Que(e)ry Collective

Journal of queer and feminist theory

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The Que(e)ry Collective

Journal of queer and feminist theory

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Cover (“Interlocutors”) by Kevin Gutierrez-Maldonado
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Statement from the collective

“Being queer saved my life.”
— Ocean Vuong

“Do work that matters. Vale la pena”
— Gloria Anzaldua

“For me this space of radical openness is a margin - a profound edge.
Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a "safe" place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance”
— Bell Hooks

Queerness indelibly augments the ways in which one interacts with the world. Beautiful and Frightening. Powerful and Melancholic. In this journal we celebrate the vivacity of our existence and all the ardor that queerness brings.

The que(e)ry Collective is a non-hierarchical undergrad student group that works with queer/feminist theory, practice, and art in collaborative and communal ways. For this issue of que(e)ry, we were looking for and selecting pieces that got us thinking together, feeling together, laughing together, confused together, struggling together, and hopeful together.

We are also incredibly grateful to the Institute for the Study of Sexuality and Gender at Columbia University.

Neither que(e)ry nor this journal would be possible without their support.

- que(e)ry Collective

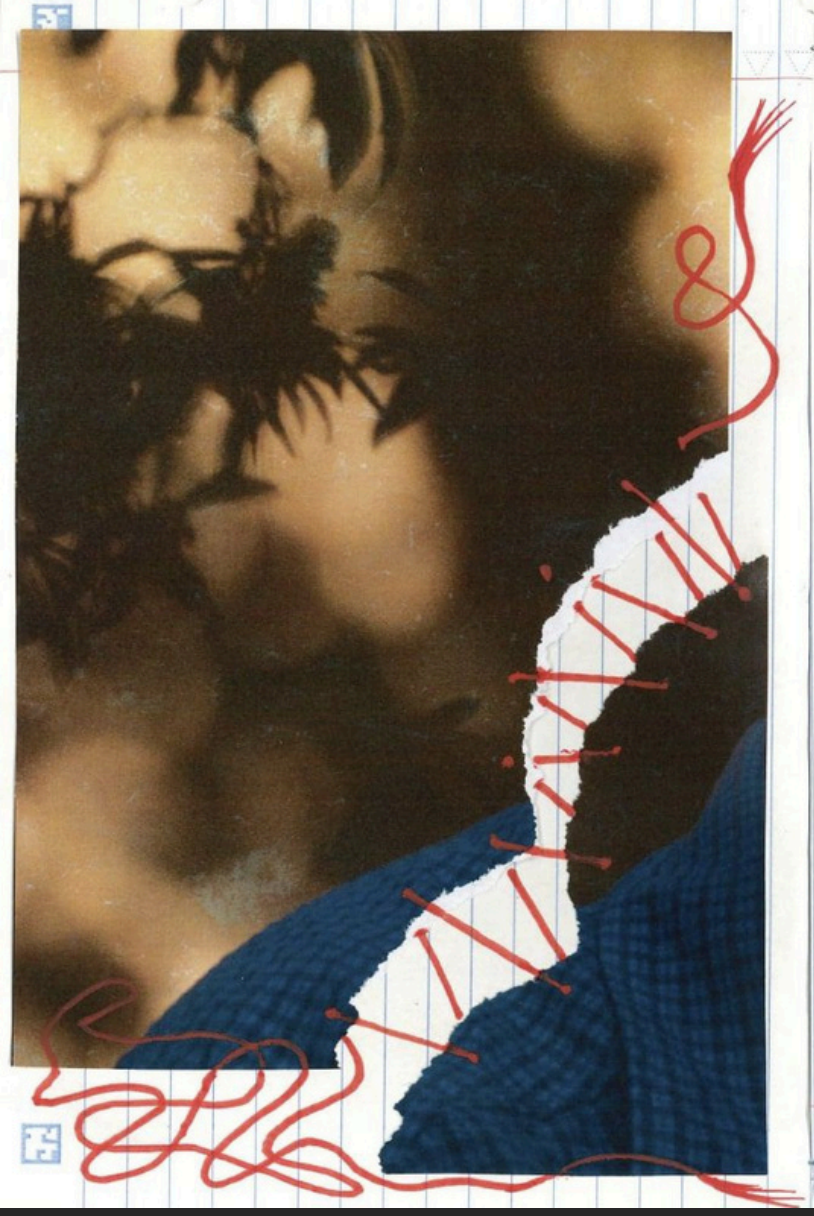
“External Self-Portrait” by Taylor S. Bronson

“Internal Self-Portrait” by Taylor S. Bronson

“Auto-Trinidad” 62 x 72 oil, dye, and fabric on canvas

by Kevin Gutierrez-Maldonado

“Trans* A Self Portrait” by Jorga Leona Garcia



In "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Woman Writers" Gloria Anzaldúa lays a foundation for what it means to be not only a woman writer, but any non-cisgender-white male or female creative. Exposed to the elements, or rather always exposed to the world, she writes "naked in the sun," exposing how feminism and Virginia Woolf's concept of a room of one's own have not always been available to writers of colors.

Involving her audience "to weave" writing, and other creative acts into their busy lives, she explains: "writing possesses me and propels me to leap into a timeless, spaceless no-place where I forget myself and feel I am the universe. this is power." The act of creation metamorphosizes an individual to continue existing against hegemonic institutions.

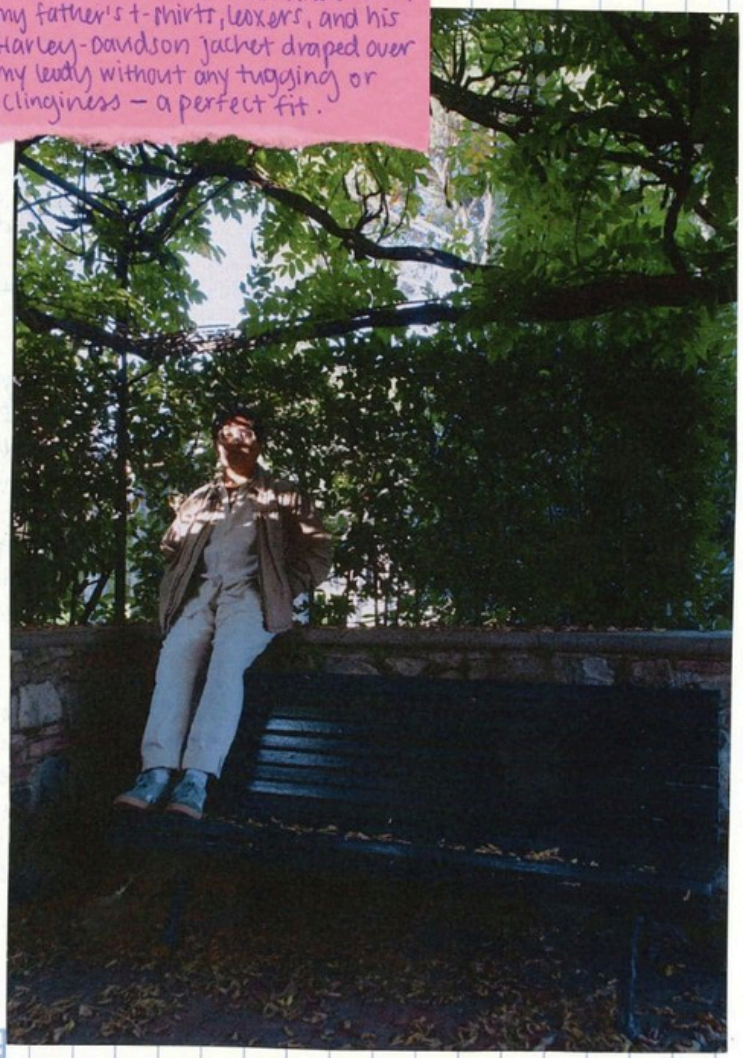
In attempt to uncover my own power, I use these photographs and writing to attest to my non-cisgender and non-white being.

Instead of following a common "trapped in the wrong body" narrative of many transsexual/transgender people, I fall into the trap that "is also a mouth, a mode of utterance... the wet threshold between tongue and thought... in weaving, a trap is a break in the threads of a warp, an unraveling, loosening, unwinding that undoes a tapestry." (Eva Hayward's chapter Spiderwomen: Notes on Transpositions).

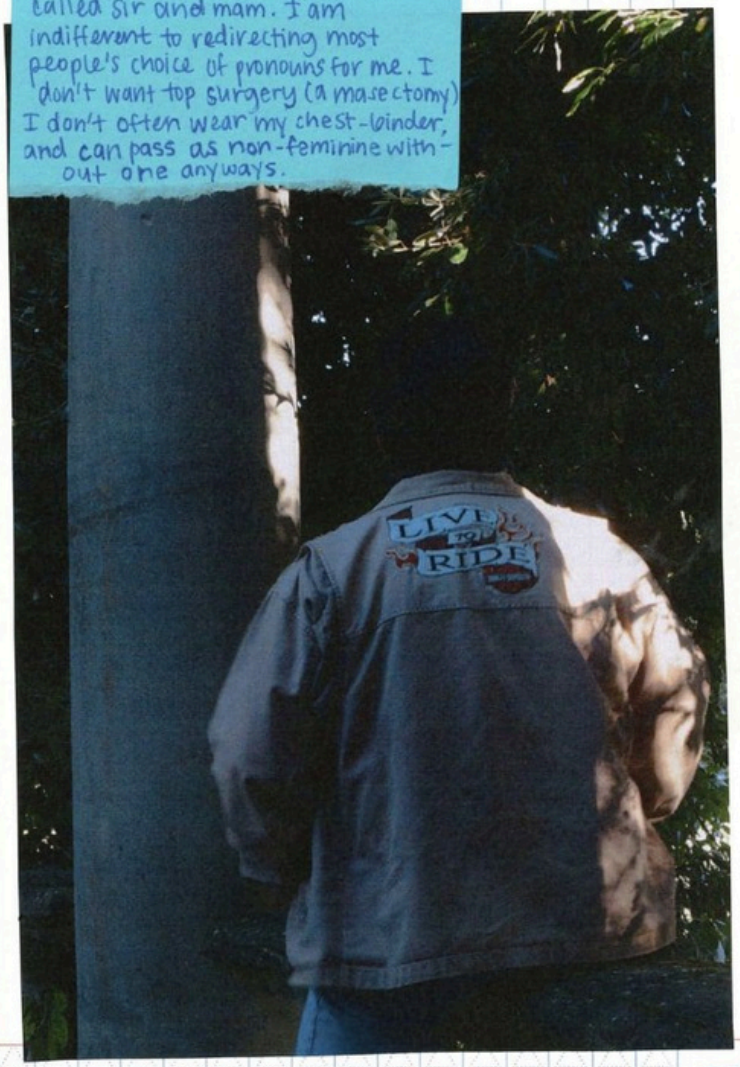
I am trapped not because of the physical attributes of my sex that don't align with the view of my identity, mind, or body that I want to have, but instead I am trapped because of how my body has been squished into an unfit mold of binary sex and gender. I was assigned female at birth, yet feminine shirts were too tight for my broad shoulders, feminine shorts rode up my & chafing legs as I walked, and feminine shoes were not even available in my size.

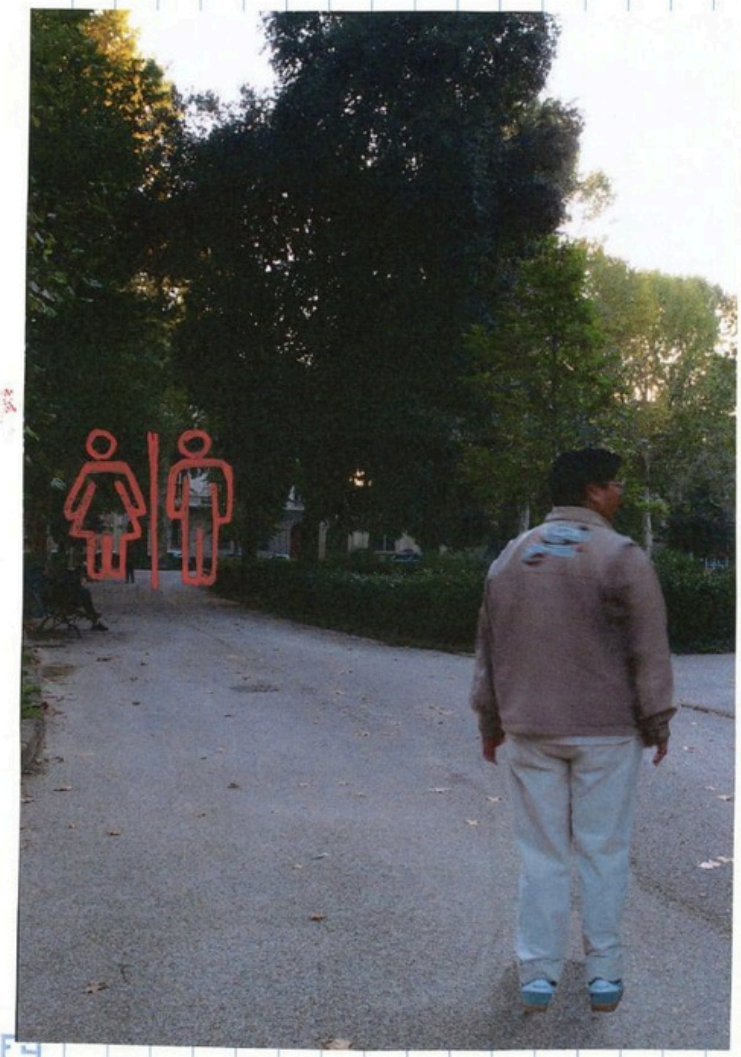
I always love a thread.

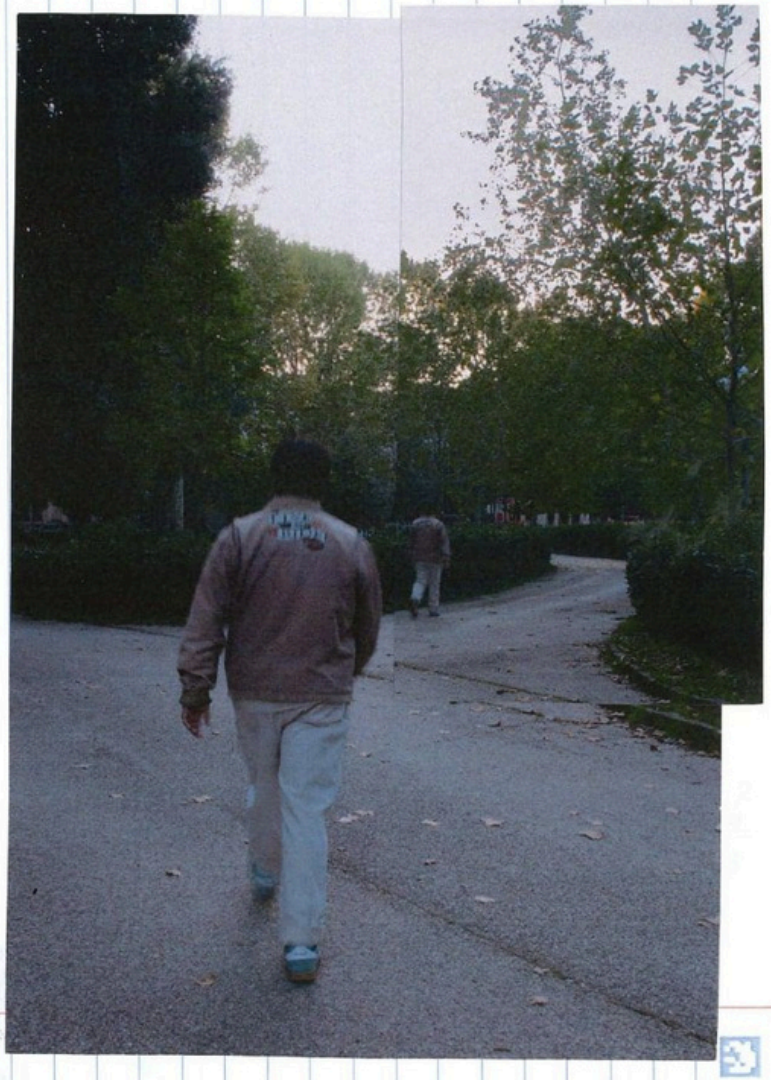
How was i supposed to keep an identity that for the most part didn't have the space for me? while masculine bralettes/all shorts, masculine shoes, my father's t-shirts, boxers, and his Harley-Davidson jacket draped over my body without any tugging or clinginess — a perfect fit.



Today, I am questioned as to what gender bathroom I use. I am called sir and mam. I am indifferent to redirecting most people's choice of pronouns for me. I don't want top surgery (a mastectomy) I don't often wear my chest-binder, and can pass as non-feminine without one anyways.







