

TRANS/SUPER/NATURAL: Fear, Trembling, and Transsexuality in American Fiction

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

TRANS/SUPER/NATURAL: Fear, Trembling, and Transsexuality in American Fiction develops new ways of thinking about the biological, historical, and social elements that constitute what we call gender by identifying 20th-century American literature's practice of mobilizing motifs of magic and monstrosity to articulate authors' material, social, and political relationships to transsexuality. These motifs are shown to be part of a historical process in which medical and social sciences as well as academic discourse have employed misogynist and racist logics to render the transsexual body "super/natural"—that is, at once an unnatural biological aberration as well as a disembodied site of abjection beyond the natural/unnatural binary upon which is projected dire spiritual implications. Identifying the centrality of this super/natural thinking to other instances of political theorizing by marginalized populations, *TRANS/SUPER/NATURAL* reads fearful and esoteric representations of transsexuality in American fiction as making visible the magical thinking underlying contemporary formulations of gender. Across three chapters, the figure of the super/natural transsexual aids in the refiguration of embodiment as an always-already mystical experience that unsettles reductive pathologies of racism and sexism; kinship and socialization as fluid processes that work not to reinforce essentialist binary gender norms, but to enable transgressive categorical slippages; and history as a malleable space vulnerable to alterations that might make the present more livable for vulnerable populations.

Dedication

*To my mother, who married at thirteen, raised her brothers and sisters as her own, worked to unionize the commercial fishermen of Alabama and the phosphate miners of central Florida, spit on George Wallace, Harlequin Romanced her way through two stoic husbands, buried them both alongside a son, a mother, a brother, and countless cats—
and survived.*

“You tell me I am wrong.

Who are you, who is anybody to tell me I am wrong?

I am not wrong.”

— D. H. Lawrence, “Pomegranate”

“BONGI: Very fucky world we live in. My only consolation’s that

I’m me—vivacious, dynamic, single and a queer.”

— Valerie Solanas, *Up Your Ass*

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INTRODUCTION: A WITCH'S MANIFESTO: Transsexual Literature and the Return of the Magician

Always dramatize!

No, seriously: all the thinkers who most guide this work have warned me again and again that the rulers of the darkness of this world work their evil through the pretense of objectivity; that is to say, that spiritual wickedness in high places persists through the willful abolition of the human from the fact, the purging of *story* from the production of knowledge. And so—

The Fool Becomes the Magician, Becomes the High Priestess: The Art of Magical Thinking

My actual earliest memory is of being both woman and witch. One afternoon when I was about four years old, I went swimming with my cousins in an inflatable pool in the poisoned, weed-choked backyard of our Florida trailer park. I was lost in a sensation I still love to this day: the sense of your body's dissolution that comes sometimes when you float weightless, feeling water slide across the porous boundaries of your flesh, adding something to you and taking something of you away.

"I'm melting," I shouted to my cousins, who seemed to know what I was talking about. "I'm melting! Like the Wicked Witch of the West!"

Eager to hasten my demise, they started splashing me.

“I’m melting, I’m melting!” I yelled over and over. Then, in touch with some chain of association that’s harder to access now, I added: “I’m wicked!”

We were watched over that afternoon by one of my more religious and conservative uncles. He was the kind of Southerner who, in pursuit of a salary, had abandoned the birthright of the outlaw to swear fealty to the police his own father had thwarted as a shine-runner and to the mining corporations his grandfather had chased from their land with a shotgun. And so it was no surprise when I heard his footsteps thudding closer and he snatched me out of the water by my arm. He stood me beside the pool, squatted down before me, and shook me by the shoulders as my body dripped into the colorless sand.

“You can’t *never* say that,” he said. He recited non-existent scripture—whether he invented it himself or whether it was some violence done upon him in turn, I don’t know—and declared that I had just committed one of the most unpardonable of all sins: pronouncing oneself to be wicked.

“It’s over and done for you now, boy,” he said. “You can’t never be forgiven for a sin like that. God’s fixin to roast you in the fires of Hell forever. You best get on your knees every night and beg Him for forgiveness but don’t expect it to do no good. The Bible says it all real clear. They ain’t no witch gets suffered to live.”

A hell of a way to start out, huh?

The story means a lot to me, but I need to issue a clarification here probably, because I’ve found that cis people tend to take a different meaning from this experience than I do. Usually, they frame it as the story of a child being brutalized, perhaps even

traumatized, by a politicized version of American Christianity and its vision of hell that owes more to the Republican Party than to scripture. Well, sure, I want to say... but why are you ignoring the part where I was a witch?

Here's a transsexual origin story of mine that cis people tend to do a little better with: on my very first day of kindergarten, our class was made to march, single-file, to the sprawling field behind the school for "physical education." I played hopscotch with a girl named Sheena whom I had befriended that morning. After an hour, our coach blew a whistle and told us to line up on a series of dots painted on the asphalt: girls on the green dots, boys on the yellow. I didn't think about it at all as I lined up on the green dots next to Sheena. All I knew is that I was like Sheena and Sheena was a girl, so I lined up on the girl's dots. I stood there for all of five seconds before the other kids started laughing at me and the coach grabbed my collar and dragged me to the yellow dots, asking whether I was "some kind of faggot." When my parents found out what happened, they laughed and told my aunts and uncles who also laughed, and they all said how I was already, at age five, a "real ladies' man" who "just wanted to be near his little girlfriend."

Again, cis people, at least the good liberal ones, know what this is about. This is a story about a kid who was hailed into the interpellating discourse of gender in a traumatizing way, whose unfettered exploration of gendered dynamics was harshly corrected via punitive logics that demanded a certain kind of performance out of him—oops, I mean her! Probably Judith Butler could illuminate the specifics of the situation in a more rigorous way!

Well... yeah. But what about the strange and elemental operations of the pre-rational here? How was it that I had already come to a decision about who I was more or less akin to, and what dots I should consequently line up on, all *before* anyone had ever told me that there was this significant and supposedly insurmountable distance between “boy” and “girl” and that I was on the wrong side of that chasm? What about this inexplicable thing?

Without belaboring it any further, there’s a theme here. When I tell cis people about being abused by some conservative family member or authority figure as a child, they’re usually sympathetic; it’s a story they can fit into their pre-existing fully-intelligible model of the world. But when I tell them about knowing I was a witch, or about the ineffable intuitions—gnosis, maybe?—that define my early interrogations of gender, they seem embarrassed for me. I suppose there’s a kind of dignity in being called a faggot by the coach on your first day of kindergarten that doesn’t extend to things like writing magical formulae on the back wall of my closet, certain that the right configuration of lines and glyphs might really “turn me into a girl.” There is something about magical thinking that seems like a humiliation to them, a debasement of who I’m *supposed* to be: the dignified subject of a story about a trans woman from the rural American South, who survived poverty and abuse and homelessness only to make it all the way to the halls of academia where at long last no one uses the f-word and my pronouns are (usually) respected.

This aversion to magical thinking is something I just can’t understand. For me, magical thinking is at the very heart of being queer, and especially of being trans. I’m

almost 40 and I *still* believe all kinds of magical propositions. I believe, for instance, that the alchemical alteration of my hormonal profile by way of weekly injections of estradiol valerate inculcates not just material changes, but psychological, social, and spiritual ones as well. I believe that a sufficiently large wardrobe of goth dresses can remove a curse. I believe that even without the injections and the dresses, simply knowing the right words might reframe certain calcified structures in my understanding of myself and bring about all the same kinds of changes. How do I account for this? I don't. It's magic. But what I want to propose is that none of us *really* accounts for it. Certainly, many academics have proposed stories that explain the causal relationships between the material and the other planes of experience that suffuse it: the mental, spiritual, psychological, social, historical, political, and so on. But ultimately these stories are just attempts to leverage explanatory power in a realm that remains fundamentally mysterious to us hundreds of years after Descartes and Elizabeth, Princess of Bohemia, first hashed it out.¹

While I've found many such stories useful, I'm not writing this to add another one to the pile. I'm not so interested in finding the mechanistic key by which I can claim these magical operations that govern our experience of the world operate. Rather, I want to ask: why are we ashamed to talk about the role that magic plays in the relationships between the body and the world it experiences? We shouldn't be ashamed, because, as I intend to show, we all rely on some form of magical thinking, even in our most materially-significant and intellectually rigorous projects.

¹ I refer here of course to the "mind-body problem" of dualism, the relevance of which to discourse on the gendered body I develop in full in chapter one.

To begin with, it is my contention that being a transsexual, although we might not like to admit it, is essentially a form of magical thinking. Attempts to describe transsexuality, to create a functional definition of it that might allow one to communicate it to those outside of the experience, to create a theory of sufficient stability to argue against those who, laughably, take our very ontology as something debatable, as if it is an illusion that might simply be disbelieved—these attempts are doomed to failure by the same kind of hermeneutical limitations which I just described. Transsexuality, or at least *my* transsexuality, is not an experience that can be reduced to or fully explained by appeals to the categories of the medical, the social, the philosophical, the economic, and so on. For as much as those categories might have to offer us by way of a vocabulary that lets us start discussing our experiences, the accounts of transsexuality that emerge from fields like sexology, psychoanalysis, feminist and queer theory, endocrinology, and neuroscience can never *exhaust* transsexuality for the simple reason that transness is not a singular or coherent object of analysis. Put simply, no single field's stories are sufficient to explain it because it is not one thing. Transsexuality is a method of evaluation and reading; it's a philosophy of history; it's an ontology; it's an epistemology of self and gender; it's a means of relating to others; it's a modality of fucking; it's a means of establishing and negating kinship; it's a means of storytelling and self-narration; it's a genre; it's trauma; it's harrowing and a lot of us don't survive it for long; it's fun.

I want to offer a certain kind of concession that is at once terrifying in what it gives up, but also enticing in what it might open up for us elsewhere. The concession is this: that the claims of transsexuals *cannot be proven* in any conventional sense of the

word. What we are cannot be made “more real” or intelligible to others, especially cisgender others, by the rationalizing discourses that we have, by and large, historically used in our efforts to understand and theorize gender. Nonetheless, there is work to do. What is worth communicating about transsexuality isn’t some claim about the truth of our ontology—that we really are who we say we are—but rather what the *experience* of being trans affords to one: the insights that our experiences open up and the new categories and concepts we bring to the discussion of subjects such as the body, history, theories of social construction, kinship, and more. Yet, in order to prevent those insights from becoming codified as yet another theoretical monolith that will, through its inevitably totalizing gestures, only repeat the mistakes of academia past and leave some crucial remainder out in the darkness, we have to admit that this major concession resigns us to the assertion that transsexuality itself is shaped by magical claims: that the past can be changed; that changing it reshapes the present and the future in turn; that some fundamental essence exists beyond the body which might be accessed, known, and altered; that the body can be changed in ways that interact with this fundamental essence; countless others.

Something interesting: when these outrageous sounding magical claims come from outside the supposedly untrustworthy and unstable mouth of the transsexual herself, they suddenly seem more conventional, their magical content obscured. The history of our fields that attempt to understand gender—from sexology to psychoanalysis to Marxist accounts of the family to feminist theory, queer theory, and trans studies—shows this to be true. If we look at Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch*, for instance, we see a work

that is seriously engaged with an understanding of gender; so serious in fact that its author sees her mission as taking on not just the injustices against women committed by an outmoded Marxist account of class struggle that excludes the materiality of gendered differences, but also the previous efforts of other feminists: the “radical feminists” and “socialist feminists” whose hermeneutical errors have made such a mess of understanding gender’s role in the origin of capitalism.² When Federici invokes the witch as “the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the *obehe* woman who poisoned the master’s food and inspired the slaves to revolt,” it’s such a formally arresting move that it’s easy to miss that the witch is not merely a metaphor in this work.³

Even though Federici levels considerable disdain at what she sees as feminism’s history of emphasizing the cultural rather than the material, her use of the witch as an organizing figure for her work is necessary precisely because her own work is animated by magical and supernatural claims that wear the mask of historical materialism. When she cites the long history of witch hunts in non-European societies where women were literally enslaved, she suggests that it is more than the gendered body which must be dominated in order for capitalism to assert its power; the spiritual disposition that arises from the body must be subjugated as well. (In fact, she considers this point so obvious that she brutalizes Foucault for pretending that he was the one to “discover” it.)⁴

² Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), 11.

³ Federici, 11.

⁴ Federici, 15.

Whenever the body might be subjugated through the blunt use of power, there is a remainder which must still be brought into line, and this remainder is just what Federici describes as the threatening spiritual disposition of the witch. There is, for instance, the witch's relationship to land as something more than commodity, a relationship that undermines capitalist logics of production and acquisition. This understanding of land as more than commodity is especially meaningful in the context of a witch's relationship to the commons and the connections it illustrates between land and knowledge of the body, the arts of healing, and cooperative community formations.⁵ There is also the witch's conception of the body as malleable and capable of transformation, a view that stands in opposition to the Cartesian and Hobbesian concepts of the body as mechanized and teleologically adapted for the labor and production upon which capitalism depends.⁶ Here we see the dire material and historical consequences of a magical claim: that what we *think* or *imagine* about the body shapes the real world political potentials of that body and the world in which it lives.

Moreover, Federici tells us that feminist analysis itself, the imagination and conceptual vocabulary that feminist theory as a field brings to bear on its objects, is alone sufficient to highlight the teleological errors of capitalism. It exposes these errors, she says, by *rewriting the past*: “woman then, in the context of this volume, signifies not just a hidden history that needs to be made visible; but a particular form of exploitation and

⁵ See also works such as Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English's *Witches, Midwives, & Nurses* (1972). A recent second edition from Feminist Press includes a new chapter addressing the massive influence the figure of the witch continues to exert in 21st-century feminism.

⁶ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 139–44.

therefore a unique perspective from which to reconsider the history of capitalist relations.”⁷ Examining women’s role in the transition to capitalism confirms that “to *reconstruct the history of women* or to look at history from a feminist viewpoint means to *redefine in fundamental ways the accepted historical categories* and to *make visible hidden structures* of domination and exploitation.”⁸ Changing the past by telling the right story, changing the way we’re able to think by saying the right words, turning the invisible visible again... these hallmarks of serious scholarship begin to sound a great deal like magic that has been hiding in plain sight all along.

The dependence of Federici’s work upon acts of magical thinking is, I think, a significant credit to her work, and is the main thing that has drawn me to it. It is, however, by no means unique in our work as scholars. In the conclusion of this work, I explore a significant thread of thinking about gender in magically transformative terms that was developed in mid-century American feminism. So far as I know, second wave feminism is the only period in our recent history of theorizing gender that explicitly acknowledges the dependence of its theoretical and political propositions upon magical thinking. And yet, so many of those propositions upon which academic feminism, queer theory, and trans studies has been built—the importance of consciousness raising, the liminal interactions between materiality and social construction, the importance to the present of developing new narrative accounts of the past—are directly derived from the work of those of us who call ourselves witches. The academic study of gender has by and

⁷ Federici, 13.

⁸ Federici, 13.

large ignored or has at least been reluctant to admit to this origin story, because we labor under a delusion that a concern with spirituality is somehow less serious and rigorous than a concern with material politics.

But this is beyond absurd. Anyone whose body is something other than the cisgendered white heterosexual male body that has long been held up as the universal model for rational humanity knows without having to be told by me that having a body, being embodied, is an experience absolutely fraught with mysticism and magic.

Yet we continue to see this delusion predominating in our field – historically and currently. Camille Paglia, that worthy adversary, writes in “Cults and Cosmic Consciousness” of the radical political movements of the era being split between, broadly speaking, “atheistic Marxism” and a contingent that “mixed politics with occultism—magic and witchcraft.”⁹ The latter, of course, we now narrativize as a kind of unserious, kitschy aspect of 1960s radicalism, in thrall as we are to the discourse that the end result of embracing spiritualism, the attainment of “cosmic consciousness” as Paglia says, is that you lose your political structure. Nonetheless, the role of the magical persists through this dismissive discourse, animating both the “counterreaction of Christian fundamentalism” and Goddess feminism, and even what we might regard as more “puritanical” strains of American feminism such as those represented by Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin.¹⁰ What Paglia’s account points towards but fails to reach is the realization that, precisely because we insist on perpetuating these divisions

⁹ Camille Paglia, “Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960s,” *Arion* 10, no. 3 (2003): 58.

¹⁰ Paglia, 65.

between a serious materialist praxis and unserious accounts of political life that leave room for the spiritual, we are led to stagnated readings of the histories of our own fields, our own political projects, and therefore a failure of imagination about where to turn next. Paglia's article ends disappointingly with the claim that what we need is the "objective truth" (i.e. – the materially reductive truth) offered by science in order to tell us what is best to do morally and politically.¹¹

To put it another way, there is a tension between our desire as theorists of gender to bring subjective experience to bear on the merely factual—the accounts given by history, biology, etc.—and our desire to then turn the insights generated by that subjective experience into a new objective truth that compensates for the failures of past scholars. And, as Clare Hemmings demonstrates in her account of the conflicting histories of academic feminism, *Why Stories Matter*, there is a relationship between that tension and the dialectical accounts we generate of our own histories.¹² In short, the dialectic itself might be a self-defeating strategy if all it can reveal to us is that each new account we make of the world leaves behind some remainder that our theorizing fails to incorporate. But this failure was obvious all along to the witch, who knows that a purely materialist hermeneutic will always make such remainders inevitable.

