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Gender Trouble in Paradise

In a 2021 HBO series, *The White Lotus*, two teenagers, Olivia (played by Sydney Sweeney) and Paula (Brittany O'Grady), spend huge amounts of time sitting casually by a large swimming pool not sunning simply but (gasp!) reading. Their choice of scholarly material clearly comments on the themes of the show—neocolonial tourism, clueless white people, the vapidity of wealth, sinister uses of new-age health practices, intoxication, and white-collar crime. When they first appear lounging poolside, Olivia and Paula are reading Nietzsche (okay, it was *The Portable Nietzsche*, so I am not sure if that counts) and Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Later Paula is reading Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, an appropriate choice given her penchant for encouraging anticolonial resistance (as long as it is at no cost to her personally), and Olivia reveals the emptiness of her Oedipal revolt by showing up with Camille Paglia's hackneyed *Sexual Personae*. As the troubles with white people intensify from week to week, episode after episode, the teens turn to Aimé Césaire (Paula), Jacques Lacan (Olivia), and finally Judith Butler's classic book *Gender Trouble* makes a quick and unheralded appearance. *Gender Trouble* shows up when Paula pulls it out of her bag while rooting around for her medication. The book, indeed, was casually taking up space alongside a small pharmacy of legal and illegal drugs.

Olivia and Paula watch the midlife crises unfold around them with the air of world-weary teens, forced by their elders into one embarrassing situation after another. Olivia is the daughter of the vacationing family and Paula is her friend, a smart but naive young woman of color who openly expresses contempt for the white family who have brought her with them to the White Lotus resort on Maui and attempts to find commonality and connection with some of the native Hawaiian people who work at the resort. The reading material of the two women mirrors their race/class positions, and so Olivia tends to read books about the psyche and Paula tends to read books about colonization. When the two women sit side by side, with Olivia reading Paglia and Paula reading Fanon, the textual politics seem clearly defined. But when Butler shows up in Paula's purse, so to speak, the

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positioning is odd. We might have expected the very white, very privileged Olivia to be reading Butler, but in fact Paula has *Gender Trouble* stored in her bag, alongside the other materials she needs to survive white leisure culture—*Gender Trouble* in this context signifies as a drug, a weapon, protection, and a banner of Paula's refusal of white heteronormative love and life. If only the rest of the show had offered even a cursory engagement with the texts that Paula brought along for light reading, it could have been great. But, alas, as the narrative ambles along its all too predictable path, from enlightenment to ruination, from family time to doing time, from the trouble with white people to the trouble with the help, all critiques of white normativity slip back into the toxic stew of tourism and TV.

I draw attention to the banalities of a light and inconsequential television series not to bestow weighty seriousness on what is in the end a series of sight gags but to situate Butler as a firm and somewhat persistent presence in popular culture. Butler has long attracted global attention for their supposedly incomprehensible, dense philosophical writings. But, as they have often said, if the writings are so incomprehensible, why are people so angry about them? Butler has been denounced by the Pope, hounded by right-wing evangelical protesters in Brazil and burned in effigy there, situated at the very heart of a feared "gender ideology," accused of trying to destroy the family, charged with transphobia by some trans* groups and of antifeminism by some TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) groups.[1] But they have also become a representative of the global impact of queer theory and feminism. Butler's books have appeared as accessories in luxury brand commercials by Gucci and others. Their image and writings have been referred to widely across high and low cultures, and they are as close as a living author can possibly come to being an intellectual global legend. They are more famous than Susan Sontag, more ethical and generous than Jacques Derrida, and more likeable and funnier than Slavoj Žižek. Butler is, in short, a superstar, a phallic authority, a celebrity. And as such, their books can be thrown into the crockpot of an HBO show angling for intellectual credibility and can signify accordingly!

