

INTRODUCTION

Sexual Difference without Cisness

Who, we might ask, is truly on the outside
of heteronormative power—maybe most of us?

—CATHY COHEN, “PUNKS, BULLDAGGERS,
AND WELFARE QUEENS”

Sex is one of the few social interactions I choose
that reminds me of my unending penetrability.

—BILLY-RAY BELCOURT,
A HISTORY OF MY BRIEF BODY

Cisness is feminism's counterrevolution. Historically, it is the concept that recasts sex as a biological fact following political challenges to the sanctity of sex as an ordained social order. Because cisness ontologizes sex as a binary of bodily forms, it orients the definition of feminism away from a revolution in the hierarchy of values that would overturn, for instance, the priority of accumulation over reproduction and domination over care toward female emancipation as an individual affair. This feminism offers women the opportunity to advance in the current patriarchal hierarchy of values. Cisness casts as feminist victories the existence of female CEOs who lord over feminized

workers and the sacralized image of the mother doing double duty that obscures the mass reality of dwindling social support for the work of mothering. To adapt Monique Wittig's classic and clarifying formulation: cisness obfuscates the reality *women* with the fiction *woman*.¹

Part of the power of cisness as ideology is its presentation as self-evident empiricism, but the protocols of its enforcement are not straightforward. Rather than a pure binary of men and women, cisness produces myriad racialized and classed categories of people whose communal indifference to the bourgeois mores of sex is deemed aberrant. The mutually reinforcing structures of coloniality, white supremacy, patriarchy, caste, and class reproduce the distinction between the powerful who do sex correctly and the masses who do sex incorrectly and therefore must be managed or punished. The claim to sexed propriety made by colonizers, settlers, enslaving societies, and bourgeois elites has been a significant component of power for the past five hundred years. To say cisness is feminism's counterrevolution is to say that cisness is the ableist apprehension of bodies into good and bad, the colonial destruction of kinship structures, the white supremacist obliteration of personhood in the service of capital extraction, and a component of bourgeois antipathy for the poor, working, and racialized people of the world.

The chapters that compose *Feminism against Cisness* foreground this racial, class, and colonial history at the heart and center of the enforcement of cisness. This scholarship addresses patriarchy without reifying the categories—woman and man—that do its brutalizing work. This feminist critique militates against misogyny by recognizing that the category of cis woman is not patriarchy's only target. From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, first organs, then hormones, and finally chromosomes became the medical bottom line of assigned sex. But before, during, and after this period of medicalization, these structures and substances have never determined who is subjected to feminizing violence, as any femme sixth grader who has walked the gauntlet of a middle school hallway can tell you. Solidarities that stem from feminizing violence are not natural, eternal, or total, but sites of political alliance with both the potential to transform social relations and the inevitable internal contradiction that such solidarities always contain. Each chapter in this collection makes a case for feminism's practiced or potential divestment from the naturalizing logic of cisness. The chapters are thus able to map the relations among patriarchy, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and capitalism that jointly establish gender as a principal way in which our lives are regulated and limited. These chapters encourage

feminists to turn away from dialogue with transphobes and turn toward one another to pose questions raised by trans life, history, and liberatory formations whose answers are necessary to understanding the operation of sex and gender *tout court*.

This volume considers feminism's most trenchant claims to be that assigned sex does not determine the qualities or value of any human being and that bourgeois domination and racializing regimes have relied on the illusion that it does. The constant renewal of cis social ordering is therefore necessary to the counterrevolutionary containment of the revolutionary potential of feminist self-assertion to shake the foundations of not just gender, but white supremacist heteropatriarchy. The enforcement of cisness creates racialized, classed, and colonial fissures in the gendered solidarities that bourgeois patriarchy wrought. Therefore, exposing the ideological operation of cisness is one way to dethrone the white bourgeois formations that have too often been inaccurately characterized as defining feminism. We locate our lines of engagement among those whose thought promulgates gender liberation for all, a project that is defined not by a march forward out of a benighted past, but often by the reinvigoration of modes of collective life that the individualist, colonial, bourgeois logic of individual rights have stigmatized and driven underground.

This introduction proposes that each chapter in this volume addresses the simultaneity of cisness as a bifurcating and hierarchizing ideology that is fundamental to racial, colonial, and class formation. In each case, the thought legacies and political desires of feminism form their author's inquiry. Scholarly and popular framings of generational conflict, of the supposed opposition between deference and innovation, have long obscured the actual genealogy of feminist thought and action. You'll find no waves here. To say these contributions are new is to say that they welcome stores of knowledge, experience, and thought that have long been part of practices that produce sex and gender freedom, but that have often been viewed as additive, marginal, or even antagonistic to something called feminism. What follows offers a theory of sexual difference without cisness to systematize the theoretical contribution of this volume's chapters.

This collection's inquiry begins in 1970 with the words of two best friends spoken across a kitchen table in New York City.² These friends, nineteen-year-old Sylvia Rivera and twenty-six-year-old Marsha P. Johnson, gathered to be

interviewed by the journalist Liza Cowen for a segment Cowen was researching on the topic of cross-dressing for the noncommercial New York City radio station WBAI.³ The conversation swiftly moves away from a dialogic exchange with their interviewer as the two subjects begin speaking to each other about their lives and commitments.⁴ Against the hiss of the radiator, Johnson says that she would prefer to partner with a gay man, “because I don’t care for heterosexual men as a husband. . . . They’re too . . . too masculine for me.” Rivera interjects: “They’re just too oppressive; be more realistic about it.” To this, Johnson doesn’t really respond, turning to talk about growing up and becoming a woman:

JOHNSON: I could always talk like a woman. I could always act like a woman. I could always do things that women would do because I was raised by my mother. Like, I could wash . . . iron . . . cook . . . sew . . .

RIVERA: [cutting in] That’s very oppressive toward women.

JOHNSON: Well, that’s what they’re good for doing. . . .

RIVERA: [cutting in] Ewwww, stop!

JOHNSON: That’s what they always do. That’s what my mother did. Well, some women don’t do that, but my mother was poor; she had to do it all herself.

Rivera responds with a succinct and forceful feminist analysis of domestic work and male oppression:

I, as a person, don’t believe that a transvestite or a woman should do all the washing, do all the cooking, and do everything that’s forced on by the bourgeois society and the establishment that women *have* to do this. I don’t believe in that; that’s all a lot of baloney. If you have a lover, or you have a friend that you really care for, you split everything down fifty-fifty. If you don’t feel like doing it, you just don’t do it. Let *him* do it because this is what we’re all trying to get across. Men are oppressive. They just oppress you in all different ways.

We are sadly denied Marsha P. Johnson’s response to Rivera’s comments, if there was one, but what the archive provides us here is plenty. In this exchange, Johnson is tasked by the topic and format of the interview to provide an account of her sense of her own sex. She describes the hormones she takes and the resulting “handful” of “bosom” growth; she discusses her plans to

pursue genital surgery, a “sex change” in her terms.⁵ But her comments cited above reveal that even before she arrived in New York City at seventeen and started pursuing these medical services, womanhood meant an identification with the strong Black woman who raised her and, in particular, with that woman’s labors. Her sex identity emerged from this affinity. Womanhood was the inclination to and fact of receiving an education in those labors through her bond with her mother: an identity born of skill transmission. Not every child who gravitates toward a parent’s gendered skills will find the grounding for a sex identity in that affinity, of course, but such identification is one material way in which the abstraction called sex materializes in the consciousness of individuals, both for those whom we call cis and those whom we call trans.

