the mere refusal of ‘visibility’ falls short in articulating an interstitial response to coercive gender assignation. Moreover, it is the invisibility of (or perhaps the refusal to imagine) the trans child which commissions their disavowal. Thus emerges an aporetic double-bind: how can we name that which is under erasure knowing the limits of naming and the trappings of visibility?

In 2011, Anderson Cooper interviewed the pop star Lady Gaga on the CBS series *60 Minutes*. Cooper inquired about a rumor he heard that Gaga has a certain “male appendage,”¹⁶⁵ inviting her to confirm or deny the allegations. Swirling a fake diamond in her mouth, Gaga replies: “Maybe I do... would it be so bad?”¹⁶⁶ Later, in August of that year, Jo Calderone attended the MTV’s Video Music Awards in Gaga’s place, “performing her hit song, “You and I,” and accepting her awards.”¹⁶⁷ Jo, of course, was a male persona played by Gaga—canonically her ex-lover—which only heightened “the

¹⁶⁴ DeLire, “Full Queerocracy Now!”

¹⁶⁵ Jezebel, “Lady Gaga Shut Down Anderson Cooper’s Transphobic Question,” Youtube Video, May 5, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28nAuWz5eZU>.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Theresa L. Geller, “Trans/Affect, Monstrous Masculinities, and the Sublime Art of Lady Gaga,” *Digital Grinnell*, 2012, <https://digital.grinnell.edu/islandora/object/grinnell:3403>.

(mis)perception of Gaga as transvestite—something Calderone himself insinuates in his statement, ‘I mean I think I’d be okay with it, you know, if I found out that she was really[...],’ the ellipsis here implying, I think, ‘a man.’”¹⁶⁸ Gaga’s performance of gendered indeterminacy conveys the trans-eroticization of flesh, in which transness operates not in a dialectic of affirmation/negation (‘I am’ or ‘am not’ trans) but a refusal of discernibility that turns the gaze back towards those fetishistically trans-fixed. Gaga responds to being transvestigated by posing another question: would it be so bad? And the answer is yes—but that’s okay. Counter to the neoliberal fantasy of happiness and wholeness, “There are no good outcomes in transition. There are only people, begging to be taken seriously.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Andrea Long Chu, “My New Vagina Won’t Make Me Happy” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html> (accessed May 4, 2023).

CHAPTER THREE: *Trans Apophasis: Apophatic Transness*

“What is common to all are cosmogonies and origin narratives. The representations of origin, which we ourselves invent, are then retroactively projected onto an imagined past. Why so? Because each such projection is the shared storytelling origin out of which we are initiatedly reborn. In this case we are no longer, as individual biological subjects, primarily born of the womb; rather, we are both initiated and reborn as fictively instituted inter- altruistic kinrecognizing members of each such symbolically re- encoded genre- specific referent- we. This is to say we are all initiatedly reborn—renatus in Saint Thomas Aquinas’s Christian term—to subjectively experience ourselves as subjects of the same encoded symbolic life kind. Why this imperative? Because for all genre-specific subjects who are reborn from the same eusocializing origin myth and / or cosmogony, their genetically encoded individual biological life and its attendant imperative of naked self- preservation must at the same time be, via initiation, aversively experienced as symbolic death.” Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” (2015) pg. 34

“In the beginning is transitivity, and it is the subsequent metalepsis and fetishization of identity that displaces this force that cannot without conceptual and political violence be limited to difference between human and human, male and female, straight and queer, human and animal, or life and nonlife. It should not, therefore, be a question of including the more subtle differences of transindividuating singularities in questions of humans, animals, or any other being, for inclusion only expands the range of the individual. Far from recognizing others whose sexual identity is more complex than the norm as individuals, one might rather see “the” individual as a covering over of a sexual complexity that cannot be stabilized into either inter- or intra-species difference.” Claire Colebrook, “What is it Like to be Human?” (2017) pgs. 229-230

“Visibility makes possible, but it also disciplines: disciplines gender, disciplines genre.” Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (2015) pg. 86