What does *Gender Trouble* signify in *The White Lotus*? Not much in relation to the cringe-worthy plot of wealthy do-nothings taking time away from their busy lives of leisure to lie in the sun, receive massages from native people, and congratulate themselves on living well. But the book means a lot within the intertextual web established by the visual tagging of the teens' readerly aspirations. There, in conversation with Césaire and Fanon in particular, and operating at the level of the show's unconscious (as referenced by Freud and Lacan), *Gender Trouble* is a little bomb landing in the middle of the family romance of colonial occupation, lighting up the violent entanglements of intimacy, the natural, the exotic, and the financial and troubling

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all of them. *Gender Trouble* in *The White Lotus* is not a simple feminist refusal of the roles assigned to men and women across the genre of "vacations gone wrong"; rather, the book indexes other forms of instability that lurk beneath the surface of all luxury tourism where white violence has cleared the way for white relaxation.

The gender stability that underpins the order of things in this particular show is in crisis from the start. In a humorous aside, the white family's patriarch, Mark Mossbacher, arrives on vacation anxious and ailing. He has lost his mojo and thinks he is dying because his testicles have inexplicably swollen up to grotesque proportions. The imbalance that the swollen testicles represent plays out in the relationship between Mark (Steve Zahn) and his successful businesswoman wife, Nicole (Connie Britton). She is literally breaking his balls, and the heterosexual matrix shudders in response. While their daughter sneers at them, their son, Quinn (Fred Hechinger), hovers over his phone watching porn with a masturbatory mania. And the discontent that courses through the white family plays out at every level of the hotel as well. Indeed, the hotel hums with resentment, addiction, disappointment, and grief. The high-paying guests perform their pettiness against the backdrop of brown rage, and the family at its center seems to unravel. But, of course, despite the best intentions of a snooty gay hotel manager, Armond (Murray Bartlett), and various other people relegated to the category of the minor by the greed and noise of white wealth, all's well that ends well, and the ending of this inconsequential soap deflates as quickly as the patriarch's swollen testicles.

But what's Butler got to do with it? The hidden copy of *Gender Trouble* is a clue pointing to what Gilles Deleuze calls the "out-of-field" space of conventional visual texts.[2] As Kara Keeling's work has shown, a figure that Keeling dubs "the black femme" (a position occupied by several people in *The White Lotus*) directs the viewer to what lies beyond the limits of common sense as it serves to smooth over contradictions in mainstream cinema. Keeling proposes that "the black femme, while a product of that [cinematic] reality, also might be a portal to a reality that does not operate according to the dictates of the visible and the epistemological, ethical, and political logics of visibility."[3] In order to access this space of a reality operating beyond the regulated logics of visibility, we need Butler's *Gender Trouble*—and Paula might want to pick up a copy of *Bodies That Matter*, too.[4]

Butler's argument has never been that gender trouble issues forth from singular genderqueer figures. Such figures may or may not disrupt roiling scenes of social dysfunction. Rather, Butler's theories of performativity, iterative subjectivity, and constrained embodiment explain the logic of the phallus that underpins ideological systems in such a way that the genderqueer figure does not need to appear, has always already been rendered

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unthinkable and abject, and occupies the far limits of what can be known or even thought. In *The White Lotus*, but also in most mainstream visual regimes, the representatives of gender normativity are mired in a melancholy that they refuse to claim as their own. Accordingly, the blame must be distributed elsewhere.