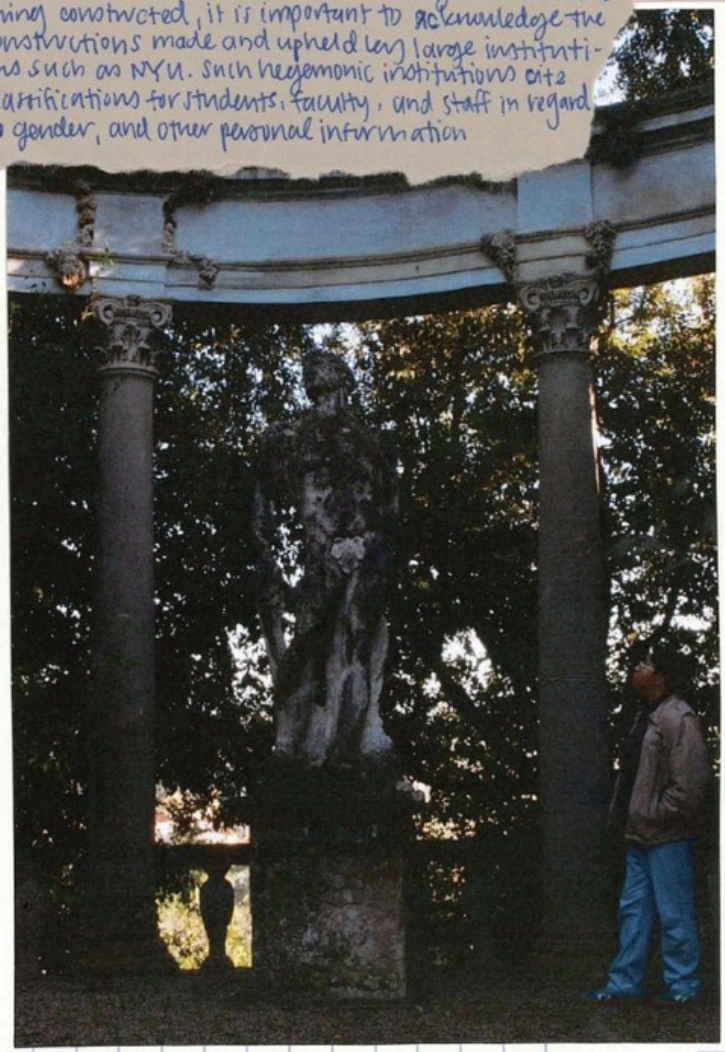

WHERE DO I STAND?!

The closest category that attempts to signal non-normative, non-cisgender lives, including my own, is trans* coined by Jack Halberstam. Halberstam explains, "The category takes the prefix for transitivity and couples it with the asterisk that indicates a wildcard in internet search; it is a diacritical mark that poses a question to its prefix and stands in for what exceeds the politics of naming and recognition (pg. 50 Trans* a quick and quirky account of gender variability). The term trans* expands upon the possibilities in which people defy gender binaries, beyond transsexual and transgender bodies who may assimilate into normative binary lives, like people of color who already live against institutional boundaries/classifications, and are affected by colonialism, racism, and socio-economic accessibility that alters their basic embodiment and transitivity in the world.

I've created my own sense of ~~m~~nature and natural way of seeing. I situate myself as natural as in a park or garden, where all of these photographs have been shot. Each is designated as an area of recreation, or play, filled with natural flora and fauna, yet also maintained, distinced, constructed, and protected by human intervention. I would rather sit surrounded by lush green leaves, exposed to the elements, than be held inside a closed off room or binary. Gender like a park or garden, is a social construction, something established by and evolving with society. They are built out of many pieces and by many hands, as are evolving ~~with society~~ understandings of gender and sexuality. Although parks and gardens have designated areas, it is still a space undefined in the fauna's unpredictable growth and humanity's unpredictable power when given the freedom to play, experiment, and create a world that feels like one's own.

As Anzaldua found the space to write under the freedom of the sun outside, I too find my ~~self~~ lingering in places where no title, power, or money is required. I use a public park to situate my understandings of non-cisgender identity, confusion, and multiplicity because the paths twist and turn, even diverge many times, as gender/identity does.

However, I've also taken some photos in the gardens and greenery of NYU Florence's Villa La Pietra estate, a private gated place, mostly only afforded to NYU affiliates. As we think about gender as something constructed, it is important to acknowledge the constructions made and upheld by large institutions such as NYU. Such hegemonic institutions cite classifications for students, faculty, and staff in regard to gender, and other personal information



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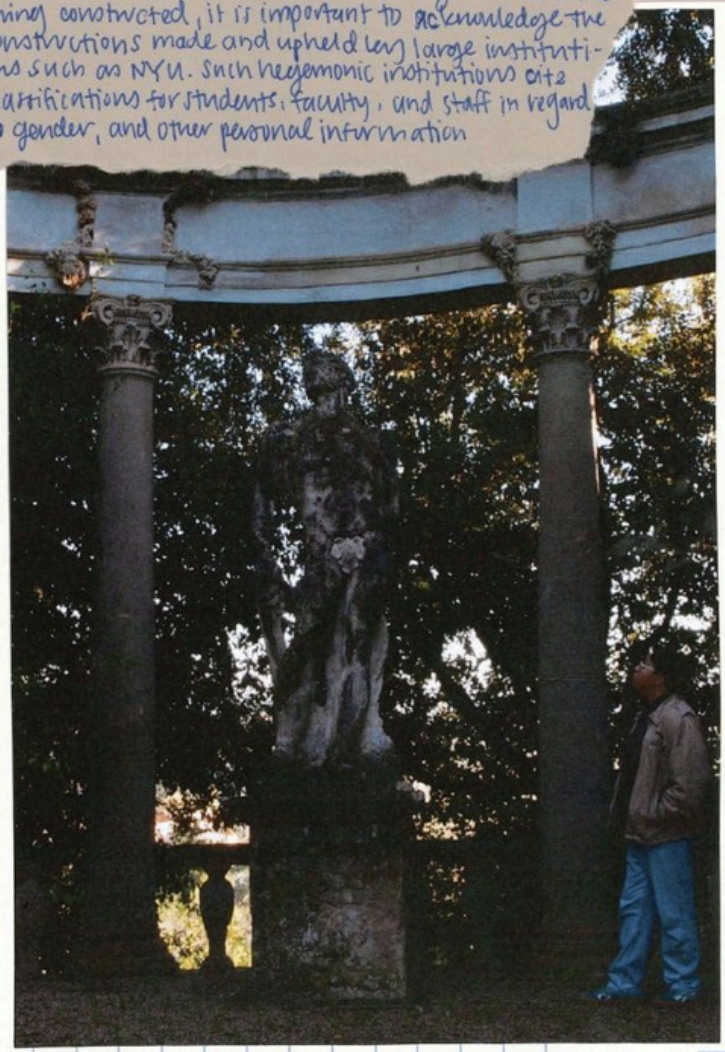
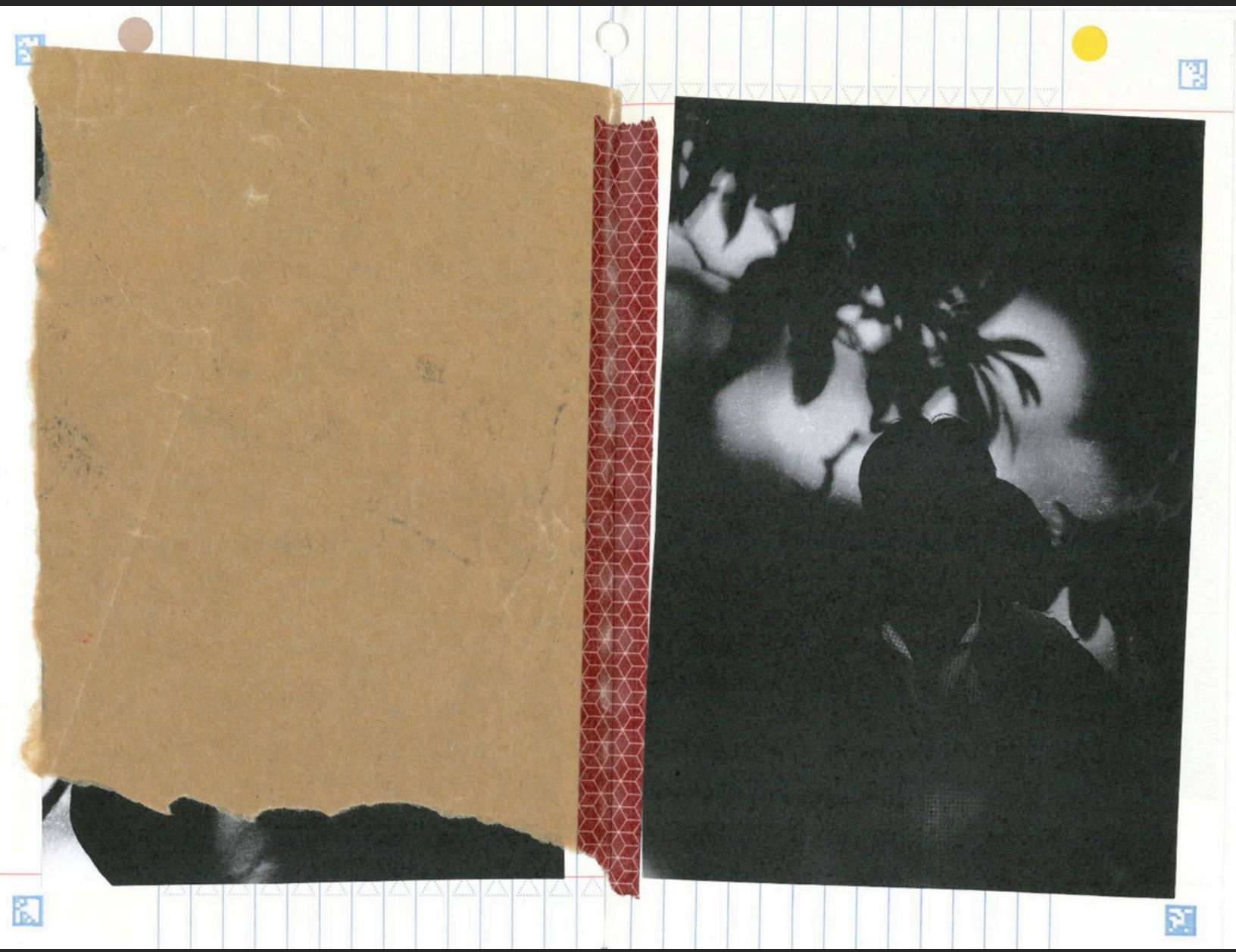
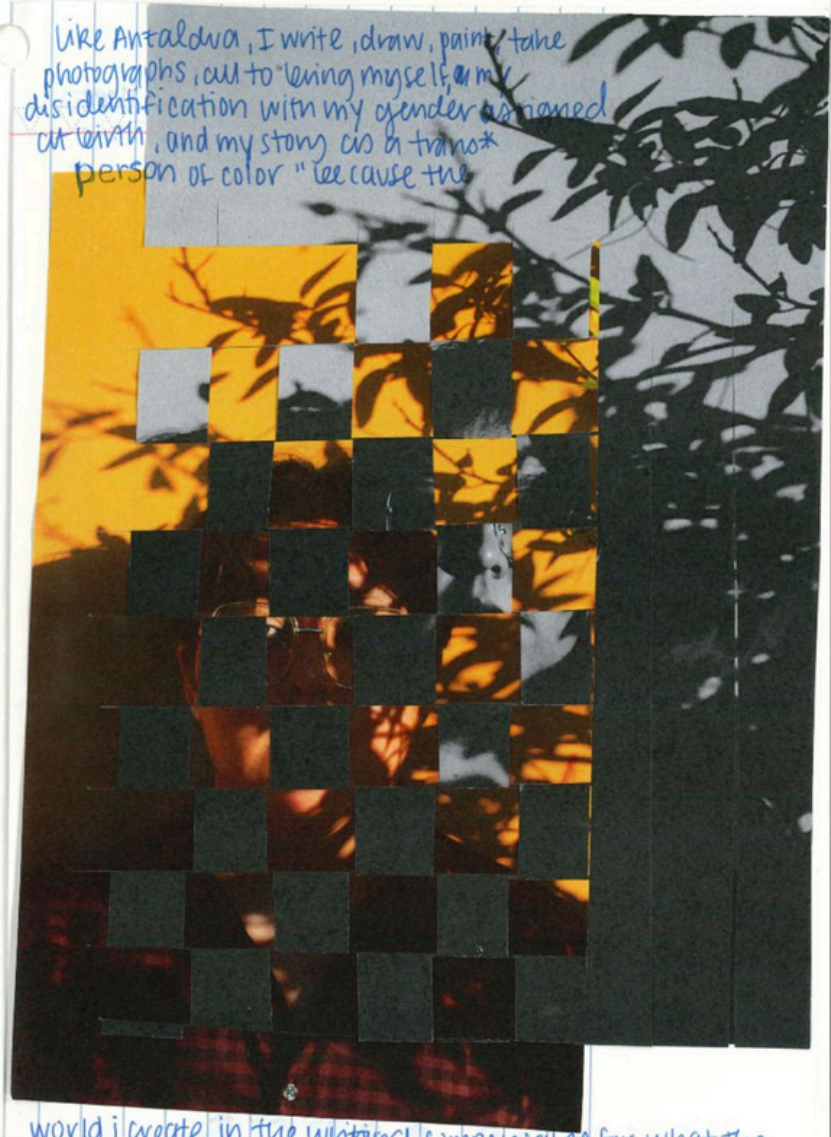


So while gender is becoming an enlarged and evolving concept, we must recall how binary gender has been defined and set into western society for centuries. There are many stories of people who we might now deem transgender, who blended seamlessly into fixtures of society in their day. There are many people who now change gender yet remain stealth and unacknowledged as trans, there are many who exist beyond transsexual/transgender ideologies and beyond medical or linguistic articulation. Trans* is a site that also signals the insufficiency of current classificatory systems ... [and] to think in new and different ways about what it means to claim a body." I believe any such trans* people exist in realms of the shadow, that change with every second coming ~~and going~~ and already gone. They alter ways in which gender may seem fixed, when in fact it can be fluid, naive, and evasive as a shadow.



i offer up these photos of myself as a singular demonstration to what trans* means to me personally. I linger in the shadows to inhabit a space that invokes an interpretation of gender and trans* that exceeds definition; something I attempt to capture yet through the essence of the photography deemed by Walter Benjamin (in Camera Lucida), it is something "that [already] has been" and is gone after I've clicked the shutter.

like Anzaldua, I write, draw, paint, take photographs, call to "bring myself, my dis-identification with my gender assigned at birth, and my story as a trans* person of color" because the



world i create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me... I [create]... To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy... To convince myself that I am worthy and that →

what i have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that i can and that I will [create], never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally I [create] because I'm scared of [creating] but I'm more scared of not [creating]."

↳ Antaldua's "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third Wind Women Writers."

JORJA GARCIA

Love is an untamed beast

Kinley Simmons

Love is an untamed beast
The moment you decide to welcome it into your home
Is the moment you think it will forever bring you joy
The moment it sits peacefully next to you
Breathing slowly as you drift to sleep
Is the moment-
The blood, tears, and years
Spent domesticating this creature
Are overthrown by its primal instincts
As quickly as you learned to love this beast
-It stares endearingly into your eyes
And rips you apart

sometimes i dream

Kinley Simmons

sometimes i dream

i’m walking through a field
where beautiful flowers stand in rows

i’m told there’s a flower for everyone
that i’ll know which is my flower
when its roots reach out to mine

a bus full of teenagers
my age
arrives
they run into the field
shears in hand
and cut the first flower that captures their gaze

they inspect its stem
pluck its petals
rip through its middle

withered and discarded
the flowers lie helpless on the ground
forgetting the days they stood proudly before the sun
the rhythm of shoes trampling their body
become their only recollection

the bus driver calls out

the kids scramble
they shove the first flower that withstands their tests
in their back pocket

i'm alone again
accompanied only by the few flowers that remain

i reach out
but they no longer embrace my touch
the thought of hurting them never once crossed my mind
but I understand they must
air on the side of caution as

once damaged, it's difficult to bloom

i walk further into the field
i study each flower from a distance

i get comfortable with the unlikelihood of finding
my flower

while stopping to observe the sky
my plight holds no weight in my mind

suddenly, i feel a pull coming from within

hesitant and skeptical
ifollow it

before long

ajuliet rose stands before me
and i sit by its side

Wounds

Koa Wallace

When will I learn to embrace you?
Tell me, when?
Was it something I'd grown out of?
Tell me, was it?
Was it simpler to embrace myself in the fog—rather than at dawn?
To wait for the mud to clear from my lungs? I was exhausted
from waiting for myself.
I was tired of the broken glass crafted of my own speech
slicing deep wounds into my stitched chest
The clock ticked, and each time it did, I became the person I
wanted to be,
the boy I wanted to be

how to throw stones at the sky

Daisy Rain Noble

There was a sky somewhere, Penny knew, but for all the water and the mud, she couldn't see it. Ahead of her, the milky imprint of a body wavered in the murk, the vague curve of the thighs and the plane of the stomach yellowed like a warped sepia photograph. Penny dove down once more, fingers sifting through the loose mud. After a moment, she pulled a small, misshapen stone from muck and dropped it in the sagging fold of her shirt with the others. What was it that Mei had told her about the stones? Penny dragged at the darkness with her free hand as the pinch in her lungs began to seize. The figure across the lake remained still.

***

Far off in the woods, an orange wisp of firelight flickered between the trees. From the landing, Penny could have plucked it out of the darkness like a lightning bug and caught it in a jar. Across from her, Mei sat cross legged, braiding leaves of grass into soft compliance. Penny watched as her fingers traversed nimbly down their spines.