There’s something queer about the colon: a signifier of dependency. Suggesting the reliance of one clause on another, as in I can’t stand to exist without you. And, this dependency is not reciprocal, but not because one side is unattached. It’s just that we’re

off balance and balance sheets. We don't deal in "terms of exchange."¹⁷⁰ When we say it's "give-and-give, [and]/or take-and-take"¹⁷¹ we mean live (in)dependently or *in* dependency—what da Silva might call "difference without separability,"¹⁷² a gamble we ante "double blind."¹⁷³ And maybe it's not for everyone and maybe that's okay. "Because nobody does this when they are up, and I mean it. *Nobody* does this when they are up—but lots of people do it when they're down."¹⁷⁴ In being down, 'we' are not the inter-altruistic, genre-specific elaboration of the human as Man that Wynter decries—a togetherness predicated on the temporary unison of otherwise separable 'I's. Indeed, 'we' may not even count as a 'we' insofar as 'we' are not subjects bound to the coordinates of space and time. Who and where we are remains "an absolutely open secret."¹⁷⁵ No credit reports means no credit or reports, which is to say welcome. Or goodbye. Either way, we remain immersed in this unfinished experiment in "seizing the means of social reproduction."¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos, "Others forms of conviviality," *Women and Performance*, October 30, 2013, <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/ampersand-articles/other-forms-of-conviviality.html>.

¹⁷¹ Constantina Zavitsanos, "Giving it Away: Constantina Zavitsanos on Disability, Debt, and Dependency." By Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez. *Art Papers* (January 9, 2019).

¹⁷² Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," *Catalogue of the 32a São Paulo Art Biennial, 'Incerteza viva' (Living Uncertainty)* (2016): 57-65.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/574dd51d62cd942085f12091/t/5c157d5c1ae6cf4677819e69/1544912221105/D+Ferreira+da+Silva+-+On+Difference+Without+Separability.pdf>

¹⁷³ Zavitsanos, "Giving it Away."

¹⁷⁴ Constantina Zavitsanos and Park McArthur, "The Guild of the Poor Brave Things," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017) pg. 239.

¹⁷⁵ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (Colchester New York Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2021), 58.

¹⁷⁶ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe New York Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 74.

To say ‘abolish cisness: abolish stasis’ implies that the relation between the two projects is necessarily dependent, that abolishing cisness does not make sense without abolishing stasis. In contradistinction to gender abolition, which concedes gender’s overrepresentation through Man to be the only possible way of thinking and doing gender, I offer that the problem may not be gender constitutively but rather the dominant *genre* of gender (cisness) which invents itself as ontological fact (stasis) through cosmogenic narratives that render cisness primordial and *a priori*: humanity’s origin and, therefore, its stasis. Instead, we refuse the invitation to coalesce around the project of gender abolition – which characterizes gender merely as “a way of calculating the body,”¹⁷⁷ capable only of producing “more roomy, responsive, lushier prisons” in denying “the possibility to not be a gender”¹⁷⁸ – in favor of an alternative cosmogony that sees transness as the “ground state of life.”¹⁷⁹ Here, “trans[ness] is not to be conflated simply with a purported ontological state of being transgender”¹⁸⁰ but a paraontological relation “stemming from a force of refusal.”¹⁸¹ That is, transness is not given in the announcement of oneself as trans; rather, transness is genesis: gender’s inherent substrata.

We like to think we know not only what transness is but who is trans. Some say we were born this way and others insist we became this way, but the thing is neither are

¹⁷⁷ Marquis Bey, *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2023) p. 137.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁷⁹ Zavitsanos, “Giving it Away.”

¹⁸⁰ Bey, “Trouble Genders.”

¹⁸¹ Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021) p. 178.

true. Transness is not something you can be or become, but something you believe in: a theology, as in *Baby, you are my religion*.¹⁸² For “in the beginning is trans,”¹⁸³ that un-essence that precedes inscription and enunciation—gender’s enforcement and performance. Contrary to popular belief, nobody is born cis. In fact, no *body* is born. Every *body* is constructed, circumscribed, and brutally maintained: a process of dys/selection necessary to cohere each era’s prevailing *genre* of humanity. Genre, like gender, stems from the Latin word *genus*¹⁸⁴ which, in the sciences, denotes a way of classifying matter through purportedly objective, biological differences. And though genre, gender, and genus present themselves as ontologically given they are nothing less than suicidal strictures imposed onto us. We become cis through a brutal process of trial and error. We learn the ropes of appropriate gender performances by having our transgressions punished, our transness exorcized. We internalize norms about what men and women can or cannot do and thereby invest in the presumption that gender has stasis: some mutually agreed upon terms and conditions, a socio-sexual contract that proceeds by acknowledging cisness as the ontological anchor of humanity. That is, if *any body* is born *any way* it is as trans because transness is primordial and para-ontological, an excess that has no essence aside from its eternal refusal, that which exists *before* not after cisness.