Gender Trouble circulates in *The White Lotus* as a phallus of sorts, a lesbian phallus, to use one of Butler's terms from *Bodies That Matter*, a "transferable phantom" (*BTM* 53) available through the process of "aggressive reterritorialization" (86). The logic of the phallus allows that, in any given system or representational regime, there is an organizing force that confers meaning throughout the system while fading into the background and disappearing. The God-force of the phallus allows the whole scene of human activity to be set up for the purpose of confirming white male power, and yet no markers of white male power need actually appear. Entire orders of representation (including much of mainstream culture—films, TV, and music) can casually and repetitively confirm and produce white patriarchal power while seeming to be simply creating pleasurable visual landscapes, credible social interactions, exciting *mise en scène*, in short, worlds. When visual or other kinds of evidence emerge to disturb this smooth visual field, we talk about gazes, points of view, perspectives, and, once the disturbance has been safely annexed to a dissident social position, it can be ignored, rejected, or made into the object of distanced amusement. Think of a film like *Get Out* (2017) by Jordan Peele, or the many Alfred Hitchcock films where the persecuted and soon-to-be violated protagonists insist that something is wrong, that the whole system is turning on them and trying to kill them. In Hitchcock's worlds, the paranoid woman is often cast as the source of the trouble she tries to denounce. In Peele's film, a horror film in which wealthy white people steal Black people's bodies, the director pulls the curtain back on the source of Chris's deep unease and reveals that the truth of white supremacy is worse than anything he could have imagined. Trouble, in all mainstream cinema, confirms the rightness of the order of things; and in renegade representational regimes, trouble throws the whole enterprise into doubt but cannot destroy it. The order of the phallus maintains a common-sense reality through both the mechanism of confirmation (Hitchcock) and the mechanism of denunciation (Peele). So how do we oppose phallic regimes?

In *The White Lotus*, when *Gender Trouble* tumbles out of a bag like a drug or illegal contraband, it marks the lesbian phallus as a countersexual prosthetic that signals the end of nature—trouble in paradise—and signals to the discerning viewer that there are ways out of the binds presented in the show as meaningful, inescapable, and inevitable.[5] With nary a lesbian or transgender person in sight, the lesbian phallus gets to work.

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Trouble comes, Judith Butler tells us, as pain, often bodily pain but also psychic pain. Trouble is a sign that a system has a weak spot and that you may be it. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler identifies "a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power" (*GT* xxvii). This phenomenon, they go on to explain, inheres in the mobile problem of "trouble" itself: "the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it" (vii). Staying out of trouble, in other words, is not the way to challenge "the prevailing law." Challenges can only be issued from the space of trouble, and Butler's goal is not to stay out of it but to figure out the best way to be in it. I think we can all agree that Butler has found their way to trouble and has "stayed with the trouble," to use Donna Haraway's admirable phrase, for most of their intellectual career.[6]

While trouble in *Gender Trouble* emerges as a problem of feminist claims on womanhood, trouble in *Bodies That Matter* operates a little differently. In *Gender Trouble*, we learn that, although "the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies," this "does not imply that repetition itself ought to be stopped—as if it could be. If repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities, then the crucial question emerges: What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?" (*GT* 32). In other words, in *Gender Trouble* the repetition of cultural scripts that produces identities and realities seems open to subversion in which "regulatory practice" itself becomes visible and can be called into question. But in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler goes a step further. Here they dare to name the subversive form of repetition that can turn the system back on itself: rather than obeying the laws of gender, within which feminine performance operates to bolster male masculinity, Butler proposes a lesbian masculinity that, from the position of abjection, calls the entire enterprise of white phallogocentric patriarchy and heterosexism into question.

Before we map this hopeful escape route, let's confirm that "the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism" work in the ways Butler proposes. Certainly, in a show like *The White Lotus*, the logic, metaphysic, and naturalized ontologies of white, wealthy heteronormativity shore themselves up through repetition and even through repetition, disruption, and more repetition. So even though the patriarch seems to doubt his masculinity at the start, later on he has an opportunity to prove his virility to his wife by intervening in an attempted robbery gone wrong and felling the Hawaiian service worker who seemed to be attacking her. It doesn't matter that the Hawaiian worker, Kai (Kekoa Kekumano), was the victim of a misguided setup orchestrated by Paula; his downfall is necessary in order to reestablish

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white patriarchal power and to wipe away all references in the show to the real theft of Hawaii from native Hawaiians by white people, perpetrated by settler colonialism. The disruption that Kai represents becomes merely an occasion for the repetition of white power.