"Have you ever wanted to touch the sky? Just to see what it's like?" Mei's question swam unevenly through the shadows creeping slowly over the bluff. *Maybe,* Penny thought, *once*. But of course, she'd considered it. Just days ago, sprawled out on the edge of the lake, she'd imagined the ferocious touch of the fiery light on the horizon; even so, there was something about the whole idea of reaching up towards the empty space that made her feel as if she were being swallowed. She'd turned her head to the flowers along the woods instead, the yellow petals jostling each other as the wind whipped their dark eyes over the bank. Mei glanced up at her, waiting.

"I dunno." Penny's voice sounded small. In front of her, a small mound of pebbles sat in the grass where she'd piled them that morning. She smoothed the pebbles over the ground and nudged them into a crooked circle. Her mind wandered down the bluff to Oliver, the memory of his shadow looming and distorted against the side of the tent. "It's not like you could touch the sky, even if you wanted to."

"You don't think so?" Mei rolled onto her side and reached for Penny's constellation of pebbles. She held the largest one up to the sky and shut one eye, as if assessing the distance. "Doesn't that make you sad?" Above them, the pine needles whispered to each other in their little clusters. Penny's mind stalled. Had that been sadness, lying there next to her on the bank? She hadn't thought to ask, but she didn't think so. It had been more like a strange dream: unsettling but forgettable. Mei continued, not waiting for an answer this time, but her eyes were focused on the face of the stone instead of the sky. "Would you, if you could? If I told you you could touch the sky, would you want to?"

Penny readjusted the pebbles to fill in the gap Mei had made in the circle. "Maybe." The wind began to pick up, clinging devilishly to the dampness of Penny's shirt, still soaked through from the lake. She scooted closer to Mei and huddled against her, and after a moment, Penny felt Mei's weight sink against her. The girl's skin was fleetingly warm and covered in goosebumps, but her body stifled the wind nipping at Penny's face and churning around them in the canopy.

"Sometimes I just pretend," Mei said, dropping her head into the hollow of Penny's shoulder. "Maybe that's silly, but it's comforting, I think, to believe the sky's not always out of reach." Mei looped the strand of grass she'd been braiding into a thin, twisting crown and placed it on Penny's head. Her lips pressed together as if she were considering.

"Pretty." Mei adjusted the crown slightly, the pads of her thumbs brushing Penny's forehead. Her eyes dropped briefly to Penny's before she turned away and laid down in the grass.

The cold rushed in over Penny's skin, prickling and hollow. She squirmed clumsily down onto her elbows and followed Mei's gaze to the water.

"Somebody told me, once, that if you throw a stone the right way, you can hit the sky and it'll break right in front of you," Mei whispered. She handed Penny the pebble, and Penny held the warmth of it to her cheek. She let it fall into her palm, regarding it for a moment, then flung it into the air. It flew haphazardly up and over their heads and into the branches behind them.

Mei laughed and leaned into Penny's shoulder. "No, not like that!" She reached back and took another pebble from the circle. "Like this." She tossed the stone from the ledge and it arced longingly towards the sky before plummeting downwards into the lake. The water rocked gently, the ripples carving rings of shadow into the light lingering on the surface.

"See? All the little bits of cloud are scattering now."

Suddenly, a distant voice rang out from the wall of trees behind them—Oliver. He called again. "Penny! C'mere, I gotta show you something!"

Penny clambered quickly from the ground and peered into the woods. The fire had shrunk to a mere pinprick. Her legs felt funny and numb, like she'd sat on a nerve for too long. She hadn't realized until now that her teeth were chattering.

"Penny?" Her name rose up hesitantly from the grass. She looked back at Mei, who had sat up and seemed to be searching Penny's face—for an answer, a question, a ripple, Penny couldn't tell. Her stomach twisted, and she glanced again at the woods.

"Mei, I need to go." The words sounded weak, but Penny was already edging towards the descent of the bluff. She tugged the grass crown out of her hair and started slowly down the path.

"You know he doesn't care about you, right?" Mei's voice was suddenly sharp. Penny stumbled over the uneven surface in the waning light and turned back to glare at Mei.

"What? Mei, you spend every summer with him," she said indignantly. "He's nice to us. He's nice to *me*."

"Yeah, well, nice isn't everything." The wind quieted, and Penny could hear the water sloshing gently against the bluff below. Mei seemed to soften for a moment. "I'm sorry, Penny, but he doesn't care. He just doesn't."

Penny could feel her face heating. Mei was wrong, and she certainly wasn't sorry. "Some people just need a chance to prove that they do." Her voice was nearly a whisper.

A melodic sigh fell from Mei's lips. She sounded tired, disappointed. "Not everyone deserves one, Penny." She stood up abruptly and pushed past Penny down the slope. Penny watched her climb down and down until she had descended into the brush and out of sight.

The grass crown in Penny's hand had begun to wilt, the softening edges folding and snapping between her fingers. She clambered back to the top of the bluff and paused at the edge, peering down at the spot where the stone had sunk. The water was once more still and glassy. Penny wiped her nose with the back of her hand, her body shaking in the cold and the dark with leaves, and sh tossed the twisting crown over the edge. The ring of grass fell in languid circles, drifting towards the lake until it kissed the face of the water and sent the clouds rippling over the surface. Along the tops of the trees, the sky was tinged the ravenous pink of strawberry guts.

The Body Speaks: Listening to Colonial Nudes of African Women

Zoë Powell-McCroey

In The African Lookbook, Catherine McKinley places the nude photographs of African women within the history of colonial exploitation. She argues that these images "expose relationships between colonial photographers and African female sitters where, at best, a grave power imbalance is evident," and that they reveal "intimations or raw truths of sexual liaisons or coercions" (McKinley 109). McKinley's framework reduces these women's bodies to simply objects of the photographer's gaze and evidence of colonial power. The focus lies on their bodies' exposure, rather than their expression. Yet, as I read McKinley's analysis, I wondered whether there was a more empowering lens to view these photographs. Weeks later, Tina Campt's Listening to Images provided just that.

In Campt's book, in which she "explores a way of listening closely to photography, engaging with lost archives of historically dismissed photographs of black subjects taken through the black diaspora," she offers a new way forward, one that urges us to go against our better judgment and "listen" to photographs, rather than just look at them. Campt's listening methodology involves attuning our ears to the subtle frequencies of "quiet," "refusal," and "stasis" that vibrate beneath the stillness of any given photograph. With this framework, Campt activates the women in these photographs and frees them from the passivity that McKinley's analysis suggests. In this listening space, we recognize how the subjects participate in self-fashioning despite the voyeuristic eye. In this essay, I challenge The African Lookbook's reductive framing of nude photographs of African women as simply evidence of colonial domination. Using Campt's framework from Listening to Images, I argue that these portraits, when listened to rather than simply looked at, reveal how their subjects use posing, posture, and gaze to assert their agency and resistance.

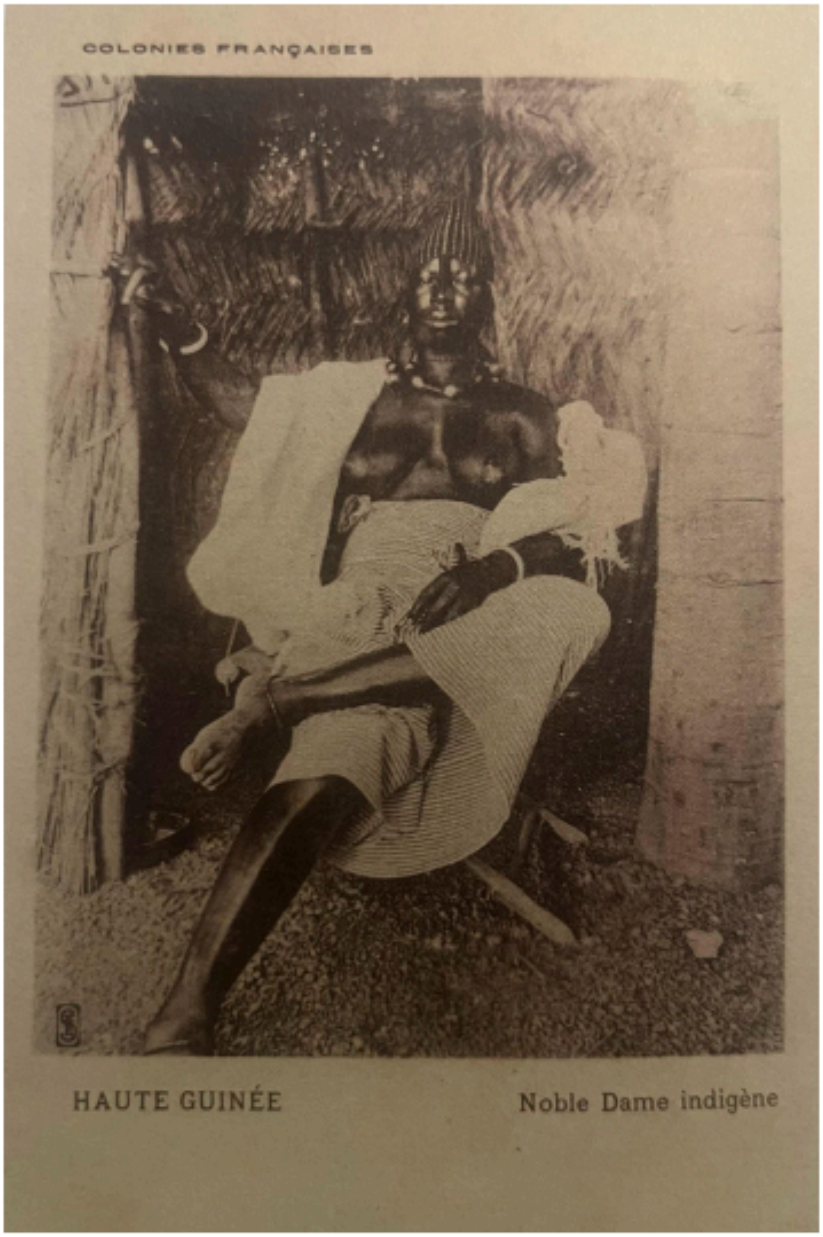
The African Lookbook approaches early photographic depictions of nude women through the lens of colonial power. For McKinley, the nude represents vulnerability; thus, the exposure of flesh and intimate parts seems to prove the photographer's authority and the subject's subjugation. As quoted earlier, McKinley believes these images unveil "intimations or raw truths of sexual liaisons or coercions," equating visibility and vulnerability with violation. For example, one section of the photographs she titles, "Through the colonial peephole," suggests an invasive gaze that imposes on the subject and positions the looker as a voyeur complicit in a structure of domination (120). Before another section, she says, "In private homes and pastorals. The photo becomes its own trophy. White French mules. Private Amazons. A bush girl in the chair sent to Porto-Novo on a ship" (122). Her language transforms the image into evidence of conquest and positions the woman's body as a captured object. Later, she titles a section "The Femme de dos," a woman seen from behind, "Odalisque," an erotic painting depicting a woman nude in a reclining position, "Femme Orientale," a derogatory term that sexualizes non-Western women, painting them as intrinsically sensual and mysterious, "Ladies who wait. Bewitchingly" (144). McKinley ties the photography to European art traditions. Each term connects to a history that objectifies non-Western women and places them as things to look at. Using this language, McKinley once again frames the nude photographs within a colonial epistemology and the women in them as victims of colonial power.

By reading the nudes solely as a record of coercion, McKinley erases any possibility that the women subjects of the photographs might express themselves that do not appear to the colonial lens. While this framing correctly identifies the deep connection between photography, colonialism, and voyeurism, it fails to see past those implications and understand how the nude body might take an active stance—see, feel, and resist. My instinct is to push against this notion that the subjects in these photographs solely exist in the context of the colonizer and consider a reality in which these women, though maybe victims of colonial power, also took their self-autonomy back through subtle bodily expressions. As Campt argues in Listening to Images, photographs, especially those of colonized or subjugated people, contain frequencies of subtle resistance that the naked eye cannot register. Listening to the images, not just simply looking, allows such a reality to come true. Photographs are not silent.

Even those that derive from the most oppressive of systems, such as mugshots and passport photographs, carry frequencies that allude to Black resistance. To be clear, a frequency, as Campt defines, is "the number of complete vibrations or cycles occurring per unit of time in a vibrating system such as a column of air. Frequency is the primary determinant of the listener's perception of pitch" (Campt 6-7). We do not hear frequencies, we feel them, as vibrations or hums through the body. To listen to images is to tune in to these vibrations and feel the subtle methods in which Black subjects embody resistance, force their visibility, and maintain their dignity. Through listening, we disempower the authority of the gaze; it forces us as lookers to consider what lies beneath the frozen image we see in a photograph. What happened in the moments before and after? What is happening at the very stillness we see on the page? Listening to images reveals the age-old tension that there is more than what meets the eye.

Campt identifies this tension stasis: "1. tensions produced by holding a complex set of forces in suspension. 2. unvisible motion held in tense suspension or temporary equilibrium; e.g., vibration" (51). Stasis, then, is not stillness without motion, but rather the vibrations of resistance "unvisible" to the eye. McKinley interprets stillness as compliance or passivity, as though the colonial camera lens forever captures and enslaves their bodies. However, in Campt's framework, the stillness becomes charged and resists complete capture. The subject's gaze, posture, or subtle smile can register as this unvisible motion. To listen for stasis is to acknowledge that resistance does not always announce itself; sometimes it hums just loud enough for the careful listener to hear. When applied to colonial nude photography of African women, Campt's ideology reframes the question of power. Listening to these images allows us to understand how these women fashioned presence and self-autonomy, even under lenses that sought to deny them.

The African Lookbook offers Noble Native Lady, Haute Guinee, Colonies Franccaise with minimal textual guidance. However, its placement within the section "Through the Colonial Peephole," following the passage about "the photo as its own trophy," suggests voyeurism and possession (McKinley 124). This curation encourages the viewer to read looking at the image as a glimpse through a colonial camera onto private vulnerability. The woman's exposed breasts and direct gaze function as evidence of her availability to the lens and proof of a successful conquest.



Noble Native Lady, Haute Guinee, Colonies Franccaises, 1906

Unknown • Guinea

Yet, listening to Noble Native Lady through Campt's framework reveals new meaning for the photograph. The woman sits upright, her right leg extended and the other crossed loosely over it in a casual, assured stance. A striped fabric wraps her waist, and a white scarf drapes casually over her shoulders, falling partially down her arm. Despite the vulnerable exposure of her breasts, this woman does not cower under the erotic pressure. Her eyes meet the camera with an unwavering gaze, her mouth sits firm, and she holds her shoulders straight and square. Every part of her exudes confidence. Her stasis does not equate to compliance but rather a deep self-assurance and stability within her situation. She does not expressively defy the camera, nor does she submit to it. Instead, she remains poised and immune to the classification the viewer longs to label her with. She is neither a rebel nor a martyr; she simply is. Her body functions as a site of what Campt refers to as "a tense self-fashioning," and it does so audaciously within an image meant to objectify (Campt 59).

Listening to Libreville Fang through Campt's concept of "quiet" reveals a confrontation rooted in subtle strength and self-assurance. As Campt defines it, quiet is a "subtle, often overlooked mode of refusal and agency in photographic subjects" (Campt 13-46). Like the subject in Noble Native Lady, the woman in this photograph sits upright, her shoulders squared and her gaze firmly fixed on the camera. Yet, unlike Noble Native Lady, her posture conveys rigidity rather than a relaxed composure. The accompanying quote: "A cannibal woman waits on a colonial stage. Fang women, they are insatiable. You know them immediately by the raised scars like crocodile skins running between their breasts" reveals a colonial rhetoric that attempts to hypersexualize and dehumanize the woman (McKinley 134).

Libreville Fang, undated

Collection P. et G.—Cliche F. Guillod • Gabon

By listening for the quiet Campt outlines in her framework, this image hums with refusal and agency that simply looking will not reveal. Her stillness is not passivity but a contained assertion of power. If we entertain the colonial notions that name her a "cannibal," an inadvertent acknowledgment of her strength reveals. This strength is a metaphor for her power that disrupts the lens seeking to contain her. Her posture, straight and tense, and her sharp, almost predatory gaze suggest she is aware of the camera's invasive nature and rejects it. Rather than attack the viewer, she sits steady, contained with potential and a quiet predation that illustrates her poised awareness of the power she holds. In this reading, the "cannibal woman" claims the center of gravity and absorbs those who look upon her with colonial desires. Her stillness, then, conceals her strength, but her quiet act of resistance is obvious

Finally, while Noble Native Lady and Libreville Fang resist through confrontation, the third and final photograph—an Unknown, undated nude photograph of a woman in the Congo—resists through bodily refusal (McKinley 146). The woman, reclining on her side with her back to the camera, disrupts the eyeline colonial gaze by denying it altogether. Draped in beads that arc across her lower back and framed by layered textile, her posture invokes tropes of the odalisque painting, but molds them into something more autonomous. This woman does not wait "bewitchingly as McKinley's caption implies, but chooses what the viewer may and may not see. Her body becomes an instrument for her autonomy

Untitled, undated

Unknown • Congo

Furthermore, Campt encourages viewers to engage with what she refers to as haptics, "multiple forms of touch, which, when understood as constitutive of the sonic frequencies of these photos, create alternative modalities for understanding the archival temporalities of images…" (72). In this photograph, textures like the cloth beneath her, the beads, and the curve of her back draw the viewer into a more physical relationship with the photo. One hand props her body up, while the other rests gently on the tufts of her hair. This motion feels intimate, and the viewer can feel the gentleness with which she arranges herself. She is not put into this position by someone else; she puts herself in it. What emerges from this understanding is the moment of her refusal and the deeper expression of control over how the photograph portrays her body. She shifts the encounter from sexual objectification to soft embodiment. Here, the photograph becomes less of evidence of colonial domination and more of a portrait of a woman's self-possession

Listening to these photographs transforms how we understand them. Rather than viewing the women as silent subjects trapped in time under a colonial magnifying glass, Campt's framework reveals their gestures, such as the stillness, gazes, and postures that act as self-fashioning and refusal. Each image has a frequency that alludes to resistance. Through listening, we move from seeing as voyeurs to recognizing expression and assertion of self-determination. These colonial nudes of African women, once perceived as evidence of conquest, now exist as records of the way the body speaks in ways words and actions cannot.