¹⁸² Marie Carter, *Baby, You are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology Before Stonewall*, (London, UK: Routledge Press, 2013).

¹⁸³ Colebrook, “What is it Like to be a Human?”

¹⁸⁴ Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in *On Being Human as Praxis* ed. by Katherine McKittrick (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2015) pg. 11.

And sure, “some will say that their transition was about themselves and themselves only,”¹⁸⁵ delineating what transness is to mount a defense in its name, responding to claims that our lives require explanation with elucidation. We see trans women locked up in male prisons and demand trans rights, correcting wrongful imprisonment with rightful imprisonment. We witness trans healthcare being outlawed and plea that we are sick and need to be cured. We try to find some ground to launch critique, maintaining faith in the possibility of equilibrium. If only they understood what it was like to *be trans*, maybe they would come around. But they will not because they cannot. Nobody knows what being trans is like. That is what makes it so beautiful. And horrifying. Rather than search for arguments to codify trans personhood within the ‘trans debate’, might we acknowledge that “beingness [is] the problem, rather than the solution, for addressing antitrans violence,”¹⁸⁶ venturing instead to consider transness theologically, neither as destination nor destiny but as exodus and unbecoming, not as something you possess but something you are possessed by? In other words, if transness can only come into being through occupying stasis, a “stasis that is itself a death,”¹⁸⁷ might we come to the defense of trans life through a faithful abandonment of the very integer of life and the individuation it implies?

In this chapter, I attempt to engage the contradictions of (mis)representation and (in)visibility subtending the ‘trans debate’ by offering an anoriginal cosmogony of transness. Because “any model of where trans people ‘come from’ - any at all - is a model

¹⁸⁵ DeLire, “Full Queerocracy Now!”

¹⁸⁶ Eva Hayward, “Don’t Exist,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 4: 2, May 2017, 191-194, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3814985>.

¹⁸⁷ Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 190.

that by default calls into question the care of anyone who does not meet its etiological profile,”¹⁸⁸ I move away from attempts to provide a historic or scientific proof of trans life in favor of a theological turn that rebukes the desire to make transness knowable through western epistemes, instead taking the condition of trans (in)communicability as a generative affordance. That is, if the grammars provided by ontological (born this way) and epistemological (performativity) accounts of trans/gender fail to exceed the confines of stasis and its implied individuation, might a negative theological turn (apophasis) allow us to speak to the viscosity of transness without reducing flesh to the body, seeing transness instead as an (un)knowable signifier of the present absence of cisness?

In the cut of his apartment in rural Arkansas, between fits of coughing and reminiscent exchanges about the kids we once were, the beliefs we once held, and the people we assumed we’d become, a friend told me: “if your conception of theology requires faith in some Big Other, you’re already fucked.” We shared a vexed relation to religion; him, once a Muslim (which he admitted to converting in part out of teenage rebellion) then a Christian (both because he loved his mother too dearly and because he believed dying for the revolutionary cause of Rojava was his cross to bear) now an atheist (what he describes as a selfish decision to live for his sisters) and myself: the eldest daughter of two evangelical pastors who is less agnostic than indeterminate. After I left for college, I didn’t come home much. I can count on my hands the number of times my parents have called me by my name with a balled fist and knuckles redder than my

¹⁸⁸ Andrea Long Chu, “Freedom of Sex: The moral case for letting trans kids change their bodies,” *New York Magazine*, March 11, 2024, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/trans-rights-biological-sex-gender-judith-butler.html>.

father's neck after a day spent toiling in the sun. "I love you," they tell me, "but I can't condemn you to hell." *If you really love me, maybe you'll reconsider.*