If you don't like *The White Lotus* references (fair enough), Euro-American culture teems with examples of the rhythms of repetition, disruption, repetition. Karl Ove Knausgaard's magnum opus, *My Struggle*, for example, offers a maximalist version of phallogocentrism.[7] Across six volumes, the Norwegian writer stages the quotidian dramas of white manhood and even gets away with naming his semiautobiographical, diaristic writings after one of the most infamous memoirs in history—Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Knausgaard finds that no detail of his life is too small to omit, and readers can read about him shitting in the woods, looking at porn, dancing in his bedroom, dreaming of girls as a teenager, dreaming again of girls (his students) as a twenty-something teacher, being accused of rape, making coffee, doing the shopping, taking a walk, going swimming, getting a cold, and so on. Knausgaard can even use the occasion of his wife's nervous breakdown, in volume six, to represent himself as the good husband who cares for a crazy woman, even as it becomes clear that he may well be the cause of her psychological distress. Knausgaard offers his struggle as universal and existential and as intimate and personal. He struggles to make sense of life, and he struggles sexually with premature ejaculation. In regard to the latter, Knausgaard offers detailed accounts of his trouble, with barely a nod to his female partners and their own attendant disappointments. This compendium of male trouble is a magnificent archive of "the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism" and the way they rise and fall and rise again. No such catalogue could have been written to such acclaim by a female author (despite the historically feminine domains of intimacy, the domestic, and the quotidian), nor by an author of color. The intimate details of life for those subjects who are not white or male, who are non-phallic in some sense, would be understood as complaint or identity politics or inconsequential or tedious or *something*. Knausgaard's own skill as a writer certainly has much to do with the readability of *My Struggle* but so does his ability to locate himself in the absolute center of Euro-American regimes of common sense.

"To offer a definition of the phallus," writes Butler, "—indeed, to attempt denotatively to fix its meaning—is to posture as if one has the phallus, and hence, to presume and enact precisely what remains to be explained" (*BTM* 60). Phallic power in Butler's critique inheres in modes of knowing and being that mistake morphology for power. Such a mistake animates both *The White Lotus* and *My Struggle*. In both texts, the fragile white patriarch assumes a form of power that has been reserved for him

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and that has been generated without effort on his part. The swollen balls in one and premature ejaculation in the other text offer indices of male trouble, but, as the trouble resolves, the body part establishes itself as normal and functional. A form of misplaced narcissism, according to Butler, white male faith in both the system and male anatomy conflates the penis and the phallus in ways that inhere in both the experience of white masculinity and the explanatory systems that are supposed to describe it but actually produce it.

In other words, Freud and Lacan, in Butler's view, attempt to show how the genitals *represent* a symbolic form of power rather than being its source, but both Freud and Lacan fall into the same mistake of making the penis into a source of power rather than its effect. Freud makes his mistake in the essay "On Narcissism"; Lacan repeats it across "The Signification of the Phallus" and "The Mirror Stage." Freud comments in "On Narcissism" that only when the body is in pain, a negative form of narcissism, does it make itself known to the ego. Using the example of a toothache, Freud describes the way that pain draws attention away from a "love object" and "lavishes libido on itself."[8] Whether the pain is real or imagined seems not to matter to Freud, and so hypochondria has the same impact and follows the same course as pain from an injury or disease. This thesis, that the body makes itself known through pain, has broad implications epistemologically and symbolically. To know something—an organ, say—only when it is in pain is to make pathology a kind of condition for knowing. And, more than that, it is to say that a symbolic system, like gender, can only be known where and when it falls into crisis. For Butler, this thesis allows for all kinds of trouble—we should, for example, look at sites of pain and abjection for information about a whole system, not to places where the system functions seamlessly. It also leads Butler to expect that the indexical mark of this system in crisis might be a body in crisis, rather than the body that the whole system has been established to support. Freud flips quickly from the toothache to the metaphor of an organ aroused into "a state of excitation."[9] The hole in the tooth, a hole located within the orifice of the mouth, hidden from view but suffusing the body in pain, can be likened, Freud tells us, not to another orifice suffused with pleasure while hidden from view—not to a vaginal space, in other words—but to "a genital organ in a state of excitation." As Butler points out, the master organ against which all bodily states shall be known is phallic. "Clearly," they write, "there is an assumption here of a singular genital organ, the sex which is one, but as Freud continues to write about it, it appears to lose its proper place and proliferate in unexpected locations" (*BTM* 59–60). The proliferation of phallic references in Freud re-establishes the phallus as a point of origin rather than as one bodily organ among many.