On the BlkQueer Subjecthood: A short statement on Purpose

Solomon Akaeze

When reflecting on Purpose as it relates to the articulation of the Blkqueer experience, I first move to complicate this notion of substantiation. I cannot begin without first addressing that there are, no doubt, issues to be raised with this evidentiary burden placed onto the critical study of Blkqueerness. Entrenched within this line of inquiry is often a central question more reflective of its true nature:"Why does this matter?. A question which itself is often coupled with the assertion that it, in fact, doesn't. Or at the very least, that there is a strong argument to that point. Any assertion that the examination of the Blkqueer lived experience lacks tangible value is, in my view, fundamentally mistaken—however, I choose now to respond to this question of purpose, as I see value in it. It allows me the opportunity to flesh out and, I believe, begin to construct a potential framework to defend BlkQueer studies.

The Black and Queer identities both intrinsically augment the ways in which one interacts with, experiences, and is able to engage in, the world. At their intersection point, these identities interface in beautifully specific epistemic and experiential ways so as to produce a completely unique lived experience. One wherein wholly unique conceptions of the world, society, and the Self can be located. In this understanding, the true project of study as it relates to the BlkQueer experience is, to me, not simply one of articulation or speculation, but one of excavation—the vibrant and complex reality of this lived experience existing embedded within one's subjecthood. Hidden from others, and requiring a process of exposition. Nonetheless, the question remains, what benefit is there to the exploration of this specific lived experience? In the excavation of its encapsulated, experientially-fixed, knowledge?

In short, So what?

The answer to me is clear, and lies in the subjective content to be excavated. That is, the conceptions of the Self, the world, and society, that are unique to those who occupy the standpoint of Blkqueerness. The complex understandings embedded within the Blkqueer subjecthood, run not only differently, but antithetical, to prevailing socio-cultural norms—and so are uniquely able to complicate their often pernicious functions. There is utter power in this. In the Blkqueer's ability to see and understand the world in ways that destabilize the very foundations of normative society. It is in total reckoning with our subjectivity, our experiences, thoughts, fears, and perspectives that I truly believe the blkqueer's subjecthood can be understood and thus shared—working to fundamentally shift societal sentiment toward this more radical posture.

Operating outside the bounds of tradition. Ever nuanced and frustratingly particular. The Blkqueer experience opens a door to the truth of what is and the possibility of what could be.

It is in this understanding that I find it not only valuable, but imperative, that there exists some corpus of knowledge excavating and documenting these sentiments and conceptions as I believe in their transformative power.

It is in this understanding that I find Purpose in helping synthesize it.

The Abnormal, The Apprehended, and The Abominable: Gendered Homophobia Within the Island of Jamaica

Michael Hunter

One of the staple events that characterizes Jamaican culture is the outdoor cookout, a food-filled event where families, friends, and communities can come together to eat, socialize, and commune. More defining of this event than the food however, is the music. These cookouts often include an array of cultural melodies which energize attendees to twist, shake, and move their bodies to the rhythm of Jamaican Reggae, Dancehall, and Fusion.

The content of these songs vary, but gather together to reflect the many values and traditions that the tiny—yet culture rich island has to offer. However, when some of the most featured songs contain lyrics such as "Boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head" (Banton 2001), an unfortunate yet stark norm within Jamaican culture floats up to the surface: Homophobia. With songs such as this one directly encouraging violence towards LGBTQ+ individuals, the anti-queer rhetoric ingrained within the Jamaican social fabric becomes apparent.

While the extent of socially mandated homophobia differs between each region, the island's officially codified policy on the matter materializes in the 1864 Offences Against the Person Act, Jamaica's acting criminal code. Section 76, which outlaws the "...abominable act of buggery…"—or anal sex—and Section 79 which outlaws the act of any male "procur[ing] or attempt[ing] to procure the commission of…any act of gross indecency with another male person" makes homosexual acts on the island of Jamaica a criminal offense, with its perpetrators at risk of facing up to 10 years in prison (Parl. of JA.). These clauses in culmination, known as the Buggery Law, create an environment in which private and public homosexual intimacy is inconceivable amongst Jamaican society. Yet, for a nation that faces much criticism for its legal and social repression of queerness, one large demographic of the queer community seems to slip under these arguments and go unnoticed: Women. While homosexual acts in Jamaica are legally restricted, it only goes as far as to punish male-on-male encounters. And while the cultural sentiment is very apprehensive towards homosexual expression, much of this hostility tends to be directed toward male homosexuality. With legal repression against LGBT Jamaicans seeming to be silent on lesbian intimacy, I ask why a distinction would be made to specifically target male homosexual expression instead of homosexuality in all regards?

Before understanding this male and female distinction, it is important to place queerness as a whole in context within Jamaican society. And within the Buggery law, even merely the title it's placed under is able to paint this picture. Placed under a section titled "Unnatural Offenses," the Buggery Law's 76th section reveals that homosexuality is deemed much more than just being merely frowned upon (Parl. of JA.). Homosexuality is framed to be a profoundly immoral action, one which goes beyond the scope of natural human inclinations and ethics—with the law going as far as to parallel it with the depraved act of beastiality.

With the law banning buggery, committed "...either with mankind or with any animal…" it likens homosexual acts to be something that only the most evil, or mentally impaired individuals would do (Parl. of JA.). This characterization is further intensified by the section's usage of the word "abominable" as a qualifier of this action. This word, not used elsewhere within the Act, situates buggery as being particularly heinous and vile, differentiating it from the other criminal actions that are highlighted inside of the law.

Furthermore, the 77th section referring to the act of buggery, not by name, but as "...the abominable act…" gives the act of buggery such an aura of disgrace that its name ought not to be uttered more than once (Parl. of JA.). This makes it so that intimacy between same-sex males is not just deemed to be socially problematic, but as something innately evil to do. With the crime of buggery being characterized as being more depraved and debauched than other crimes—including infanticide, kidnapping, and even genocide—homosexuals in Jamaica are diminished as a social vice, and morally blasphemous; homosexual desires are smeared to be deeply, and gravley perverted.

This viewpoint is not limited only to the legal space. A 2023 study conducted by J-FLAG, a Jamaican-based LGBTQ advocacy organization, found that one-third of all Jamaicans believe that homosexuality is an optional choice (10), while double the amount believe that homosexuality should not be considered normal by society (13). From this, we come to understand that the rejection of homosexuality within Jamaican society is caused by aversions to what is deemed abnormal or unnatural. The justification for an anti-queer culture is a claim to homosexual's supposed immorality and perversity.

Yet still, in effect, much of this scrutiny seems only to be reflected upon queer men. Beyond the Buggery Law's specific outlawing of "indecent assault" and "act[s] of gross indecency," specifically with "...another male person…," there is a jarring absence of women within anti-queer rhetoric (Parl. of JA. sec. 79). Daily issues of the Jamaican based newspaper, The Observer, have contained many editorial cartoons depicting homosexuality, none of which depict lesbian relations. On the contrary, however, all of these homophobic cartoons depict gay men—particularly as violent, crude, and lacking virility.

Fig. 1
(Translation: We are not gunmen!//JFJ: We back him)

Fig. 2
(Translation: I rebuke you, you guys do not set a good example!//Tell it to them pastor, pure nastiness is going on!!)

> Within Jamaican media, homosexual men are largely illustrated to be social deviants that clash with civility and self-discipline norms, while homosexual women are left totally undepicted. Being posed as not only deviating from standard conventions of sexual expression, but displaying socially irregular and improper attributes pushes gay men further into a sphere of social discordance. As a result, society shuns this phenomenon that feels unfamiliar and unexplainable to them
>
> On a surface level, this aversion makes sense. Humans have always inaturally feared what is considered to be deviating from the norm. As hunters and gatherers, it was necessary for humankind to distinguish patterns and normalities within persons, places, and things, to acclimate to the ordinary and to sense the danger outside of it. In her Dissertation titled, Music and the Uncanny Valley Nightmares: Three Compositions for Instruments, Gestures, and Electronic Sounds, University of Pennsylvania Professor Natacha Diels describes a common form of this universal fear, called the uncanny valley, a phenomenon in which attributes that closely resemble human features or behaviors, yet don't quite reach the benchmark, instills a sense of fear within its viewers. She argues that "The 'uncanny' is that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar," making the point that due to our strong sense of the ordinary, things that slightly deviate from our mental archetypes instill "a particular feeling of uncertainty" (Diels 3).

Queerness invokes these feelings of unease because of the ways in which it teeters on top of established spoken and unspoken convention. Discussing those who he considered to be similarly "...harbingers of category crisis" (Cohen 6), author Jeffery Jerome Cohen amalgamates these binary defying individuals into a single term: "Monsters" (3). These monsters, as Cohen describes, are creatures who are unable to, and refuse to be placed within established social categories. They violate the basic laws of nature simply by existing within their monstrous configurations. Their characteristics "question binary thinking" thereby "introduc[ing] a crisis" in which those who perceive them must reconcile the "monster['s]" existence with their own personal conceptions of social or biological divisions (Cohen 6). According to Cohen, these monsters "demand a radical rethinking of boundary and normality," to which logically associates queer individuals within Jamaica amongst these beasts (6).

J-FLAG reported that 57% of Jamaicans either did not believe or were not sure homosexuals experience the same emotions as their heterosexual counterparts (10). In seeming to defy typical human disposition, these queer monsters "instill fear and panic as one cannot be aware of that character's intentions" (Diels 4). As a result, "the uncanny may be exaggerated due to the perceived potential threat of violent behavior or harm" (Diels 4). When Jamaican society places these monsters as the character within this scenario, their perceptions of queer men as being sexually unnatural and socially uncouth create a tension due to

fear of the unorthodox—surpassing society's expectations and thus their ability to predict. Meaning, when someone who presents physically as a member of society, yet defies both civil and sexual expectations, it instills discomfort within others due to their inability to predict their actions, and protect themselves from it. Queer people become a zombified vector of sexual backwardness and social depravity, housed within a body. Just as much as the behavior of the monster is unpredictable, the consequences for the acceptance of the monster are just as much unforeseeable. Therefore, Jamaican society is warned not to "step outside this official geography" of the binary (Cohen 12). Accepting this uncanniness within society, despite its "uncomfortabl[e] strange[ness]" (Diels 2) could mean risking "...attack by some monstrous…" and hostility characterized queer (Cohen 12). Or even worse, acceptance may mean to risk "becom[ing] monstrous oneself] (Cohen 12). Thus—for the sake of preserving lawfulness, the family unit, or sexual compatibility—homophobic Jamaicans are motivated to adamantly avoid these risks by deeming this uncanniness unacceptable.

While homosexual men are repressed because of apprehensions against the atypical, are we to suppose that, on the contrary, Jamaican society perceives something to be inherently more natural or typical—and thus predictable—about female homosexual tendencies? At the passing of the Offenses Against the Person Act and the infamous Buggery Law in tandem, Jamaica was still a colony under the British sphere. Thus, it is important to look at the British norms which dominated much of what the island used to perceive gender roles. A close look at gender culture within colonial Britain would suggest that close, same sex relations between women were, in fact, tolerated. Called "Romantic Friendships" oftentimes between unmarried women, two same-sex parties in the 18th and 19th centuries would openly share passionate correspondence, be publicly intimate, and even live with other female partners of their choosing.

However, this does not equate to this society accepting homosexual acts between women as normal. This was not an endorsement of lesbian relationships, nor does it assume that there exists something more natural about lesbianism. But on the contrary, a woman's sexual agency to drive themselves into homosexual relations tended to be disregarded as fantasy. Lesbianism did not produce the same uncanny uneasiness as male homosexual perceptions, because it was not deemed to exist in the first place.

Colonial Jamaica was no less homophobic than its modern counterpart. The acceptance of these kinships was largely driven by the popular social conceptions of women at the time. While men also participated in these friendships, society was particularly tolerant of female romantic friendships because they were deemed as innocent and authentically platonic in nature. Digital Archivist Kathryn Antonelli stated that these relationships were "romanticized by men as being intrinsically virtuous and pure, partially because most men did not believe sexual relations between women were possible—never mind desired" (Antonelli). Thus, these relations between women were much more normalized within society. In their femininity, women were not seen as individuals who would be driven into same sex relations out of lustful passions, something deemed much more of masculine in nature.

This early-mid 19th century era was dominated by the Cult of Domesticity, a social shift in the anglosphere that prioritized women's relevance in the domestic sphere and the characteristics of sanctity that followed. According to researcher Cait Caffery, the main attributes women were expected to hold within this era were virtues of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Caffery). This "true woman" did not have the agency to initiate sexual relations; moreover, neither was she interested in anti-biblical, sodomistic adultery (Caffery). Being perceived as docile and innocent in nature, lesbian relations between women were deemed the last thing one would suspect from female kinships. Homosexual women went unnoticed and avoided repression due to a social inability to conceive women engaging in homosexual intimacy. Their perpetuation of the uncanny had become completely unpredictable and, thus, invisible.

While many of these colonial concepts were overturned by the feminist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the stains of these customs still reside within Jamaican society. The social quelling of male homosexuality in Jamaica often involves violent assault or intimidation. On the contrary, however, Jamaican lesbians, because of their perceived inconceivability, have become the unfortunate target of corrective rape; that is, the sexual assault of lesbians in order to "correct" their orientation. In her 2015 memoir, Jamaican Poet and activist Staceyann Chin recounted her experience being a victim of gang rape after coming out as lesbian on her Jamaican college campus—the primary assailant justifying this action by telling Chin that he is "fucking her to save her from herself and from hellfire" (qtd. in White 4). Furthermore, female sexual agency continues to be ignored within the Jamaican legal realm. As the notion that women are socially and sexually docile persists, it encourages laws such as the Jamaica's Sexual Offenses Act, which only acknowledges when a "...man commits the offense of rape…," leaving women legally incapable of being charged and repremanded for rape (pt. 2 sec. 3). These norms which define women as lacking any sexual agency continuously affect modern Jamaican society centuries later.

Amid the violence faced by homosexual men on the island of Jamaica, there is acknowledgement. In order to intimidate, murder, and imprison others for their identity, one must first admit the existence of their "perverted", yet real attributes. Gay men are offered a tacit recognition of their sexuality every time they come in contact with homophobic hands.

Women are not offered the same lowly prospect. The violence against queer women, intending to reverse their sexual preferences, denies them of their queerness in the first place. In attempting to correct them, their attackers reject them, making the inconceivability of lesbianism evident. Thus, it becomes apparent that the absence of lesbian women from Jamaican social and legal scrutiny is a result of lesbianism's absence from homophobic Jamaican's sense of possibility.

So, where does this leave the topic of homosexuality on the Caribbean island? Queerness continues to be widely persecuted, with dozens of reports of assault, intimidation, and sexual violence being reported every year. And dozens more go unreported, slipping under the cracks with victims fearing being dismissed, outed, ostracized, or even worse: slain. Given the historical context, this shouldn't be fully surprising. However, many British-Commonwealth nations with similar legal histories have gradually relinquished themselves of anti-queer laws. The islands of St. Kitts, Antigua and Barbuda, and Barbados all decriminalized homosexuality in 2022, with Dominica and St. Lucia following along in subsequent years (Hum. Dig.).

Meanwhile, however, Jamaica remains adamant on preserving its buggery law. Under what is called the "saving laws clause," the Jamaican Parliament recently passed an amendment to the Jamaican constitution which included a ban on judicial review on laws pertaining to sex (JA Charter chap. 3, clause 12). This means, although the criminalization of buggery is in direct violation of its section one constitutional protection of privacy, it cannot be struck down by a judge and is therefore still enforceable island-wide. Widening outside of Jamaican history, however, it is important to see that even many activists who fought discrimination on racial, ethnic, and religious lines were perceived as nature resisting, convention-bending, and "monstrous" of sorts. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was deemed a "mannish woman like hens that crow" (Davis 95).

Dr. Martin Luther King was called a "filthy abnormal animal" (Kayyali). And on this not-so-new terrain, the pioneers of sexual justice—whether in Jamaica or around the world—will not be perceived as any different. Through the abnormal, we enter into "an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world" (Cohen 7).

As Cohen describes the monster as deriving liberation from their freedom to be odd, Jamaican Queer activists have too turned their monstrosized identities into a source of sanctuary for others. When Brian Williamson publicly came out as gay and formed the Jamaican LGBTQ organization, J-FLAG, he was met with death threats and constant intimidation. Seeing the ways in which these turmoils affected not just him, but every queer Jamaican, he used this momentum to open Entourage, Jamaica's first gay night-club, which acted as a social haven for queer Jamaicans who otherwise lacked a space to commune (Stratton).