Rivera and Johnson’s exchange is, in a sense, an orthodox instance of consciousness-raising, the paradigmatic political practice of 1970s American radical feminism, modeled after the Chinese communist revolutionary feminist practice of “speaking bitterness.”⁶ Through open autobiographical storytelling, Johnson reflects on the household tasks that ground her identity as a woman. Rivera purports to correct her, saying that this definition is oppressive to her and the rest of “us,” raising Johnson’s consciousness to the reality that she and other women are “good for” more than just domestic labors. But, before Rivera’s interjection, Johnson was already producing feminist analysis from a 1970s feminist vantage and, specifically, from a Black feminist vantage. All over the world, women were observing that womanhood itself is the social expression of reproductive labor.⁷ Black feminists and other working-class women were noticing the social structures through which this labor was distributed, not evenly across all categories of women, but especially tasked to racialized and low-wage women—poor women, like Johnson’s mother—thus producing not an internally homogenous “womanhood” but a striated category of sex produced through racialized and classed internal contradictions. This analysis led to, for instance, the politicizing of welfare provision and the conditions and operations of public housing during the period that followed.⁸

The materialist feminist dialectic is alive in this exchange between Rivera and Johnson: shared feminized labors are the necessary work of life-giving in Johnson’s mother’s home. In Rivera’s experience and analysis, the feminization of these labors is the dreadful and dehumanizing burden on which white supremacist bourgeois patriarchy is premised. Both seemingly opposed perspectives are true as simple statements; the analytical truth is their synthesis: to destroy patriarchy would be to free these, the only necessary labors, from their gendered and racialized character, to communize them, to free the world’s

efforts from the production of surplus value and bourgeois identities and refocus these efforts on the tasks that sustain and reproduce life. This would mean the general recognition of the value of Johnson's mother's labors as the only real form of value.⁹ The embrace of the dialectic tension between valorizing and refusing domestic labor recognizes the production and progression of contradictions, rather than the adjudication of who is right, as the political mode that matches how history moves.¹⁰

But if sex is only a question of labors and the social categories that the uneven valuation of labors produce, then how to engage the knowledge that Johnson makes when she describes her body and the processes that she is helping her body to undergo? Is it true, as Judith Butler writes, that bodily structures, adipose deposits, and organs, to the extent that we can cognate them, are "indissociable from discursive demarcations"?¹¹ Is there nothing in bodily dwelling that is not capturable by the ideological constraints of the word? Are the tools of materialist feminism adequate to the task of addressing these questions? And aren't we, in the year 2024, sick of asking these questions and getting only unsatisfactory, vague conciliations that have different feminist theories in their own orbits, agreeing to disagree? These are well-worn questions in the history of feminist inquiry since the 1990s, but there is yet to be a satisfactory theoretical formulation to answer them. This introduction, informed by the analyses of the chapters gathered in this collection, proposes an analytic of sexual difference without cisness to finally reconcile the evident linguistic substance of all social identities with the embodied experiences that fall out of thought when sex is viewed as only the lived instantiation of words.

If the historical materialism of Rivera and Johnson's exchange provides the first half of this articulation, then an interview conducted by the historian Eric Marcus nineteen years later, in 1989, in Sylvia Rivera's Terrytown apartment, provides the second: entry into an essential materialist, feminist analysis of the body. Rivera tells her story of leaving her grandmother's house in the Bronx when she was eleven after finding her grandmother in tears because the neighborhood gossips were calling Sylvia a *pato*.¹² The child found her way to Times Square, where she began to engage in the survival sex work that would be her source of income for many years to follow. Marcus queries her on whether she actually engaged in sex work at such a young age. Rivera responds: "You can sell anything out on the streets. You can sell men, young boys, and young women. There's always a customer out there and they are the ones that are sick. I remember just going home and just scrubbing myself in the tub with hot water saying: 'oh these people touched me.' I mean the

sleaze. Even if they weren't old. They could have been young."¹³ The need that the child Sylvia Rivera felt to scrub her skin after sexual encounters with—how should we refer to them? sex work clients? assaulters? the most local instance of a social system that left an eleven-year-old kid with no resource but access to her body to exchange in order to attain the necessities of barest life?—provides a deep investigation of the material reality of sex. That is, if we understand sex, as I propose we do, as the embodied experience produced by the comingling of two kinds of social relations. On the one hand there are affinities that pull you toward identification with people situated on one or the other side of the sex binary; this is how Marsha P. Johnson and many others come to sex.

On the other hand, there are social relations that subject you to one or the other term in a symbolic binary of penetrator and penetrated; this distinction sexes or sexualizes a body in ways that track you as female/feminine or male/masculine. To feel dirtied by sexual use, to need to trade access to one's body for certain resources, to routinely feel oneself positioned as the object through which someone else can reproduce their own identity as sexually dominant over you: these bodily sensations define sexual difference for those positioned as feminized, penetrable terms in that binary. This social positioning has very little to do with the act of sex, although sex, sexualization, and sexual attraction are intensified points of articulation for this ideological positioning because the penetrability of the body serves as the organizing ontological premise for sex. Men, both cis and trans, can be penetrated and can even invite penetration. But to be a man is to be able to escape association with penetrability as an organizing structure of your extra-sexual social life, as a public quality, let's say. A person might even endure the most symbolically laden form of penetration, rape, but not wear a social identity that is haunted by rape, a disjointed gender experience that creates its own devastating emotional legacies. Conversely, a person might never have been raped but wear a social identity that associates her with this form of penetration as she walks home in the evening to a chorus of catcalls or as she navigates daily gendered relations at work and in her private life.

Rivera's scrubbing is, then, a practice of sexual difference, arising from the emotional and physical states that attend feminization. Her experience demonstrates that these conditions do not solely adhere to the bodies, life experiences, and communal histories of those assigned female at birth. Rivera's status as a minor, her race, and her trans femininity all subject her to the conditions that make her feel the need to scrub. The interview places this practice

in the context of her broader vulnerability to arrest, assault, maltreatment in sexual relationships, and rape; this vulnerability is produced by the transversal relation between the different terms of her identity.¹⁴ Her race and transness foreclose her from the kinds of protections that a white supremacist society purports to provide women and children, implicitly defined as white and cis.¹⁵ This and similar materially grounded experiences provide the context for understanding the social practices that cis society views as the actual markers of Rivera's gender: that she is drawn to the feminine name of Sylvia; to feminine kinship terms like "mother" and "half-sister in struggle"; to the pronouns she/her/hers; and to feminine clothing, hairstyles, and makeup.¹⁶

The social order in which she exists sees and reflects her identity to such a uniform extent that when she is misgendered, she reads this as a willful shaming. Her account of one such experience, inflicted by gay male leftists, vivifies misgendering itself as a feminizing form of subjection:

I was at the demonstration when the gay people charged the United States with genocide. . . . [T]his person . . . starts off *Mr.* Ray Rivera . . . *Mr.* Rivera likes to be called by his transvestite friends as Sylvia. This is very oppressive. Everyone calls me Sylvia. . . . I've had this name for nine years, straight or gay. Even on my job, the girls, the women, that I used to work with called me Sylvia. . . . It's not just transvestites that called me Sylvia or consider me or treat me as she. . . . People respect you. This is respect.¹⁷

In recounting this and other experiences, Rivera and Johnson occupy the infrastructure of the interviews, removing their lives from articulation in the "issue" of cross-dressing, in the first instance, or as some periphery or subset of LGBT life in the second. Their lives were not phenomena to be examined from the outside or issues to be debated: their lives were social processes in motion with relentlessly material bases: race, class, gender, and trans experience. Their comments reflect that feminization as a social process both adheres in and exceeds the category *woman*. The various operations of power that constrain those positioned as womanlike attain their power to diminish from the association it implies with *woman*, but it also attains a new kind of power to diminish because *womanlike* implies an inadequacy, that one is *not even*, properly, a woman.

We are left in need of a theory composed of two modalities of materialism: historical materialism and the materialism that emerges when historical categories order the way our bodies feel in the world. This theory reflects the

reality of sex as not natural, not even necessarily uniform or consistent over time, but, yes, an ontological experience premised on the symbolic ordering of penetration to the extent that sex is felt, sensed, and experienced on the level of the substance of the body. This is over and against the false ontology that approaches, for instance, the vagina as the singular site of sexual penetration and assembles a cast of organs, hormones, and chromosomes as the criteria of true womanhood. We need a theory of sexual difference without cisness. The following section provides a systematic accounting of this theory.