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The patriarch's swollen balls in *The White Lotus* collapse symbolic and physical sources of power—the body announces itself through pain, but the pain is literally in the place where authority and truth should be located. The testicular pain (a reaction to a virus) speaks loudly in this instance as a form of narcissism that has collapsed truth, power, order, and law into genitality and then found that when the representational system of male authority is in crisis, on account of illness, political confrontation, or female domination, white patriarchy seems to hang in the balance. As a husband, Mark has been outdone by his wife. As a father, he is ignored by his children. As a man, he has been rendered ridiculous by his swollen anatomy, and, in an extension of his physical crisis, Mark also learns that his father's death was not suicide but was the result of HIV/AIDS. His father was gay, his son is a porn addict, and his virility is seriously in question. But no sooner is the insight into a weakened and vulnerable white masculinity available than it recedes again, as the flow of social power organized around white phallic mastery reasserts itself to confirm that the white father is still "the man." This form of social power takes prisoners, literally: Kai, the Hawaiian who challenges the rights of white settler colonialism, is arrested and incarcerated; Paula and Olivia and his wife Nicole must be violently punished and subordinated; and the son can now be empowered as a powerful figure of futurity.

Most mainstream representation follows this pattern—white male authority can be threatened, upset, and destabilized, but it cannot be taken to the point of collapse. And the common-sense environment that supports, confirms, and reestablishes white patriarchy quickly patches up all holes, so to speak, that appear in the fabric of its existence. This happens, Butler proposes, because the body is not the source of social power but its effect. And so the damage done to the father is not damaging to the law of the father. So entrenched is this order of power that even in the texts of Freud and Lacan, where these theorists attempted to explain and establish universal forms of subjectivity, the phallus insistently and ubiquitously appears at the center of signification itself.

What connects Freud's and Lacan's essays for Butler is a clear sense that the body is produced by the ego rather than the ego or conscious self being produced by and housed in a material body. In other words, just as Butler claims that sex is not the stable foundation for the elaboration of a gender identity, and indeed that the sexed body is the end result of a preexisting gender ideology (that reads sex onto the body rather than finding it there all along), so they argue that the body is not a stable referent for the self but rather constitutes a site of misrecognition and phantasmic projection. What does this mean? It means that the ego or self does not exist in the world just waiting for language to come so that it can articulate being;

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rather, the infant understands itself as coherent and stable only because the world offers an ideology of coherence through which the baby comes to know itself. This is what Lacan calls "the mirror stage."[10] For Freud, the body makes itself known to the ego when in pleasure or in pain. So both Freud and Lacan, in Butler's reading, register the way in which language produces the order of being propped up and represented by phallic power or phallogocentrism. Butler writes:

> Bodies only become whole, i.e., totalities, by the idealizing and totalizing specular image which is sustained through time by the sexually marked name. To have a name is to be positioned within the Symbolic, the idealized domain of kinship, a set of relationships structured through sanction and taboo which is governed by the law of the father and the prohibition against incest. For Lacan, names, which emblematize and institute this paternal law, sustain the integrity of the body. What constitutes the integral body is not a natural boundary or organic telos, but the law of kinship that works through the name. In this sense, the paternal law produces versions of bodily integrity; the name, which installs gender and kinship, works as a politically invested and investing performative. To be named is thus to be inculcated into that law and to be formed, bodily, in accordance with that law. (*BTM* 72)