What I'm trying to get at here isn't just that academia is allergic to seeming unserious by dallying with the non-material dimensions of the political. And it isn't just that there is often an attendant turn towards spiritualism, the supernatural, and magic in

¹¹ Paglia, 109.

¹² Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011).

times of dire global political crises, although that's important too. My claim, built upon the observations of Federici and the way we narrativize the history of our attempts to understand gender, is that the magical and spiritual is the always unavoidable remainder of our theorizing, the thing that is not only always present, but animates our political aspirations and makes them "imaginable" to us in the first place. In the story that I want to tell of our field, magic is ever-present. There's not a single significant movement in the history of biology, sexology, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, queer theory, trans studies, that does not depend upon magic in some way, most often through the inherent belief that there is some transformative power located in the seeming contradictions that reside between the materiality of the demands we must make of the world as marginalized outsiders and the spiritual resonances of our actual lives as we live them.

As I suggested above with the anecdotes that open this section, I don't find the idea that transsexuality is built upon a magical premise to be ridiculous or pitiable in the least. Rather, I think one of the main insights to be gleaned from transsexual experience is that transsexuality and the magical thinking associated therewith serves as a mirror that reflects the hidden magical thinking in literally all of our critical, theoretical, and political projects, especially queer and feminist projects. One reason for this insight is that, at the heart of these projects is a model of the social world and its interconnected material world that is structured around oppositions: models of center and periphery that create hierarchical categories of an "inside" comprised of that which is good and necessary to the continuity of a system and an "outside" that is bad and which threatens that continuity. It is not a new observation to make the poststructuralist claim that people,

animals, and ideas become assigned to either the inside or the outside based upon their instrumental use to the powers that inscribe and reproduce the binary oppositions upon which inside and outside are based. For instance, it might be almost too obvious to point out that capitalism depends upon the binary opposition of “male” and “female” in order to function, and that this opposition structures our ideas about the limits of knowledge, what constitutes a viable method of knowing, the formation of subjects, and even language and the symbolic order itself. The reason such an observation sounds so obvious, however, is that the underlying form of argument is so familiar to us; so much—nearly all?—of our work as feminist, queer, and trans theorists of gender has been to try to accurately describe the aforementioned model and, diagnosis in hand, suggest ways to overcome it.

What I suggest here is that we perform this diagnosis chiefly through an act of magical belief. Namely, a belief that a position on the “outside” of the aforementioned structure enables us, as women, as non-white people, as queers and transsexuals, to attain a perspective that is unavailable to those on the “inside.” This outsider’s perspective, as Federici wrote above in regards to women, is just the thing that qualifies us to perform this act of diagnosis, to claim that the structural model we have created has some purchase in reality. The methods we tend to propose for overcoming this structure most often concern, as we have seen, the creation of “new categories of analysis.” If something can be interrogated, exploded, or deconstructed by way of the outsider’s perspective we bring to bear on the body, on history, on the current arrangement of world politics, then those things can be changed for the better.

Some specific examples of what I'm talking about are in order. Consider what Michael Warner meant when he wrote in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, near the very inception of queer theory as a field, that the value of feminism has always been to foreground gender as “a primary category of the social in a way that makes queer social theory newly imaginable.”¹³ Here, he is reiterating the hidden magical claim upon which feminist theory, queer theory, trans studies, and indeed any academic field with political ambitions depends: that an injection of new analytical insight from “outside” the dominant social order carries with it the potential to create new knowledges that destabilize and reform that social order.

I use Warner as an example because he states the matter so blatantly, but once we know what to look for, this sentiment is literally everywhere across some of our most foundational analyses of gender and race. One major example is Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work *Borderlands / La Frontera* refers to the special insight afforded to those living on the outside as *la facultad*, a “capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.”¹⁴ Writing as a Chicana lesbian, Anzaldúa positions this prescient ability to see what is invisible to others as an emergent property of those who are pushed into the social remainder created by a Eurocentric dependence upon binary thinking. Further, she spatializes the concept of the margin or the remainder as the titular “borderlands,” a liminal place outside the rigid categories of

¹³ Michael Warner, *Fear Of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1993). p. viii.

¹⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters / Aunt Lute, 1987), 13.

the dominant social order wherein one with “mestiza consciousness” develops a “tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity... She learns to juggle cultures... She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned.”¹⁵

More than metaphor, the consciousness afforded by marginalized life on the borderlands is presented in explicitly magical terms, with Anzaldúa linking it to the powers afforded to those in indigenous shamanistic traditions: “Maimed, mad, and *sexually different people* were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures’ magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift.”¹⁶ And the magic of *la facultad* is more than mere parlor trick. It is said to be absolutely crucial for survival, emerging out of a capacity to witness the invisible violence committed against one’s community by binaristic thinking. It also carries the potential to dramatically transform society, offering a “hope that the left hand, that of darkness, of femaleness, or ‘primitiveness,’ can divert the indifferent, right-handed, ‘rational’ suicidal drive that, unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond.”¹⁷ Here again we see the familiar magical patterns of marginalization leading to insight, and insight leading to the imaginative possibility of liberation.

Theresa A. Martinez noted in 2002 that Anzaldúa’s *la facultad* bears a conceptual similarity to the “double-consciousness” that W.E.B. DuBois articulates in *The Souls of*

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, 79.

¹⁶ Anzaldúa, 41. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Anzaldúa, 91.

Black Folks.¹⁸ Double-consciousness is another great example of the magical thinking inherited in our political projects as it is once more explicitly cast in terms of lines, crossings, and a dynamic of inside and outside. “The problem of the Twentieth Century,” as DuBois writes, is “the problem of the color line,”¹⁹ and Black Americans, by virtue of falling on the ‘wrong’ side of this racist categorization, are made into “outcasts” and “strangers.”²⁰ This experience, however, imbues one with a double-consciousness that allows for greater social insight—one can suddenly see beyond the illusions of white society to the core social mechanisms leading to racial oppression, an insight which Du Bois describes as a form of “second sight.”²¹

These magical theorizations of marginalization and liberatory insight appear virtually everywhere in the early canon of Black feminism as well.²² Patricia Hill Collins’ 1986 article, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought” draws on Georg Simmel’s 1921 essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” and its conceptual figure of “the stranger,” to develop a theory of the “outsider within,” the figure who is marginalized for reasons of race, gender, and sexual orientation, who, as a consequence of their positioning on the outside are afforded the ability to “see patterns that may be more difficult for those immersed in the situation to

¹⁸ Theresa A. Martinez, “The Double-Consciousness of Du Bois & the ‘Mestiza Consciousness’ of Anzaldúa,” *Race, Gender & Class* 9, no. 4 (October 31, 2002): 158.

¹⁹ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Penguin, 1995), 41.

²⁰ DuBois, 45.

²¹ Martinez, “The Double-Consciousness of Du Bois & the ‘Mestiza Consciousness’ of Anzaldúa,” 158.

²² For relevant works beyond those cited here, see also Barbara Christian’s *From the Inside Out: Afro-American Women’s Literary Tradition and the State* (University of Minnesota, 1987) and “The Race of Theory” (*Cultural Critique* 6:51-63, 1987), as well as Cathy J. Cohen’s “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3:437-465, 1997.

see.”²³ bell hooks (as noted by Collins) offers a similar analysis of the insight afforded to the Black female subject when she describes growing up in a rural Southern town by saying, “living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out... we understood both.”²⁴ And of course Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider* writes about Black liberation in terms of insides and outsides and the advantage gained by the outsider to imagine and build tools that might “dismantle the master’s house”:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.²⁵

What is at the root of this claim about knowledge that, if it is developed from a place of oppression, it might strike back against the hegemonic? First is the insight that this would-be revolutionary interplay of inside and outside is fundamentally a claim about narrative or story-telling, about being able to describe the world in different words,

²³ Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): 15, doi.org/10.2307/800672.

²⁴ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 7.

²⁵ Audre Lorde, *Zami; Sister Outsider; Undersong* (Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993), 112.

via a different narrative and different vocabulary, and that this act of “telling a better story” is invested somehow with a powerful political import. To return to Warner for just a moment, he characterizes modernity itself as a kind of narrative he calls “repro-narrativity,” or “the notion that our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession.”²⁶ And how is this bad narrative overcome? Literally through telling a better story, through an act of imagination that is then made real, specifically the act of imagining what might lie outside the boundaries of totalizing discourses. “Heteronormativity,” he says, “has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by actively imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world.”²⁷ The word “necessarily” here does some heavy work. Its casual usage obscures the absolute immensity of the magical claims central to the work of academics, philosophers, social theorists, magicians, or simply outsiders who wish to survive: that what is necessary for liberation, for overcoming oppressive totalities, can be imagined into being. As a trans woman I say: sure!

The second thing which lies at the root of this claim about knowledge is a realization that this belief in the capacity of stories and imagination to exert political transformation necessarily entails a belief in the alterity or even malleability of one’s own relation to time and space. Theorizing the social in terms of narrative and imagination, as we seem to do even when we don’t consciously refer to our work as such, necessarily imposes upon us the development of models of temporality and space in which the

²⁶ Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text* 29 (1991): 7.

²⁷ Warner, 8.

operations of disruption, liberation, and overcoming are allowed to play out. Not surprisingly, then, feminist and queer theory seems to have emphasized the development of these models in the decades since its inception. For instance, we might look at the field-shaping antagonisms between different queer attitudes towards the perhaps ultimately facile question of “how one should, as a queer person, think about the future.” On the one hand we have the restrained aspirational prognostications of Jose Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, who describes queerness as a liberating force that is “not yet here,” a “rejection of here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”²⁸ On the other hand, that queer disjunction from the present is itself emphasized by Leo Bersani as “a potentially revolutionary inaptitude... for sociality as it is known,”²⁹ or perhaps something which reveals, as Lee Edelman suggests, any kind of futurity as a “passion play” built on liberal notions of progress.³⁰ On yet another hand—out of necessity, let us imagine into being a third hand—is Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place* which invokes an incendiary cocktail of quotidian experience and punk affect that supposedly “produce[s] alternative temporalities” through acts of imagination rendered possible by the experience of “the humdrum perversities of our existence” that give rise to “logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”³¹

²⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia : The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York : New York University Press, c2009., 2009), 1, find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE004261109.

²⁹ Robert L. Caserio et al., “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819.

³⁰ Caserio et al., 821.

³¹ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (NYU Press, 2005), 2.

What is going on here? Are we so inured to our own ridiculousness that we can read things like the above and somehow think of it as sober, staid, rationalistic discourse? How is one's relationship to futurity something that can even be meaningfully debated if one is actually committed, as one might like to imagine, to purely materialist (and therefore serious) political discourses? How is that something we can even imagine altering in some meaningful way if we are not operating in a register where that which is fixed becomes unfixed and malleable by transformative acts of imagination? Just as when we looked at Federici earlier, the magical thinking upon which any of these projects depends becomes abundantly clear when we go looking for it. And once again, I stress that my pointing out this dependence is not an indictment. Magical thinking produces amazing ideas. The actual position that one occupies with respect to this debate about queer temporality is probably, in some respects, irrelevant. What is important to note is that a significant preoccupation of feminist and queer thinking has been the notion that one's relationship to time and history is something about which new stories can be meaningfully told, something which can be *contested*, something which can be made unfixed.

This set of fixations—the faith that we place in the political power of imagination and story-telling; the belief that imagining new concepts into existence exerts an effect, somehow, on material reality; the malleability of one's relationship to past, present, and future—constitute what I refer to as the magical propositions which animate and are inescapably embedded in all queer and feminist projects.

But it seems worth noting here that the sheer abundance of writing on this topic from non-white writers suggests that the emergence of this widespread magical thinking about the dynamics of inside and outside is something white academia imported from non-white cultures. Certainly, there seems to be a kind of flattening that occurs when something like mestiza consciousness or double-consciousness is used by authors like Warner to address the marginalization of queer life. This is not to say that queer people do not undergo a similar process of marginalization, but rather that we should look more closely at the flavor of our claims to the emergence of an insightful or transformative power as the result of that marginalization. In short, it seems that authors like Anzaldúa or Lorde are more willing to refer to phenomena like *la facultad* via the language of magic or esoteric disciplines. We might then read the shying away from such terminology, the retreat to a rationalist account of a fundamentally magical operation in mainstream white academic theory, as an unwillingness to be associated with supposedly “primitive” (that is to say, “irrational”) non-Western conceptions of religion, magic, transformation, and so on. This disheartening and racializing conflation of the primitive and the irrational is worth keeping in mind as we move forward.

Given the centrality of magical thinking to our projects, I want to question just why we’re so wed to a standard of intelligibility that never quite accords with the mystery of our experience. I suppose I told the above stories about myself because I want to point out how, in order to be a good trans person—the kind of trans person that a cis person knows what to do with—I’m supposed to accede to a standard of intelligibility that I don’t actually feel. I’m supposed to say things that make sense within the liberal, rational,

Western analytic that we believe drives our work in the academy. “Gender is a social construction and my very existence interrogates it,” I’m supposed to declare, as if that says anything at all. “I feel much better now that I have the right hormones that make my brain match my body,” I’m supposed to say, imagining how a set of electrodes attached to my brain might generate some kind of pattern that now matches the pink line on the graph rather than the blue one.

But what about the witch?

I guess what is most shameful, pitiable, and embarrassing about an embrace of magical thinking, what is most *regressive* about it, is that it makes me unintelligible in a field in which the most successful thinkers and writers are said to be those that make the most intelligible and compelling arguments. But what I want to say here is that those arguments always have remainders, some excess that remains after they produce their explanatory accounting of the world. No matter what hermeneutic I subject myself to, something remains—the witch, the role of gnosis, the crucial operations that carry forth between the physical and the mental and the spiritual, perpetually transforming each other—that introduces contradictions and ambiguities into all of our proposed totalizing explanations.

Well, what of it? This work is in part about asking the same questions of our most treasured-up academic and scientific accounts of gender that I should have asked the adults in my life at age five: do I contradict myself? Very well, then. Do I really have to eradicate contradiction and its animating power in the service of intelligibility or, worse, respectability? What might it look like instead to take the remainder, the thing that

troubles our totalizing accounts of experience, and think with it? What might it look like to take the commitments to liminality and the disruption of categories that we're *supposed* to have as good scholars, good queers, good subjects, and, instead of treating them as safe and tepid metaphors, we actually lived out those commitments and made them central to the work we do?

This is the charge, the *geas*, this transsexual witch lays upon you: *think magically*.

The End of Intelligibility, or, Stop Making Sense

I want to be careful here to say that I don't think the magical thinking reflected in transsexuality is in opposition to the material or scientific. It is simply that the experience of being trans, being queer, being a woman, is not reducible to the material or scientific, and I consider it worthwhile to root out the places in our fields where we might have attempted to perform this act of reduction, even if we were not consciously aware of that desire. Later in *Cruising Utopia*, Munoz discusses the difficulty of uncovering certain lived aspects of gay history such as the ephemeral attachments formed during hook-ups in public sex venues during the 1980s. These experiences obviously do not lend themselves to being recorded in textual or film histories, or at least not to any kind of extent that really conveys their complexity and significance. Instead, Munoz writes, once again invoking the supernatural in plain sight, we can only try to access these histories

through various “ghostly traces”³² that they leave behind, traces that are of necessity outside of the realms of the material and tactile. There is a profound relationship between this concept of recovering history through its phantasmal traces and Muñoz’s larger project of exploring the concepts of “hope” and “utopia” as they pertain to queer life. The space reserved in Muñoz’s work for the inevitable frustration and disappointment of one’s hopes is a crucial aspect of this relationship: the function of hope for a queer person lies in its ability to spur us to imagine what is currently impractical, or in other words, what is currently unreal. As we’ve seen before, this imaginative leap is crucial to any kind of queer, feminist, or trans politics—if any kind of policy that was currently practical, if any strategy of intervention that was currently materially existent could actually save us, then we would already be saved, and our troubles would be at an end. Any hope we might have *necessarily* resides within the unreal and within our capacity to magically transmute the unreal into the real. Muñoz’s invocation of ghosts highlights for me the important relationship between what he calls the material and tactile, the materially extant, and scope of what we imagine to be practicable or realistic at the level of the political.³³ This distinction is important for our magical conception of transsexuality because, once again, our magical thinking is not in opposition to the material or scientific—rather we are in opposition to the idea that what is not reducible to the material is unreal, and that what is unreal by these standards can exert no effect upon the world. The ghostly traces of our lives as trans people show this to be false.

³² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 40.

³³ Muñoz, 40–48.

But there is a vitally important recognition to make here. I've discussed above queer, feminist, and trans theory's orientation towards social and political liberation as a form of creating and reproducing narratives about humanity and possibility. And at the core of our fields is the work of uprooting the ideological commitments at place in any given narrative's act of revelation and obscuring—e.g., the binaries upon which a narrative resides, what it chooses to emphasize about us, what it chooses to deny, what it keeps for the “inside” and what it pushes to the “outside,” what it refuses to name at all, and most of all, what it's afraid of. Within the space of the false idea that our magical thinking is opposed to—“that what is not reducible to the material is unreal, and that what is unreal by these standards can exert no effect upon the world”—something powerful is at work. When I consider the historically influential narratives marshaled by those who hold power within the dominant social order such as the supposed reality of binary gender, the inevitability of capitalism, the evolutionarily ingrained teleology of patriarchal power, biopolitical and necropolitical accounts of power, Hobbesian theories of sovereignty and the body, the American veneration of competition and survival that justifies both slavery and colonial imperialism, the history of Western science and its attendant brutalities as the carthorses of capitalism and fascism, all our theories of how history, psychology, trauma, ideology shape us as subjects, all of the ways in which we inscribe political and social boundaries around what we define as the possibilities of human life, there seems to be one commonality in all of them. This thing upon which our world in modernity seems to depend is an absolute commitment to the fundamental

rational intelligibility of the world and of life, the belief that the whole of life can be apprehended, catalogued, known, and instrumentalized.

What I'm talking about here is something akin to what various writers within the Frankfurt School call "instrumental reason,"³⁴ the concept they use to link the historical Western notions of enlightenment and a rational subject to the rise of fascism. Drawing upon Max Weber,³⁵ Horkheimer writes that Western rationality is an attempt to render the world fundamentally intelligible, to overcome the inherent unpredictability of life that is analogously tied to the natural world (something that has strong resonances for our figure of the witch as well), as opposed to the rational, knowable world.³⁶ Within this ideological regime, emotion and desire are tied to the natural world and its fearful unpredictability, while reason is projected as the means by which one might become a subject distinct from that nature, and thus immune to its unknowable terrors. Later, writing with Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer casts instrumental reason as "the rationality of domination,"³⁷ an interpretation that is likewise taken up by Herbert Marcuse, who writes in 1941 that:

Reason has found its resting place in the system of standardized control, production, and consumption [...]. Rationality here calls for unconditional compliance and coordination, and consequently, the truth values related to this rationality imply the subordination of thought to pre-given external standards [e.g. – the demands of capitalist

³⁴ Or alternately, "technical rationality," "technological rationality," or "instrumental rationality," depending upon translation.

³⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (1936; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1375–76.

³⁶ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947; repr., New York: Continuum, 2004), 85.

³⁷ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

productivity]. The point is that today the apparatus to which the individual is to adjust and adapt himself is so rational that individual protest and liberation appear not only as hopeless but as utterly irrational. The system of life created by modern industry is one of the highest expediency, convenience, and efficiency. Reason, once defined in these terms, becomes equivalent to an activity which perpetuates the world. Rational behavior becomes identical with a matter-of-factness which teaches reasonable submissiveness and thus guarantees getting along in the prevailing order.³⁸

This “call for unconditional compliance” and “subordination of thought” is what I find so recognizable in the dominant narratives of life that I mentioned above: an absolute devaluation of types of thinking that are not seen as oriented towards the purpose of mastery and the ultimate intelligibility of a life separated from nature, or, as the authors of the Frankfurt School might phrase it, any type of thinking that lies outside of instrumental reason. Devaluing these ways of thinking, then, is just one step removed from devaluing the people who hold to those ways of thinking; in time, Horkheimer argues, those people come to be viewed not as subjects but as objects that need to be leveraged for their instrumental value in the project of overcoming the troubling contradictions of a life in which humanity is a part of nature.³⁹ Capitalism and Nazism are their prime examples of the ultimate political ends of instrumental reason: systems in which subjects have been turned into objects that are instrumentalized in the service of one dominating ideological impulse.

³⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941; repr., New York: Humanities Press, 1983), 421–23.

³⁹ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 83.

Adorno and Horkheimer use this concept of instrumental reason as the basis for their theory of the culture industry, or the examination of how cultural productions inevitably serve capitalistic ends, because the systems of instrumentalization are so socially ingrained and so efficient at performing their work. In doing so, I think they miss out on something more fundamental. If the narratives of our dominant social order, the functioning logics of our governing disciplines of science, psychology, political possibility, economics, and so forth—in short, the stories told by those on the “inside”—are so absolutely insistent upon preserving the idea of an ultimately intelligible world, a world unchallenged by the contradictions embodied by the witch and by trans life, that they literally transmute subjects into objects, then it must be said that what is necessarily left out of the accounting of life under this commitment to intelligibility is... life itself, for life remains fundamentally unintelligible.

It seems fruitful to try to understand the operations that structure power—what we call the inside and the outside, the center and the periphery, the power that drives out the witch and makes necessary her return—through their unshakable commitments to the totalizing rational intelligibility of the world, and this commitment’s subtle influence over every social and material aspect of our lives. Going forward, I refer to this commitment to intelligibility and its attendant structuring power as *logopower*, which I describe as the concatenation of forces ideological, cultural, and material which...

- ...compel commitment to Western ideals of a fully intelligible world, composed only of that which is reducible to a purely rationalistic and material account of what is real and unreal. Adherence to this intelligibility is enforced as a basic prerequisite to possess subjectivity or humanity. In other words, that which jettisons appeals to magical

thinking and the “ghostly traces” of queer life as irrational, and therefore not in accordance with desirable conceptions of the subject or the human.

- ...produce via materially and culturally legitimated fields of knowledge the most dominant and influential narratives by which we make sense of our subjectivity, humanity, and life itself. Here, I include not just the Known Enemies of capitalism, imperialism, racism, and so forth, but also the blunt and un-nuanced usage of critical systems which have historically been important to feminist, queer, and trans theorizing, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and so forth.

- ... possess the capacity to, as if by an act of evil magic, use marginalization to impose a diminished type of subjectivity upon those it wishes, turning those subjects who elide or refuse the commitment of rational intelligibility into *objects* (both in the sense of objects of study and as figures (seemingly) drained of social agency) through the use of force, physical or otherwise.

The reason I take the time to develop logopower as a specific term and analytic is that doing so operates as a subtle restatement of my earlier claim that the grounds of our fight as theorists of oppression and liberation are always already invested with a spiritual, magic, and supernatural dimension, even when our pretenses suggest otherwise.

Likewise, the totalizing discourses that I’m placing under the umbrella of logopower are not entirely predicated on the purely materialist and rationalist positions they appear to champion, but are instead driven by a kind of fear of the “outside” they themselves created—a fear which compels the absolute negation of contradiction and ambiguity upon which magical thinking, and therefore the life of the outsider, depends.

I gestured above, in my brief treatment of queer theorization of futurity, to why magical thinking and its willingness to mine the contradictory and unintelligible might be

politically valuable. It is worth looking further, now that we are equipped with an analytic of logopower, at how the unintelligible propositions of magical thinking are already a source of considerable import in our field. In doing so, we can begin to see more clearly the constrictions of totalizing theories based on a commitment to intelligibility and, most importantly, how we might be performing these constricting operations on ourselves, both in how we construct our relationship to other scholarship in terms of addressing a lack, and of slowly accreting a totalizing theory of our own.

To take Halberstam for instance, if one looks at his writings on the slipperiness of what is called history and what is called memory, I think he seems more adept than many at seeing the value of magical thinking that animates feminist and queer theory by prodding at “ruptures and contradictions” in totalizing discourse, here brought to bear on the essentially trans capacity to rewrite the past:

Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls a ‘ritual of power’; it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other ‘memorializations.’ In this book, forgetting becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality [again, the supernatural] than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure rather than transcription.⁴⁰

Halberstam’s real insight in these writings is the magical realization that trans lives (and by extension, trans studies) offer an opportunity to rethink the directionality of queer temporalities and narratives of liberation. Our lives, situated in and so dependent

⁴⁰ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

upon the reclamation of narrative, point to the way in which queered dispositions towards space, time, and all the social categories emerging from totalizing discourses necessitate not just an imaginary of the future, but a rewriting of the past. Working on the levels of both biography and history, these acts of rewriting willfully create, out of absolute necessity, present conditions from which liberated futures might grow. Where he seems to fall short, however, is the recognition that these insights mark and long for a return to a reputedly old-fashioned way of thinking: the occult spiritualities we now obscure in our own work and associate only with the outmoded second wave of American feminism. It's perhaps easy to understand the many reasons why. Even as Halberstam acknowledges that a certain commitment to "illegibility may in fact be one way of escaping the political manipulation to which all university fields and disciplines are subject,"⁴¹ his professional position is contingent upon maintaining a certain veneer of academic or professional "seriousness" to which any kind of spirituality, much less one rooted in witchcraft and magic, seems antithetical.

This backing off at the essential moment of truth, of approaching the edge of embracing magical thinking and then stepping back and saying "just kidding!" illustrates the very thing which has motivated me to write this work: the absolute necessity to the lives of trans people of developing a magical way of discussing gender that proclaims rather than obscures the magical thinking we bring to bear in our political projects. Magic as I use the term organizes a host of useful figures that already occupy an utterly central, if obscured, place in the history of American thinking about gender: the witch who can

⁴¹ Halberstam, 10.

transform bodies and whose seduction is a peril to social order; the monstrosity who threatens to undo everything through its distressing claims to humanity, the ghostly spirit that can possess flesh and structures that are not its own. These figures and others, while they might seem to occupy the fringe of academic discourse, have actually always been essential to the discussion of transsexuality and the theorizing of gender on the whole. I refer here to a number of places, which I elaborate in more detail below, where we can see these figures bursting out of ruptures and contradictions and demanding their place in our discourse, such as the centrality of the Gothic to women's literature and to the development of feminist criticism as a methodology, the role of monstrosity in historical discourses of the body and its reclamation at the inception of trans studies by Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker (and even by Donna Haraway), Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the witch's flight and its relationship to how one "becomes a woman," and so on.

What I want to develop then, is a strategy of reading and theorizing which draws out and foregrounds these ruptures and emergences of the magical in our discourse, instead of obscuring them. This "magical reading" is, in part, reading "against logopower," but it is not exclusively that, because magic (like me) swiftly gets bored with the fixity of its objects. It is also, therefore, a way of reading that resists totalizing conclusions and which strives to retain the animating forces of contradiction and ambiguity by keeping to the liminal spaces, the remainder left behind by the material analysis, by an investment in an untimeliness that looks forward and backwards in time simultaneously, allowing one to rewrite the other. This unorthodox handling of the

remainder and its historical situation is made possible precisely because of what I have been alluding to all along: magic is not the binary other of the material. Magic's only opposite is binary itself.

The Gothic, the Abject, the Monstrous

What we have determined so far is that magical thinking, the kind on which I argue transsexuality depends, is much more common in our political projects than we might be inclined to admit. Having come to the realization that academic political theory seems to genuinely believe that being pushed into an outcast or marginalized position gives one both an altered relationship to space and time, as well as some kind of power to alter reality through force of imagination, what happens if we actually begin to take that idea seriously? This question, in many ways, was the originating seed of this work, and the one which I hope to continue to flesh out. Being who I am, the best way I know of to do that is by taking hold of this mystical calculus of inside, outside, time, and space, and the magical operations of crossing over the boundaries between, thereby making trans people the focal point of my efforts.

I say that and yet, after glancing at the table of contents and getting a sense of the actual works of American literature I'll be looking at in later chapters, one might fairly point out a lack of transsexual authors. Indeed, the works that I've chosen to examine here are those which trace a long American history of casting gender variance in terms of monstrosity and abjection, of using the trans person as a locus of dire fears and anxieties

about the slippery categories of gender. In other words, the kinds of works about trans people that would fall under the heading of “bad representation.” Why did I choose these works rather than looking at more recent examples of literature actually written by trans people? Besides being something of a masochist, I made this choice because I think a more interesting view of transsexuality’s intersection with the magical thinking that animates our academic projects can be obtained through analyzing us as we exist in the imaginary, our shadow selves that dominate the furtive and fearful imagination of the American public. It is, after all, this monolithic trans imaginary that results in our continual casting into the position of outsiders whereby, as we have said, we gain the emergent powers that make us such good witches in the first place.

My thinking behind this choice is also significantly indebted to Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, in which she asks questions about racial dynamics in American society by looking not at actual Black lives and culture, but at “the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served.”⁴² Her reading of American literature questions whether many of the “major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact

⁴² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 6.

responses to dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence.”⁴³ In other words, she examines race in America through a methodology that undermines its originating assumptions, highlighting how American writing does not respond to but rather *creates* race as an oppositional terror against which whiteness defines itself:

Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows.⁴⁴

The fabricated shadow of Blackness which American literature conjures up relies, as Morrison notes, on an affect of intertwined fear and desire, one in which the Gothic, the abject, and the monstrous are employed as a code for projecting white fears and anxieties over the dissolution of racial and biological boundaries onto a literature that “provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom.”⁴⁵ It should be clear how Morrison’s tools for understanding the work of fear and desire in representations of difference relates to the study of gender variance in American literature. It is crucial not to treat Morrison’s method as possessing a 1:1 relevance that can be directly imported from the analytic of

⁴³ Morrison, 6.

⁴⁴ Morrison, 6.

⁴⁵ Morrison, 7.

race to the analytic of transsexuality, especially in the sense that the conclusions her methods offer her about race cannot be directly imported. Nonetheless, the method *itself* I think provides a useful model for how we might successfully think about the way fear and desire operate in American literature, and also how the projection of an other outside the default social order works in tandem with this.

Foregrounding fear and monstrosity was also a choice predicated on the sheer abundance of material available for analysis. Virtually anywhere that trans people appear in American literature, we appear in some kind of language borne out of horror. We appear as monsters, freakish aberrations, figures of supernatural power looking to deform and mutilate the stable sanctity of cisgendered life. I included here not only fiction, but also theoretical writings on gender and gender variance in a variety of professional and academic fields. Consider for a moment the sheer preponderance of works that turn to the monstrous in order to explore gender as a concept. We have Hélène Cixous's Medusa, Julia Kristeva's emphasis on horror and abjection, Mary Daly's hag, Donna Haraway's monsters, Sylvia Federici's witch-centric accounts of the relationship between capitalism and gender, Sylvia Wynter's demons, Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English's work on the relationship between witches, gender, and the history of medicine, Janice Raymond and Susan Stryker's fraught battle for the iconography of Frankenstein's monster, Valerie Solanas' imagery of scum and mutants and her calls for blood, the pagan sensibilities and Dionysian invocations of Gertrude Stein, H.D., Djuna Barnes, and Radclyffe Hall, the ghostly women in Truman Capote's windows, the commitment to mysticism, magic, and

horror in Flannery O'Connor, Shirley Jackson, Ursula LeGuin, Octavia Butler, Carmen Maria Machado, and so on.

In order to more fully articulate the relationship between transsexuality in American culture and the language and concepts of horror, I want to briefly explore three key concepts that have historically been used (often unwittingly) to trace similar associations: the Gothic, the abject, and the monstrous.

There are two ways in which the Gothic influences the emergence of gender (and gender variance) as a category of analysis. The first is the appearance of Gothic sensibilities and motifs in the (supposedly) scientific writing of late 19th-century sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing. I'll simply gloss this association for now because I later go into a more detailed analysis of Krafft-Ebing's use of the Gothic in his foundational tome of sexology, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Suffice to say, from the very beginning of medical science's treatment of trans people, we have been rendered in terms of the monstrous and the supernatural, our bodies rendering us biological aberrations at the same time as we are said to possess almost mystical abilities to confuse and prey upon the normal populace. In no uncertain terms, our gender variance is attributed to dabbling with sorcery, consorting with fortune tellers, summoning demons, and "hereditary taints."⁴⁶ I'll also demonstrate how these same magical sensibilities—especially the notion that gender crossings are of a necessity some kind of magical transgression that places us in a category over and beyond the "unnatural" descriptor that our biology would

⁴⁶ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, "Selections from Psychopathia Sexualis With Special Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 26.

afford us—continue to show up throughout 20th-century psychological and biological accounts of trans subjects, such as Harold Garfinkel’s account of the famous “Agnes.”⁴⁷

The other major strain in which we can trace a relationship between Gothic and the emergence of gender as a category of analysis belongs to the 20th century, where the Gothic is central to the emergence of feminist literary criticism as a codified academic field (and by extension, to our construction of the historical category of “women’s literature” writ large). One of the first major works to treat with this was Ellen Moers’ *Literary Women: The Great Writers*, in which she organizes a number of women writers who use horror to write about gendered experiences such as birth (Mary Shelley) and the inescapable boundaries of a domestic existence (Emily Brontë) under the rubric of the “Female Gothic.”⁴⁸ She establishes the female gothic as a literature that employs the generic tropes of the Gothic (“...fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural”⁴⁹) in order to exert a physiological effect on the reader, to “get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermic, and circulatory system.”⁵⁰ The purpose of this bodily access through literature was, for Moers, to more astutely render the visceral bodily aspects of women’s experiences that were marginalized from daily discourse. When second-wave feminists began to enter the academy and codify feminist literary and social analysis, the field was inextricably shaped by this notion of the Female Gothic and its attendant motifs of the abjected female

⁴⁷ Harold Garfinkel, “Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an ‘Intersexed’ Person,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 58–93.