THE MATERIALIST DISARTICULATION OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE FROM CISNESS

An ontological nature of bodies is that they are penetrable; sexual difference is the partitioning of bodies into penetrator and penetrated, an ideological ordering premised on the denial of universal penetrability. This binary of ideological categories does not adhere consistently to any type of body as we've seen, or even necessarily consistently to any individual body. Your sex can change regularly, to the extent that the same person can occupy the position of masculinist personhood during one period, in one relation, or even in one moment and then the position of feminized nonperson, excluded from being in another period, relation, or moment. This can occur just as a well body can become sick, either for a time or for evermore, and as a young body will certainly become old. A body that is racialized in one way in a given social context will be racialized differently or unmarked by racialization in another. A butch can experience masculinist priority amid community in the dyke bar and be feminized by harassers on the subway home. A woman CEO can rhetorically dominate a boardroom and be subject to brutal or subtle misogynist undermining by her husband at home. A white woman can flex her personhood by degrading a woman of color in a misogynist way, be she coworker or employee, even as she herself might be subject to tonally similar degradation in other contexts. A man of color might be punished or even killed for representing the very kinds of masculine qualities that protect and privilege his white male peer.¹⁸ A boss of any gender might seek to shame and punish a subordinate in order to bolster the boss's masculinist authority. A transphobic woman can call attention to the genitals of a trans person and experience for the first time the thrill of engaging, on the masculinist side, in this long-standing misogynist tactic of calling embarrassing, feminizing attention to their target's genitals or other sexed structures.¹⁹

One's sex is the sum total of these machinations with the hierarchy of masculinity over femininity, and the maintenance of masculine priority for those in positions of class and racial power, as the stable social field in which these oscillations operate. Of course, many of us are more intractably and uniformly bound to one or the other position; a woman is much more likely to be tasked with the labors and associations that feminize a person than is a man. These machinations are rarely consciously manipulated. Rarely are the expectations and burdens produced by sexual difference articulated; rather, they permeate social life, creating feelings, impulses, and instantiating dynamics. Then there are those who inhabit categories of experience that are the most uniformly and intractably bound to the violent degradation that adheres to femininity in a misogynist society. Examples include sex workers, poor and working-class women, single mothers, women on welfare, and women in service-sector jobs.

Accounting for the reality of these operations and the lives that they ensnare requires the clear theoretical articulation of the relation of two concepts: sexual difference and cisness. Sexual difference is the social organization of the supposedly biologically derived terms of the sex binary into a hierarchy of persons and qualities: masculine/male (active, cerebral, spiritual, agential) over feminine/female (passive, emotional, material, dependent).²⁰ Cisness is the biologizing ideology that these social roles of sexual difference adhere to assigned sex based on the appearance of genitals at or (via prenatal imaging technologies) before birth. In other words, cisness is the idea that those identified as girls at birth are naturally inducted into the social expectation that sexual difference sets for the feminine and likewise for boys with the masculine. So, as is clear from these definitions, both sexual difference and cisness are ideological constructs, but of different types.

Sexual difference is an ideological construct that emerges from a material structure. The terms of this difference have been established by their differential relation to money. The category feminine/female is the social expression of the valuelessness of reproductive labor: cooking, cleaning, care for children and elders, gestation and lactation, and emotional care. All these activities are associated with wageless work and are devalued both when unwaged and when they are waged as feminized service-sector jobs. As I argue in *The New Woman*, trans femininity, in addition to being constructed around this historical structure of reproductive labor, emerged from association with a particular form of waged reproductive labor: sex work, the particular class and racial character of which has been accounted for in an extensive body of fine scholarship.²¹ The persistent criminalization of this form of work sets it apart

from other feminized work, and by extension sets apart the forms of social life it produces from the category of cis womanhood.²²

This valuelessness then adheres in a more ideated form. The feminine, devalued materially, is ontologized as sexual penetrability. The availability of feminized people for degraded and degrading sexual penetration establishes a mutually reinforcing equation among penetrability, submission, and degradation. To say sexual difference is material is different than saying sexual difference is natural or eternal: far from it. It is, in fact, to say the opposite: that as material conditions change, so too would the ideological status of persons and qualities whose value is established by the rubric of sexual difference. Currently, however, it is a dominant structure that determines the real experience of our lives.

Cisness, in contrast, has no material basis of its own, only the one it attains via its imbrication in sexual difference. This may sound counterintuitive, because the ideology's relation to the physical structure of our bodies produces the impression of a real basis in chromosome, flesh, follicle, hormone, muscle, and organ. But consider the following concrete, material example: a vagina is a structure composed of skin, mucous membrane, muscle, and other tissues. Its functions are real, are important, and require attention. Further, the possessor's relation to this structure is so laden with ideology that she might feel, even on the highly affecting level of sensation and bodily self-awareness, that this structure actually grounds her sex identity. In the negative, she may experience her vagina, for example, as the source of her body's vulnerability to rape.

But we know that vaginas, in themselves, are no more vulnerable to or inviting of sexual assault than other bodily structures that can be penetrated. We know this because people without vaginas are also vulnerable to rape and disproportionately so, according to certain group-forming attributes. Trans women, racialized people, gay men whose gender expression communicates (or is interpreted as) effeminacy, incarcerated people, enslaved people, workers in a subordinate labor position, children, disabled people, people who are economically precarious and/or experiencing homelessness, sex workers, gender-nonconforming and trans masculine people whose trans status is known or has been revealed: all of these populations are disproportionately vulnerable to rape and are not categorically defined by having vaginas.²³ What is the quality that explains this disproportionate vulnerability across these vastly disparate social categories among people with all forms of genitals and combinations of secondary sexual characteristics? The answer to this question

is the rapist's perception of their victim as actually, properly, or potentially socially positioned as powerless. This social positioning is then reinforced in its relation to the feminine through the use of the tactic of sexual assault with its historically produced relation to the feminine. That is to say, the production of disproportionate vulnerability to assault is the rapist's enforcement and reproduction of the ideology of sexual difference. This social positioning has defined the category *woman* historically, but its effects have never been limited to those assigned female at birth, to those who identify as women, or even to those socially recognized as women.

Any adequate account of that social process must recognize that the qualities that position an individual in this structural relation to their rapist might have nothing to do with what we commonly think of as biological sex or even gender, as the history of racialized gender violence in the United States makes plain. An enslaved person's vulnerability, for instance, is produced by an ideology of anti-Blackness and the white supremacist legal, cultural, and political structures that allowed and administered slavery. The claim here is precisely *not* that enslaved people experienced routinized sexual assault because slavery positioned enslaved people *as women*. Such a claim would preserve a distinction between "woman" and "the enslaved," naturalizing womanhood as whiteness and obscuring the point altogether. Rather, the claim is that sexual difference itself, the ability to withhold power based on a perceived or enforced relation to the feminine, can operate as a racializing tactic. Likewise in the case of Black women's experiences under the conditions of chattel slavery and in its afterlives, the foreclosure from feminization, the enforcement of conditions and punishments that among whites were reserved for men, was also a constitutive sexuating operation of racialization.²⁴ Far from being a new observation, one has only to read the primary literature of the experience of enslavement in the American chattel system or the theoretical articulations of scholars that stem from that history in order to understand this reality.

As one consequential example of the operation of sexual difference without cisness drawn from this historical context, consider Harriet Jacobs's narrative of her enslavement and self-emancipation, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs's story provides a detailed analysis of the role of routinized sexual assault in the lives and logics of slavery; she is compelled by the structural imperative of the genre, despite deep reticence and disinclination to do so, to use her own experience as a representative example. She describes the terror that attends enslaved girls' twelfth birthdays when they can expect these abuses to become a daily fact of their lives, and she details the strategic

choices that enslaved girls and women made to lessen the devastation of this constant menace.