Apophasis comes both from the neo-platonic rhetorical tradition and divine hermeneutics espoused by different sects of Abrahamic religions. As a rhetorical device, apophasis characterizes the presence of truth through denying its assertion—as in 'I love you, but I can't love *you*.' For theologians, apophasis measures the divine as constitutively unknowable—such that any attempt to describe God's nature imposes humanist, and thus idolatrous, characteristics onto a being that transcends being itself. Susan Cornwall offers a preliminary synthesis of apophatic theology and trans studies in the form of a trans apologetic, suggesting that the association of cisness with divinity (or at least, the absence of sin) blasphemously scripts gender onto God (and therefore back to humanity).¹⁸⁹ But in attempting to make trans life commensurate with Christian theology, Cornwall's treatise is 'already fucked.' In excess of a particular theological tradition, I consider transness apophatically and apophasis transversally by perverting Spinoza's monistic metaphysic; that is, if there exists only one substance in the universe (God or Nature) and what we seek is a cosmogenic account of the universe called gender, then it is 'trans all the way down.' By this, I do not mean that everyone *is* trans nor that everyone must *identify* as trans but that transness, as an anoriginal expression of desire, precedes and exceeds gender's construction; transness is elemental and its negation is in fact what produces cisness as gender's premiere genre.

¹⁸⁹ Susan Cornwall, "Apophasis and Ambiguity: the 'Unknowingness' of Transgender" in *Trans/Formations* ed. by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, (London, UK: SCM Press, 2009).

To pause merely at the observation of trans fundamentality, of its anoriginal cosmogony even as it pushes against the grain of gender's discursivity leaves much to be desired in the face of material assaults on trans life. Indeed, the era of trans visibility is simultaneously marked by a series of invisibilities, narrowing the acceptable *genres* of transness to modes of embodiment legible through *cisness as whiteness as stasis*—a mimesis of the internal disciplining cisness requires to cohere itself. The ensuing strictures fall not in the regulatory schema of gender performance – which assumes the referential stability of a subject caught in a cycle of repression and transgression – but in crafting “life-enhancing and death-making worlds,”¹⁹⁰ a ‘trans necropolitics’ that does not simply delimit how one can live, but if they are to live at all. In the remainder of this chapter, I develop a rhetorical application of trans apophasis that troubles the politics of trans (in)visibility by suggesting a departure from the (counter)publics formed in response to the trans debate in favor of a tacit affirmation of (in)communicability elaborated through Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s conception of the undercommons. Following Moten and Harney, I situate the undercommons not in the coordinates of space and time but between pursed lips, perpetually on the tip of the tongue—refusing the social scientific demand for context and precision as an exercise in “no-body’s radical empiricism, held in the question of the meaning of living behind lives that are said to be in need of explanation, in want of conceptualization, in search of self-possession.”¹⁹¹ Ultimately, “the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality,

¹⁹⁰ C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics: a Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix* ed. by Susan Stryker and Dylan McCarthy Blackston, (London, UK: Routledge Press, 2022).

¹⁹¹ Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*, 82.

[might] be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question.”¹⁹²

On April 30th, 2023, Erin Stille – a white trans woman from Missouri – tweeted that she had been interviewed by AP News about D.I.Y. hormone therapy. In the write-up, Stille reportedly “sent a \$300 bank transfer to a Taiwan-based supplier for a 6-month supply of estrogen patches and androgen-blocking pills.”¹⁹³ For nearly three weeks after placing her order, Erin “feared she’d been scammed”¹⁹⁴ – harkening tropes of an untrustworthy, exotic merchant cheating western workers out of their hard-earned money. Eventually, however, her shipment arrived. The Taiwanese supplier Erin had shopped with was just one source in a “digital master list of hormone suppliers” that her and other trans people had been “discreetly circulating”¹⁹⁵ online—discretion here meaning publicly disclosed to a news outlet and linked below a tweet quoting the article she was featured in. Though much has been written about the politics of disclosure for trans people, such discourse typically orbits around the stakes of revealing a trans identity. Pushing beyond the lens of identity, in order to trouble the disclosure of trans epistemologies and ontologies, I ask if our “plans are [already] afoot”¹⁹⁶ whom does it serve to leak them?

¹⁹² Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 96.

¹⁹³ Hannah Schoenbaum and Summer Ballentine, “When States Limit Care, Some Trans People Do It Themselves,” *AP News*, April 30, 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/transgender-health-missouri-hormone-stockpile-4376cac68eecd22df9d3ad86825c18d3> (Accessed May 4, 2023).

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 77.