⁴⁸ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 90.

⁴⁹ Moers, 90.

⁵⁰ Moers, 90.

body; its traces can be found in such foundational works as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*,⁵¹ Juliann Fleenor's *The Female Gothic*,⁵² and Eugenia DeLamotte's *Perils of the Night*.⁵³

It seems clear to me that these early concatenations of the Gothic and gendered and sexual difference would remain massively influential to the literary and cultural portrayal of trans people throughout the 20th century. I don't wish to assign an originating role to the Gothic, however. The Gothic, as a genre, might have supplied a supernaturally inflected language by which sexologists and literary critics alike could talk about transsexuality, but it was only successful in doing this because *the fear was already there*. When Krafft-Ebing or Gilbert and Gubar see witchcraft at work in the lives of trans individuals, they are employing the Gothic to talk about real and actual fears that are already apparent in Western culture: legitimate, paralyzing, widely felt fears of femininity, gender variance, and the malleable edges of the social categories on which society depends.

Julie Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* picks up on the seeming universality of this fear of transgression and boundary-crossing, giving us the term "abjection," which would come to be crucially important to both the representation and analysis of gender variance. For Kristeva, the abject is "what does not respect borders, positions, rules," and that

⁵¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁵² Juliann Fleenor, *The Female Gothic* (New York: Eden Press, 1983).

⁵³ Eugenia C. DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

which “disturbs identity, system, order.”⁵⁴ Already, its relationship to our understanding of the way queer/feminist authors use language and invoke history becomes clear. Kristeva even describes the abject in terms that highlight its function under logopower; it has the power to “expel” the “I” from one’s experience of life, to de-subjectify one through contact with it.⁵⁵ Barbara Creed describes this de-subjectifying power as “separating out the human from the non-human and the fully-constituted subject from the partially formed subject.”⁵⁶ The abject is something which must be placed on the other side of some imaginary divide or boundary, and unless we do so, we have no ability to construct ourselves coherently (and by this I mean, to be constructed as subjects under logopower).

Yet, the abject always calls out to us; there is an attractiveness to its undifferentiated character, even as we are repulsed by it. In another way of speaking, one might say that logopower demands the pushing away of the abject, that it defines the “abjection response” as a way of ensuring one’s intelligibility and therefore one’s subjectivity. Kristeva also makes clear the role of abjection in art and its fearful representations of boundary crossings: the writer’s “only sustenance,” she says, “lies in the beauty of a gesture that, here on the page, compels language to come nearest to the human enigma, to the place where it kills, thinks, and experiences *jouissance* all at the

⁵⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

⁵⁵ Kristeva, 3–4.

⁵⁶ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 68.

same time... Black mysticism of transcendental collapse.”⁵⁷ Later, she goes even further: “all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so – double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.”⁵⁸

Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* more explicitly links the abject to the analysis of gender and gender variance through her realization that historically, stories of sexual difference are stories about monstrosity.⁵⁹ She cites Freud’s employment of motifs such as fear, mutilation, castration, and even the supernatural to articulate the status of women and homosexuals within the psychoanalytic regime, arguing that his abjected response to women resonated so strongly with a patriarchal culture that it emerges throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in monstrous representations of women: the witch and her threat to conventional sexuality via her sexual congress with demons, the succubus who seduces even stalwart Christian men, and so on.⁶⁰ The abject’s relationship to gender is further developed by Judith Butler who writes in *Bodies That Matter* that just as heterosexuality is enshrined as an identity partially by its rejection of the abject figure of the homosexual and homosexual practices,⁶¹ transgender people find ourselves in a double-bind whereby the formation of any kind of stable group/social/collective identity

⁵⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 206.

⁵⁸ Kristeva, 217.

⁵⁹ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*.

⁶⁰ Creed.

⁶¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 103.

depends on an identification with the abject, an identification we are pushed to shun by literally every facet of culture.

I want to slow down for a moment to focus on some of the earliest debates about trans inclusion in feminist theory and practice, because I think it's worth highlighting the role that abjection (and its relationship to monstrosity as later elaborated by Creed) plays in these debates, and because it will provide an opportunity to work out how these concepts and terms operate differently at different nodes of the field of gender. Chiefly, how the monstrous works differently when talking about the feminist concerns of cis women and when talking about transsexuals. Fortunately, some of the most notable figures who deal with this question during the second wave of American feminism in the 1970s perform a compelling synthesis of the analytics they inherit from the foregoing literature of the medicalized trans body in sources like Krafft-Ebing *as well as* the notion of the Female Gothic. These writers employ revulsion and abjection as first principles, offering a deep view of the concatenation of transness and the Gothic, the conflation of the natural with the moral and the subsequent relegation of trans people to the twin realms of the unnatural and the immoral. This last part is especially notable, as it marks a significant mainstream instantiation of what I will call the slippage of the transsexual into a register outside of the natural/unnatural binary: I call this home of the transsexual the

“super/natural” because of its inextricable pairing of biological aberration with the emergence of magical and mystical qualities.⁶²

Where else can an honest witch begin but with Mary Daly? Her 1978

Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism is a smorgasbord of abuses of the type that, as a trans woman, I’ve been taught to hate, but which I, as a trans woman, secretly love. One of the first canonical texts of the second wave to deal directly with trans people, *Gyn/Ecology* is deeply interpenetrated with magical thinking about the body, sexual difference, and political possibility. The structure of the work as a whole is designed to elucidate “croneology,” an intermingling of consciousness raising, cultural hermeneutics, and praxis designed to put a stop to the most dire effects of patriarchy, here fashioned as “Goddess murder,” and transform women into our true forms: “Revolt Hags.”

To say that I love the tone and timbre of this hag-centric treatment of gender is an understatement. And yet of course I must deal with the ways in which it hates me (perhaps me specifically). Daly’s stance on transsexuals is less one of the careful elucidation of one’s place within the fabric of the social, as in the case of Garfinkel, but is animated by even more imagination. The “majority of transsexuals,” she writes...

⁶² It is worth noting here that this genealogy of the body, with its emphasis on Mary Daly and Janice Raymond, is *not* meant to suggest an overriding interpretation of second wave feminism as wholly antagonistic to trans people. In fact, much second-wave literature is devoted to exactly the opposite thesis: the second wave’s most fundamental understandings of gender are made possible at all by the coordinated force of trans and ritual magic.

...are 'male to female,' while transsexed females [by which she means "trans men"] basically function as tokens, and are used by the rulers of the transsexual empire to hide the real nature of the game. In transsexualism, males put on 'female' bodies (which are in fact pseudofemale). In a real sense they are separated from their original mothers by the rituals of the counseling process, which usually result in 'discovering' that the mother of the transsexual-to-be is at fault for his 'gender identity crisis.'⁶³

In just one paragraph, we have the fantasy of body-snatching in which trans women are imagined to be either alien invaders or some kind of magical shape-shifters, whose nefarious act is made possible specifically through the "rituals" of psychology and medicine. These rituals are said to hold such power that not only do they grant us our untold power to destroy women, but they also, "*in a real sense*" ("real," she writes!), separate us from our mothers by placing the blame for our deviancy on her.

The conspiracy runs deeper yet. It is not merely psychology and medicine that imbue us with our unholy power, but a sinister alliance with the transgender god/dess Dionysus his/her self. The "seductive preachers of androgyny," as Daly calls us faithful priestesses, concern ourselves with "the seduction of women—including feminists—into confusion by Dionysian boundary violation."⁶⁴ By boundary violations, she seems to be responding, at least in part, to the feminist adoption of Derridean post-structuralist methodologies by which femininity and masculinity are revealed as a false binary, culturally constructed codes of behavior that might be adopted, jettisoned, performed, and

⁶³ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 67–68.

⁶⁴ Daly, 68.

eschewed as one needs and desires. The post-structural approach to femininity is, she writes, quite literally “M-A-Dness,” a form of insanity predicated on “Male Approval Desire.”⁶⁵ When confronted with the rigid, vicious, and brutal face of Apollonian masculinity, women are likewise driven into madness, but there it is a strategically productive madness, borne out of the need to acquire the approval of Daddy Apollo “in order not to be raped, maimed, starved to death, imprisoned, murdered.”⁶⁶ This “clearheaded M-A-Dness” is contrasted with the M-A-Dness cast upon us like a dark spell by the androgynous, effeminate, gender non-conforming Dionysus⁶⁷, which “kills women softly” through preaching the false doctrine that womanhood is in any sense a performed, rather than essentially biological, status.⁶⁸ Although the boundary-crossing genderqueer priestesses of Dionysus might appear to represent “a relief from the stern masculinity of Apollo,” we are in fact the greater threat because our “ultimately deceptive glorification of femininity, convinc[es] women that it is desirable for men and also desired by them, lur[es] females into forgetting the falseness of femininity, blind[s] us to the fact that *femininity is quintessentially a male attribute.*”⁶⁹

It is notable, I think, that transsexuals are so powerful that we can, just by touching the concept of femininity, even through the act of wearing it *as a mask*, force the entire concept to be absolutely jettisoned and re-instantiated in the category of the

⁶⁵ Daly, 69.

⁶⁶ Daly, 69.

⁶⁷ Hungarian philologist Károly Kerényi, Daly tells us, has revealed the sinister boundary crossing power of Dionysus through classical inscriptions of the god/dess as “*pseudanor*, ‘the man without true virility’ [...], *gynnis*, ‘the womanish’, or *arsenothelys*, ‘the man-womanly.’” (From Kerényi’s *The Gods of the Greeks*, p. 273; quoted in Daly.)

⁶⁸ Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 69.

⁶⁹ Daly, 69.

male, completely divorcing “the feminine” from its role in the constitution of “woman” as either subject or analytical category.

Even so, the dire consequences of our liaison with “the demonic power of Dionysian deception” continue: the “final solution” for women, at which all gender variance is aimed, is the “violation of our own Hag-ocratic boundaries,” leaving women in a state ready to be “incorporated into the Mystical Body of Maledom, that is, to become ‘living’ dead women, forever pumping our own blood into the Heavenly Head, giving head to the Holy Host, losing our heads.”⁷⁰ All of this made possible by, I stress once again, the mere *suggestion* that boundary crossing within the realm of sex and gender might be possible. Abjection creates powerful enemies indeed.

There’s one last element of Daly’s mythology worth mentioning: her work might be, as far as I can tell, the origin of the long-standing association between the trans body and Frankenstein’s monster. Early in *Gyn/Ecology*, she delivers a reading of *Frankenstein* in which Victor’s efforts are predicated on an inversion of Freudian motivators: he is so distraught that he does not have the biological capacity to be a mother, that he constructs life in the only way that a man knows how, which is to say utterly mediated by death: a child born from the dismembered flesh of corpses. Assigning second wave intentions to Mary Shelley herself, Daly writes that the author “unmasks the mentality of the technological ‘parent’,” the medical and psychological architects of

⁷⁰ Daly, 67.

transgender bodies through the practice of “phallocratic technology.”⁷¹ It’s probably worth reading through this vast web of associations in its entirety:

Transsexualism is an example of male surgical siring which invades the female world with substitutes. Malemothered genetic engineering is an attempt to “create” without women. The projected manufacture by men of artificial wombs, of cyborgs which will be part flesh, part robot, of clones – all are manifestations of phallocratic boundary violation. So also the behaviorism of B.F. Skinner and “physical control of the mind” through the use of implanted electrodes by such scientists as Delgado, are variations of monstrous male “motherhood”. Having implanted electrodes in the brain of his “child” (brainchild), the Master Mother has it firmly tied to his electronic apron strings. The list can be extended to include other Master Mothers, such as physicians and surgeons (especially in gynecology/obstetrics and in neurosurgery), psychiatrists, therapists, and counselors of all kinds. The pseudocreative power of boundary violation (the Dionysian specialty) is clearly an invasion of women's bodies/spirits and of all our own kind: earth, air, fire, water. This is real violation/invasion and requires that Hags make our Selves impermeable to the invaders' violations and exorcise the effects of their presence.⁷²

I think it would be easy to grapple with this text on the basis of facticity. Daly is manifestly “wrong” in myriad ways: statistically incorrect about the distribution of trans women to trans men in the population, woefully understudied on what psychoanalysis would have said about the mother’s role in the diagnosis of “gender identity disorder” even in 1978, and in need of a long conversation with transgender transphobe Camille Paglia on the matter of Dionysus. But it is senseless to concern myself with facticity—the

⁷¹ Daly, 70–71.

⁷² Daly, 71.

matter of what is “merely true.” Rather, here and elsewhere, I want to read these writers as story-tellers, as creators who, in the course of communicating to us their sense of what the world and life is like, tell us things about the fears and desires that animate our social life. And what Mary Daly’s rampant imagination tells me about a conception of the transsexual that was widely circulating and influential during the heyday of second wave American feminism is, I think, really striking.

The transsexual here clearly inspires a kind of revulsion or abjection that seemingly cannot be grappled with, at least by Mary Daly and the mass of feminists drawn to her work over the decades, without staging our bodies as inherently possessing a severe existential threat to the existence of cisgender women. Just as with the sexologists I discussed earlier, the transsexual body is deeply imprinted with a moral quality, but in this case, we are seen as not merely morally wrong, but in fact an instantiation of such moral depravity that the depths of our embodied evil can only be explained through a strange narrative admixture of dark magic, conspiracies to leverage the medical apparatus to create an army of Frankensteinian trans women, ancient pacts with the god/dess Dionysus to destroy women body, mind, and spirit, and an apparent well-hidden long-term support of transsexuals by the Christian church itself to bolster the “transsexual world” of its own creator mythology.⁷³ Interesting to me as well is that our threat seems so vast as to require a complete revaluation of language in order to contest our power; as with our poisoning of the concept of femininity, Daly seems to believe that if we have touched a word, that word is now so soiled that it must be replaced by a new

⁷³ Daly, 229.

word that more truly embodies the telos of the Revolting Hag (hence her rampant neologisms: Hag-ography, Goddess Murder, M-A-Dness, and so forth).⁷⁴

An admission: although I (clearly) enjoy this work for its excesses, I'm more than a little sad that Daly's fear of the boundary-crossings made possible by the Dionysian forces her, perhaps, into certain conservative positions vis a vis gender. Her investment in having "women" as an available category of analysis, crucial though she might have thought it to the establishment of a real and politically efficacious feminism, should not have required the definition of that category to be so rigidly fixed, and yet she seems to need it to be just that way in order to tell her story of us transsexuals and our bodies. There are many of her contemporaries that she might have looked to, especially queer women and women of color, who were even at that moment doing the most enduring and politically powerful feminist work by disrupting the idea of "unity" within the concept of woman and replacing it with "difference."⁷⁵ But as productive as difference might be, it seems to be intolerable when it shows up in a trans body. And so, Daly perishes on the rock of Scylla rather than following me and my witches into the swirling and generative waters of Charybdis.

Moving on to a work written under the tutelage of Daly, Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (1979) often serves as a kind of

⁷⁴ See also Daly's later work, *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, a long-form dictionary of new words and re-definitions of existing words intended to liberate language, and as such, praxis, from the influence of patriarchy and gender deviance.

⁷⁵ Especially poignant here is Audre Lorde's "Open Letter to Mary Daly" from *Sister Outsider*, in which she tries to bring Daly back into the fold of inclusive feminism by asking her to "remember what is dark and ancient and divine within yourself" and asserting that "as outsiders, we need each other for support and connection and all the other necessities of living on the borders" (69-70).

scapegoat for the entire gestalt of transphobic second-wave feminism. It's easy to see why. Raymond casts the very existence of trans people in terms of rape by saying things like "all transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating the body for themselves. However, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist violates women's sexuality and spirit, as well. Rape, although usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception."^{76 77}

There are some interesting notions here about what meanings might be projected onto the trans body. For Raymond, the body becomes a very busy space indeed; it must become a container capable of holding her own projections, concepts of performance, and also essential qualities of "realness" (which mostly seem to be biological, except when they aren't). What is interesting is that literally all of these things can be read through the body itself – not just its shape or form, but its movements and behaviors, provided that one has a shrewd enough hermeneutical eye. While "the male-to-constructed female transsexual exhibits the attempt to possess women in a bodily sense while acting out the images into which men have molded women, the male-to-constructed-female who claims to be a lesbian feminist attempts to possess women at a deeper level, this time under the guise of challenging rather than conforming to the role and behavior of stereotyped

⁷⁶ Janice Raymond, "Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist," in *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1979), 103–4.