Jacobs includes descriptions of the woman who is married to her enslaver posing as her husband and whispering sexual things in Jacobs's ear as she sleeps in order to investigate her husband's infidelity, as she views his behavior. In this dynamic, a white cis woman sexually abuses Jacobs, demonstrating the operation of sexual violence as a racializing violence.²⁵ That is also to say that the white woman inflicts feminization as a tactic of racialization, her masculinist position in sexual difference here produced by her whiteness, thus illuminating the way sexual difference operates independently of cisness. The bourgeois white woman who uses sexual assault as a racializing attack and the Black woman who is consigned to manual labor or punishment on a chain gang—indeed, the labor and punishment histories of women who are not white and bourgeois—demonstrate that “womanhood” is a racialized and classed category, as Talitha L. LeFlouria has demonstrated via historical argumentation.²⁶

Jacobs also discusses an enslaved male friend named Luke whose male enslaver compels him to engage in “freaks . . . of a nature too filthy to be repeated” for the enslaver's sexual satisfaction.²⁷ Sexual precarity has different iterations for Jacobs and Luke based on their social positioning as a woman and a man and as a result of Jacobs's capacity for pregnancy. An analytic of sexual difference without cisness allows us to understand the solidarity between Jacobs and this male friend that is produced by the common state of sexual precarity that their enslavement inflicts on both of them.²⁸ That common precarity produces the solidarity bond that explains Luke sharing his experience with Jacobs and her resulting deep empathetic identification with her friend, whose bodily experience she well understands.²⁹ Theirs is a bond that cuts across cisness, demonstrating the “transversal relation,” in C. Riley Snorton's terms, between Blackness and sex.³⁰

To take another example: likewise in the case of children, it is not analytically precise to say that children are *like* women in their common vulnerability to sexual assault.³¹ Rather, an ideology of sexual difference that imbues the feminine with—in fact *defines* the feminine as—powerlessness reproduces itself through the sexual abuse and assault of children who are in a materially powerless relation to adults. The vulnerability of children is both categorical and internally differential, depending on additional social factors.

The way these factors cut across cisness is clarified by juxtaposing accounts from two recent memoirs. First, Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* (2019) addresses his experience of sexual abuse by a babysitter when he was eight years old. His

abuser, a woman in her twenties, forces her breasts into his mouth, a form of forced penetrative sexual contact.³² Laymon explains that his emotional response to this abuse is formed by his identity as a fat boy. The experience produces many muddled feelings, including insecurity about his body's softness and worry about what his adult abuser will think about how he smells. This experience occurred because of his material positioning as a child. His feelings about this abuse are embodied, but rather than a social relation to femininity, he feels uncertainty around his fatness and desirability. He doesn't have adequate language or conceptual structure for the experience, except to feel a vague connection between his abuse and the normalized way in which his male peers treat the girls in their social world. When these boys go off into a bedroom to serially sexually assault a peer girl, a practice they call "running the train," Laymon "stood there wondering why the shallow grunts and minisqueaks coming from the boys in Daryl's room made [him] want to be dead. [He] didn't know, but [he] assumed some kind of sex was happening."³³ The adult Laymon contemplates the fact that his child self couldn't access connection to these girls whom the boys socially coerce into sexual service because these girls experience him as one of those boys. The memoir conveys both embodied commonality between those who experience sexual assault and the way that cisness obscures that similarity and therefore precludes the expression of solidarity across the border that the ideology imposes.

Janet Mock's *Redefining Realness* (2011) documents her experiences of sexual abuse and her adult project of finding language to analyze her experience, which also began when she was eight years old. For several years she was abused by the teenaged son of her mother's boyfriend, who lived in the house with her. Mock analyzes that a child like her, a trans feminine child, is much more likely to be targeted for this kind of abuse than a child such as Laymon who is not considered (and doesn't experience himself as) feminine. Her adult reckoning, like Laymon's, includes negotiating the way that abuse felt like an affirmation of her desirability and girlhood, activating the sense of herself as a girl that had exclusively been acknowledged previously through punishment and censure by adults.

Looking at the important similarities and differences between these experiences—both the common penetrability of these children's bodies and the differential exposure to the risks that this universal fact of bodies poses to each in a misogynist society—clarifies the way that sexual difference structures the experience. For Laymon, his status as a minor makes his body vulnerable; his identity as a boy and eventually a man forms how those experiences affect him

in the long run. For Mock, her femininity, trans status, and status as a minor make her body vulnerable. The fact that the first two identities persist beyond childhood explains the recurrence of these abuses in later life. Also, the view of Mock's body as sexualized, subject to scrutiny, and violable continues to shape her life in a much more pronounced and public way than is the case for Laymon, as their stories go on to tell.

The transversal relation produced here by childhood, drawing together the experiences, produced by sexual difference, of a cis boy/man and a trans girl/woman, provokes the theoretical articulation of sexual difference without cisness. Most obviously, the noncausal relation between assigned sex and lived sex means that Mock is positioned as a girl in these dynamics; sexual difference operates independently of assigned sex, a reality that exposes the ideological status of cisness. This fact of trans life, however, helps us understand the opaque point that sexual difference can also operate within other vectors of social power: race, class, age, and disability, not only trans status. Contrasting these accounts of experience exposes abuse and rape as social and historical, not biological, harms. This seems like a truism too obvious to bother stating, but we haven't fully accounted for this truth in a theoretical denaturalization of cisness as I aim to do here.

Sexual difference serves not only as a structure of bodily dispossession and social violence but also as a structure of pleasure and identification. Here too, while sexual difference orders social relations, cisness is not its basis. In the positive, women who have uteruses and ovaries are encouraged to view these organs as the source of experiences of maternity. Anyone who mothers a child whom they did not gestate knows the ideological nature of that claim. But mothering, the provision of care associated through history with gestators, is still marked as feminine by this historical accretion, regardless of who undertakes that role. Therefore, as communist feminist Sophie Lewis argues, "mothering" is a form, a labor, a verb over and against the identity noun *mother*; the verb "[designates] people who do mothering without necessarily being mothers."³⁴ Mothers, in contrast,

have, after all, historically both brought down oppressive regimes and built them. On the one hand, maternal feminists, maternalist activists and femo-nationalists (so-called mothers of the nation) have served for centuries as prime movers of world-systemic evils such as white supremacy, spearheading imperial and settler-colonial projects of "racial uplift" and eugenics. On the other, as we've seen, dispossessed mamas, mamis, othermothers and

queer motherers have consistently posed a formidable threat to capitalism and the state. The dialectic in question is . . . more properly articulated not as a contradiction in the soul of every mother, but as a structural matter of colonially imposed scarcity; of planetary whiteness and its abolition; of the war between social reproduction “from below” and class society’s reproduction from above; of motherhood’s very invention and design, finally, as an institution to render indigenous and formerly enslaved people “kinless.”³⁵

This is the anti-essentialism that has too often been misconstrued as essentialism. To say that fatherhood is a relation of property and that mothering is a practice of care is to say that these sexed roles are fully circumscribed in the changeable conditions of history. It is also to say that these “maternalist activities” do not spring from any particular configuration of somatic traits or bodily processes, both enjoining all who would do the work of mothering and also creating a standard for what qualifies as mothering beyond the act of gestating or bearing the legal designation of mother.

Such a theory also clarifies previous theorizations of embodiment that have often been dismissed as essentialist. Luce Irigaray theorizes *woman* as the reality of difference against the masculinist consolidation of the subject as singular, possessed of bodily integrity, and agential. This distinction is produced by the projection of woman as absence, both in an existential sense, as nonbeing, and as a sex in a physical sense, marked by the absence and passivity that this masculinist logic projects onto the structure and manifold activities of vaginas. In fact, Irigaray theorizes, the feminine is the multiple, the internally different; vagina as metaphor speaks to this diffuse, proliferating difference, the paradigmatic form of which, for Irigaray, is sexual difference.³⁶

Sexual difference without cisness allows us to name the historical reality that this internally different Irigarayan vaginarity, a feeling of diffusion both in sexual sensation and in identitarian sensation (to feel different even from oneself, in Irigarayan terms), has never been restricted to those assigned female at birth. To illuminate this reality we can consult a long archive of trans women’s writing that describes the experience of penetrability as a positive sexual and sexed quality of their bodies. These accounts are available from the sexological archive of the latter nineteenth century to recent work. Consider just two: the early twentieth-century account of the life of a Brooklyn street fairy named Loop-the-loop and the recent autobiographical writings of the historian Jules Gill-Peterson.