In other words, and in Butler's sense, the body is a fiction of control produced by a narcissistic investment in coherence and regulated by systems of kinship organized by paternal law. The wholeness of the individual body and the social body is an illusion engineered by an ideological system within which white male power equates to stability, natural right, smooth equivalence, and heroic struggle leading to resolution. Butler rewrites Lacan's and Freud's accounts of the phallus and shows how the phallus cannot be the penis, should not be represented by the penis, and, indeed, in order to represent the contingency of power, should be detached from the male body in order to become a dildo-like appendage, fully plastic and detachable. What Butler names "the plasticity of the phallus" is, they propose, "the way in which it exceeds the structural place to which it has been consigned by the Lacanian scheme, the way in which that structure, to remain a structure, has to be reiterated and, as reiterable, becomes open to variation and plasticity" (*BTM* 89). What does this do at the level of the symbolic? It reveals the marks of construction that elevate masculinity to power, allow for the possibility of new bodies, new imaginaries, new masculinities.

But while the lesbian phallus represents an order of pleasure, a relation to being and having that exceeds the patriarchal algorithm of possession, all claims upon the phallus are tinged with melancholy. The melancholia of heterosexual subjects resides for Butler in the way they mistake their genitalia as being generative of gender and the cause of their pleasure rather than the effect of gendering—the surface of the body is felt to be the literalization of interiority when in fact it is interiority established through

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incorporation, which is a "fantasy of heterosexual melancholia" (*BTM* 65). The melancholia of the queer and the trans* subject resides in the experience of the psychic pain of a knowing projection—the trans* subject in particular knows and feels that the body is not at all a congruent surface onto which identity can be projected. To the extent that the projection fails in transgender embodiment, to the extent that the trans* subject acknowledges their phantasmic embodiment, they cannot slip into the calming waters of a naturalized set of relations between body, ego, surface, gender ideology, genitalia, and so on. These relations, for many queer subjects, are scrambled, contradictory, ambivalent.

While queer and trans* subjects cannot escape the discomfort of embodiment, the heterosexual subject enjoys the fiction of congruence, and the heterosexual white male enjoys full social support for his fiction. This congruence slips into Freud's text despite his better intentions, leading to a conundrum whereby he has used the penis as a prototype or example but then allows it to become a privileged signifier for all bodies. Because the phallus and the penis become "the sex which is one," the essentialism that Freud wants to contest slips back into the text, making other forms of phallic power seem impossible.

As Butler shows, this allows the social order to be represented through the white male body and white male genitalia, and this means that the representational equipment itself reproduces the order it claims only to represent. The return to Lacan, for Butler, reveals the structure of "normative heterosexuality" that undergirds his descriptions of sex and sexual difference. Lacan, according to Butler, recognizes the subject as one founded upon lack, but he assumes that, in some sense, heterosexuality works: in other words, Lacan describes the way that threat (of castration) constitutes sex, but he assumes that the threatening and abject figures of the feminine male and the masculine female are consigned to the realm of impossibility. Butler asks of Lacan: "But what happens if the law that deploys the spectral figure of abject homosexuality as a threat becomes itself an inadvertent site of eroticization?" (*BTM* 97). The reading of Lacan in "The Lesbian Phallus" is elusive and difficult, but it comes down to three main points: first, the lesbian phallus, the possibility of a female body both being phallic and having phallic power, is a consequence of Lacan's theoretical framework but denied by him as a possibility. The lesbian phallus intervenes moreover in the relation between parts and whole, which Lacan tends to essentialize. Second, male narcissism allows for men to misrecognize their penises as proof of their superiority and then to project that misrecognition onto the world around them. And, finally, if the phallus symbolizes the penis, then it cannot *be* the penis, and the phallus is bound to the penis by "determinate negation" (*BTM* 84).