⁷⁷ The "deception" she refers to here is simply our pretense that we, as transsexual women, might also be feminists. It does, however, bring to mind another resonance, which is the deception of the medical apparatus that is such a common part of the trans experience – a practical necessity for many or most trans people in order to render ourselves intelligible to the system in a way that grants us the care we need or desire. For more on this and the questions raised by it, see Dean Spade's "Mutilating Gender." [Dean Spade, "Mutilating Gender," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 315–32.]

femininity.”⁷⁸ A classic double bind: trans women who evince femme behaviors or sartorial choices are seen as reinforcing a harmful and essentially patriarchal gender binary, whereas trans women who are less femme are enacting the old Dionysian conspiracy to attack women “at a deeper level” through a kind of subterfuge.

None of this, however, is fooling Raymond, who says in no uncertain terms that you can just tell by looking at us that we suck, and that we are able to convincingly act out the role of the lesbian feminist “precisely because [we are] free of many of the residues of self-hatred⁷⁹, self-deprecation⁸⁰, and self-contradiction⁸¹ that attend the history of women who are born with female bodies—all of which is communicated both subtly and not so subtly in gestures, body language, and the like.”⁸²

Suffice to say, I think Raymond falters in mostly the same ways as Daly. Her investment in the literal mythologizing of trans duplicity as Dionysian conspiracy compels a similar commitment to the stability of boundaries that seems fundamentally incompatible with the interests of feminism. “The Dionysian transsexually-constructed-lesbian-feminist would have us believe,” she writes, “that all boundaries are oppressive. Yet if feminists cannot agree on the boundaries of what constitutes femaleness, then what can we hope to agree on?”⁸³

Indeed, what?

⁷⁸ Raymond, “Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist,” 99.

⁷⁹ Really?

⁸⁰ No, wait, REALLY?

⁸¹ OK, this one tracks, at least for me personally.

⁸² Raymond, “Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist,” 102–3.

⁸³ Raymond, 109.

For my money, the strongest statement by far on the productive potentialities of the discourse of monstrosity as a gendered analytic taken up by Daly and Raymond is Susan Stryker's 1994 essay, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Valley of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." Responding to Daly and Raymond's depiction of the trans body as a Frankenstein's monster, Stryker writes that:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.⁸⁴

Having so bluntly stated this identification, Stryker goes on to detail the ways in which monstrosity is visited upon the heads of the trans community. Firstly, by the community itself in their taking up of the rhetoric of Daly and friends. Citing a number of letters published in feminist newsletters of the time, invectives that "if said of other minorities, would see print only in the most hate-riddled white supremacist, Christian fascist rags"⁸⁵, Stryker uses the words of transphobes to paint a grim picture of what it means to champion the "natural." I quote her here at length because this passage is justly famous in trans circles:

⁸⁴ Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 238.

⁸⁵ Stryker, 238–39.

To quote extensively from one letter to the editor of a popular San Francisco gay/lesbian periodical:

“I consider transsexualism to be a fraud, and the participants in it . . . perverted. The transsexual [claims] he/she needs to change his/her body in order to be his/her ‘true self.’ Because this ‘true self’ requires another physical form in which to manifest itself, it must therefore war with nature. One cannot change one’s gender. What occurs is a cleverly manipulated exterior: what has been done is mutation. What exists beneath the deformed surface is the same person who was there prior to the deformity. People who break or deform their bodies [act] out the sick farce of a deluded, patriarchal approach to nature, alienated from true being. Referring by name to one particular person, self-identified as a transsexual lesbian, whom she had heard speak in a public forum at the San Francisco Women’s Building, the letter-writer went on to say: When an estrogenated man with breasts loves a woman, that is not lesbianism, that is mutilated perversion. [This individual] is not a threat to the lesbian community, he is an outrage to us. He is not a lesbian, he is a mutant man, a self-made freak, a deformity, an insult. He deserves a slap in the face. After that, he deserves to have his body and mind made well again.”

When such beings as these tell me I war with nature, I find no more reason to mourn my opposition to them-or to the order they claim to represent than Frankenstein’s monster felt in its enmity to the human race. I do not fall from the grace of their company - I roar gleefully away from it like a Harley-straddling, dildo-packing leatherdyke from hell.⁸⁶

Secondly, Stryker details the aforementioned work by Mary Daly and Janice Raymond to link the transsexual with monstrosity, this time noting the “commonplace of literary criticism” that Frankenstein’s monster is horrendous to Frankenstein precisely because he resembles him so much, quoting Shelley directly to show us Victor addressing the

⁸⁶ Stryker, 239.

monster as “my own vampire, my own spirit set loose from the grave.”⁸⁷ “Might I suggest,” Stryker asks coyly, “that Daly, Raymond and others of their ilk similarly construct the transsexual as their own particular golem?”⁸⁸

Now this is a dialectic I respect: so strong is Daly and Raymond’s conviction that trans people are in cahoots with the medical apparatus⁸⁹ that Stryker’s identification of them here with the mad doctor himself allows her to perform a kind of reverse pathologizing: in their desperation to remain attached to the stability of the referent “woman,” imagining that we need that term to be stable in order to do the work of feminism, Daly and Raymond fall prey to a kind of pernicious paranoia and create exactly the monster that has now returned to destroy them.

Stryker has re-imagined the monstrous as a space in which she can lay claim to a “dark power... without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself.”⁹⁰ She strives to actualize this fantasy by fully embracing the term “monster” in the same way that other minority populations have reclaimed other insults, and casts the negative affect that might be generated by being called a creature or a monster in terms of the ideology of mastery and intelligibility (i.e., in terms of logopower):

The affront you humans take at being called a ‘creature’ results from the threat the term poses to your status as ‘lords of creation,’ beings elevated above mere material existence. As in the case of being called ‘it,’ being called a ‘creature’ suggests the lack or loss of a superior

⁸⁷ Stryker, 238.

⁸⁸ Stryker, 238.

⁸⁹ They’ve clearly never tried to actually *get* a prescription for hormone replacement therapy.

⁹⁰ Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” 240.

personhood. I find no shame, however, in acknowledging my egalitarian relationship with non-human material Being; everything emerges from the same matrix of possibilities.⁹¹

I take Stryker at her word here not only because I strongly feel this sentiment resonating with how I conceive of myself and my own embodiment and the pleasures I take at fearful, trembling (mis)representations of my power, but also because she grounds the possibility of empowering monstrosity in the concept of emergence. Later in the article, she recounts the fraught relationship trans people have to surgical interventions, acknowledging that complicity with the medical apparatus which so profoundly misunderstands us often feels dirty, while also resisting the notion that medical alteration of the trans body necessarily entails a “cultural politics that are aligned with a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the natural heterosexual order,” as is claimed by Daly and Raymond.⁹²

How is this possible? Precisely because, through the process of altering the body surgically, through the event that unites the malleability of the material with the realms of imagination, desire, perversity, crossing, monstrosity, and so on, something more is always created than what the surgeon intends to produce. As Stryker writes, “the very success of Mary Shelley’s scientist in his self-appointed task thus paradoxically proves its futility: rather than demonstrate Frankenstein’s power over materiality, the newly enlivened body of the creature attests to its maker’s failure to attain the mastery he

⁹¹ Stryker, 240.

⁹² Stryker, 242.

sought. Frankenstein cannot control the mind and feelings of the monster he makes. It exceeds and refutes his purposes.”⁹³

Yes, but this is more than *ressentiment*. It is more than a squirreling away of one’s private desires in the confines of one’s mind until one uses the medical apparatus for what value it might have to offer us, and then afterwards revealing our “true selves,” as the popular reception of the Agnes story might suggest. It is not a keeping safe of something that will survive the surgery, but rather that what “exceeds and refutes” the purposes of the doctor is that something *new* which immanently emerges out of the conditions of the trans body. Again I quote at length:

My own experience as a transsexual parallels the monster’s in this regard. The consciousness shaped by the transsexual really is no more the creation of the science that refigures its flesh than the monster’s mind is the creation of Frankenstein. The agenda that produced hormonal and surgical sex reassignment techniques is no less pretentious, and no more noble, than Frankenstein’s. Heroic doctors still endeavor to triumph over nature. The scientific discourse that produced sex reassignment techniques is inseparable from the pursuit of immortality through the perfection of the body, the fantasy of total mastery through the transcendence of an absolute limit, and the hubristic desire to create life itself. Its genealogy emerges from a metaphysical quest older than modern science, and its cultural politics are aligned with a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the naturalized heterosexual order. None of this, however, precludes medically constructed transsexual bodies from being viable sites of subjectivity. Nor does it guarantee the compliance of subjects thus embodied with the agenda that resulted in a transsexual means of embodiment. As we rise up from the operating tables of our rebirth, we transsexuals

⁹³ Stryker, 242.

are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be.⁹⁴

What are the consequences of taking this “something more” seriously, as I do?

One consequence I think is that my strategy of thinking trans-centrally is utterly vindicated. If we begin to think of the non-transsexual body as not possessing gender in some natural biological way, then we can no longer think of trans bodies as a “bad copy” thereof. We can’t be bad copies, because *there is no original*.

Additionally, I think Stryker’s concept of the emergently monstrous trans body has interesting implications for both a historical accounting of how we think of materiality and naturalness vis a vis discourses like enlightenment and scientific rationalism, as well as the role of language in the self-definition of the body. In the first case, Stryker does the work of exploding the trans relationship to the natural/unnatural binary by pointing out that the very act of undergoing surgical effects intended to artificially “satisfy the visual and morphological criteria that generate naturalness as their effect”⁹⁵ evinces the unstable tensions between the natural and unnatural, meaning that “transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship to a Nature in which it must nevertheless exist.”⁹⁶ In Stryker’s “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” she discusses the way that trans people can call into question “what cultural critic Frederic Jameson called a ‘mirror theory of knowledge,’ in which representation consists of the reproduction for

⁹⁴ Stryker, 242.

⁹⁵ Stryker, 242.

⁹⁶ Stryker, 242–43.

subjectivity of an objectivity assumed to lay outside it.”⁹⁷ In other words, the dominant theory of knowledge in the West, which has its roots in “the rise of scientific materialism in societies of Western European origin since the end of the fifteenth century,” holds that there is a material world of absolute reality which is reflected in a “mirror of representation.”⁹⁸ This emphasis on “matter” as the root of knowledge and “the fundamental source of meaning” plays into the idea that a real, material sex is “represented socially by a gender role, and subjectively as a gender identity.”⁹⁹ Where trans people are able to stage our intervention is by “call[ing] into question both the stability of the material referent ‘sex’ and the relationship of that unstable category to the linguistic, social, and psychical categories of ‘gender’”¹⁰⁰. Both the “wholeness of the body and ‘sameness’ of its sex are themselves revealed to be socially constructed.”¹⁰¹

The staging of this intervention in the grounds of the monstrous opens up further possibilities. In Mary Shelley’s novel, language is of preeminent importance. The monstrous is that which exceeds what we have language and categories capable of containing... but then the monster itself learns to speak. And so too are trans people now speaking for ourselves. Speaking (and especially, writing) for ourselves, I think, is what it means to most productively embody Sandy Stone’s concept of the body as a text of a genre—it is not enough to be a text, but one must be a text that frustrates the writing of

⁹⁷ Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

⁹⁸ Stryker, 9.

⁹⁹ Stryker, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Stryker, 9.

¹⁰¹ Stryker, 9.

itself by outside forces, a text wherein words appear mysteriously where blank space held before, the product of no discernible marker, a text that leaks and smears its ink belligerently all over those next to which it is shelved. To quote from Stryker once more:

Phallogocentric language, not its particular speaker, is the scalpel that defines our flesh. I defy that Law in my refusal to abide by its original decree of my gender. Though I cannot escape its power, I can move through its medium. Perhaps if I move furiously enough, I can deform it in my passing to leave a trace of my rage. I can embrace it with a vengeance to rename myself, declare my transsexuality, and gain access to the means of my legible re-inscription. Though I may not hold the stylus myself, I can move beneath it for my own deep self-sustaining pleasures.¹⁰²

Indeed, we must understand the monstrous as referring not just to features of bodies, or to affects of dysphoria, but as an instantiation that overturns the insider/outsider paradigm on which our political projects falter; it is a condition whereby, if we really do gain the ability to speak words of power and to see clearly like a prophet, then we must use those words to powerful effect. Monster, after all, as Stryker points out, is “derived from the Latin noun *monstrum*, “divine portent,” itself formed on the root of the verb *monere*, “to warn.” [...] Monsters, like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. [We] served to announce impending revelation, saying, in effect, ‘Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening.’”¹⁰³

That thing of profound importance, I think, is at once Stryker’s exposure of the natural/unnatural binary as insufficient for describing transsexuality as well as her

¹⁰² Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” 250.

¹⁰³ Stryker, 240.

invocation of the now-familiar pattern of magical thinking that I described at length above, the hope that something about the transsexual subject position might enable us to embrace an “enlivening power of darkness” that could lead to liberatory social change:

To encounter the transsexual body, to apprehend a transgendered consciousness articulating itself, is to risk a revelation of the constructedness of the natural order... We do have something else to say, if you will but listen to the monsters: the possibility of meaningful agency and action exists, even within fields of domination that bring about the universal cultural rape of all flesh. Be forewarned, however, that taking up this task will remake you in the process. By speaking as a monster in my personal voice, by using the dark, watery images of Romanticism and lapsing occasionally into its brooding cadences and grandiose postures, I employ the same literary techniques Mary Shelley used to elicit sympathy for her scientist’s creation. Like that creature, I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face, and redefine a life worth living. I have asked the Miltonic questions Shelley poses in the epigraph of her novel: ‘Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me man? Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?’ With one voice, her monster and I answer “no” without debasing ourselves, for we have done the hard work of constituting ourselves on our own terms, against the natural order. Though we forego the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which nature itself spills forth. If this is your path as it is mine, let me offer whatever solace you may find in this monstrous benediction: May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world.¹⁰⁴

When I read this passage, I can’t help but think of Nell in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, who describes her relationship to the outside world as being a

¹⁰⁴ Stryker, 254.

“small creature swallowed whole by a monster” with the world as “the monster [who] feels my tiny little movements inside.”¹⁰⁵ The quote has always represented for me the power of the remainder, the excess on the margins that comes back to trouble the center. Stryker’s work here makes it feel more personal to me; it’s gratifying to imagine the transsexuals of the world as small creatures troubling the digestive tracts of the masters of logopower. Of course, I’m not so naïve as to think that we represent a threat to social order along any of the existing liberal models of resistance. For instance, the notion that our existence might compel a more inclusive rethinking of the models of biology. Such thinking is not a threat to logopower at all; it simply claims something like “your current understanding of biology is wrong because you forgot to account for me; you forgot to carry the one in your calculations.” I cannot see this as being of use of queer politics in the long term. Forgetting to carry the one is an error that logopower can survive, because it can be redressed without changing the fundamental structures of power (see also: the push for legislative rights within the homonormative model of queer liberation). In that case, the phantasm of an intelligible totality of the world upon which logopower depends can persist, as will all the forms of oppression licensed by it. The threat leveled by transsexuals must instead be magically disruptive in its elemental pointedness; it must *refuse* to be accounted for in any calculus that demands closure, finitude, non-contradiction.

¹⁰⁵ Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1950; repr., New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 41.

The Three Pillars of the Trans/Super/Natural Method

In order to achieve these ends, it seems necessary to move beyond the existing frameworks for analyzing American literature's fear and trembling towards the transsexual subject. Each of the primary methods of accounting for affects of fear and disgust seems lacking for my purposes in some crucial way.

The Gothic doesn't work for me as a framework because it is ultimately too dependent upon its historical binary opposition to rationality. As a genre, and as a matter of its form, it re-instantiates rationality as the desired release from the dizzying experience of the supernatural and the irrational. It never finds a home in its own darkness and as much it ultimately serves the stultifying operations of logopower.

The abject is similarly lacking because, while it brings into play the concept of boundary crossings that are crucial for an analysis of the American fear of transsexuality, it is too wedded to the psychoanalytic as a framework. Works on the abject feel to me as if they stage the conflict of fear and its effects on culture entirely within the realm of the abstract, the social, the psychological. Even when the abject response is motivated by an encounter with the body or bodies, the response itself is localized in psychoanalytic processes that are fundamentally an abstraction from the inescapable embodiment of the transsexual. In other words, the abject encounter with the transsexual may exert material consequences in the form of violence or oppressive policymaking, but the abject ultimately narrativizes this encounter in terms of escape and dissociation. Finding ways to escape the sludge of abjection is fine for those inside the circle, but the actual

experience of transsexuality is not so easily washed off. Once we accept ourselves for who we are, identifying with the abject form rather than pushing it away, the abject has little left to say to us.