The first narrative was published by a US Army doctor in the *American Journal of Urology and Sexology* in 1917. The narrative is composed of the doctor's reflections on physical examinations and interviews with Subject 23, a fairy named Loop-the-loop who was born in rural Pennsylvania in 1883 and lived in New York as a sex worker at the time of the doctor's examinations. The doctor describes Loop-the-loop's genitals and concludes that they were perfectly "normal" and "virile." He is therefore confused and angry when Loop-the-loop "invited . . . attention to the fine development of his breasts, whereas there was not the slightest evidence of gynecomasty."³⁷ The doctor goes on to report that Loop-the-loop "was laboring under the honest conviction that his anus was indeed an aborted vagina—a most extraordinary delusion."³⁸ Loop-the-loop confirms this bodily self-understanding by reporting that she "avoids the danger of a brutal coitus" that might result in "tearing [her] very small vagina." The doctor interprets these comments as evidence that she has "lost . . . every sense of shame; believing himself designed by nature to play the very part he is playing in life, it was truly remarkable to hear this nervous, loquacious, foul-mouthed and foul-minded 'fairy' of the most degraded slums of a multi-millioned city chatter about his experiences, just as though he were talking about the rearing of fancy pigeons, or anything of a similar nature."³⁹ So precisely here we see the expert dismissing the subject's understanding of her body as delusion. Despite harassment by police and the scorn that marks the doctor's report, Loop-the-loop felt that her "instinct [was] not congenital" and that she "sees no immorality in it; there is no desire for alteration in his nature, and so fierce is the sexual impulse in his case that he claims to be practically insatiable."⁴⁰ The reality of the lives of street fairies cannot enter into the doctor's understanding. This doctor believes that Loop-the-loop's life is criminal and wants Loop-the-loop to believe that her life and body are an affliction. Her contentment with her body, her relationships, and her life break the very operation of the medical encounter where the patient is supposed to seek the expertise and aid of the doctor.

The second account is from Gill-Peterson's "Estro Junkie," in which she outlines the bodily and identitarian practices of her hormonal regime. She writes,

How can I explain what is happening to me, when I puncture the small round progesterone ball with a different needle, before lubricating it and stuffing it inside my ass? What can I do about my desire for it to make my boobs go from Cs to Ds? . . . What kind of feminist am I today: a feminist hooked on progesterone, or a transgender body hooked on feminism? I have

no other alternative but to revise my classics, to subject those theories to the shock that was provoked in me by the practice of taking progesterone. To accept the fact that the change happening in me is the metamorphosis of an era.

Except, it's not. There is no real change in my feminism, merely its tactical defense from the bad faith fascists who send me death threats in its name. There is no revision of my classics by the mundane fact of putting a hormone oil capsule inside my ass each day. . . . There is no shock, there is no era inaugurated. . . .

My breasts may be swelling and my libido running hot, but that was also true before I started progesterone. Yes, I can fuck my boyfriend hard, and nearly indefinitely, with my girl dick. Castrated as I am, we can even share the intimate pleasure of me cumming inside him without any of the usual anxieties. But no era is born of this congress. . . . I am far more concerned that the flat fact of my taking hormones to maintain this body is reason enough to be treated as disposable, expendable, and contemptible by those who have nothing better to do than visit hate upon the marginal to secure their station.⁴¹

In this passage, Gill-Peterson does many things. First, simply, she narrates her body on her own terms with no doctor to receive, censor, or translate. She is not beholden to the medical model's logic of change nor must she dodge a doctor's attempted erasure of trans women's embodiment from the historical record. She remarks the active elements of female embodiment: swelling, desiring. Gill-Peterson's body acts on the world, on her boyfriend, and on her own consciousness. Her description of her body destroys the mutual exclusion of penetrability and ability to penetrate, revealing the universal ability of bodies to do both, by one moment "stuffing" a capsule into her ass and the next stuffing herself into her boyfriend's body. Her description of sexual relationality detaches the acts of penetration from the bodily ordering that cisness rests on, from the binaries active/passive, subject/object, presence/absence, showing us that penetration is an offering and beckoning penetration is an act. Finally, castration here is an enlivening, affirming, possibility-producing experience that does not inaugurate a new era, life, or person but is one event in the becoming of the body that writes these words.

Perhaps most importantly, however, penned by a historian who is working on a manuscript that tells the story of the many ways that trans women

have outfitted their bodies for themselves in the twentieth century, Gill-Peterson's personal account disrupts the conceptual apparatus that has held trans women in a perpetual state of novelty, always brand new, always too new to be allowed to exist.⁴² This history, throughout the entire span of trans women regarded and depicted as categorically distinct from cis women, has presented trans women, as Gill-Peterson goes on to say, as "mere allegory, reduced at the same time to the too literal, she is what has no space in which to mean, and so she knows . . . what materialism really demands."⁴³ In Gill-Peterson's ability to know that she is doing this, the text does inaugurate a new era, not of a personal history but of a collective one. This is not to say that a trans woman is doing something for the first time here; to claim that would be to collaborate in producing the collective amnesia stretching from Loop-the-loop to Janet Mock and encompassing the texts of thousands of their sisters and siblings, and this writing knows that bodily experience is relentlessly historical. Rather, again, Gill-Peterson is positioned here, in history, both to narrate her body as it speaks to her *and* to envision the audience who can read her. This audience is not categorically cis and she needn't translate for the benefit of a supposed cis readership. All the trans women's writing to which Gill-Peterson has been audience has readied the way for this historical emergence. It is that same audience that we constitute, anticipate, and hope to expand and bolster with this volume.

FEMINISM AGAINST CISNESS

Every chapter in this collection helps to clarify the knot of the two materialisms that have structured this introduction: first, society is ordered around a hierarchy of value stemming from monetization of work with the corollary devaluation of reproductive labor. Second, sexual difference is a social hierarchy organized by the reproduction of the link between penetrability and subordination; its animating premise, proffering a homology between cisness and bourgeois whiteness, is one of its most potent weapons. Each chapter, departing from a place of knowing these things, pushes forward political, historical, and theoretical thought that reflects the real terrain of sex, gender, and sexuality, unobscured by the ideology of cisness.

In chapters that focus on the politics of trans identities, Cameron Awkward-Rich, Margaux L. Kristjansson, and I redraw the lines of communication away from cis people and among trans people and trans historical genealogies. Awkward-Rich's "On Trans Use of the Many Sojourner Truths"

investigates the image of Sojourner Truth addressing the audience of the 1851 Women's Rights Convention, an event that has had a long and varied life. Her famous question—"Ain't I a woman?"—has for decades circulated in a variety of feminist contexts as a contestation of narrow, misogynist, and white supremacist conceptions of *woman*. It's not surprising, then, that this image of Truth has been likewise put to use in twenty-first-century contestations of trans-exclusionary feminisms (and plain trans misogyny under the guise of feminist concern). Foregrounding the example of Joy Ladin's 2016 TEDx talk, titled, of course, "Ain't I a Woman?," Awkward-Rich's chapter thinks critically about this relatively new trans life of Sojourner Truth. In particular, it queries the rhetorical moves and effects of Truth's invocation in white trans contexts, arguing that these invocations rely on a structure of analogy with and displacement of race. In turn, this structure of argument works to obscure the extent to which cis sex/gender—that is, sex/gender as a stable, binary configuration—was and is a racial project. Further, the chapter takes seriously the likelihood that Truth never actually posed her membership as "woman" as a question. Using the long-standing debate about whether Truth ever asked her famous question as a context, it suggests that (white) trans feminist investment in nonetheless invoking Truth as the question "Ain't I a woman?" can teach us something about the racist logics of liberal trans feminism. But, rather than turning away from the most popular image of Sojourner Truth as a resource for Black trans feminism, the chapter concludes with a turn toward two Black trans feminist potentials embedded within it.

In "1970s Trans Feminism as Decolonial Praxis," Kristjansson and I proceed from writings by trans feminine people active in 1970s Trans Liberation political projects in New York City, Philadelphia, and Miami. We write in the ongoing life of an anti-Black and settler colonial order, where trans feminine life and resistance continue under the conditions set by the murderous logics of sexual violence, murder, disappearance, and the carcerality of everyday life. In this scene of ongoing dispossession, settler states offer trans inclusion as the promise of the next frontier of civil rights struggle. Agents of this state position legislation, such as the trans bathroom bills, as the representative form of anti-trans violence and recommend legal challenges. As important as these legal efforts are in protecting trans access to public space, delimiting trans struggle to the promise of inclusion in state protection is revealed to be also an effort to conscript trans people into the reproduction of the settler nation that has always been structured by enslavement, genocide, and bureaucratic and carceral enforcement of cisness.