Due to the legacy of institutional abandonment, “most [trans] people have always transitioned DIY.”¹⁹⁷ In fact, “smuggling and reselling hormones was once quite normal, verging on unremarkable.”¹⁹⁸ For Stille, however, D.I.Y. hormone therapy was “a ‘last resort’”¹⁹⁹ necessitated by the crumbling support for institutionalized care in her home state of Missouri. Her longing for public infrastructure coupled with her skepticism towards (and dry snitching on) D.I.Y. hormone therapy cannot be explained as anything but an instantiation of her own whiteness. Indeed, “the history of DIY trans care doesn’t leave behind the written records, research data, and publications,” which Stille offered in the form of an op-ed because “the trans women of color who ran the black markets didn’t have newsletters in which they could publish their side of the story. (And considering what they were doing was to varying degrees illegal, they had little reason to leave traces of their work behind.)”²⁰⁰

Rather than situate Stille’s decision to disclose the details of D.I.Y. transition as a selfish desire to occupy the limelight, I argue that it expresses a tactically erroneous form of Compulsory Interlocution—a “habit of affirmation”²⁰¹ which dignifies the call of the ‘trans debate’ with a response. This desire to make our wounds known, our pain communicable, in hopes of achieving equilibrium articulates freedom as a return to stasis

¹⁹⁷ Bea Wall-Feng and Jules Gill-Peterson, “Fifteen Questions: Jules Gill-Peterson on Trans DIY History, Deep-Fried Memes, and the End of the World,” *The Crimson*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/11/4/Jules-Gill-Peterson-15Q/> (Accessed December 11, 2023).

¹⁹⁸ Jules Gill-Peterson, “Doctors Who?” *The Baffler*, October 2022, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/doctors-who-gill-peterson> (Accessed December 11, 2023).

¹⁹⁹ Schoenbaum and Ballentine, “When States Limit Care.”

²⁰⁰ Gill-Peterson, “Doctors Who?”

²⁰¹ Daniel Colucciello Barber, “The Creation of Non-Being,” *Rhizomes* 29 (2016) <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/barber.html>.

in suggesting both the possibility and desirability of resolving the ‘trans debate.’ Yet, the nature of trans(ant)agonism—true to the dialectical unfolding of history—can achieve synthesis only through negation, which takes form by recuperating civil society and banishing its outside. In the ‘trans debate’, every argument outlining the necessity of D.I.Y. healthcare is married to its corollary refutation because stasis is cathected to apophasis under the liberal-democratic terms of equivalence. So these “unregulated suppliers” and patients are presented as “extraordinarily dangerous” by medical experts who claim to know best, while the best defense mounted in favor of D.I.Y. healthcare is that many “say they see no other option.”²⁰² Yet long before the recent crackdown against trans healthcare began, many trans people have relied on D.I.Y. hormones due to other routine exclusions in healthcare: where lacking papers does not just mean documented therapy sessions that prove you are ‘really’ trans, but also insurance cards, bank accounts, and government ID’s. So too is the problem irreducible to a simple binary of inclusion/exclusion, as doctors are empowered to proscribe the regiment they see fit—using clinical trials conducted with cis patients to model goals for transition—maintaining the ever present threat of denial, vexed by rampant medical racism. The appeals to rhetorical civility which animate Stille’s politic of disclosure courts sympathetic publics to defend an institutionalized vision of trans life, casting doubt on the need for medical autonomy through a coercive demand to work within the proper channels of civil society—channels which routinely abandon many.

²⁰² Schoenbaum and Ballentine, “When States Limit Care.”

Ellie Bridgman, another trans woman featured in the interview told the reporter that she had been lying to her doctor, intentionally underdosing so that her blood tests would show unusually low hormone levels, in turn causing her doctor to up her dosage. Building up a stockpile was Bridgman’s “No. 1 priority,” as “the suicidal thoughts”²⁰³ began to creep back without estrogen. And so this “life *or* death situation”²⁰⁴ operates as a double-bind, as it is assumed that trans life can be made grievable through translating our pain, such that transness is reduced to a state of suffering that can only be alleviated through proper medical care. Taking up the ‘trans debate,’ we respond to those who would rather see us dead by hurling an army of statistics regarding “rates of depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse”²⁰⁵ among trans youth. We make our pain legible and beg for a right to exist. But in framing trans life through such a flattened sense of injury, “it leaves the door open for care to be refused when a doctor, or someone playing doctor, deems the risks too high.”²⁰⁶ And that is what people do not understand about being trans: they think “people transition because they think it will make them feel better.”²⁰⁷ The truth is it won’t. But every romance requires a tragedy. As Andrea Long Chu explains:

I’ve watched my dysphoria balloon since I began transition. I now feel very strongly about the length of my index fingers — enough that I will sometimes shyly unthread my hand from my girlfriend’s as we walk down

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Zavitsanos, “Giving it Away.”