Furthermore, after singer Diana King became the first ever reggae artist to come out publicly as a lesbian, despite pushback from some of her Jamaican fans, she soon after announced plans to create a lesbian-only record label to uplift marginalized women artists who have faced boundaries due to their sexual orientation (Yates). In personal acknowledgement of their identities, Jamaican activists have been able to redefine themselves as social benefactors, while still retaining their queerness. Bravely, they continue to teach us the lesson that through perceiving our "monster" as a redemption from binary constraints, we find a place to celebrate—and not fear—the uncanny, the different, or the unconventional. And this creates a path for broader acceptance of queer individuals both in Jamaica and beyond.

Unspoken Tensions: Historic Suppression of Sapphic Desire

Sage Elation

I remember sitting down to watch Rebecca Hall's adaptation of Passing by Nella Larsen in late 2021, the weight of the previous year still heavy in my thoughts. The summer of 2020's Black Lives Matter protests, followed by witnessing Kamala Harris take her historic oath of office that January, had created this intense backdrop of racial reckoning and progress happening simultaneously in America. Passing offered a nuanced exploration of gender, race, and desire amongst other concepts, speaking so clearly to our present moment. What struck me most was how refreshing it felt to see a story about Black history that wasn't centered on Black trauma or defined by white characters' perspectives. Instead, it delved into the inner worlds of these two complex women. The film captured the essence of Larsen's novel - how it lets us live in Irene and Clare's thoughts, desires, and fears. They're driving their narrative, making choices (for better or worse), and grappling with their relationships with identity and each other.

Passing is set in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City in the 1920s during the era of the Harlem Renaissance. It centers on the unexpected reunion of two childhood friends – Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield— whose renewed acquaintance kindles a mutual obsession that threatens their livelihoods. Irene identifies as a fair-skinned African-American woman living an affluent, comfortable life with her husband (a doctor) and children. Her world shifts when she encounters Clare, who, as it turns out, has been "passing" as white, completely severing ties with her former life and even marrying a wealthy, racist white man who remains oblivious to her true identity. As the two women's lives intertwine again, Clare becomes increasingly drawn to Irene's world– not just to the warmth of the Black community she left behind, but to Irene herself.

Larsen’s narrative expands beyond the central concept of “racial passing”, as the text suggests the idea of “passing” under a different identity occurs at a surprisingly wide variety of levels (Letellier). From ; the beginning, Larsen depicts Irene as a character who seems to be uncomfortable with sexuality. She becomes disturbed when she learns that her son’s friends have been teaching him “sex jokes”, she is so upset that she wants to send him to study abroad. Her dramatic reaction to this cannon event seems to indicate that Irene harbors some sexual discomfort or anxiety. This feeling permeates her marriage with her husband, Brian, and strains it, as their relationship lacks satisfaction. The Redfields have separate bedrooms and though they have children they act more so as “co-parents”, not as active sexual partners (Blackmore 1). This plotline allows for the development of sexual tension between Irene and Clare by establishing the absence of stability and intimacy within Irene and Clare’s marriages, “Larsen can flirt…with the idea of a lesbian relation between them” (McDowell 23). From the beginning of the novel, Irene seems very entranced with Clare – more specifically her physical appearance. The Clare that is showcased to us through Irene’s perspective appears to have embraced her sexuality and appeal in a way that is exaggerated to Irene.

Even before she reacquaints herself with Clare formally, Irene (watching Clare from a distance) declares that she is “a lovely creature” with a “tempting mouth…long lashes” and warm eyes (Larsen 150). As the novel progresses, Irene becomes even more infatuated with Clare, calling her "exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting…her eyes sparkling like dark jewels" (Larsen 203). Irene's descriptions of Clare are sensual because, though she does not explicitly articulate her attraction, she can't help but notice the certain heated glances that Clare evokes in her. Irene’s observations are weighted with an unacknowledged tension, a persistent awareness that reveals more than she intends. How Clare exists in a room, speaks a single phrase, or turns her head becomes a subtle performance that captivates Irene's complete attention, drawing her into a complex emotional landscape where desire and restraint constantly intersect.

However, the tense nature of Irene and Clare’s relationship is not solely depicted in Irene’s attraction to Clare but also through her aversion. We are introduced to the text of Passing with the description of a quite unusual letter that Irene received from New York. Irene has pushed it to the end of her stack as she “disliked the idea of opening it and reading it”, but eventually she brings herself to it (Larsen 4). The letter read:

"*... For I am lonely, so lonely . .. cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life. . . . You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of..... It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases. ..." Sheets upon thin sheets of it. And ending finally with, "And it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't know, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago…*”(Larson 8).

The language that Clare uses holds a level of dramatics and desperation – describing her desire as “terrible” and “wild”, and directly attributing these feelings to seeing Irene in Chicago presents an almost romantic confession that begs Irene to respond. Irene’s discomfort with the letter's intensity leads her to try to dismiss and avoid its implications; she channels her feelings into criticism and rejection of Clare's "dangerous" behavior. However, it is the intensity of Irene's objection to the letter itself that lends to the idea of repressed attraction, as her emotional responses to Clare are seemingly too powerful to be explained by mere social disapproval or concern for racial solidarity. This argument is supported by how Irene's moments of strongest rejection often coincide with moments of potential intimate connection or when Clare's beauty is most apparent. Even given Irene’s aversive reaction to Clare’s letter, one would think she wouldn’t want to meet up with her in person. Yet, she still finds a way to give in to Clare’s request to meet, which happens not just once but frequently. The repetitive nature of their meetings, with Irene repeatedly saying no but ultimately agreeing, creates a pattern of resistance and surrender that carries erotic undertones. The push-pull dynamic between attraction and aversion creates a palpable tension throughout the novel, suggesting that Irene's emotions toward Clare are a significant part of an underlying sapphic subtext.

Fig. 1. Irene sat with Hugh Wentworth during the gala for the Negro Welfare League (analogous to the NAACP), intensely watching Clare dance (from Netflix's Passing)

Fig. 2. Irene reaches for, and then holds, Clare's hand as her back is turned watching people dance at the Gala (From Netflix's Passing)

Rebbeca Hall does an exceptional job with the film in framing the picture to mirror not just the contents of Larsen's novel but the sapphic desire that lingers underneath the plot. The photos (figs 1 & 2) reference a scene in the film where we are introduced to Hugh Wentworth (A famous white author), who watches Clare dancing at the Negro Welfare League gala and wonders who the white woman is. Irene tells him, "Things aren't always what they seem", and so they begin to engage in conversation about "passing" (in more ways than racial) while playing on and alluding to the secrets of each other.

The scene's visual composition is deliberately confronting. Hall's decision to shoot in a 4:3 aspect ratio with a low-mode filming technique creates an intentionally claustrophobic and intimate framing. This view focuses more on the subject's immediate surroundings and creates a sense of closeness or intimacy by cropping out more of the peripheral view; it's often used to emphasize a character's expressions and actions within a tighter frame. Hall's stylistic choice here forces viewers to focus intensely on facial expressions, micro-expressions, and the charged spaces between characters.

The black-and-white cinematography further amplifies this sense of emotional restriction. It becomes a metaphorical extension of the film's themes of passing and hidden identities, with shades of gray quite literally representing the liminal spaces between racial and sexual boundaries. The scene itself, with its many cuts, has its own kind of choreography that lends itself to the sapphic subtext of the film. The camera's deliberate panning between the movement of Clare dancing and then back to Irene who watches at a distance, creates a visual metaphor of desire. Clare's dance becomes a kind of public/private performance, while the intense focus on Irene's gaze transforms the moment into a private experience. Beyond the visual complexities, it is the conversation between Irene and Hugh in this scene that is particularly revealing. This scene's dialogue particularly oozes conflicted eroticism, as when Irene watches Clare dancing with Brian, she declares (to Hugh) that one can be drawn to something (or someone) that seems "repugnant".

The term "repugnant" itself is loaded - suggesting a desire that is both attractive and uncomfortable, a perfect word to describe the tension between her and Clare. Irene also ends the conversation by saying "We're all of us passing for something or other…aren't we?" And then proceeds to wink at Hugh. Those statements coupled with the camera panning back and forth between Clare and Irene with an intense gaze, allude to the idea that Irene is very subtly talking about her affection for Clare. This theory is plausible as just a moment later, when Clare returns from dancing, Irene reaches for her arm (fig. 2), and they clasp tight and share a longing look; no words, just a steady gaze between the two. The brief moment when Brian returns and the women "straighten up" and stop holding hands quickly is tellingly performative. It suggests the constant negotiation of identity and desire, the need to constantly perform acceptable roles even as unspoken sapphic desires linger.

As time goes on, Clare leaves for Europe, and Irene's seemingly peaceful life begins to unravel. Her marriage grows increasingly strained, and she finds herself continually circling back to thoughts of Clare, her absence creating more of a tension than her physical presence. The silent intimacy between Clare and Irene, once marked by their lingering gaze, now transforms into a psychological obsession that permeates every aspect of Irene's existence. As her internal struggle intensifies, Irene attempts to redirect and repress them because she recognizes that her sapphic desires are a threat to her status and place in ; society. In response to this realization she has a fight or flight reaction and begins to "take steps to eradicate the danger", which means "fabricat[ing] an illicit romance between Brian (her husband) and Clare" (Blackmore 9). Irene's choice to resort to introducing a male element through the speculation of an affair represents heteronormative projection and reinforces how female queer desire is often displaced into heterosexual narratives. These feelings come into a full circle in the last chapter, where Irene is last seen holding onto Clare's arm as she is either pushed or jumped out the window. If Irene did push Clare maybe this was her way of finally getting rid of her desire for Clare.

Simply because she could not cope with her identity and the only way to truly "protect herself" was to "sacrifice Clare…because she is a reminder of that repressed and disowned part of Irene's self" (Blackmore 9). Passing as a whole —more specifically the trope of an affair between Clare and Brian – reinforces the historical patterns of sapphic erasure and delegitimization through heteronormative reframing. Irene's genuine feelings for Clare cannot exist naturally because they must be filtered through a compulsory heterosexual framework to be rendered comprehensible, even to herself (Hallet 2).

Compulsory heterosexuality, also known as comphet, is a theory that was coined by writer Adrienne Rich in her article, Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980). In this theory, she affirms that heterosexuality is enforced by society, not a natural preference. According to Rich, the assumption "that women are 'innately' sexually oriented only toward men, and that… that the lesbian is simply acting out of her bitterness toward men,...are widely current in literature" and delegitimizes sapphic identities (Rich 13). This concept of compulsory heterosexuality has been developed since the genesis of Greek Western literature and this has evolved to infiltrate modern-day media and compositions. There has always been a perceivable amount of heteronormative biases in conjunction with patriarchal power structures that have shaped the literary portrayal of queer female sexuality from classical texts to contemporary media.

The Ancient Greeks and Romans have contributed significantly to the development of Western literature from poetry, to drama, and essays to prose. More specifically, Greek culture and by proxy, Greek literature were characterized by an emphasis on the human psyche and complex relationships with ; each other. Greek epics and tragedies, in particular, were known for their exploration of human emotions and untraditional relationships. Notably, works including Symposium and The Iliad depict the omnipresent history of queer love and relationships in Greek literature and culture. However, it is important to recognize that these homosexual encounters are told mainly through references to relations between two queer men. The first explicit discussion of love in Western literature and philosophy begins as a discussion of homosexual relationships in Plato's Symposium. As Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff – translators and commentators on the 1989 interpretation of Plato – asserted, queer relations in Greek culture "often had a crucial educational and ethical dimension" (Nehamas XIV). In ancient Athens, it was a common and accepted practice for older men to seek out adolescent boys to "fall in love with and seek sexual gratification" (Woodruff 3). The two men would assume roles, the older was regarded as the "lover" (erastēs), and the young boy was deemed the "beloved" (erōmenos). The main reasoning for these relationships involved the lover in the role of ethical and intellectual teacher and the boy in the role of the student" (Nehamas XV).

As alluded to previously, “The Romans defined sexuality via sexual roles” these being the dominant (or the penetrator; typically an older male) and the passive (or the penetrated; typically a young male or a female (McEdulff). These sexual roles aligned heavily with the gender roles that existed for men and women to fulfill, similar to the gender roles present in today's society. Men – especially those of good or wealthier families- were expected to devote themselves to gaining intellect. These homosexual relationships between queer men often were a “crucial part of the socialization [of these men] into adult civic life (Woodruff). On the other hand, women had a “shared duty” of marrying men and producing offspring. Any female same-sex desire relationship, for that reason, was considered to be unacceptable. For many Greeks and Romans the idea of homosexual relations “between women was viewed as puzzling, as well as discomforting and disturbing” (McElduff 5). They were unable to configure the concept or possibility of two women having sexual relations, given the absence of a man who would be able to assume the male role. In other words, women could not penetrate; therefore in a relationship, they both would not be able to achieve the dominant and passive sexual roles of the time. The lack of ability to ; recognize a relationship between two women because of the lack of genital penetration has affected the sapphic depiction in modern literature and dated works.

One of the exceptions, Sappho —an Archaic Greek Poet from the island of Lesbos– was well known for her works focusing mostly on love between women and her homosexual passions. However, her poetry, except for a single complete poem, survives only in fragments. As Judith Hallett in her article “Sappho and Her Social Context: Sense and Sensuality” asserts “Sappho is absent from the history of sexuality, as from many other histories, apart because she is a woman, because she writes about sex between women and female desire” (Hallett 2).

Fig. 3: One of the few surviving poems about Sappho’s sapphic desires; here she describes her attraction to another woman, who is talking with a man

Fragment 31: translated by Julia Dubnoff

“That man to me seems equal to the gods, the man who sits opposite you and close by listens to your sweet voice and your enticing laughter— That indeed has stirred up the heart in my breast. For whenever I look at you even briefly I can no longer say a single thing, But my tongue is frozen in silence; Instantly, a delicate flame runs beneath my skin; With my eyes I see nothing. My ears make a whirring noise. A cold sweat covers me, trembling seizes my body, And I am greener than grass. Lacking but little of death do I seem.” – Sappho, If Not Winter

Hallet's idea maintains that because Sappho's desire does not align with the "male subject", many felt it wasn't worth telling. Although there was a plethora of gay males writing poetry in ancient times, unlike Sappho, they were not singled out for their sexual orientation. Hallet explains "The negative reaction which female homosexuality has aroused from the Hellenistic period…caused Sappho to receive different [(and increasingly inequitable)] treatment" (Hallet 5). This truth corroborates the delegitimizing of sapphic culture and representation, even with the existence of other queer groups.

The survival of Fragment 31 by Sappho is particularly significant as it showcases how female same-sex desire has historically been filtered through the lens of compulsory heterosexuality– note how the poem begins with "That man" despite being fundamentally about the speaker's desire for another woman. This framing device, whether intentional or necessitated by social constraints, foreshadows what Adrienne Rich would later term "compulsory heterosexuality" in modern literature. The physical symptoms Sappho describes – the frozen tongue, the whirring ears, the cold sweat – are notable not just for their intensity, but for how they've survived as authentic expressions of sapphic desire despite centuries of heteronormative literary traditions trying to erase or reframe them. The fact that even this fragment needed to be contextualized through a male presence ("That man") demonstrates how deeply ingrained compulsory heterosexuality was, even in ancient times, creating a literary precedent that would echo through centuries of writing about female same-sex desire.

This pattern of requiring heterosexual framing or justification for sapphic content persists well into modern literature, where lesbian characters and themes often need to be "justified" through ; heterosexual plot devices, male viewpoints, or tragic endings. The trembling, grass-green symptoms of desire that Sappho so boldly documented would frequently be recast in modern literature as illness, madness, or moral failing – a literary tradition that your upcoming section on compulsory heterosexuality will explore in depth. In this way, Sappho's fragment serves as both a testament to the endurance of sapphic desire in literature and a stark reminder of how such desire has historically been constrained, censored, and reframed through heteronormative lenses.

From the fragmented verses of Sappho to the nuanced psychological landscape of Irene's desire, the historical suppression of sapphic narratives emerges as a persistent pattern. The literary tradition of reframing, censoring, and heteronormalizing female desire finds its eloquent embodiment in Irene's desperate attempts to conceptualize her attraction through the presence of a male narrative. Just as Ancient Greeks and Romans were "unable to configure the concept or possibility of two women having sexual relations given the absence of a man who would be able to assume the male role" (McElduff 5), Irene cannot process her desires for Clare without inserting her husband as an intermediary figure. Her choice to reframe her jealousy and attraction through the lens of heterosexual infidelity mirrors the deeply rooted historical pattern of sapphic delegitimization.

Like the fragments of Sappho's poetry that were deemed insignificant because they failed to align with the "male subject", Irene's genuine feelings for Clare cannot exist naturally - they must be filtered through a heteronormative framework to be rendered comprehensible, even to herself (Hallet 2). This compulsive need to introduce a male element into female relationships has persisted from Ancient Greek literature into modern narratives, demonstrating how comphet continues to shape and distort the representation of female same-sex desire.

When Irene fabricates the affair, she unknowingly participates in the same erasure of sapphic narratives that led to Sappho receiving "different and increasingly inequitable treatment" from her colleagues (Hallet 5). The eventual tragic ending, with Clare's death, further reinforces how sapphic desire that cannot be successfully channeled into heterosexual narratives must be eliminated - a trend that echoes the historical suppression and erasure of female same-sex relationships in literature.

From Ancient Greek texts to modern literature like Passing, female same-sex desire has been systematically marginalized, filtered through heteronormative lenses, or violently eliminated. Yet, in bearing witness to these unspoken tensions, in tracing the contours of desire that refuse to be fully contained, we create space for understanding. The sapphic experience continues to whisper between the lines, resisting erasure, and demanding recognition—a testament to the resilience of desire that cannot be easily silenced or simplified.