In historical chapters, Greta LaFleur and Beans Velocci take the concepts that emerge from these political formations and bring them to bear on archives. LaFleur's "Trans Feminine Histories, Piece by Piece, or, Vernacular Print and the Histories of Gender" reads eighteenth- and nineteenth-century settler newspaper reports that refer to, gesture toward, or describe the experiences of self-castration. The strategies that appear in these reports are variegated, creative, and, to the one, partial, depicting approaches to trans womanhood that include everything from modifications to modes of dress to what might amount, in our own time, to hormone adjustment. None of the reports are longer than a few hundred words, at best, and many of them are rendered in the judgmental and/or disciplinary language of strict settler gender systems and gendered racial expectations. The chapter has two aims: first, it showcases these reports as narratives important to the ongoing project of writing thicker and more robust trans feminist histories of eighteenth-century North American cultures; second, the chapter takes these reports as a point of departure for sketching out a trans feminist historiographic method for the study of early periods that combines care, creativity, and historical research methods sensitive to a complex knot of eighteenth-century realities (colonialism, multiple and competing understandings of gender diversity, racialization and enslavement, gendered discipline, etc.). Central to the chapter is the assumption that erasing or undermining the claims of trans women to womanhood has been a prerogative of traditional methods for writing history, including (or especially) women's and queer history, but that some scholarship in women's and queer history nonetheless offers us some tools to undo assumptions of cisness, cis sexist epistemological principles that inform historical research.

Velocci's "Denaturing Cisness, or, Toward Trans History as Method" counters arguments that transness is a newfangled invention and therefore an illegitimate way of being. Historians of transness and nonacademic trans people alike have sought to locate trans individuals in the past to prove that they have always existed in some way or another. But while this approach promises contemporary validation of identities, it has several unintended consequences. First, because trans history developed out of a history of sexuality paradigm that focuses on genealogies of contemporary categories and demands tight historicization of identities, it continuously runs up against the problem of defining "who counts" as a subject of trans history. This insistence on a coherent and recognizable trans subject presupposes an ontological gender stability that runs contrary to transness itself. Second, a minoritizing search for trans people in the past unintentionally reproduces a cis/trans binary—in that model, throughout history, most people's gender

identity or social role has naturally mapped onto their sexed body, in contrast to trans people who are distinct for their lack of fit. This renders invisible the way that that *all* sex and gender—including what is regarded as cisgender, or non-trans—has constantly failed to fit into normative taxonomies. Cisness itself had to be actively constructed as arguments about racialized and classed sexual difference, scientific study of sex that revealed constant bodily anomalies, and quotidian violations of gender norms constantly threatened to undermine the idea of a coherent, stable, and binary sex system. It is, in fact, cisness that cannot ever be adequately defended. Third, the very attempt to legitimize contemporary transness through an insistence on a trans historical transness takes for granted that the best way to defend something in the present is to show that it has always existed. This chapter, then, in addition to arguing that cis normativity is itself a historical construct, also pushes back against the impulse to historicize transness at all, offering an alternative trans historical temporality that values change and fluidity over stability.

In theoretical chapters, Kay Gabriel and Marquis Bey provide conceptual tools for understanding the present state of trans life and how it might move through revolutionary futures. Gabriel's "Two Senses of Gender Abolition: Gender as Accumulation Strategy" asks what contribution does the struggle for trans liberation have to this communist horizon? To pose this question raises immediately the vexed relationship between class struggle and so-called identity politics. This chapter aims to understand the totalizing, rather than particularizing, force of political movement from one or another standpoint of social identity. The Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács introduced *standpoint* as a category in order to think the differential perspectives onto capitalist totality that class positions enable. In a Lukácsian attempt to account for the capitalist production of sexual identity, Kevin Floyd in *The Reification of Desire* has argued that this production of identity—a reification in the sense of the freezing and solidification of a stable position out of a historical process—enables a particular, historically situated, and critical knowledge of capitalist totality: "To think sexuality in reification's terms is to begin to see the way in which reification refers to a social dynamic that opens critical vantages on the totality of capital as much as it closes them down."⁴⁴ The author pursues an analogous argument from a specifically transsexual perspective. This chapter says *transsexual*, versus *trans* or *transgender*, advisedly. Gabriel's aim is to foreground the sphere of embodiment that transsexuality bears on—where "embodiment" signals the social dimension of signification that any particular body partakes in.

Bey's "Faceless: Nonconfessions of a Gender" unfolds in a first-person perspective. Their chapter yearns for a gendered subjectivity of facelessness. They know that their body, read as cis too often, read as Black nearly always, and rarely understood as what that impossible nexus entails, is made to confess certain things. Indeed, Foucault says elsewhere that sociality is structured by the demand to confess oneself as a way to coerce truth from deviant criminality. To refuse the gender binary is a criminal act, and trans antagonism—a violence that manifests along a spectrum from head-shaking disapproval to death—is at base a vociferous coercion to confess. The aim in this chapter is to pose this question: What happens when one's body belies what they wish it to be? For those of us who are read as cis, have not undergone the alterations potent with gendered signification, and are not trans(gender) in a sense that registers with how such an identity is made tentatively legible, what claim do we have to a gendered subjectivity that is in fact a nonconfession, a confessional refusal, a desire for facelessness? And how might (their) Blackness muddy the already muddy waters of gender alignment, that uneven epidermis indexical of an anoriginal lawlessness lacerative of the "cis" of cisgender, intimate with the "trans" of transgender? In this they have only a byzantine desire for a way of moving in the world and among others on grounds unstable, being and becoming a nobody, a faceless being not without gender per se—oh, how known it is that one has a gender, one everyone assumes and insists on and demands of them, ontologically—but with a subjectivity that vibrates away from perinatal circumscription. In a desire for facelessness and confessional refusal, they are intrigued by the contours of the engendered world when living unto a way of being that is not coerced to confess its gendered self or confined to the normative registers of the body-made-legible.

If Gabriel and Bey provide a glimpse at utopian horizons where the knot of compulsory cisness, capital, and anti-Blackness is undone, Joanna Wuest and Jules Gill-Peterson document impediments to such futures. Wuest's "Assuaging the Anxious Matriarch: Social Conservatives, Radical Feminists, and Dark Money against Trans Rights" addressed the recent and strange convergence of Christian legal organizations, conservative foundations and nonprofits, Trump administration officials, and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). These social conservatives and radical feminists have joined forces in legislative and judicial conflicts over the rights of physicians and therapists to treat gender-nonconforming and transgender youth as well as over inclusionary bathroom access policies. Though it resembles past partnerships of feminists and conservatives who allied against pornography and for the

victims of violent crime, the coalition's mobilization of feminist, antiracist, and even intersectional arguments against the very notion of trans experience and identity heralds the advent of a new social conservative feminist political logic. The Family Policy Alliance, for instance, has unveiled its own version of #MeToo feminism with its "Ask Me First" campaign, which champions the voices of cis women and (presumably cis) children and uses them in ballot referenda and legislative campaigns against trans rights. Additionally, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), the country's largest, most well-funded right-wing Christian litigation group, has funded TERF groups like the Women's Liberation Front and has worked with them across a range of legal battles and public education events. In doing so, the ADF has centered a POC cis-female plaintiff to make an appeal to the rights of racialized (cis) women against trans women (styled in part as the ever-creeping specter of the opportunistic cis-male predator). Thus, at its core, this coalition is prepared to levy the principles of feminism, womanhood, intersectional antiracism, and diversity and pluralism more broadly against the expansion or erosion of sex and gender as social categories. This chapter tracks the emergence of this series of partnerships and campaigns and interrogates the rhetorical and ideological transformations that have attended them.