And as fertile as monstrosity has been as an analytic for feminist and queer writing on gender and gender variance, it faces something of the opposite problem of the abject. It becomes too mired in and attached to the body in a way that obscures the emergence of supernatural possibilities. If we really do believe, as I have shown we do, that relegation to the margins results in the emergence of a supernatural status, then the monster's adherence to the natural / unnatural binary is a form of rationalization that inhibits taking this supernatural emergence as seriously as I suggest we should. I do think Stryker has begun to write back against the reductive rationalization of the powers of the margin somewhat, especially as she suggests that trans monsters might adopt a role as "heralds of the future" and when she talks about the unanticipated emergences that happen beneath the surgeon's scalpel, but she is more or less alone in this respect.

The closest any commonplace analytic of American fear comes to serving my purposes is Flannery O'Connor's writing on the grotesque. In her essay, "On Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," she writes in terms that are now familiar to us, claiming that the writer of grotesque works makes "alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man would never experience in his life."¹⁰⁶ If other writers reserve the outsider status and its prophetic

¹⁰⁶ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 40.

powers for people who are commonly understood to be marginalized figures, O'Connor seems to suggest that all good writers suffer a similar fate; to write, she seems to suggest, is to be cast into some outer realm, whereupon one inherits a responsibility to accurately describe what might be seen in that outer realm, inaccessible to most of us. "All novelists," she says, "are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality...if the writer believes our life is and will remain essentially mysterious... then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself."¹⁰⁷ Through this entanglement of real life and mystery, O'Connor articulates a kind of "realism of the mysterious," which is a striking reiteration of our tendency towards magical thinking in a way that connects it directly to the act of writing and literary production. The art of fiction is successful only insofar as it is *magical*, working to cross distances between points "in the concrete" and other points "not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by [the writer] firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees."¹⁰⁸ Successful fiction, then, is a literal manifestation of a "prophetic vision" that allows "seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up."¹⁰⁹

This analytic of the grotesque is dear to me, not least of all because O'Connor herself goes on to intuitively apply it to the examination of transsexuality in her short story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," which I explore at length in a later chapter. What

¹⁰⁷ O'Connor, 40–41.

¹⁰⁸ O'Connor, 42.

¹⁰⁹ O'Connor, 44.

prevents me from adopting her framing of the grotesque directly for my own explorations of gender variance in American literature, however, is its positioning within a specifically Western and Christian conception of magic, transcendence, and grace. While O'Connor has the honesty and decency to understand American Christianity as a real and traumatic communion with horrifying spirits, her own commitments to Catholicism perhaps obscure the multiplicity of ghosts which I would like to invite to haunt my own research.

My own term of art then, as I alluded to earlier, is the super/natural. I employ this term in order to enfold but also expand upon several of the important meanings that emerged from our analysis of the Gothic, the abject, the monstrous, and the grotesque. Specifically, I feel that the super/natural captures the transsexual's evasion of the default categories of the scientific analysis of bodies and gender, the natural and the unnatural, by taking seriously the way we are always, from the earliest sexological analyses of biology and gender to second-wave treatises on the limits of our sociality with women and countless fictional accounts through which our shadowy phantasm ruptures, imbued with a dire spiritual significance that emerges from our fearful biology. There is no material account of transsexual otherness which does not betray this kind of magical thinking, the notion that we not only pervert biological boundaries, but spiritual and moral ones as well. The super/natural then captures both the sense in which our naturalness moves above the more common natural/unnatural binary, as well as the magical, irrational, transformative, ghostly, terrifying powers with which we are perpetually inscribed.

To these ends, I call the framework through which I'll be reading American fiction over the course of this project the "trans/super/natural" method of reading. In brief, the trans/super/natural method can be described as relying on three basic principles, which are as follows:

The Art of Misreading, or, The Law of Anti-Identity

The first pillar of the trans/super/natural method is what I call *the law of anti-identity*, which means reading transsexuals in American literature (both characters and creators) not as prescribed by an act of self-identification, but rather through tracking new relationships among being, becoming, and the magical thinking of the margins. It is also a means of allowing me to maintain that I "only read transsexual authors," even as I read Joyce, et al. Although it might seem strange to draw upon cis European philosophers as one of the bedrocks of my trans/super/natural method, the work of Deleuze and Guattari is immensely generative for me due to their magical thinking vis a vis the concepts of being, becoming, and emergence.

I am not the first to anticipate the importance of Deleuze and Guattari to thinking about trans existence. T. Benjamin Singer observes a similar importance, drawing upon the Deleuzian "rhizome" as a model for more productively imagining the complications

of gender beyond models of “gender complexity” offered by the medical apparatus.¹¹⁰ He discusses the role of aesthetic judgments of gender configurations (i.e., how hot and intelligible a particular trans person is) in relation to the quality of care given to them, and argues that the rhizome offers a way of understanding that “transgender sublimity [an experience of the sublime instead of the abject upon encountering a trans body] likewise can be said to encompass all manner of becomings, in the sense that being overwhelmed and even transformed by it does not follow simply from calculating the possible combinations of potential bodies and genders in the world,” as suggested by the “‘arborescent’ schema that map phenomena into tree-like logical structures” currently favored by the medical community.¹¹¹ Rather, that sublimity “arises from a dimension that evades quantitative operations.”¹¹²

Thinking about the relationships among marginalization, becoming, emergence, and the super/natural led me to one of Deleuze’s earliest solo works, his treatise *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. There, in a discussion of Nietzsche’s eternal return, he articulates an understanding of being and becoming that resonates strongly with transsexuality. Attempting to complicate the concept of the eternal return to mean more than a cyclical repetition of the same linear thread of time, Deleuze questions the relationship of the present moment to the notion of the past and future, and uses this to address the relationship between being and becoming. “The present moment,” he writes,

¹¹⁰ T. Benjamin Singer, “From the Medical Gaze to Sublime Mutations: The Ethics of (Re)Viewing Non-Normative Body Images,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 601–20.

¹¹¹ Singer, 602.

¹¹² Singer, 602.

“is not a moment of being or of present ‘in the strict sense,’ that it is the passing moment, forces us to think of becoming, but to think of it precisely as what could not have started, and cannot finish, becoming.”¹¹³ This refiguring of the present and past as dynamic rather than static and fixed illuminates a fundamental yet common misunderstanding of the eternal return as a “return of the same”:

It is not being that returns but rather the return itself that constitutes being insofar as it is affirmed of becoming and of that which passes. It is not some one thing which returns but rather returning itself is the one thing which is affirmed of diversity or multiplicity. In other words, identity in the eternal return does not describe the nature of that which returns but, on the contrary, the fact of returning for that which differs.¹¹⁴

To put it another way, the concept of eternal return necessitates relationships among the present, the past, and the future in which the present is always in a state of flux, with the state of flux itself creating the very meaning of the not-at-all static and fixed moment of the present. In other words, it collapses being and becoming into the same instance; there *is no* being that is not perpetually embroiled in a becoming by which it defines itself.

Deleuze describes this collapse of being and becoming as a “synthesis of time and its dimensions, a synthesis of diversity and its reproduction, a synthesis of becoming and the being which is affirmed in becoming,”¹¹⁵ but I’m wary of that term. Synthesis reads to me as a process that leads back to some kind of unity, wherein even a perpetually becoming unity might be left prone to the calcifications of nuance and multiplicity that

¹¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962; repr., New York: Continuum, 1986), 48.

¹¹⁴ Deleuze, 48.

¹¹⁵ Deleuze, 50.

occur under logopower. Donna Haraway issues a similar warning in her essay, “Situated Knowledges,” in which she argues for a less “innocent” conception of the “strategies for seeing from the standpoint of the subjugated,” which resists returning to a “totalization in the ideologies of objectivity.”¹¹⁶ “The split and contradictory self,” she writes, “is the one who can... construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings... the knowing self is *partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly and therefore able to join with another.*”¹¹⁷

Bearing this caveat in mind, however, Deleuze’s troubling of the relationship between being and becoming speaks to an essentially transsexual state of existence, wherein one is perpetually relating to a given gendered subject position through an identification with it (“I am a woman,”) as well as a desirous affect towards it (“I want to be a woman”). Learning how to occupy this seemingly contradictory position is crucial to the trans/super/natural method of reading for two reasons. Firstly, this interplay of being and becoming allows us to read in a way that takes seriously the supernatural emergences our magical thinking ascribes to the marginalized. Secondly, it provides a justification for seeking out correspondences (between the near and the far, the real and the imaginary, the transsexual and her phantasmal shadow, and so on) that contradictorily emphasize relation and difference simultaneously, and of naming these correspondences transsexual.

¹¹⁶ Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Assn Books, 1996), 192.

¹¹⁷ Haraway, 193. Emphasis mine.

Emergence and the Magic of the Witch's Flight

The second pillar of the trans/super/natural method of reading is to take seriously the concept of *emergence* as it pertains to our magical thinking about marginalization. No retreats into rationalization, no use of metaphor; I intend to proceed through the 20th century of American literature with the foregrounded assumption that we really do believe in the magical transformations we invest in our culture's outsiders. This is also to say that I'm doing a tremendous favor to the American consciousness that is terrified of me and my sisters; I am taking their fear seriously, and doing my best to integrate the shadow self they've held up before me, in an effort to see what it can say about the actual existential grounds of my life as an American transsexual.

I want to again draw upon Deleuze and Guattari for what they have to say about the concept of immanence and its relationship to emergence. Their work in *What is Philosophy?* draws distinctions between philosophy and science that help to explain such a relationship. One of the realms of contest in my work, clearly, is between science and other methods of knowing; the way that Deleuze and Guattari articulate a difference between being and becoming, and allow space for multiplicity and contradiction within the latter, enables me to say just what the grounds of this contest are. Certainly, science is not to be jettisoned altogether, and it plays an important role in trans lives and the constitution of our bodies. I may be a depraved Dionysian witch, but I still inject myself with hormones every week as a part of my becoming of concomitant importance with my regular full moon rituals. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari establish science

as dealing with the realm of those things which are already constituted—objects that have already been frozen or concretized at a particular moment in space and time within “the plane of reference.”¹¹⁸

Philosophy, by contrast, concerns the “plane of immanence,” an analysis of constitutive forces themselves, in a state of flux prior to their temporally- and spatially-bound concretization in the plane of reference / the domain of science.¹¹⁹ Rather than the state of an object of analysis in its fixed being, philosophy for Deleuze and Guattari concerns concepts in their “becomings,” the perpetually flowing state which encompasses the whole of the rhizomatic connections a concept is capable of forming.¹²⁰ The magic or super/natural in my work (and perhaps more broadly, all the marginalized remainders with which our theories are concerned) clearly belongs to the realm of “becomings” rather than “beings” (via recognizing their unity of difference), and through treating with the transsexual as a state of perpetual transformation and becoming, I am able to float comfortably with multiplicities and contradictions (including the contradiction between being and becoming [desire?] itself). I would not be able to say the same if I were concerned with fixity and the articulation of transsexuality as an unchanging object. Again, I’m not the first trans scholar to anticipate the importance of immanence to the study of trans life—Lucas Cassidy Crawford, for instance, has written on this topic¹²¹—but so far as I know, I am the first to incorporate it into a methodology of reading that is

¹¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (1991; repr., Columbia University Press, 1994), 118.

¹¹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, 35.

¹²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, 27.

¹²¹ Lucas Cassidy Crawford, “Transgender Without Organs?: Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3–4 (2008): 127–43.

turned not only on transsexuality but on the constellation of cultural objects that emerge from it and inform it.

As I mentioned a moment ago, a huge part of the draw of Deleuze and Guattari for me is their incorporation of magic and its implication as a productive and generative social force (regardless of its “facticity”). It is neither an accident nor an overreach that I associate magic and the super/natural with their conception of philosophy. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they describe in some level of detail a number of “becomings” that they discern as possessing politically transformative and anti-fascist importance. Among these is “becoming-woman,” obviously a concept deeply resonant for a trans woman, which they describe as both essentially minoritarian in its interests:

There is no becoming-majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian. Women, regardless of their numbers, are a minority, definable as a state or subset; but they create only by making possible a becoming over which they do not have ownership, into which they themselves must enter; this is a becoming-woman affecting all of humankind, men and women both.¹²²

And yet, unsurprisingly to anyone who has read this far, there is an emergent power here in the space of this becoming, the power of “sorcery,” which spreads by the contagion of sorority and animality and monstrosity and animates the community forming and political action of minoritarian groups such as those that concern me:

There is an entire politics of becomings-animal, as well as a politics of sorcery, which is elaborated in assemblages that

¹²² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 106.

are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State. Instead, they express minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions, groups all the more secret for being extrinsic, in other words, anomic. If becoming-animal takes the form of a Temptation, and of monsters aroused in the imagination by the demon, it is because it is accompanied, as its origin as in its undertaking, by a rupture with the central institutions that have established themselves or seek to become established.¹²³

Sorcery is, naturally, also intimately tied into the minoritarian transformation of becoming-woman, of which we are told, and asked: “becoming-woman, more than any other becoming, possesses a special introductory power; it is not so much that women are witches, but that sorcery proceeds by way of this becoming-woman. [...] Toward what void does the witch’s broom lead? And where is Moby-Dick leading Ahab so silently?”¹²⁴

The trans/super/natural method, then, must take seriously this sorcery and struggle to identify the concepts that appear emergently out of the contested and contradictory rendering of the transsexual in American literature.

Écriture Transsexuelle and the Will to Power

The third pillar of the trans/super/natural method is *écriture transsexuelle*, which refers not merely to the literature produced by transsexual authors, but to a bolder claim

¹²³ Deleuze and Guattari, 247.

¹²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, 248.

about the relationships among writing, being/becoming, and the will to power, which I describe below.

Obviously, *écriture transexuelle* takes its name from Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*, or her notion that women, having been excluded from writing as a practice by the long machinations of patriarchy, must now write ourselves into existence. In doing so, we must create a more expansive literary vocabulary for representing and addressing the specific concerns of women. For Cixous, creating this vocabulary means in part that one must write with an emphasis on one's status as an embodied subject, distinct from what she describes as the clinical, detached, body-less prose associated with masculinity and its cultural pretense towards objectivity.¹²⁵ As with virtually any 20th-century analysis of gender, we can see in Cixous' writing the same inclination towards magical thinking about outsiders and their emergent powers that we have seen elsewhere. She declares openly that women make for better writers than men precisely because our marginalized subject position means that we are capable of finer and more prescient insights than men; this power is gained because of our status as ghosts occupying a world we have "secretly haunted since early childhood."¹²⁶ "Women's imaginary," she writes, "is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: [our] stream of phantasms is incredible"¹²⁷ because we

¹²⁵ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *The Essential Feminist Reader* (1975; repr., New York: Modern Library, 2007), 319.

¹²⁶ Cixous, 320.

¹²⁷ Cixous, 319.

write from the vantage of the “without,” “from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond ‘culture.’”¹²⁸

Most striking is the sense in which she projects a deeply relevant liberatory power onto the act of women’s writing, granting it the ability to “write and thus to *forge for herself the antilogos weapon*, to become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process.”¹²⁹ Assigning this disruptive power to marginalized figures bears similarity of course to the magical thinking we’ve been discussing all along, but the innovation of Cixous is to center this capacity in writing, to put forward, like O’Connor, an image of writing itself exerting a magical effect upon the rationalistic organization of society, both within the symbolic and political realms. She even theorizes this act in a way that uniquely meshes with the aforementioned transsexual collapse of being and becoming, noting that while women’s writing “can never be theorized, enclosed, coded,” this “doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist.”¹³⁰

In response to Cixous’ work here, I have to put forth the question, what is transsexual writing? What would a writing look like that encapsulated not merely a “return to the body” as Cixous theorizes, but a return to a schizoid body that is rendered at once material and super/natural? I imagine here a writing that somehow exists in a register that is at once materially grounded in the shape and manifestation of the body, but which also wholly believes in the reshaping of that body not merely through chemical, but also alchemical, mystical, and imaginary means; which considers these

¹²⁸ Cixous, 321.

¹²⁹ Cixous, 322.

¹³⁰ Cixous, 324.

latter transformations not just a consolation, but a vital necessity to the experience of transsexuality. Necessary because of the capacity of the super/natural to exert real effects in the real world; in other words, a writing that belligerently attempts to make reality in its own discordant, contradictory, perpetually-becoming image, in opposition to the polished rationalist rhetoric of logopower.