Transgender Histories in China: Between Subversion and Binary Reinforcement

Yuhan Zhao

What does it mean to write a "transgender history" of China when the very term transgender is a recent, Anglophone category? Rather than searching the past for proto-trans heroes who neatly anticipate contemporary identities, this essay traces how bodies that crossed, blurred, or temporarily suspended gender boundaries were imagined, regulated, and made meaningful in different Chinese contexts. From imperial eunuchs and cross-dressed heroines to opera nandan and post-Mao film icons, such figures emerged at the intersection of law, ritual, entertainment, and fantasy. They reveal not only alternative ways of living gender, but also the tremendous effort invested in keeping gender—and the social order it underpins—in place.

At the center of this inquiry is a tension between subversion and containment. On one level, eunuchs, female cross-dressers, and male actors in female roles expose the instability of the male/female binary: their bodies inhabit the "in-between," and their stories repeatedly imagine genders that do not fit neatly into Confucian norms. On another level, these same figures are tightly bound to patriarchal projects. Eunuchs are recruited to serve imperial power; heroines like Hua Mulan and Zhu Yingtai gain agency only through male disguise and are ultimately returned to—or expelled from—the gender order; nandan artistry flourishes within a theatrical system that excludes real women from the stage. Reading across opera, classical narrative and modern film, this essay argues that "transgender histories" in China are best understood as histories of ambivalence: sites where gender nonconformity is at once instrumentalized and admired, stigmatized and desired, briefly destabilizing the binary only to help restore it.

Eunuchs and the Politics of Gender Control

Within the Confucian ritual order, gender difference was tightly bound to the hierarchy of the family and to the orthodoxy of the state. Those who crossed these boundaries were understood not only as moral deviants but also as potential threats to social order (Tran 17–20). Drawing on Qing judicial archives, Matthew Sommer shows that cases in which men appeared in women's clothing were often prosecuted as "offenses against public decency" and frequently grouped together with crimes such as sexual assault or fraud, thereby producing a narrative of the "cross-dressing predator." This legal framework translated gender nonconformity into a problem of public security, and in so doing further reinforced a binary, patriarchal norm. (Sommer 50) At the same time, law and morality did not operate only through repression; the state also actively designed channels through which certain forms of gender ambiguity could be absorbed and made to serve imperial power. The most typical example is the institution of the imperial eunuch.

Eunuchs were men made so through castration, occupying in social life a position somewhere between male and female. (Tsai 14–17) Castration removed the conventional markers of masculinity and, in traditional discourse, eunuchs were often described as "neither man nor woman." Because they could not reproduce, they were regarded as "safe attendants" within the inner palaces, and were therefore assigned to women's living quarters and granted intimate access to the depths of the imperial harem. This institutionalized role turned eunuchs into a regulated group: although they were not acknowledged as either "men" or "women," they nonetheless performed a distinctive function at the very heart of imperial rule. (Dale 53–56)

Throughout Chinese history, eunuchs long served as the emperor's closest personal attendants, handled confidential affairs, and, under favorable political conditions, even formed their own power networks. The emperor's willingness to trust them stemmed in large part from the fact that they were "cut off" from descendants and were believed to lack both a kinship base and the ambition to seize the throne. This kind of "institutionalized desexualization" effectively transformed eunuchs into extensions of imperial will. (Kutcher 83-102)

Within this patriarchal order, castration itself carried a powerful moral stigma. Confucian ethics emphasized filial piety and the continuation of the ancestral line; to voluntarily sever one's own capacity for reproduction was therefore construed as a betrayal of one's responsibilities to the family. In elite discourse, eunuchs were routinely demonized as greedy, devious, and manipulative; popular drama and vernacular fiction further reproduced these prejudices through stock figures of the treacherous inner-court attendant or the power-hungry "evil eunuch" who throws the polity into chaos. Such narratives certainly responded to instances of historical abuse of power, but they also reveal deeper gendered anxieties—a rejection and fear of bodies that did not embody the "virtues of a man."

For this very reason, Howard Chiang cautions that to simply treat eunuchs as "early transgender subjects" is to efface their specific historical context. For the vast majority of eunuchs in the imperial period, he argues, self-identification remained male; what they sought was wealth and prestige within the existing patriarchal order. Their ambiguous gender position was, to a large extent, the product of institutional arrangements rather than a self-chosen gender identity. (Chiang 282)

It is precisely in the shadow of this historical experience that contemporary literature and cinema remake the figure of the "eunuch / self-castrated subject." On the one hand, they inherit this tradition of stigmatization; on the other, they rewrite it as an imaginative arena for crises of masculinity and gender ambiguity. Jin Yong's The Smiling, Proud Wanderer and its film adaptation Swordsman II: The East Is Red are exemplary in this regard: they transform the "castrated body" from a palace servant into a highly visible body that combines political power with gender instability. (Wang 129)

In Jin Yong's original novel, the point of departure for this transformation is the famous manual Sunflower Scripture. This secret martial text promises invincibility, but only on the condition of self-castration. The line "To master this skill, you must first castrate yourself" renders the "abandonment of the body" as a concrete threshold that must be crossed in order to attain supreme martial prowess. (Jin) Here, this "eunuch-style" self-castration no longer signifies weakness or mutilation, but a form of exchange: the loss of reproductive capacity is traded for a level of martial prowess far beyond the ordinary. Castration is no longer merely a sign of lack; it becomes the very precondition for excess—an excess of speed, an excess of strength, an excess of power over others. From this angle, Jin Yong effectively rewrites the traditional stereotype of the eunuch as weak, sinister, and despised into a terrifying figure of "castrated masculinity": the body is frightening precisely because it concentrates both physical injury and political power.

In Jin Yong's original novel, Dongfang Bubai is the leader of the Sun and Moon Sect, who castrates himself in order to master the Sunflower Manual and then withdraws from public view, manipulating the jianghu from behind the scenes with unrivaled martial power. Tsui Hark's film Swordsman II: The East Is Red pushes this premise even further, transforming the "self-castrated sect leader" into a highly feminized, eroticized visual figure.

Casting Brigitte Lin as Dongfang Bubai, the film presents this self-castrated master as a body that is androgynous but tilted toward the feminine: crimson robes billowing, long hair streaming, a light and agile frame whose highly stylized movements amount to an almost supernatural "feminine grace." The film's narrative suggests that the deeper Dongfang Bubai advances in his training, the further he moves away from "being a man." Castration here signifies not only the loss of the phallus but a thorough sliding and transition into another mode of gendered embodiment. Yet this transition is framed from the outset as both alluring and dangerous: Dongfang Bubai's beauty and elegance coexist with her cold cruelty and ruthless ambition for power. She is at once the most formidable fighter and the greatest single threat to the existing order.

Through this character, the film transforms the older imaginary of "eunuchs entangled with power and intrigue" into a strikingly visible, gender-ambiguous villain. Dongfang Bubai's castrated body condenses multiple anxieties: a fear of the collapse of normative masculinity, a fear of transgressive female power, and a suspicion toward loyalty to state and sect alike. The film repeatedly emphasizes that her near-invincible martial power is obtained at the price of "no longer being a man," yet the narrative never attempts to reposition her within any stable feminine role. On the contrary, she remains suspended outside the male/female binary; it is precisely this unclassifiable status that constitutes her threat to the existing order.

At the same time, the emotional relationship between Dongfang Bubai and Linghu Chong adds another layer of complexity to this figure. Linghu Chong is drawn to Dongfang Bubai's gentleness and vulnerability, and his feelings persist even after he discovers her history of self-castration and her non-normative body. Their moments of intimacy briefly imagine a possibility in which desire does not necessarily obey the male–female binary. Yet this possibility ultimately cannot be sustained within the film. (Jin) Dongfang Bubai must in the end die, and her death restores the moral and gender order that she has unsettled. This castrated, feminized body is allowed to be seductive, pitiable, even lovable—but only as a fleeting spectacle; by the narrative's conclusion, it must be eliminated.

From imperial eunuchs to Jin Yong's self-castrated martial masters, and finally to Dongfang Bubai in Swordsman II, we can trace how the figure of the "eunuch / self-castrated subject" shifts from a stigmatized servant to a highly visible emblem of "castrated masculinity." In both the novel and the film, castration no longer simply signifies lack; it becomes a narrative device for constructing a body that is at once powerful and impossible to situate within the male– female binary.

Yet such a body is consistently portrayed as fundamentally incompatible with social and moral order: its power must be tamed, demonized, or ultimately neutralized through romanticized sacrifice and death. In this sense, contemporary popular culture both perpetuates the cultural memory of the eunuch as a "gendered Other" and, through the figure of "castrated masculinity," produces a visual pleasure that wavers along the boundaries of binary gender. However, whatever subversive potential this image might contain is ultimately folded back into a familiar resolution in which heterosexual, patriarchal order is restored.

Literature: The Conditional Legitimacy of Female Cross-Dressing

In Chinese narrative tradition, the figures of Hua Mulan and Zhu Yingtai represent the most iconic stories of gender crossing. Their acts of female-to-male disguise both challenge and reaffirm gender hierarchy.(Tso 117) On one hand, they allow women temporary access to spaces monopolized by men such as the battlefield or the academy, producing tension, excitement, and admiration. On the other hand, these narratives ultimately close by reinstating patriarchal order through virtues such as filial piety, chastity, and loyalty, which resecure women's place within Confucian morality.

Among these tales, The Ballad of Mulan offers the most enduring image of a woman in male disguise. Mulan dresses as a man to take her father's place in the army, serves for twelve years without her true identity being discovered, and returns home covered in honor. (Tso 118) The story celebrates a heroic woman who rivals men, demonstrating that women are equally capable of bearing civic and familial responsibilities, yet Mulan's transgression is never framed as rebellion. Her motive of filial devotion and patriotism perfectly aligns with the Confucian virtues of loyalty and chastity. Late Qing commentators even elevated her as a paragon of womanly virtue, praising her filial piety and modesty during wartime. Thus, while Mulan's disguise breaks gender boundaries, the narrative safely reabsorbs her transgression into moral orthodoxy, transforming deviation into exemplarity. (Edwards 175–214.)

From a gendered perspective, however, Mulan's story subtly destabilizes the binary division of roles. Her long service in a male-coded space proves that courage, discipline, and intelligence are not inherently masculine traits but socially assigned ones. Still, the story's conclusion neutralizes this subversive potential. When Mulan "puts on her old dress again," she symbolically restores the gender order she had momentarily unsettled. Her heroism is permitted precisely because it is temporary and exceptional.

As Louise Edwards observes, Mulan's transgression enjoys conditional legitimacy; it is sanctioned only insofar as it serves patriarchal ethics such as filial duty and national loyalty. The return home functions as narrative closure and moral containment, transforming what might have been radical into a spectacle of virtue. (Edwards, 179–180, 185–188)

It is worth noting that different historical periods have attached distinct meanings to the figure of Mulan. Since the Republican era, modern nationalists have celebrated her as a patriotic heroine who proves that women, too, can defend the nation. Yet some critics express regret over her eventual resignation and reversion to womanhood, interpreting it as a reflection of her time's constraints on female autonomy. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the spirit of Mulan aligned closely with socialist ideals of gender equality. The slogans "women hold up half the sky" and "men and women are the same" transformed her story into a model of female participation in public labor and nation-building. However, as scholar Dai Jinhua observes, this socialist vision of equality often erased gender difference. （Dai 94-95） Women were encouraged to prove themselves by doing what men could do, while their specific subjectivity and desires were overlooked. Thus, Mulan became both a symbol of liberation and a reminder of the identity dilemmas faced by women entering a male-defined public sphere.

The story of Zhu Yingtai reveals the tragic dimension of gender crossing. In the legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, Zhu Yingtai disguises herself as a man to study at a male academy. While concealing her identity, she becomes close friends with Liang Shanbo, and their friendship gradually deepens into mutual affection.（Idema xxix）

Yet Liang remains unaware of Zhu's true identity, and this concealment sets the stage for tragedy. When Zhu is forced by her parents to marry another man, Liang dies of heartbreak. At his grave, Zhu sacrifices her life and transforms into a butterfly, allowing the two lovers to unite in death. (Tso 119)The emotional and moral tension of the story arises directly from Zhu's act of gender crossing. Her desire for education and autonomous love compels her to violate the social norms that restrict women's behavior, leading to a series of dramatic consequences

From the perspective of gender order, Zhu Yingtai's transgression is even more subversive than Mulan's. In traditional society, it was considered improper for a woman to disguise herself as a man and study alongside men. Zhu's successful disguise over three years demonstrates the performative and malleable nature of gender roles. Through adjustments in appearance, gesture, and manner, a woman could convincingly "become" a man, suggesting that gender identity was not fixed but enacted. Yet unlike Mulan's tale, which concludes with a safe return to normative womanhood, the Liang-Zhu story ends in tragedy. Zhu's crossing is portrayed as irreconcilable with Confucian morality. She cannot openly marry Liang while living as a man, but once her female identity is revealed, she is trapped by her parents' decision of an arranged marriage. The only resolution lies in death, where the lovers transcend human law and merge as butterflies, achieving symbolic freedom only in the realm beyond life.

This tragic structure underscores the limits of gender fluidity within feudal society. Zhu's transformation is neither socially sanctioned nor morally rewarded. Her transgression exposes the rigidity of patriarchal order, which allows no space for alternative gender identities or selfdetermined relationships. The legend therefore turns the impossibility of gender and social liberation into romantic inevitability. The butterfly metamorphosis at the end restores moral harmony at the cost of life, translating transgression into aesthetic redemption. (Tso 119)

Historically, interpretations of the Liang-Zhu legend have focused more on its themes of faithful love and tragic devotion than on Zhu Yingtai's gender disguise. Popular readings celebrate it as the "Chinese Romeo and Juliet," praising eternal love rather than advocating gender equality. Yet in modern gender studies, Zhu has increasingly been viewed as an enlightened or proto-feminist figure. Her decision to cross-dress for education and love expresses a spirit of resistance against patriarchal confinement. Although the story ultimately does not allow her to overcome traditional constraints, the sympathy and admiration she evokes reflect a popular longing for female autonomy.

*I*n this sense, the Liang-Zhu narrative dramatizes the cost of gender transgression in premodern China. Social norms neutralize or romanticize such challenges through moral or aesthetic closure, preserving the stability of the binary system. Both Mulan and Zhu Yingtai achieve agency only through male disguise, which implicitly reinforces the centrality of masculinity. As Matthew Sommer notes, this form of female impersonation is typically framed as a temporary deviation justified by moral purpose. Transgression is tolerated only when motivated by filial piety or loyalty; otherwise, it is condemned as deceit or social disorder. Zhu Yingtai's story, while not overtly revolutionary, remains a deeply emotional and complex cultural model for exploring the fluidity of female roles within and against the patriarchal imagination.

Opera: Nandan and the Reversibility of Gender on Stage

The same dynamic of opening and containment appears vividly in the tradition of crossgender performance in Chinese opera. The most representative example is the nandan phenomenon in Peking Opera and other regional forms, where men perform female roles. Unlike women cross-dressing as men in literature, nandan performance institutionalized the process of men "becoming women." This transformation was celebrated within the artistic sphere but stigmatized outside it, entangled with associations of prostitution and homoerotic relations. The same act of gender crossing was thus coded very differently depending on the social context.

The term nandan refers to male actors who specialize in performing female roles. Historically, due to Confucian moral codes and professional restrictions, women were often prohibited from performing on stage. As a result, men took over all female roles, creating a distinctive culture of cross-gender performance in Chinese opera.（Li 6-7） These actors underwent rigorous training in costume, gesture, and vocal technique to embody femininity with precision, producing a visual illusion so convincing that audiences often described the experience as "deceptively real." The practice reveals the remarkable fluidity of gender as performance. Male actors could successfully "become" women through disciplined stylization, a concept that later resonated with Judith Butler's notion of gender as performative. (Butler 519-531) However, it is crucial to situate nandan within its historical and institutional context.

The cross-gender tradition in Chinese opera did not arise from an intention to challenge gender norms but from the need to conform to them. The prohibition of women on stage, coupled with the guild-based monopolies of the performance industry, produced a professional system in which men were required to perform all roles. In traditional culture, the nandan actor was still considered male offstage, and his cross-dressing was regarded as an artistic technique or occupational necessity rather than a reflection of gender identity.

During the late Qing and Republican periods, nandan performance reached its artistic peak. Renowned actors such as Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, and Shang Xiaoyun became cultural icons. They were celebrated not only for their technical mastery but also for evoking a unique aesthetic of "male femininity." Urban audiences marveled at the ambiguity of their beauty, and some male spectators even expressed desire toward these performers, blurring the boundaries between admiration and attraction. （Goldstein 160–164）

Scholars note that the 1920s and 1930s marked the golden age of nandan artistry, when a relatively cosmopolitan urban culture allowed for a richer engagement with gender and sensuality. (Goldstein 167–171) After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the state's cultural policies and aesthetic ideology changed dramatically. Socialist realism and the doctrine of gender equality redefined theatrical authenticity. Male actors performing female roles came to be seen as "unrealistic" and as remnants of a feudal past. By the 1950s, opera schools gradually abolished nandan training, advocating that female roles should be played by women.