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At stake in Butler's reading and in my reading of Butler are alternative masculinities that do not depend upon the penis or male embodiment. If we return one last time to *The White Lotus*, we can see how phallic orders of representation eliminate all threats to white phallic power. In the final episode, a contest that has simmered throughout between Armond, the gay concierge, and a honeymooning husband, Shane (played with suitable banality by Jake Lacy), comes to a messy conclusion. Shane is a blithely privileged himbo, who spends his days explaining to his wife how lucky she is to have married him and his evenings ranting at Armond about the shortfalls of the room to which the couple were assigned. Shane finally gets his way and has Armond fired after he catches him in flagrante delicto with a bellboy. Armond, a symbol in the show of deviant pleasures and indulgence (sex and drugs), decides to express his disdain for Shane by entering his room and taking a shit in his suitcase. But, in an encounter that mirrors the earlier confrontation between Nicole and Kai, Armond is discovered by Shane, and when Shane, having heard about the earlier break-in, attacks Armond, presuming him to be a burglar, he knocks him out and kills him. The ceremonial dump that Armond has taken represents so much about the ruinous impact of white recreation. In a reverse alchemy, the white, wealthy tourists have literally turned gold into shit. The natural resources of the island, the goodwill of the native population, the hotel's hospitality have all been wasted by the tourists. Even Belinda (Natasha Rothwell), the Black masseuse who offers healing help to grieving guest Tanya McQuoid (Jennifer Coolidge), finds herself at the receiving end of this alternation between pleasure and grief as Tanya, who had previously offered to help Belinda to start her own business (a women's wellness center), just casually hands her an envelope of cash (more shit) rather than looking over her business plan and helping her to set it in motion. The white family, the honeymooning rich kids, the grieving and alcoholic widow, and even the bored but brainy teens have all exhausted the island and its inhabitants, and, once they realize this, it is time to leave.

With Armond's death, all credible alternatives to the normative masculinities of Mark and Shane have been eliminated. Kai, associated with criminality by the white family, is in jail. Armond, associated with deviant anality, is dead. And the adolescent son, who was in the throes of a full-fledged Oedipal rebellion at the start, has "gone native" by the end of the narrative arc and become a putative "lotus eater." He is drunk on the pleasures of the island and decides to stay there. As for any lesbian or trans* masculinities, they have disappeared altogether such that, even when Paula gets her bag back, Butler's book is nowhere to be found. Only the lonely-hearts suitor who hits on Tanya represents a way out of the mayhem of white sociality—he is, we suspect, terminally ill. The big "no future" sign that hangs clearly over

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him as he convulses into coughing fits finds its corollary in Tanya, who tells him he is wasting his time with her because she is herself "a dead end." That's the perfect phrase, however, for white love and white aspirations in this narrative series: they are all dead ends—too much whiteness, not enough lotus.

Butler is no utopian, and, as a theorist of the melancholia of being, they recognize that a lesbian phallus cannot bring down the order of things. It can appear out of place—as Butler's own book does in *The White Lotus*, in a bag, by a pool, in paradise, as an index of other possibilities—but it cannot bring those possibilities to life because the lesbian phallus, like all phallic conditions, is not enough. Butler's book, situated as it is in a library of books carried by Paula, and pertaining to the colonial condition, could, in the right radical company, offer a theory of anticolonial queer revolt. It could, like the drugs in Paula's bag, offer an alternative route to both pleasure and ruination. But when Paula's bag goes missing—the gay concierge has appropriated the drugs for his own uses—we presume Butler's book goes too. None of these characters offers much in the way of gender trouble, and none aspires to have the lesbian phallus, but, just as the workers in paradise are counseled by the gay manager to "disappear behind their masks," so Paula's queer and anticolonial library inflicts its damage quietly and out of sight. The rebellion may still be to come, but for the moment, Butler's book confirms, there is gender and other trouble in paradise.

Notes

1. I use the word "trans" with an asterisk to denote the open-ended nature of the definitional reach of "trans." For more on this, see Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley, 2017).
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London, 1986).
3. See Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, The Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC, 2007), 143.
4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, 2011). Henceforth these will be cited parenthetically in the text as *GT* and *BTM*, respectively.
5. For the concept of "countersexual prosthetic," see Paul Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York, 2018).
6. See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC, 2016).
7. See Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Volumes 1–6*, trans. Don Bartlett (New York, 2013–19).

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8. Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism” (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London, 1916), 82.
9. Ibid., 84.
10. Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” in *Écrits: A Selection,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), 1–7.

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