Gill-Peterson's "Caring for Trans Kids, Transnationally, or, Against 'Gender-Critical' Moms" names and indicts the transnational network of anti-trans political alliances in the United States and United Kingdom that targets children explicitly for harassment, bullying, and legislative and administrative violence. Trans children find themselves in the crosshairs of a series of anti-trans political fronts: state legislative efforts in the United States to make trans-affirmative healthcare a *crime*, and to ban trans children's participation in education and organized sports; the saturation of UK corporate media outlets with moral panic stories about trans children, leading to the imperiling of reforms to the country's Gender Recognition Act; the circulation of pseudoscientific theories like "Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria"; and the invocation of trans children as moral degeneracy incarnate by right-wing movements with white supremacist and authoritarian goals. This diffuse field of anti-trans movements has in common the stimulus that children are far more culturally and legally vulnerable to political violence than adults.

To produce a political analysis of this varied field of actors, this chapter focuses on the most respectable of such crusaders: so-called gender-critical moms, who have organized around the aggrieved identity category of "mom" or "mommy." Using a sentimental political mode in the United States and

United Kingdom from which white women, as mothers, have long benefited, these well-funded, organized groups claim to be sincerely alarmed at the supposed growing ranks among their children who are coming out as trans. Although their “critical” understanding of “gender ideology” is based in a series of easily falsifiable claims, this chapter aims not to prove them wrong or catch them in a lie, which would do little to challenge their current clout and respectable veneer. Instead, as a contribution to the political analysis of white supremacy embedded in cis normativity and trans-exclusionary feminism, this chapter places gender-critical moms in the larger context of resurgent reactionary, authoritarian, and ethnonationalist political movements in both countries. What does it mean, the chapter ultimately asks, that white women are the respectable face of a politic invested in the fantasized outcome of exposing trans children to social and literal death?

Grace Lavery’s “Generic Deductiveness: Reasoning as Mood in the Stoner Neo-Noir” models what trans feminist analysis can do with the transmisogynist conditions established by the political actors that Wuest and Gill-Peterson describe. To capture and theorize the particular condition of trans women under the present circumstances of unprecedented historical surveillance, this chapter examines the epistemic ambivalence and erotic deflation of what it calls the “stoner neo-noir” subgenre of Hollywood cinema. The genre’s principles were, Lavery suggests, sketched in the classic 1970s noir revival movies (Polanski’s *Chinatown* and, especially, Altman’s *The Long Goodbye*) but became a staple of studio output in the 1990s (with the Coen Brothers’ *The Big Lebowski*) and into the present (with Paul Thomas Anderson’s adaptation of *Inherent Vice* and the recent *Under the Silver Lake*). These movies share more than a stoned protagonist (a detective, or “dick”) and a Southern Californian location: crucially, they depart from traditional noir by emplotting mysteries that, while they may have conventional solutions, provoke unruly and metaphysical speculations into the nature of suspicion, depicting and perhaps even promoting a lethargic air of deductiveness that exceeds (indeed, only partly overlaps with) the mysteries delineated by plot, applying itself rather to the ambient, affectively muted condition of social reality as mediated by the phenomenological experience of the dick. “Generic deductiveness” aligns the double-deductiveness of the stoned dick, solving both a particular mystery and the mystery of reality itself, with the curious condition of the trans woman positioned as theorist of a general condition while simultaneously charged with resolving a plot whose particulars are all-too-intimately known. Although she stops short of claiming a causal relationship, Lavery

also examines narrative echoes and reverberations between the stoned dick as protagonist of neo-noir and the contemporary (that is, the 1970s to the present) emergence of a feminist critique of Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory—a fateful decision to elevate fantasy above plot in the causal scheme psychoanalysis attributed to the development of the sexual subject.

WHO IS ON THE OUTSIDE OF CISNESS?

The epigraphs that begin this introduction demonstrate a lineage of this thought. Cohen's seminal essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" lays out, by simply looking around at the real conditions of history in her present, that heterosexuality is a minoritarian structure of power and not actually a lived social norm for most people. The essay springs from Cohen's resistance to the way that white queer radicals in the early 1990s were drawing a simple and antagonistic political line between queers and straights (or breeders as the misogynist parlance often had it). Looking around her life and the people in the neighborhoods where she felt safe and seen, Cohen noticed that there was not such an easy line. Black women, Black families, and other people of color were held outside the protections of heteropatriarchy, taxonomized by gender and sexuality through terms like *welfare queen* as categorically as any subgroup of queer people. Rather than dissipating the force of political resistance to heteropatriarchy, for Cohen, this fact expands its force, indicating the material basis for a web of solidarity that reached the vast majority of people.⁴⁵

To adapt Cohen's essential formulation, we might ask who is on the outside of cisness? The literal answer: every single one of us, because even those who are called cis only own that title through the maintenance of nervous denial about the way bodies work.⁴⁶ Despite this universal non-cisness of bodies, however, groups of people are radically differentially socially positioned in relation to this fact. People who are racialized or poor, people with disabilities, and, most overtly, people who are called trans or gender nonconforming: these are the people made to bear all the weight of the universal non-cisness of bodies because they are made to represent that fact. That is why, for so many decades of the twentieth century, culture, in the United States and other colonizing/colonized contexts, created a substantial archive of media that presented trans women as a joke, a sign of panic, or, simply, dead.⁴⁷ This genocidal cultural imaginary and the particular representational forms that constitute it (which include presenting trans women as seductive forces up

until the revelation of genitals, the emphasis on the comical nature of trans women's very existence, and the centrality of images of trans women who are abused or murdered) index the stakes of being thus laden with the role of representing something about bodies that cis people do not want to admit.

But, then, who is outside of sexual difference? The answer is none of us. Cis or trans; men, women, nonbinary people: all of our sex and gender experience is devilishly bound by its symbolic field. Billy-Ray Belcourt is talking about the act of sex when he says that "sex is one of the few social interactions I choose that reminds me of my unending penetrability" in his book of essays *A History of My Brief Body*.⁴⁸ But, this introduction argues, the experience of sexed embodiment is also (and relatedly) a reminder of our "unending penetrability." We are simply differentially positioned regarding this universal penetrability of bodies, which is the material reality of sex. All of us live in bodies that are interpreted in the terms set by this ideological formation, more or less able to deny or deflect our body's penetrability. Those who are called women are tasked with representing this universal reality, but that signifier *woman* is only shorthand for the object of feminization, a category that can be mobilized in many ways, as this introduction has demonstrated. Each of us has other identities that are not as a subsidiary, modifying, secondary, or additive but constitutive of and transversal to sex, this field of meaning in which our bodies circulate. Belcourt, like Irigaray, models embrasure of the unending penetrability of bodies as the only true resistance to a historical formation that renders the penetrable person expendable or nonexistent. Belcourt's beautiful sentence begins with sex and ends with penetrability; "I choose" is the hinge at the center. To be able to choose how we all manage our penetrability is the ur-goal of feminist political struggle, in a sense, and this is a question of material conditions and practices. Queer and trans life, historically, has known this reality of bodies intimately and elaborately, even as those cultural formations are also striated with masculinist refusal, necessitating the assertion of the feminine embrasure of penetrability here too. Herein lies one significant distillation of the mutually constitutive nature of feminist and queer/trans struggle.

This introduction has attempted to outline a theory that allows us to push past the impasse, set up by the misrecognitions of queer theory as it emerged in the early 1990s. It is cisness, not the historical category *woman*, that limited feminist revolutionary horizons. When woman is a conceptual or political problem, it is a racial and class problem. Whiteness and cisness, co-emergent and inextricable historical formations, are the impediment

to gender liberation. The strands of queer liberation that orbited academic queer theory in the early 1990s couldn't see this, and so woman became the bad object and femininity the field of expression that came to represent gender expression *tout court*. In much the way that Cohen observes that this moment posed heterosexuals as the problem, while sidestepping the way that *the heterosexual* only really serves as an alibi for the claim to the natural sexual propriety of whiteness, these same operations rushed to femininity and woman as the problem. They sidestepped the way that these formations serve as alibis for whiteness and accumulation and even in this sense only to the same extent as are masculinity and maleness. Cisness is the true crux, foundation, and ideological substrata of all this gendered ordering.