（Li 205–18） Officials such as Minister of Culture He Jingzhi explicitly denounced nandan performance in the 1960s for three reasons: it violated the principle of authenticity, it contradicted the new healthy aesthetic ideal, and it originated in an outdated social system. Under these directives, nandan artistry declined rapidly. Many veteran performers were forced to retire or switch professions, and by the end of the twentieth century, few younger actors pursued the form.（ Li 195）

Although nandan performance has nearly disappeared as a profession, its cultural and symbolic legacy remains significant. From a gender studies perspective, the nandan body is a site of tension and complexity. Some scholars describe it as a "cultural oxymoron": it simultaneously reflects patriarchal control over women's representation and the subversive potential of gender fluidity. On one hand, the tradition reinforced the exclusion of real women from the stage and allowed men to possess and reconstruct female imagery. On the other hand, it destabilized gender binaries. When audiences were moved by a male actor's portrayal of a woman, the distinction between male and female blurred at the aesthetic level.

The Chinese opera stage became an unstable field of gender meanings because of the nandan. It continually repeated patriarchal norms while also hinting at their dissolution. Mei Lanfang's performances of delicate, suffering women captivated audiences precisely because they revealed how femininity itself could be a role, a disciplined artifice performed by a male body. In doing so, the nandan tradition transformed gender from an essence into a skill, exposing its constructed nature and performative reversibility. This doubleness of nandan performance—at once patriarchal and potentially subversive—finds a powerful afterlife in Chen Kaige's 1993 film Farewell My Concubine (Bawang bieji). Set against the upheavals of twentieth-century China, the film follows the dan actor Cheng Dieyi, whose stage persona as Consort Yu bleeds into his offstage life.

As critics have shown, the film uses the historical institution of the nandan to explore how male femininity is produced, desired, and punished across different political regimes. The temporal and medial distance between the traditional opera stage and the 1990s arthouse film allows Farewell My Concubine to make the nandan body newly legible to global audiences: Cheng Dieyi's feminized performance circulates not only in Beijing's theaters but also through international film festivals, queer film criticism, and world-cinema canons. In this sense, the film marks a crucial moment in the cultural transmission of nandan—transforming a historically localized practice into a transnational image of Chinese gender fluidity, even as it reiterates older anxieties about effeminacy, homosexuality, and "degeneracy."

Conclusion

Placing eunuchs, cross-dressed heroines, nandan performers, and figures like Dongfang Bubai side by side makes visible a shared structure. In each case, gender nonconformity is not simply forbidden; it is managed, staged, and narrativized. Imperial law and court institutions turn castrated men into trusted servants of the throne, even as moral discourse demonizes them as monstrous others. Literary tales of Hua Mulan and Zhu Yingtai grant women access to male spaces and capacities, but only under the sign of filial piety, patriotic sacrifice, or tragic death. Opera and film take male femininity to dazzling aesthetic heights, yet ultimately reassert that such bodies cannot be allowed to endure within a stable social order.

These trajectories suggest that "transgender histories" in China are less about linear progress toward recognition and more about recurrent patterns of conditional legitimacy. Gender-crossing figures are permitted, even celebrated, when they serve family, nation, or empire; once they begin to threaten those structures, they are disciplined, pathologized, or annihilated. At the same time, the pleasures these figures generate—whether the visual thrill of "castrated masculinity" or the affective charge of cross-gender romance—testify to a persistent cultural fascination with lives lived at the edge of the binary. Attending this double movement of subversion and reinforcement does not resolve the gap between historical actors and contemporary transgender identities. But it does offer a critical genealogy: a way of understanding how Chinese societies have repeatedly imagined, used, and contained gender variance, and how the traces of those imaginaries continue to shape both popular culture and the possibilities available to gender-nonconforming subjects today.

Legislative attacks on both abortion access and gender affirming care have come hand in hand in the years following Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization. As of November 2025, thirteen states had full bans on abortion, meaning abortion is illegal regardless of stage of pregnancy (Choi and Cole 2025). These bans may, but often do not provide exceptions for cases of rape or incest. Meanwhile, attacks on trans rights surged in 2023 and are continuing to ramp up, with a mounting number of anti-trans bills under consideration. These bills cover a wide range, focusing on areas like education, healthcare, and athletics. They seek to enforce limited definitions of gender and curtail access to gender–affirming care, especially for minors. Attacks on abortion and gender affirming care complicate healthcare access, especially access to reproductive care in states with abortion bans.

A report by the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) examines the overlap between anti-abortion and anti-trans tactics, such as vilifying healthcare providers, and proposing unnecessary and targeted regulation for providers, among many other tactics that have been adapted from anti-abortion efforts (National Women's Law Center 2025). Beyond the healthcare overlap, attacks on abortion and trans rights share rhetoric about protecting children, target intensely personal experiences, and mobilize ideas around morality and perversion. The overlap between anti-abortion and anti-trans legislation allows us to better understand the threat anti-trans legislation poses, as well as the rhetoric of reproduction that both are grounded in. The NWLC highlights how anti-trans bills repurpose the anti-abortion tactic of targeting healthcare providers. These providers are restricted from providing essential care under threat of severe punishment. Anti-trans bills have adapted this tactic of criminalizing medical care and threatening providers.

One instance is malpractice suits, which are typically to be filed within one to three years. When it comes to gender-affirming care, these suits have been given extended statutes of limitations by some lawmakers. In Arkansas, Florida, Tennessee, and Missouri, the statutes range from 15 to 30 years for those who received gender-affirming care as a minor. This extended statute raises the possibility of patients suing clinics decades after receiving care. As some states ban gender-affirming care for minors, clinics in states where care is still legal still face the possibility of legal and financial consequences. Even without actual lawsuits, the extension of statutes has raised the price of malpractice insurance exorbitantly, hampering the ability of gender affirming clinics to continue operating. Attorney and Harvard Law School instructor Alejandra Caraballo described this as the use of "legal liability to chill a certain type of conduct," paralleling these changes with tactics used against abortion providers (Nowell 2024).

Abortion bans have proved catastrophic for maternal health. In 2022, almost all cases of abortion were banned in Texas, with "civil and criminal penalties for those who perform an abortion," continuing the pattern of criminalizing healthcare providers (Texas State Law Library 2025). There is an exception to protect the life or health of the pregnant patient, but there are no exceptions for rape and incest. Alarmingly, despite the exception for maternal health, as of 2023, maternal mortality increased by 33 percent post-ban. Also notable is that Black women in Texas faced 2.5 times the chance of maternal mortality compared to white women in 2023 (Gender Equity Policy Institute 2025). The uptick of maternal mortality is accompanied by harrowing stories of women who were unable to access lifesaving care during pregnancy, such as that of Tierra Walker, who was denied an abortion for her high-risk pregnancy and ultimately died of preeclampsia (Surana and Presser 2025). When abortions are banned, necessary and life-saving treatment is avoided for the sake of avoiding prosecution. By threatening medical providers, abortion bans prevent access to proper care even when the patient's life is in danger.

The Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (EMTALA) guarantees emergency medical care for patients in the United States. Following Dobbs, restrictions on abortion access have been subject to scrutiny on their potential conflicts with EMTALA. On May 29, 2025, the Trump administration rescinded a memorandum from 2022 that reaffirmed hospitals' obligation to follow EMTALA regardless of state laws. (American Civil Liberties Union 2025). The original memorandum, released in 2022, stated that "If a physician believes that a pregnant patient presenting at an emergency department is experiencing an emergency medical condition as defined by EMTALA, and that abortion is the stabilizing treatment necessary to resolve that condition, the physician must provide that treatment. When a state law prohibits abortion and does not include an exception for the life of the pregnant person — or draws the exception more narrowly than EMTALA's emergency medical condition definition — that state law is preempted" (Department of Health & Human Services 2025). Rescinding the memorandum places the effective role of EMTALA in uncertainty, weakening its protections, and endangering the lives of pregnant people throughout the nation.

The state of abortion care across the United States paints a grim picture for access to gender-affirming care if attacks continue. These threats towards medical providers limit the ability or willingness of a doctor to provide care, even if the required operations are theoretically permitted. Furthermore, attacks on abortion force some providers to move away, leaving places absent essential OB/GYN practitioners, with dire consequences for maternal health. The attacks on abortion shape expectations for the difficulties faced by gender-affirming care centers, and the subsequent effect on access to care, as rising insurance costs and legal threats push them away. Abortion and transness are linked by the centrality of sexuality and ideas around reproduction – conceptions that abortion and transness both challenge and subvert.

The goal is not humane, but rather structural. Johns Hopkins' Professor Gill-Peterson notes that "state violence directed at actual, living children is secured by the political currency of the imaginary, capital-C Child," and argues that these limitations that center children in discussions of abortion and transition outline a mandate that people should reproduce heterosexually– in standard manners, in ways that maintain the status quo (Gill-Peterson 2024, 77). While healthcare is a key front for both abortion and trans rights, the two are ultimately questions of autonomy. Attacking access to healthcare has wider impacts both for queer and feminist work, as well as for health in general (Donegan 2023).

The implication of attacking access to healthcare is that the health and wellbeing of pregnant people and trans people is unimportant. Rather than preserving lives, these bills curtail bodily autonomy and accept denial of care not only as a byproduct, but as a means of restriction. Abortion and trans attacks signify a mindset where preserving traditional ideals of birth and gender matters more than preserving human beings. While justification may center morality and protecting children, by targeting medical care, legislators reveal a callous disregard. The rhetoric of denying care allows justification for legislation's implementation in healthcare, serving to restrict health and bodily autonomy.

Looking Cis and Cis Looking: The Aesthetics of Transvestigation and the Case of Lance Twiggs

Nicholas Ford

Does Lance Twiggs look trans? They surely presented in a feminine manner, contrary to traditionalist notions of masculine gender expression; the picture in the onesie suffices to evidence that, at the very least. Yet, other pictures depict them in normatively masculine clothing, dressed in a dark-toned hoodie and sweatpants.1 The reality is that in fact, there is little to know about Lance and their gender identification. The name 'Lance Twiggs' has been promulgated throughout online media primarily due to its connection to the murder of Charlie Kirk. Kirk was a political commentator, popular among American conservatives for 'debating' college students and for his defense of 'traditional values'. He was an outspoken advocate against gender equality in the United States, particularly against the decriminalization and normalization of gender variance (e.g., drag artists, transgender and transsexual people). When he was killed on September 11, 2025, the state was swift in its identification of Tyler Robinson, a 22-year-old student in Utah, as a suspect. Yet, it is not Tyler Robinson who has been afforded the most interest in social media; he seems, in fact, to be the least culturally suspect, a cis white man raised by a family of conservative evangelicals and inculcated by online gaming communities. Instead, it is his partner, Lance, who is of much greater interest.

Like Tyler, Lance (also 22) was brought up in a deeply religious familial context. Before an alleged argument regarding a religious dispute which led to Lance leaving their family home, they were described by the New York Post as a "gifted straight A student". In this way, the two are actually quite similar; they were even known to navigate the same online spaces together. Theories are already starting to emerge that given this proximity, Lance was the one to 'radicalize' their partner and manipulate him into shooting Kirk as an act of violent extremism. However, one difference (arguably the one essential to understanding their depiction as the obscured 'mastermind') between the two is that Lance, at least according to the state, is trans. Regardless of if the introductory question is relevant to the criminal investigation of Charlie Kirk's death, what matters is that it is a question that is able to be asked. Trans as a discourse produces the conditions of possibility for asking the question of transness. In reality, it is significant that such a question is not particularly being asked, perhaps because it produces doubt in the conceptual schema of the trans debate. If the aesthetic authenticity of Lance's transness is called into question, the paradigmatic declarative 'I know what you are'2 transforms into the interrogative 'What are you?'. The phenomenon being described here can be termed 'transvestigation', which can be generally understood as a mode of inquisition always oriented towards revealing the 'true gender' of the accused. One need only invoke the conspiracy that female public figures (most often Michelle Obama, and more recently Brigitte Macron) are secretly men to provide a number of suggestive examples. The aesthetic authenticity of (Lance's) transness, then, is central to the process of (their) transvestigation; it is rather notable that the state, its legal and juridical components, in fact declared the fact of transition and by implication transness. In this way, one might conclude that the process of transvestigation has been skipped over altogether.

However, we should rather read the declaration of transness as a constitutive component of the trans debate and of transvestigation writ large. Transvestigation, much like other conspiratorial logics, seems to function by elision: it is not a deductive logic but rather an inductive one. In transvestigation, it is the conclusion which precedes the argument. Transness as a fact is named prior to its epistemological confirmation, and evidence therefore only appears as retroactive justification. Such a constitution is, coincidentally, revealed in the construction of the portmanteau itself: 'trans' is named prior and the 'investigation' is only what follows.

McKenzie Wark writes that the "cis gaze is… always on the lookout for transsexual exception".3 Cis-ness as a structuring force in the visual economy of sex/gender is always looking for transness, which is marked primarily as an aesthetic experience. Aside from the obvious nod towards Butler's "stylized repetition of acts"4 , an understanding of trans performativity as self-fashioning undergirds a reading of trans as primarily an aesthetic experience. The visual economy of dysphoria also points to this conclusion. To be transsexual is, as a result, always to be seen as transsexual; it is to demonstrate the doubly threatening and fascinating malleability of sex/gender and their respective identifications. Thus is transsexual exception. Performing transness as self-fashioning is always to exceed the naturalized contours of sanctioned gender. The exceptionality of transness is such that it enacts an undoing of the doxa of sex/gender. Barthes' notion of doxa is an important reminder here that normative bodily configurations are always already attempting to conceal their historical contingency. They mark "the overturning of history into nature".5 Transness therefore always exceeds the regulation of this visual economy overdetermined by the conception of the body as natural: "it takes away the body as the legitimating anchor for the naturalness of the spectacle".6

Transsexual self-fashioning disabuses us of the illusion that bodily configurations are themselves natural. If the sex/gender divide relies on sublimating the threat of gender's construction into sex as a naturalized feature of human existence (i.e., the popular notion that gender is socially constructed, but sex is biologically grounded in the body), transsexuality then signifies a discontinuity in the smooth elision of gender into sex and sex into the body. It signals that sex and the body into which it is collapsed, not just the expression of gender identity, are in fact malleable, historically contingent, and ultimately unnatural. If a 'naturally male' body has its penis replaced by a vagina, its testosterone replaced by estrogen, its Adam's apple and square jaw traded for hips and breasts, and, perhaps in the future, its testes traded for ovaries, can we still say that it is a 'male body'? What we might call Theseus' transsexual here productively demonstrates the threat that the transsexual poses to the doxa of sex/gender.

Hence why the visual economy structured by cis-ness constantly operates as the search for transsexual exception. "The cis gaze clocks us in order to other us."7 It is necessary for cis as a structuring force to mark trans as the subordinate, secondary, and derivative term by its suppression because the reality of trans as original, as expressed by the formulation of transsexual performance as self-fashioning, threatens to undo the cis-trans binary as the centering of gender. As we are reminded by both etymological and sexological history, it is actually trans-, the *terh-, the transvestit, which emerges first.8 The revelation marked by visually 'clocking' transsexuality exposes the uncentered reality of gender; neither cis nor trans, male nor female, is rooted in some determinate sexual-bodily meaning, and are rather two possible configurations of meaning in the broader context of freeplay. Hence, "we have to pass… we have to tell the sanctioned stories of our lives."9 To 'pass' here refers to a condition of what we might call 'unclockability': one must perform 'real' manhood or womanhood such that it eliminates the possibility of registering transsexual exception to the cis gaze.10

Yet passing, as Wark reminds us, has as much to do about the aesthetic confirmation of narrative as it does about the aesthetic authenticity of the transsexual body itself. For much of the history of medical transition, transsexual patients were required to confirm the authenticity of their gender/ed narratives in order to undergo surgeries or hormone treatments. This was verified by means of living as the desired gender for a period of time, typically at least one year. 11 Ignoring for the time being the implications of this mandated precarity, the practice of real-life experience therefore locates the 'truth' of transsexuality in the aesthetic confirmation of the narrative of lived experience. One was required to perform "one of the sanctioned genders"12 ; there was no room for gender misfits, and only the 'good transsexuals' who performed valorized normative (and might we add, aesthetic) genders were granted access to hormonal or surgical treatment.13 Meanwhile, the shadowy figure of the 'bad transsexual' is left to pursue more dangerous means of transition outside of the medical apparatus.

We should be cautious to note, however, that this shadowy figure does not dissipate as we move away from medical discourse. This 'bad transsexual' who abides by the law of neither legal institutions nor gender is thus posed as a threat due to the visual incommensurability of their bodily configuration. Because they are 'clockable', because they do not conform to one of the "sanctioned genders", they are dangerous and threaten the undoing of gendered meaning. Transsexual exception mounts such an immense threat that even the smallest markers of gender-sexual-bodily non-normativity are deemed as markers of suspicion for transsexuality. This is, in part, a paradoxical product of the cis gaze itself. Because cis looking produces the necessity of passing, it necessarily also produces imaginations of transsexual outsiders 'infiltrating' cisgender experience. The 'trans' in the 'bad transsexual' therefore denotes not only the 'trans' of crossing gender-sex-bodily configurations, but the 'trans' of exceeding boundaries, of trans-gression. The ultimate irony of transmedicalist rhetoric is that the 'good transsexual' is actually not dysphoric, but the bad one is.