For Deleuze and Guattari, such flights into realms not so readily accessible to rational discourse are simply what thinking—and, I might argue, fiction—is:

Thinking provokes general indifference. It is a dangerous exercise nevertheless. Indeed, it is only when the dangers become obvious that indifference ceases, but they often remain hidden and barely perceptible inherent in the enterprise. Precisely because the plane of immanence is prephilosophical and does not immediately take effect with concepts, it implies a sort of groping experimentation and its layout resorts to measures that are not very respectable, rational, or reasonable. These measures belong to the order of dreams, of pathological processes, esoteric experiences, drunkenness, and excess. We head for the horizon, on the plane of immanence, and we return with bloodshot eyes, yet they are the eyes of the mind. Even Descartes had his dream. To think is always to follow the witch's flight.¹³¹

Thus, I yield the writing of myself to a realm of emergence and contradiction because I unironically believe in both the super/natural essence of transsexual ontology and the objects of my desire. I am neither facetious about the life-potentials generated by magical thinking and reading practices, nor distanced from the implications of what I discuss in this work; the marks of both of these are imprinted upon my body and spirit on a daily basis. When I discuss, for instance, trans life as embodying a contradiction

¹³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 41.

between what one already is and what one desires to be, I model desire in the Deleuzian and perhaps Nietzschean senses of the phrase. Trans desire does not express a lack, it is not a dissociated longing for an unreachable *jouissance*, it is not a reductive manifestation of class struggle, nor an effort to instantiate the repressed desires of the ego, bodily or otherwise. Rather, it is a desire which, in the model of the desiring-production of the Anti-Oedipus, and in the mode of the will-to-power, *creates* reality itself; in a Real sense, *I am* my desire, and my desire is the real itself in the process of its becoming real. Beyond the acquisition of rights, access, legal protections, the cultivation of social tolerance, arguing with TERFs on the internet, and donating to my surgery fund, accepting the reality-constituting function of desire is, at least in large part, what I think it takes to treat trans people seriously. As with the practice of magic, one is either ready to invite monsters and the end of intelligibility into one's life, or one isn't.

To summarize, then, these are the three pillars of the method:

BEING IS BECOMING, or, I only read trans books and I read everything.

MAGIC IS REAL.

*DESIRE IS REALITY.*¹³²

By these three pillars, I propose to read widely across the most recent century of American literature, developing a set of witch's tools by turning the trans/super/natural method on three loosely organized sets of works representative of three of the most

¹³² It is pretty funny to me that these three pillars of the method coincidentally stand in direct opposition to the three Aristotelian laws of logic, in the sense that the Law of Identity ($A=A$) is contradicted by my analysis of transsexual being and becoming, the Law of Non-Contradiction ($\neg[A \text{ and } \neg A]$) by my assertion that contradiction is one of the potential grounds for emergent knowledges, and the Law of the Excluded Middle ($A \text{ or } \neg A$) by my refiguration of identitarian transsexuality as the will to power.

widely theorized forces by which gender is argued to be constituted: the body, history and socialization, and the gendering gaze.

My first chapter, “Inside the Shell, All the Wallpaper is Yellow: Supernatural Desires and the Body in Trans(ed) Literature,” interrogates the notion that gender is rooted in purely material and biological features of the body. I explore the treatment of the body in queer American fiction about haunting, beginning with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” (1899), and moving through Flannery O’Connor’s “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” (1954), and James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), works that re-theorize the relationship between the material and the immaterial, between our bodies and the conceptual frameworks that seek to define them. Through the protagonists’ queer desires to be haunted, these works unsettle reductive pathologies of sexism and racism, and substitute an embodiment characterized by collectivity, dynamism, and the disruption of stable categories. Reading narratives of embodiment through the framing of a desire to be haunted enables us to see the body not merely as a material form, but as a haunted materiality embroiled in a process of becoming that asserts and makes possible a perpetual remaking of its own social context.

In my second chapter, “Loved by Something Strange: Trans Modernism, Kinship, and the Fate of Repulsive Women,” I rethink socialization and kinship as forces that impart a fixed gendered status. To do this, I turn to the modernist literature of American women and genderqueer authors writing in the Paris literary salons of Natalie Barney and Gertrude Stein. My objects here are some of the most significant queer and trans writing of the early 20th century: Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* and Ernest Hemingway’s *The*

Garden of Eden. Through these works, I reveal a portrait of queer feminist kinship, animated by a supernatural commitment to spiritualism, paganism, and magic, that works not to reinforce essentialist binary gender norms but to enable profound transitions across just such categorical boundaries. In doing so, I write against the historiographies of figures like Shari Benstock and argue that the formation of a history of American women's literature has always been a trans history.

In my third chapter, "The Beast Who Shouted 'I'd Fuck Me' at the Heart of the World: Fear, Trembling, and the Transsexual Gaze," I reckon with the gaze's creation of gender through acts of mutual recognition, a concept of particular importance to transgender people. Expanding on Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze and scopophilia, I examine gender-variant character in American horror cinema through Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018). For transgender women, the prevailing narrative of our bodies in horror cinema has been one of incurable perversity and monstrosity. But by reading these films against a deep body of trans scholarship on the empowerment of identities characterized by monstrosity and abjection, I resist casting American horror cinema's representation of trans embodiment as either monolithically heteronormative or as queerly redemptive. I instead understand American horror cinema as entering a nuanced, ongoing conversation about the emergent possibilities of the bodily Otherness produced by a gendering gaze.

Finally, my conclusion, "Witchcraft, Second Wave Feminism, and the False Histories of the Days to Come," explores the figure of the witch in the writings of second wave feminists, showing how her history of persecution was vitally important to the

social, political, and aesthetic foundation of modern American feminism and, consequently, American understandings of trans femininity. In the hands of authors like Mary Daly, Janice Raymond, and Starhawk, the witch troubles the material facticity of history and unexpectedly unites imagined narratives of women's power with contemporary cultural criticism that situates women's history in Marxist and psychoanalytic terms. Thus, I argue that American feminism writ large, as well as the literary and cultural vocabulary that makes possible our analysis of gender, has always been rooted in acts of mythmaking and magical thinking as vital political strategies.

What such a method of reading allows us to do is to find where we have always thought magically without realizing it, to find the places where magic and the supernatural have animated us and kept us going in spite of queer, feminine, and trans oppression under logopower. To this end, this work is devoted to the magical reading of queer and trans American literature. I make very little distinction here between fiction and non-fiction/theory, and I read both in largely the same way: as attempts to articulate, albeit through very different means, stories of lives on the outside of logopower, what those lives see, and what those lives need in order to persist.

The magical and the supernatural as it appears in American fiction, particularly in the queer/feminist/trans American fiction I'm concerned with, is important to me precisely because it demonstrates the unrestrainable rupture of the supernatural into our writing—a demonic mode of writing that disrupts totalities of reason, tells new histories, and writes one's self into being. In part we might conceive of this rupture as a response to abjection—the things that are truly terrifying to us might require the register of magical

writing in order to get at them because they resist a more direct mode of interrogation (often because the categories under attack supply the language and concepts by which we could even begin such an interrogation in the first place). The magical, supernatural, and monstrous, in other words, might sometimes be the only way we have to talk about that which we've been forbidden to talk about.

At the same time, the supernatural in American fiction is more than a response to abjection: by taking the subjects of American fear seriously within the magical thinking endemic to our fields and to transsexual life, we can learn to imagine the rupturing of the totalizing categories of logopower. This rupture is the power of the witch that Hélène Cixous champions—the power to live outside, to exist in the dark unintelligible, to live alongside contradiction that one has no impulse to resolve, to befriend the monstrous: in all of these capacities we rebuke that which would reduce us. Either way, as Shirley Jackson warns us, “no live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream.”¹³³ It may be, then, that magic and the super/natural are things which we have no real choice but to welcome into our worlds, because they fulfill some vital purpose for us; their historical persistence in our work and lives certainly suggests as much.

¹³³ Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 1.

CHAPTER ONE: INSIDE THE SHELL, ALL THE WALLPAPER IS YELLOW: Supernatural Desires and the Transsexual Body

“I scarcely know how to describe that room,”¹³⁴ you say. And then you begin to describe it. “One of the walls was a dirty, streaked white where he had torn off the wallpaper,” you say, thinking of that old short story you had to read in high school.¹³⁵ You shudder to recall that “the wall facing it was destined never to be uncovered, and on this wall a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses.”¹³⁶ Something about these carefree figures was appalling to you, their distance from you and Giovanni, in whose arms you remember lying, almost an insult to you. But, strolling in their destined place at the center of the world, they were also the target of your desire: something you always secretly wanted to be.

“Look at the garbage of this city,” Giovanni says to you. “Where do they take it? I don’t know where they take it – but it might very well be my room.”¹³⁷ You feel he is making excuses. You can’t help but think “this was not the garbage of Paris which would have been anonymous: this was Giovanni’s regurgitated life.”¹³⁸

It is a terrible thing to know someone on this level, to know him down to his broken violins and rotting potatoes and the stench of spilled wine. It is terrible because

¹³⁴ James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 85.

¹³⁵ Baldwin, 86.

¹³⁶ Baldwin, 86.

¹³⁷ Baldwin, 87.

¹³⁸ Baldwin, 87.

this means that you, likely, are known too, and then you must become yourself. As you look into Giovanni's room, so too does Giovanni's room look into you. The "staring windows, staring like two great eyes of ice and fire" fix you, demand that you look at the real source of your abjection, the source of the fear and trembling with which you recall this time and place in your life. It is that source and center which insists to you, as you recall it, that your time here was a time spent among the haunting presences of the dead: "the ceiling which lowered like those clouds out of which fiends have sometimes spoken and which obscured but failed to soften its malevolence behind the yellow light which hung like a diseased and undefinable sex in its center."¹³⁹

You realize that you see these things in the room, that the room is showing you these things – fiend, monster, abjected, filthy, sexed, undefinable – because that is what it sees in you. And you smile.

The Ghostly Traces of Gender

This chapter, the first in my long project which attempts to reevaluate our understanding of the constitutive forces of gender through trans magical reading, is focused on the constitution of the transsexual body in American literature. I mean literature both in the sense of the prevailing academic understanding of the trans body and its historical origins, of which I'll attempt to provide my own genealogy, but also in

¹³⁹ Baldwin, 87.

the sense of our canonical and para-canonical works of fiction. Looking at the examples of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," and, of course, James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, I consider the ways in which gender-oppressed bodies—that is to say both cis women and transsexuals, in the sense that both are considered a kind of deviance invested with moral significance—in American literature often seem to be conveyed to us in a supernatural mode, registered with us via the motifs of hauntings and possessions and monsters and magic. As I demonstrate, this mode is concomitant with a historical process by which, through the combined forces of imperialism, capitalism, medicine, sexology, psychoanalysis, and academic theorizing, the transsexual body has always been made super/natural by those who seek to define it.

Crucially, what I read into these works of fiction is a desire on the behalf of those oppressed by gender to be haunted. As my trans/super/natural reading method makes plain, this desire is so abundant as to be nearly ubiquitous in American fiction, once you know how to look for it. What is the thrust of this desire? Does the trans body seek a haunting as a way to fulfill its vision of itself? To transcend itself? To escape something? None of these seems quite right, although they may at times be incidentally true. What seems most animating about this desire to me is just how, through it, we can see the ecstatic power of a body returning to its monstrous self, to its extra-categorical home of becoming. In short, what we really shall see here is a simple yet terrifying and somehow undeniable revelation: having a body has *always* been a haunted experience.

More fundamentally, then, this chapter is about haunting. In our discussion of gendered bodies, and specifically those bodies which have been oppressed by the institutionalization of gender, such a frame is not just warranted but compelled on multiple levels. One is the level of the tradition of American literary criticism, where we might note that feminist literary analysis as a methodology first comes into its own through recognizing the workings of gender *through* its expression in the supernatural. I refer here, as noted earlier, to works such as Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* and Eugenia C. Delamotte's *Perils of the Night*, which find the grounds for a gendered analytic of literature in specifically gothic representations of patriarchal oppression: confinement, madness, abjection, haunting.

Another (considerably deeper) level on which the frame of haunting might be warranted as an approach to exploring the gendered body is what I see as the interlocking historical development of gender and the supernatural. Indeed, American cultural interest in the Gothic, monstrosity, and the supernatural really came into its own, via both literature and through widespread movements such as spiritualism, at roughly the same time that the fields of biology and sexology begin developing "gender" as an object of science. As we shall see, the strange excesses of gender not amenable to categorical reduction to pure materiality, lend themselves readily to the supernatural, a category defined by its reckoning with those areas of the world not fully apprehensible to empirical analysis.

As an example of the appearance of the supernatural in an early framing of gender as a scientific object, we might look at an extraordinary account in Richard Krafft-

Ebing's 1886 *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a massively influential medical treatise on "contrary sexual instinct," first translated into English in 1892. Case 131 in this text concerns "Count Sandor V.," whom we are told is a "man-woman" known to the author to have been arrested on the dual charges of "swindling" and going about as "a woman in male attire" (Krafft-Ebing 22). Sandor, who was assigned female at birth but dressed and behaved as a man for the majority of his life, had a number of intense romantic affairs with women before being arrested and subjected to a sexological examination which determined that his "criminal acts... had their foundation in [his] abnormal and irresistible sexuality," which was the result of a "great hereditary taint" (26). Many secondary analyses of the case end here, apparently content to feel a kind of superior revulsion at the reductive pathologies of late 19th-century sexology, but if one looks further at the specificities of that hereditary taint, something interesting emerges. I'm quoting the following description at length because Krafft-Ebing's pearl-clutching characterization of Sandor's family would make Poe blush with its Gothic excesses. Sandor, we are told...

... comes of an ancient, noble, and highly-respected family of Hungary, in which there have been eccentricity and family peculiarities. A sister of the maternal grandmother was hysterical, a somnambulist, and lay seventeen years in bed, on account of fancied paralysis. A second great-aunt spent seven years in bed, on account of a fancied fatal illness, and at the same time gave balls. A third had the whim that a certain table in her salon was bewitched. If anything were laid on this table, she would become greatly excited and cry, 'Bewitched! Bewitched!' and run with the object into a room which she called the 'Black Chamber,' and the key of which she never let out of her hands. [...] S.'s mother was nervous and could not bear the light of the moon. [...] One line of the family gave itself up almost entirely to spiritualism: Two blood-relations on the father's side shot themselves. The majority

of her male relatives are unusually talented; the females are decidedly narrow and domestic. S.'s father had a high position, which, however, on account of his eccentricity and extravagance (he wasted over a million and a half), he lost. Among many foolish things that her father encouraged in her was the fact that he brought her up as a boy, called her Sandor, allowed her to ride, drive, and hunt, admiring her muscular energy. On the other hand, this foolish father allowed his second son to go about in female attire, and had him brought up as a girl....¹⁴⁰

I choose to focus on this excerpt from Krafft-Ebing not simply because I think it's cool, but because it shows to us that pathology is always a moral action, that the act of *making meaning* on someone else's body is always a moral act. What the Gothic character of Krafft-Ebing's writing makes clearer to us, is that the historical co-emergence of the Gothic alongside the codification of knowledge about gender is not coincidence or accident—imagination, fear, abjection, magic, and other super-natural forces *also* emerge as a part of those moral acts of pathology, and therefore, as a powerful yet overlooked aspect of the construction of the gendered body.

I also offer this analysis of Sandor V. because I think it allows us to see the preoccupations that *continue* to haunt our discourse around gendered embodiment, even in the fields of feminist, queer, and trans theory. My take on the discourse of the body that runs through these fields is that it has primarily concerned itself with the matter of “livability,” or with the movement from definitions of embodiment that women and queer people find unlivable to definitions that allow us to live. This is something of a simplification but I will show how it holds up across a discourse that begins with feminist

¹⁴⁰ Krafft-Ebing, “Selections from Psychopathia Sexualis With Special Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study,” 22.

reckonings with the patriarchal cultural trappings of dualism, through Simone de Beauvoir's phenomenological feminism, Luce Irigaray's writings on rationality and sexual difference, Judith Butler's account of "materialization," Elizabeth Grosz's "volatile body" and new materialism, and on into the foundational writings of trans studies by Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker.

Modern theorizations of the gendered body, like Krafft-Ebing's account of Sandor V., hinge on a problem of dualism—namely which force has primacy in the formation of the human: the material or something more ineffable (the cultural, the psychological, the spiritual, the phenomenological, etc.). This dualistic concern has relevance to those trying to understand gender precisely because of a long history of symbolically inscribing women as corporeal and men as rational. (It is worth noting, offhand, that even this relationship of women and nature often tracks with the aesthetic binaries of the Gothic, with women on the side of the irrational, the mad, the incomprehensible, and patriarchy on the side of the rational and civilized world of clear apprehension.)