²⁰⁵ Andrea Long Chu, “My New Vagina Won’t Make Me Happy” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html> (accessed May 4, 2023).

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

the street. When she tells me I'm beautiful, I resent it. I've been outside. I know what beautiful looks like. Don't patronize me. I was not suicidal before hormones. Now I often am... I tell you this not because I'm cruising for sympathy but to prepare you for what I'm telling you now: I still want this, all of it. I want the tears; I want the pain... Desire and happiness are independent agents.²⁰⁸

To choose transness is not to claim it as a possession but to activate it as a force of (dis)possession, a matter of faith in the face of loss - of friends, of family, of lovers - to know the risks and accept them anyways in pursuit of something both immanent and transcendent. The ritual practice of putting yourself together through tearing yourself apart: a theology. Grounded in this spiritual conviction, 'we' do not seek to form publics or counter-publics in hopes that we may deliberate ourselves to a position of freedom. Instead, we take our cue from the subterfuge rhetoricity practiced by the trans women of color who ran and run illicit networks of D.I.Y. transition as expressive of an undercommon politic of (in)communicability. Unlike publics and counter-publics, which form to convince an external audience of one's right to exist, the undercommons goes without saying to secure the material conditions of existence. It has no time for deliberation. It is not concerned with persuading those who are not already convinced. "If you don't know, why ask?"²⁰⁹ Still,

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 38.

If you want to know what the undercommons wants, what Moten and Harney want, what black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we (the “we” who cohabit in the space of the undercommons) want, it is this – we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls.²¹⁰

We seek not to settle the trans debate but to render its questions inoperative, or at least irrelevant to the subterfugal reproduction of trans life. Apophatically held, our faith in our own (un)knowability offers strategies of survival, renewal, and abolition. Don’t ask, don’t tell. If you know, you know. Either way, we remain (un)grounded in the conviction that “we must change things or die. All of us.”²¹¹ Have faith.

²¹⁰ Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, 6.

²¹¹ Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond,” 10.

CONCLUSION

Compelled by the insufficiency of existing grammars to make sense of the contemporary marriage of ‘trans’ and debate,’ I wrote this thesis immersed in a climate that is not singularly defined by an assault on trans life but the world producing (and world ending) violence of white sovereignty—from Cop City, to Palestine, to the Congo, and beyond. The ‘trans debate,’ which dramatizes itself as a nascent crisis, finds its conceptual scaffolding in a series of anti-black and genocidal impositions. I therefore approach trans studies in a way that is both inflected by and indebted to Black and Native Feminists because I believe aspirations towards trans-normativity replicate (and indeed, rely on) the reactionary and suicidal impulses of whiteness. I think rhetorically because there exists, as Fred Moten reminds us, “[an] irreducible relationship between being trans and what it is to be communicable.”²¹²

Throughout this thesis, I have exhumed different scenes in the ‘trans debate’ typically unthought of as debate in order to complicate the way both transness and debate are traditionally operationalized. I offered a series of devices (cisness as whiteness stasis, Deadly Assemblages, the sociogenetic principle of transphobia, apophatic transness) in

²¹² Wu Tsang and Fred Moten, “All Terror, All Beauty,” in *Trap Door: Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 344

hopes they find transversal utility beyond their applications here. Rather than a finished product or enclosed totality, I offer these tentative provocations as an invitation to think through a trans-individual transness that is beyond identity, interlocution, and enunciation in order to complicate the logics of stasis, speech, and freedom that subtend debate; it is my hope that we may find a way to respond to the exigencies of the trans debate without acceding to its terms of rejoinder, while refusing the impulse to sever transphobia from its entanglement with and emergence from anti-blackness and colonialism. To all those committed to the project of abolition: may we live to die another day.

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2020 Dean's Challenge Award, George Mason University.

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“Trans Apophasis, Apophatic Transness: a Theological and Rhetorical Reckoning”
Rhetorical Society of America: Denver, Colorado. May 2024. **Competitive Paper.**

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