A complete, successful transition in the transmedicalist frame should, by logical implication, eliminate or 'cure' any feelings of gender dysphoria by means of medical (but ultimately aesthetic) transition. Where transition goes wrong, where it is not allowed or must be abated, is the real site of dysphoria. Dysphoria is both indispensable to the transsexual experience and also always-already excessive. As Paul Preciado reminds us in Dysphoria Mundi, dysphoria is the nominal conjunction of the Greek prefix dys- (indicating a difficulty) and the verb pherein (carry, bear)14 ; it is, quite literally, an expression that what we might call the 'weight of gender' is unbearable. It is too much to bear. Because of this excessive nature, dysphoria is conditioned by a perpetual state of spilling-over. The dysphoric, 'bad transsexual' necessarily becomes an expression of this excess by means of metonymy.

Consequently, transsexuality comes to express a metonymic relationship to violence. Dysphoric, bad transsexuality marks the subject as mad, and therefore unstable and more likely to experience a 'break' in the psyche that leads to an externalization of psychic tensions through violence. This rhetorical association between transsexuality and violence is sutured by the figure of the child

Children function as a rhetorical substitute for purity, particularly as a metonym for the family and its hegemonic mode of social reproduction, to which the excessive dysphoria of the 'bad transsexual' poses a threat. Drag queen story hours 'indoctrinate' children into 'transsexual ideology', 'forcing' genital mutilation upon them. By their very proximity to transness, children are rendered insecure by the possibility that dysphoria may exceed the bounds of the gender variant body and 'infect' them. Rather than by pathology, children are penetrated by bullets when dysphoria exceeds the body and is manifest in shootings by 'mad (bad) transsexuals'15 . Such is the imperative of transvestigation: hunt the trannies, save the kids! Transvestigation, as briefly discussed above, is structured by at least two identifiable forces. Firstly, the paradoxical condition of passing as redeeming the 'good transsexual', and secondly, the logic of conspiracy and overcoding of transness with violence. The production of the stakes of transvestigation is conditioned by the excessive dysphoria of the 'bad transsexual' leaking even into the figural 'good transsexual'.

The primacy of passing, of lived experience as a model of finding the 'truth' of the transition narrative produces a subject-position for bad 'good transsexuals' in the shifty, perverse transsexual who yet passes in order to infiltrate private gendered spaces. Gendered bathrooms and changing rooms serve as the paradigmatic example of this. Transsexuality is figured as 'exceeding' the private gendered space of the respective 'birth-gender' bathrooms, spilling over into conceptual regimes of 'men pretending to be women' and 'women pretending to be men' to use their respective bathrooms and sneak a peek at one's genitals. Transvestigation becomes an imperative for the bathroom; cis women (and cis men, but the predominant narrative surrounds women) must always have their guards up, employing the cis gaze to 'clock' any suspiciously large women in their midsts that might constitute threats (both to the centered meaning of gender, and to their safety). Transvestigation is therefore always already prefigured as a form of aesthetic interrogation with stakes of violence and safety. The intertwining of transsexuality and violence is not the consequence, but rather the presupposition of the logic of transvestigation. As a process, transvestigation is animated by what has been called a logic of conspiracy. What I mean here by logic of conspiracy is a mode of epistemological encounter which inverts the frame of evidentiary verification and conclusion. Rather than operating deductively, by observing the living operations of some sphere of the world and drawing conclusions about it based on its principle truth(s), conspiratorial logics instead begin by supposing a conclusion and then proceed by developing a stock of evidence which vaguely supports the conclusion.

As described above, conspiracy is necessarily retroactive. In this way, transvestigation works from the conclusion (that someone is a transsexual) to the production of evidence supporting this conclusion (exposure to the cis gaze as a form of aesthetic confirmation).16 In coordination with its foundational logic of conspiracy, transvestigation is not only preconditioned by the rhetorical association of transsexuality with violence, but it also works to cement such an association. Not only does transvestigation serve, on the primary level, to assume the conclusion of transness as fact, to affirm the "I know what you are" of the cis gaze, but also, on the secondary level, to assume the conclusion of violence and later supplement this claim by primary transvestigation. Secondary transvestigation reverses the typical framing of violence being derivative of transsexuality and instead suggests that violence in fact is the assumption, and transsexuality is the proof. Secondary transvestigation in this way expands the stakes of transphobia beyond simply transgender or transsexual people; because even cis men and women can be violent, they can by secondary transvestigation be suspect of transness.

Secondary transvestigation is supplemented by primary transvestigation is supplemented by exposing bodily configurations, even cis-normative ones, to the aesthetic judgment of the cis gaze. According to this logic, it is not that trans people are violent which needs affirming, but the opposite: violent people are trans.

The Case of Lance Twiggs

Returning now to the question I posed at the beginning of this short essay, I am hesitant to answer it. Many news outlets have assumed the use of normatively masculine pronouns to describe them, and yet others resort to the normatively feminine, likely out of an impulse to use the 'correct' pronouns. You may have noticed that I refer to Lance Twiggs using the gender-neutral 'they/them' pronouns. All of these determinations of pronoun usage imply a sort of representational violence to some extent; even my own selection risks placing them in a third space outside the gender binary, what some call 'de-gendering'. The reality is that, for me, Lance does not look trans. There is little evidence beyond vague gestures made by representatives of the state that Lance is "transitioning from male to female"17 which suggests that they either participated in some form of transition (e.g., social, legal, medical) or that they privately aligned with a trans identity. It is uniquely important to question the meaning of "transition" here. If socially transitioning, why is there so little evidence of a change in gender presentation or the paradigmatic use of the feminine 'she/her'; if legally transitioning, why has there been no confirmation that documents prefiguring a sex marker change were filed; and, most importantly, if medically transitioning, why not share that they were taking hormones (and, ideally, which ones)? The medical question here is, as I have noted, the most significant. This is because the presence of feminizing hormones presents a unique juncture at which gender variance more generally departs from the model of cis-/trans- sexuality.

It is quite possible that despite performing a level of femininity and, indeed, even possibly taking feminizing hormones, Lance still firmly identified as a man. In the context of alt-right LGBT subcultures, an alternative configuration of sex/gender has arrived in the figure of the femboy. The femboy emerges in the context of failure to perform normative gender along masculine/feminine lines: they are either trans women who began their transition at a point deemed 'too late' by the community to achieve the aesthetic confirmation of passing, or men who fail to perform masculinity and are forced to reconcile with their subordinate position in the alt-right hierarchy of masculinity. 18

The overlapping subculture of inceldom similarly reflects these attitudes, purporting that 'cracking a femboy' will redeem their subordinate masculinities. What matters is that femboys emerge as male figures with a self-fashioning that is feminine, including taking feminizing hormones (while supplementing them with drugs, such as bicalutamide and selective estrogen receptor moderators [SERMs], inhibiting breast growth, and as a result maintaining their male gender-sex-body). Even if there is evidence of medical transition, then, it is indeed quite possible that contrary to what has been declared by the state, Lance is not trans. But to labor to make conclusive their status of gender identification is to miss the point entirely. The actual gender identity of Lance is irrelevant; what matters is that it is indeed quite possible that they were not trans, and yet have been declared to be so. In uncovering this reality as the narrative continues to unfold, there is a possibility which is not insignificant that my analysis is for wrought.

The reality of my writing on this topic is that because we are in the midst of its development and incorporation into broader discourses, I am never quite sure about the conclusiveness of my conclusions.

Still, I find the theoretical weight of reading a text that has yet to be written to be overwhelming, perhaps dysphoric. What is unlocked, despite its risks, by analyzing the ongoing and therefore evolving case of Lance Twiggs, is an opportunity to see and grasp the logic of transvestigation in action. What was assumed, declared really, was that Lance is trans. These are the facts, according to the Law; the significance that these claims are exclusively verified by agents of the state is not lost here. What we know, however, is that given what scarce evidence is available suggesting Lance is trans (and, because of the likelihood that "transitioning" refers to medical transition, its indeterminacy), it is actually quite possible that they are not. Their actual gender identity is in this way irrelevant to their marking as trans. It is the work of secondary transvestigation which suggests that given their intimate proximity to violence (manifest here as their partner,

Tyler Robinson), it is the discovery of their transness, its aesthetic signification of violence as mutilated, cut-up surgical projects figured by the 'bad transsexual', which serves as retroactive evidence. The developments in the narrative surrounding Lance as of now reflect this quite clearly: Tyler Robinson is discovered to have a partner and roommate, who comes to be suspected of transness, which is then confirmed by the state by its nebulous claims of "transition"

Eliza Buckner, citing Marshall McLuhan, asks in her analysis of the 2022 Club Q shooting, "[I]f 'the medium is the message', what does a spray of bullets communicate?" Perhaps what I have done here is ask, "what is the message of transvestigation?" The structuring power of transvestigation as a form of aesthetic interrogation reveals transness as an aesthetic dimension, and as a consequence its own paradoxical logic. In the context of Lance Twiggs, understanding that it actually does not matter whether they are trans or not underscores the real ways in which matrices of power intersect to produce a violent aesthetic of transness which justifies and is justified by transvestigation as it unfolds.

1. There are a number of news outlets that have disseminated a number of pictures of Lance Twiggs. The New York Post article, "Alleged Charlie Kirk shooter's trans lover was gifted straight A student — before a family argument upended his life" (9/25/2025) by Jared Downing and Chadwick Moore includes the photos I reference here. 2. Eliza Buckner, "Abolish Cisness: Abolish Stasis," pp. 34 3. McKenzie Wark, "The Spectacle of Disintegration and the Transsexual Exception", pp. 175, emphasis in original 4. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", pp. 519 5. McKenzie Wark, "The Spectacle of Disintegration and the Transsexual Exception", pp. 179 6. Ibid., pp. 180 7. Ibid., pp. 175

8. Nicholas Ford, (Unpublished) “Keyword: Cis”, pp. 2. I will elaborate on the histories I have invoked here: trans- as a prefix in Latin is thought to arrive from the Proto-Indo-European *terh-, whereas cis- (its opposite) only arrives afterwards; similarly, the terms transvestitismus and cisvestitismus, coined by German sexologist Ernst Burchard in 1914, only arrive after Magnus Hirschfeld’s use of the term transvestit. Hence, the trans- is the original term, and the cis- only its negation. 9. McKenzie Wark, “The Spectacle of Disintegration and the Transsexual Exception”, pp. 175 10. For a further discussion on discourses of ‘passing’ and ‘clocking’, see Judith Butler’s chapter “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion” (most specifically, pp. 88-91) from their 1993 book, Bodies that Matter. 11. Andrea Long Chu describes real-life experience as “that long march through the clinics during which a pre-op trans person must demonstrate that transition will not disturb their or anyone else's social productivity” in her 2017 article, “The Wrong Wrong Body: Notes on Trans Phenomenology”, where she discusses the concept further through Jay Prosser’s Second Skins (1998). Sandy Stone briefly touches on the practice as a site where trans women navigate narrative agency in “The Empire Strikes Back” (1987, pp. 160-162). For a more in-depth descriptive account of real-life experience, see Katherine Rachlin’s “Medical Transition without Social Transition: Expanding Options for Privately Gendered Bodies” (2018). 12. McKenzie Wark, “The Spectacle of Disintegration and the Transsexual Exception”, pp. 175

13. Nicholas Mirzoeff writes more extensively on the construction of what he calls visuality, a project of visualizing, and thus differentially aestheticizing, history in order to normalize relations of power, in his book The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality (2011). As a brief summary of the relevant concepts, which can in no way do justice to Mirzoeff’s more nuanced discussion, visuality operates as a supplement in the authorization of power by means of differential aestheticization of history which produces predominant historiographies as conclusively ‘right’ and ‘aesthetic’. The 19th century American paradigm of visuality, for instance, is the civil war General, valorized for his ability to ‘envision’ the battlefield (while in reality relying on subaltern soldiers for information). 14. Paul Preciado, “Dysphoria Mon Amour” in Dysphoria Mundi: A Diary of Planetary Transition (2024) 15. The recent proliferation of the trope of “Transgender Ideology-Inspired Violence and Extremism” (TIVE) by American conservatives would likely serve as a productive point of departure for further analysis of this phenomenon. I have chosen to omit that discussion here for the sake of brevity, and also because of its nascent conception. I prefer the use of my own analytic of ‘mad (bad) transsexuality’ because of its specificity to my discussion of the pathologization of transsexuality (especially the figural ‘bad transsexual’ examined above) within medico-political discourse. 16. Eliza Buckner, “Abolish Cisness: Abolish Stasis”, pp. 39-40. See “Chapter Two: Trans-fixed: Erotic Speculation and the ‘Trans Debate’” for a fuller discussion of the history and emergence of transsexual conspiracies.

17. A number of news sources articulate this. Fox News’ Brook Singman first broke the story on her X/Twitter account (x.com/BrookeSingman/status/1966889202412347602). It was later confirmed by Spencer Cox, the Utah State Governor, as reported by Khaleda Raman on NewsWeek (“Who Is Tyler Robinson’s Roommate, Lance Twiggs? Boyfriend of Kirk Suspect”). 18. My analysis of the femboy phenomenon here is largely theoretically indebted to the genealogical account of the emergence of the femboy detailed by Jules Joanne Gleeson in “An Anatomy of the Soyboy” (2018) and expanded upon by Alexis Davin in “Femboys in the Factory: Trans Labor beyond Abjection?” (2024).

I recommend reading their work for a more nuanced analysis, including discussion of the femboy in relation to transgender and transsexual women, as well as its constitutive disavowal of transness, which (while likely a productive site of elaboration for my discussion here) I have chosen to omit for brevity.

Commentary

Gabriel Olano

"Gender identity' reflects a fully internal and subjective sense of self, disconnected from biological reality and sex and existing on an infinite continuum, that does not provide a meaningful basis for identification" (Trump 2025)

The day he was signed into office, President Trump issued the executive order "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" that denounced 'gender ideology' as scientifically baseless and reduced the known complex experiences of sex and gender to a conservative binary of male and female. The U.S. federal government now operates under an antiquated sex-gender framework that struggles to cover how poorly it reflects the state of social progress within the American population's culture. However, following these rapid advancements in public understanding of sex-gender-sexuality in the past three decades, there was bound to eventually be a cultural shift towards conservatism. While the tug between progressivism and conservatism involves myriad different global topics, social issues are often the most contentious since they reach so close into our daily lives and worldviews. 'Gender ideology' rises to the top of that list as it deals with not only our view of how societies should be made up, but also how our selves are made up. Maintaining a stable understanding of sex-gender-sexuality is central to mental stability, so it's necessary for a healthy sense of self to ground that understanding in reliable knowledge or evidence that can stand against criticism.

This is where the most glaring issues arise within the executive order. It supports its strongly-worded proclamations on sex-gender with references to a biology that serves as a concrete bastion of truth from which to derive the right and wrong ways to define humanity. Countless times now, scientists have proven that this is far from the case - that there is by no means a natural binary distinction of categories of sex (Ainsworth 2015). So we end up with a government asserting a sex-gender ideology that is anything but objective, and laws and institutions that are forced to wrap around its oppressive beliefs.

The creative and affirming possibilities of the queer lens are erased from the interface of the U.S. by an anti-academic move that forgot to cite a single source. The executive order exists on its own, with nothing next to it, in conversation with no one. Of course, this is for a reason. There's no questions to be asked without any adjacent interlocutors. And forget about an objection. The speech, the edict, the executive order are the preferred methods of communication for the intellectually insecure. The image of the powerful individual sitting in superior position to those in the standing room below and telling them without asking them is one that has only ever manifested itself in a single way in our world: the oppressive white patriarch. This king most thrives when, not only is he able to ignore any questions/objections coming from below, but the people looking up don't know what to say, or don't know how to say it. The oppressive structure hates practiced curiosity. The king's favorite domain is one in which he doesn't have to put in any effort to understand the people he automatically categorizes. He loves his bias, it makes everything easier.

It takes a counter-culture to transform cultural, governmental hegemony. A transformation that's more like a mutation than a replacement: it's impossible to start from scratch, it has to come from what's already there. And it takes doing things differently. If the way things are done above, at the level of the throne, is the same as the way things are done in the community, then nothing will change. There has to be a difference in method. If the people are acting in their own kingly ways, holding the right values and knowing where to listen closely and where to shut their ears, nothing will change.

The executive order outlawed so many aspects of the act of queering, thus the solution is to queer. That is, as a verb, meaning 'to make queer'. Meaning, when we queer something, we make it make queer. It's a verb that verbifies, activates its object, makes it its own verb to go off and activate even more things, to spread the queer. Queering is unstable, necessarily in constant action and expansion, as it spreads its transformative qualities. At its core is pure radicalness; its essence is change against the oppressive norm. The king hates queering. He loves a stable, singly-directional line of action and command where what he says is. He's the only one allowed to do verbs. Queering means that everyone can do verbs, can queer, can talk. There's no streamlined top-down commands in the queer space, instead there is complexity and compromise and a level floor that allows everyone to move around and hold their place as valid and worthy nodes of a system of relations.
More than ever, we must engage with feminist STS scholar Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges, which is the idea that there is not one true, objective reality to be expressed by someone, but that the most accurate representations of the world come about through collective knowledge production and synthesis between various groups, acknowledging their respective locations of experience and how they contribute to the ideas they generate.
As Haraway puts it,

"We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice - not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals" (Haraway 1988, 590)
Contrary to the spirit of the executive order, no one person could ever have the right answer. Agreeing to agree or disagreeing to disagree with someone because they're on your team or on the other side, will never bring anyone closer to truth. Queering is in nuance, in complexity - it's in asking questions to really understand all the sides and angles of what someone is saying before acknowledging your own origins. It's in using your voice to not just say, but ask.