The phrase "feminism against cisness" ought to be a redundancy and *Feminism against Cisness* seeks to make that imperative plain going forward. Feminism should be definitionally against cisness. For people to assert femininity for its own aesthetic and social possibilities not for the small compensation of gender-normative, which is to say racial and class, benefit is to militate against cisness. For women to march together, to gather unmediated by men, to, in their being together, reject the hierarchy imposed by sexual difference is to attack cisness. For trans people to march together, to work out the antagonisms internal to trans community, unmediated by cisness, to, in their being together, reject the hierarchy imposed by cisness, and in transgender publicness and mutual recognition reveal cisness as only an ideology that manages us for whiteness and capital accumulation, is to end cisness. For all to assert the queerness and femininity of reproductive labors, because, not in spite, of their position against the state of the world as it is, organized by capital accumulation and the extractive violence that allows such accumulation: this is simply a substantial component of any program that can claim the mantle of feminism.

NOTES

- 1 "‘Woman’ is there to confuse us, to hide the reality ‘women.’" Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," in *The Straight Mind*, 16.
- 2 Gill-Peterson, "It's Not Enough to Celebrate Transgender Women of Color during Pride."
- 3 For the audio and a transcription of the interview, see Rivera, "Bonus Episode—From the Vault: Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, 1970."
- 4 This impression is strengthened by the fact that the interviewer's questions have mostly been edited out of the surviving copy of the interview, which was discovered on a reel-to-reel tape in a box in the basement of the Lesbian Herstory

Archive in Brooklyn in 2019. There is also a third person in the interview, who's identified as Victor.

- 5 See Greta LaFleur's contribution to this collection for a provocation regarding the many methods of body modification that the historical archive holds.
- 6 Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, 62.
- 7 Fortunati, *Arcane of Reproduction*.
- 8 See Williams, *Politics of Public Housing*; and Kornbluh, *Battle for Welfare Rights*.
- 9 For an elaboration of this communist analysis of reproductive labor, see Gleeson and O'Rourke, "Introduction." See also O'Brien, "To Abolish the Family."
- 10 See Kay Gabriel's contribution to this collection for a thorough and new articulation of the relation between transsexual embodiment and the instrumentalization of gender for capital accumulation.
- 11 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 235.
- 12 *Pato* is Spanish-language slang for faggot, as Rivera explains.
- 13 Rivera, "Sylvia Rivera—Part 2."
- 14 Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.
- 15 See Jules Gill-Peterson's contribution to this collection for a fulsome historical and theoretical account of this racial mobilization of the idea of women and children.
- 16 Rivera, "Transvestites."
- 17 Rivera, "Bonus Episode—From the Vault: Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, 1970."
- 18 See Greta LaFleur's work in progress *A Queer History of Sexual Violence*, which addresses the early American use of castration as a punishment for a variety of racialized and classed criminalized behaviors and conditions.
- 19 See Joanna Wuest's contribution to this collection for an account of the political alliances that compose the transnational circuit of transphobic political action that seeks to popularize gestures such as this one.
- 20 I work with a long-established feminist analysis of sexual difference. See, for example, Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the biologizing of social difference in service of the creation and maintenance of woman as a secondary, othered term to the unmarked male universal in *The Second Sex*. See also Luce Irigaray's theory of sexual difference articulated in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. In this text, Irigaray argues that the history of Western philosophical thought from Plato to Freud has been built around a supposedly universal subject who is in fact gendered male. This subject is produced through contrast with woman in this philosophical system; her unreason and intractable material embodiment provide the Other through which universal Man is aggrandized. The political philosopher Carole Pateman uses the phrase "the law of male sex-right" to describe men's social and political priority and that "sexual mastery is the primary means through which men affirm their manhood," with rape as the "primal scene" through which this power is confirmed. Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, 3.
- 21 For a small sampling of the scholarship on the relation of sex work to race and class, see Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin'*; Chin, *Cosmopolitan Sex Workers*;

Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics*; Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*; and Wong, *Transpacific Attachments*.

- 22 Heaney, *The New Woman*, 20.
- 23 The scholarship documenting the disproportionate vulnerability to sexual assault and abuse among these demographic groups is extensive; what follows is a small sampling. For quantitative analysis of sexual assault and abuse in children, see Gewirtz-Meydan and Finkelhor, "Sexual Abuse and Assault in a Large Sample of Children and Adolescents." For analysis of incidence of sexual assault among disabled populations, see Andrews and Veronen, "Sexual Assault and People with Disabilities." For an analysis of sexual assault of incarcerated women, see Hartsfield, Sharp, and Conner, "Cumulative Sexual Victimization and Mental Health Outcomes among Incarcerated Women." For a statistical analysis of incidence of sexual assault among populations of queer and trans people, see Langenderfer-Magruder et al., "Sexual Victimization and Subsequent Police Reporting by Gender Identity."
- 24 See Cameron Awkward-Rich's essay in this collection for an analysis of how Sojourner Truth, both her actual situation as a self-emancipated, formerly enslaved orator and her presentation by subsequent generations of commentators, reflects negotiation of this transversal relation between Blackness and gendered treatment.
- 25 For a careful and clarifying historical analysis of white women as managers of plantation labor and finances, an analysis that provides the necessary historical materialist context and corollary for this white woman's behavior, see Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*. For an account of Black women's exclusion for the rhetoric of protection and maternity that formed the experience of many bourgeois white women, see Morgan, *Laboring Women*.
- 26 For a careful and clarifying account of convict labor as a racialized form of punishment used against Black women, see LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*. Thank you to Scottie Streitfeld for drawing my attention to this book during our discussion hosted by the Queer Theory Reading Group at UC-Irvine.
- 27 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 214.
- 28 The other side of Spillers's argument regarding the ungendering of flesh; this history produces solidarities of the feminized. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."
- 29 See Marquis Bey's contribution to this collection for a theoretical parsing of the "facelessness" that adheres in the non-cis operation of Blackness.
- 30 Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.
- 31 As, for example, Shulamith Firestone does in chapter 4, "Down with Children," in *The Dialectic of Sex*.
- 32 Laymon, *Heavy*, 23.
- 33 Laymon, *Heavy*, 16–17.
- 34 Lewis, "Mothering against the World." See also O'Brien, "To Abolish the Family."
- 35 Lewis, "Mothering against the World."
- 36 See Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.
- 37 Shufeldt, "Biography of a Passive Pederast," 453.

- 38 Shufeldt, "Biography of a Passive Pederast," 454.
- 39 Shufeldt, "Biography of a Passive Pederast," 455.
- 40 Shufeldt, "Biography of a Passive Pederast," 455.
- 41 Gill-Peterson, "Estro Junkie."
- 42 Jules Gill-Peterson, "Gender Underground: A History of Trans DIY" (manuscript in progress). For an account of this consistent, recurrent claim to the "newness" of trans life, see Heaney, "Preface," in *The New Woman*, xv–xvii.
- 43 Gill-Peterson, "Estro Junkie."
- 44 Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, 20.
- 45 Cohen's work exemplifies and portends the articulation of queer of color critique as well as a wealth of political and cultural organizing from the late 1990s to the present that, in centering BIPOC LGBT people, inherently avoids the kind of whitewashed political and intellectual imaginary that Cohen critiques. Recent political formations including the Undocuqueer movement, which centers the needs of LGBT migrants against an advocacy discourse that often privileges the bonds of nuclear families; anti-pinkwashing groups that fight back against the use of the presence of the forms of LGBT life and civil rights discourses that are legible to Americans and Western Europeans as a cover for the continuation of racist and Islamophobic policies, colonial expansions, and imperialist wars that diminish the life chances of people of all sexual and gender identities in targeted territories; and Queer Muslim political and cultural projects that allow for the articulation of LGBT perspectives and priorities without slipping into the Islamophobia that mainstream LGBT spaces have been too willing to tolerate or even foster. See Margaux Kristjansson's and my contribution to this collection for a partial historical genealogy of this kind of political work.
- 46 See Beans Velocci's contribution to this collection for a thorough historical analysis of the eugenicist history of how cisness attained this primacy.
- 47 For an overview of this cultural landscape through film and television, see the film *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*, dir. Sam Feder (Netflix, 2020).
- 48 Belcourt, *History of My Brief Body*, 72.

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