Feminist and queer attempts to resolve this issue have chiefly consisted of attempts to synthesize the material with the spiritual in an intelligible way. De Beauvoir, for instance, in articulating how a woman is not born but rather made asserts that "to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is *at once* a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world,"¹⁴¹ with that point of view

¹⁴¹ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (1949; repr., New York, N.Y.: Vintage, 2011), 39.

mediated by “physiological facts [that]... take on meaning... dependent on a whole context” of social and cultural acts of meaning-making.¹⁴²

Luce Irigaray draws on Beauvoir’s work to perform a similar act of synthesis, arguing that sexual difference, a force so powerful that it literally determines the possible horizons of thought, is constituted by an interacting dynamic of the natural and the ineffable. The array of cultural meanings projected onto the penis and the vagina, the presumed determinants of gendered embodiment, create conditions whereby philosophy and rationality itself are shaped by patriarchal preoccupations with those meanings aligned with the phallic: unity, linearity, “the one of form, of the individual.”¹⁴³ Rendered invisible here are the fluidity and rejection of stability embodied by the “contact of at least two lips” that “keeps woman in touch with herself,” a mode of thought emerging from a specifically feminine materiality that stands in opposition to patriarchal rationality and painting woman as a “mystery... in a culture claiming to count everything, to number everything by units, to inventory everything as individualities. She is neither one nor two.”¹⁴⁴ Margaret Whitford’s expansive study of Irigaray’s work frames this division not as biological essentialism or anti-rationality, but rather a creative act focused on the livability of gender configurations other than male. She argues that Irigaray does not see male and female as “empirical descriptions which can be ‘read off’ the world, but as reconceptualizations which might help us change and transform our society in a direction

¹⁴² Beauvoir, 66.

¹⁴³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (1977; repr., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 26.

¹⁴⁴ Irigaray, 26.

which is less inimical to women.”¹⁴⁵ What is at stake, then, in Irigaray’s analysis of the gendered body is “the restructuring of the construction of the rational subject,” a subject that either “bears the morphological marks of the male body, whose cultural products are characterized by unity, teleology, linearity, self-identity, and so on or it bears the morphological marks of the female body, characterized by plurality, non-linearity, fluid identity, and so on.”¹⁴⁶ What I want to emphasize here again is that this effort to account for dualism through synthesis is fundamentally rooted in a concern for livability. If the point here is to articulate sexual difference in order to overturn patriarchal conceptions of the world and the body through accessing different modes of being, then Irigaray’s central argument is akin to the *écriture féminine* of Hélène Cixous. She believes that through cultural products, creativity, and imagination, we might make ourselves intelligible in new ways that make life more livable to us, allowing us to escape the unlivable categorical habitats produced by patriarchy.

Similar arguments and preoccupations lie at the heart of Judith Butler’s conceptualizations of the gendered body. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler responds to critiques of her earlier work on performativity which claimed that she ignored materiality altogether by developing a concept of “materialization.” Materialization, for Butler, is another act of synthesis in this eternal quest to unify the contradictions of dualism; it is a challenge to “the relation between culture and nature presupposed by some models of gender ‘construction’ [that] implies a culture or an agency of the social which acts upon a

¹⁴⁵ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1991), 57.

¹⁴⁶ Whitford, 55–56.

nature, which is itself presupposed as a passive surface, outside the social and yet its necessary counterpart.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, the material is not some pre-existing template onto which we inscribe meaning through cultural acts, but rather, the material itself is something that is created through regulatory norms, as an “effect of power, as power’s most productive effect.”¹⁴⁸ The imposition of regulatory norms, including the performance of gender which “materializes” sex and “constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements” is necessary, once again, because of a desire for intelligibility; the cultural imposition of norms is the very thing which “qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.”¹⁴⁹

And again we can see how this attempt to reckon with dualism by recognizing the ways in which it is structured by power and how it demands intelligibility of us brings us back to the matter of livability. Subjects, Butler tells us, are produced through a process of fear and abjection: what is intelligible is normalized and as such materialized—literally “made natural,” a potent contradiction in terms—while what is not intelligible is jettisoned into the zone of the abject. Here we see the echoes of Krafft-Ebing’s account of Sandor V.’s gender, wherein what was intelligible was reckoned with through a discourse of criminality and heredity, and what was unintelligible was spoken of in tones of fear, astonishment, magic, diablery. What this means is that the abject “designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living

¹⁴⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 4.

¹⁴⁸ Butler, 2.

¹⁴⁹ Butler, 2.

under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.”¹⁵⁰ So much of our available discourse on gender and the body is rooted in the preoccupation of rendering the zone of the abject habitable, and doing so by resolving contradictions embedded into dualist schemas of the body in a way that would render us culturally intelligible, or “make us natural.”

As another example, Elizabeth Grosz’s 1994 *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* argues, similarly to Irigaray, that our discourse around the body is fundamentally flawed by phallogentric preoccupations that disguise themselves as “the human” via universalizing language. Just as I look to center the trans body in an effort to shake up and destabilize these patterns, Grosz centers the (cis) female body and its specific abjected processes (menstruation and birth, for instance), in an effort to rebuild a new theory of subjectivity: “the wager is that all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject’s corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness and the unconscious.”¹⁵¹ Here she explicitly decries Cartesian dualism as responsible for “the coupling of mind with maleness and the body with femaleness,” and attempts her own kind of synthesis, a liberating of the body from its status as an unthinking object for the scientific and philosophical operations of the mind and find new ways to discuss the

¹⁵⁰ Butler, 3.

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (University of Indiana Press, 1994), vii.

reciprocal interactions between body and mind that seem to actually characterize embodiment as we live it.¹⁵²

It is this “refusal or transgression of the mind/body dualism” and its replacement with a “more uneasy yet noncontradictory relation between the binarized terms”¹⁵³ that gives rise to Grosz’s “volatile body,” a body that enfolds various “nondichotomous understandings” of corporeality.¹⁵⁴ Her goal here is to synthesize a non-dualistic account of the psychic as emerging from the corporeal, the disentanglement of corporeality from sex and race (“Women can no longer take on the function of being *the* body for men while men are left free to soar to the heights of theoretical reflection and cultural production. Blacks, slaves, immigrants, indigenous peoples can no longer function as the working body for white ‘citizens,’ leaving them free to create values, morality, knowledges”¹⁵⁵), and the abolition of deriving bodily norms from one type of body rather than a field of bodily multiplicities.

Of interest to me here is the way that the concept of the volatile body aligns Grosz with a Nietzschean view that locates the body in the will-to-power, which she equates with a “kind of parallelism between the organic and the subjective, for just as the subject is a multiplicity of forces, the organism is not singular and unified.”¹⁵⁶ The sensory faculties of the body cannot “yield knowledge or even error; rather the body necessarily generates and presumes interpretations, perspectives, and partial and incomplete

¹⁵² Grosz, 4.

¹⁵³ Grosz, 18.

¹⁵⁴ Grosz, 21.

¹⁵⁵ Grosz, 22.

¹⁵⁶ Grosz, 122.

acquaintance, which serve its needs in the world and may enhance its capacity and hunger for life.”¹⁵⁷ As with Irigaray and Butler, we once again have an imagining of the ways in which creative acts, particularly those addressing the “virtualities” and “potentialities within biological existence that enable cultural, social, and historical forces to work with and transform that existence” can make life more livable for those whose gendered embodiment goes unrepresented by hegemonic discourse.¹⁵⁸

Although this conception of the body is a powerful one that allows Grosz to think of the body—its materiality and emergent subjectivity—in terms of the effects of its rhizomatic connections to the surrounding world, she does seem to acknowledge certain limitations in the end, namely that “there will always remain a kind of outsideness or alienness of the experiences and lived reality of each sex for the other.”¹⁵⁹ I wonder here, personally, from where this outsideness and alienness comes? Is it an emergent quality of sexual difference, or might we say that it is emergent from embodiment in and of itself? For even in (or especially in) trans life, there persists estrangement from the body, even after it has found a way to cross over the boundaries of sexual difference. How is it possible to be estranged from the body without returning to a sense of the body as separate from the psychic registers of experience, from mind? Something draws me back again and again to Grosz’ insistence on a “non-contradictory” disentanglement of

¹⁵⁷ Grosz, 122.

¹⁵⁸ Grosz, 24.

¹⁵⁹ Grosz, 207.

mind/body dualism, a rock against we seem to founder again and again¹⁶⁰ in our attempts to refine ourselves into a full understanding of gendered embodiment. Perhaps there is something to be said for comprehending the body as a type of contradiction, a productive tension of things that are differently unified or united in difference, as a condition of the will-to-power?

Jay Prosser begins to reckon with these problematics in his 1998 book *Second Skins*, one of the earlier texts specifically devoted to transgender studies. Here, he writes of existing in a “gendered nonzone,” where he feels “too embodied (only body) yet also disembodied.”¹⁶¹ Prosser attempts to reckon with these contradictions of trans embodiment by re-emphasizing the “materiality” of the process of transition and the body that undergoes it, delving into narratives of transition to understand them less abstractly and foregrounds “the bodily matter of gender crossings.”¹⁶²

This act of foregrounding is necessary, Prosser theorizes, because of a certain kind of appropriation of the transsexual body that has been carried out by the field of queer theory, especially through its understanding and deployment of the work of Judith Butler. Specifically, Prosser reads Butler’s use of the drag queen as a central example of her theory of gender performativity as performing a subtle conflation of “gender performativity” and “queer performativity,” or, of gender and sexuality, that causes them

¹⁶⁰ For other instances of feminist and queer theorizing of the body that attempts similar non-contradictory syntheses of mind and body besides those listed here, one might look at, for example, Donna Haraway’s articulation of “natureculture” or, more recently, Angela Willey’s “biopossibility.”

¹⁶¹ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

¹⁶² Prosser, 4.

to become almost interchangeable terms for the field itself.¹⁶³ This use of the trans body is one that Prosser regards as discarding the essential embodied status of transition¹⁶⁴, through its diminution of the role of narrative: “the value of the matter that often most concerns the transsexual: the narrative of becoming a biological man or a biological women [...] in brief and simple the materiality of the sexed body.”¹⁶⁵

As we see, it does not seem possible to dwell for long on the pure materiality of the body for there is nothing there to animate it. The animating force for Prosser becomes narrative itself. Speaking both of transsexual autobiographies and of narrative writ large, he contends that transition itself is “the definitive property or narrative, the progression and development that drives narrative and coheres its form,” and suggests that “the resexing of the transsexual body is made possible through narrativization.”¹⁶⁶ I’m interested in what this view implies for my own method of trans/super/natural reading, which as I stated earlier purports not only to read the trans sentiments that are hidden in plain sight in American literature, but which actually itself performs an act of transition on the text itself, rendering it trans in the process. Certainly, it is an act of contradiction, but no greater a contradiction than that already read into the trans body itself through countless bodies of texts, whole disciplines, devoted to establishing us as both too focused on literal naturalness (to the point of reinscribing harmful patriarchal sentiments through our relations to gender) and as too uprooted from nature, mired in the

¹⁶³ Prosser, 27.

¹⁶⁴ Prosser, 24.

¹⁶⁵ Prosser, 32–33.

¹⁶⁶ Prosser, 5.

postmodern sea of dissociative ruptures.¹⁶⁷ If Prosser's work is about a response to what he sees as queer theory's attempts to use the transsexual as a figure to de-emphasize the bodily substance of gender crossings, and seeks to put flesh back on the ghost, so to speak, I think my project is aimed more squarely at illuminating the ways in which all flesh is already ghostly.

This expansion beyond the material is, in a sense, also the aim of Gayle Salamon, who in 2010's *Assuming A Body*¹⁶⁸ "seeks to challenge the notion that the materiality of the body is something to which we have unmediated access, something of which we can have epistemological certainty, and contend[s] that such epistemology uncertainty can have great use, both ethically and politically, in the lives of the non-normatively gendered."¹⁶⁹ In brief, Salamon's method is to complicate our notion of the materiality of gendered bodies by discussing a phantasmatic "felt sense" that exists in relation to the body as a "productive tension that accounts for ways in which the materiality of the body is present to consciousness as well as importantly, the ways it absents itself from consciousness."¹⁷⁰

It's worth noting the ways in which this articulation of the "felt sense" that is constitutive of a gendered body is defined in opposition to Prosser's work. Salamon reads Prosser as wanting to "reveal the hidden and, presumably, disavowed materiality that lies

¹⁶⁷ Prosser, 13–14.

¹⁶⁸ Also of interest here, in an alternate universe, might have been Schuller's *Biopolitics of Feeling*, which tackles the emergent properties of the flesh in another way, through the concept of "impressability" – affect and sentimentality's historically fraught ability to write meaning upon the body. [Schuller, Kyla. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. Duke University Press, 2017.]

¹⁶⁹ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 1.

¹⁷⁰ Salamon, 2.

beneath performativity,” a stance which she takes as fundamentally misreading Judith Butler.¹⁷¹ Far from seeing Butler as using the material transsexual body only as a means to an ends of a schema in which that body is “overlaid with a layer of social/imaginary,” Salamon understands her to be thinking in terms of the simultaneous emergence of the material with the social with the imaginary with the performative, and making a claim that what performativity really highlights is that the locus of subjectivity is exactly that site at which fantasy or imagination suffuses and gives meaning to our materiality.¹⁷² *Second Skins*, she feels, goes wrong insofar as it enters into a “trend in trans studies” which “conclude[s] that a ‘real’ materiality is the only thing that can give traction to the transgendered subject, to anchor his or her identity in both difference... and sameness...”¹⁷³ The deathblow here is that she imagines Prosser’s emphasis on the material to be a woeful misstep that places his bodies, disastrously, beyond the reach of the domain of language, and by extension Prosser’s animating force of narrative:

Prosser’s emphatic insistence that the transsexual body is ‘unimpeachably real’ ends up landing him square in the Real, that domain of plenitude and fullness that not only exists outside of language, but, indeed, is fundamentally impossible with subjectivity itself. Psychoanalytically speaking, to be characterized by total plenitude and without lack is to be outside of language, outside of meaning, outside of the symbolic, outside of relation, outside of desire. It is a motionless and meaningless stasis equated with radical abjection and death – not a productive position from which to theorize subjectivity, trans or otherwise.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Salamon, 28.

¹⁷² Salamon, 34–35.

¹⁷³ Salamon, 37–38.

¹⁷⁴ Salamon, 40.

Or is it? Although I take Salamon's critiques to heart, I wonder if she overlooks the ways in which radical abjection and death might be their own animating forces, might be their own grounds for subjectivity for lives that have been made into monstrosity?

Bodily being for Salamon is located in "the tension between the historicity of the body and the immediacy of its felt sense," something she attempts to prove by turning to concepts of the phantasmatic articulated by Freud and readings of the bodily ego, and in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological notion of proprioception.¹⁷⁵ What these figures seem to offer her is the understanding that there is not necessarily a coherent mapping between the physical features of the body (such as genital configurations) and the felt sense of the phantasmatic body; indeed, a "phantasmatic body part cannot be considered not-body simply because of its nonmateriality."¹⁷⁶ Jacob Breslow points out that this suggests a total disruption of the idea of the body as a unified whole for Salamon (that "sense of one's body as a unified whole is itself phantasmatic"¹⁷⁷); rather, the body as she understands it is now "continuously and laboriously produced through feelings, desires, phantasies, and the processes of identification."¹⁷⁸

It is hard to decide where this phantasmatic body stands in relation to something like Grosz's volatile body. Both seem to run up against the problems of contradiction, the perpetually shifting primacies of the material and the psychic that attend the experience

¹⁷⁵ Salamon, 77.

¹⁷⁶ Gayle Salamon, "'The Place Where Life Hides Away': Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and the Location of Bodily Being," *Differences* 17, no. 2 (2006): 100.

¹⁷⁷ Jacob Breslow, "'There Is Nothing Missing in the Real': Trans Childhood and the Phantasmatic Body," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3–4 (November 1, 2017): 433, doi.org/10.1215/23289252-4189910.

¹⁷⁸ Breslow, 432–33.

of having a body, and split when it comes to the question of whether these qualities can be understood to exist in relation to one another in a unified whole. Whereas Grosz turns to the will-to-power as a way to hold together the body and all of its ghostly excesses, Salamon's take is to read the body not as a unified substance at all but as something utterly rife with discontinuities, ruptures, coming-aparts.

Well, then. As a witch that reads for ruptures, I wonder what can be done here with the volatile body, the narrative body, and the phantasmatic body in respect to trans/super/natural reading practices. If Sandy Stone's edict to us is that we treat the transsexual body as a text, what does it mean to our conception of our bodies to do just that? For me, it is a reading practice that demands understanding these various attempts to grapple with rupture and then, perhaps, turning one's back on them. Each is animating in its own way but if one's goal is to in some way develop a model that mirrors the non-unity of the body (and it might well not be), then it seems that a commitment to non-intelligibility requires reading these accounts of ghostly bodies as ghost stories in their own right. When reading a ghost story, does it matter if the ghost is "real," or simply that we are reading as if it is? Again we see the productive slippages that are engendered by the super/naturalizing impulses of those who write about the trans body.

It would be remiss, of course, to talk about how the trans body is rendered ghostly without attending to both the racially inflected historicity of what it means to theorize the materiality of a body, and the actual death inflicted on that body. For this, I turn to C. Riley Snorton's recent work on trans and race. In his article with Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics," he writes that the un-naturalizing of the trans body in public discourse—

whether in the realm of public policy or our own work in academia—“creates the precise moment where we as scholars, critics, and activists might apprehend a biopolitics of everyday life, where the transgender body of color is the unruly body, which only in death can be transformed or translated into the service of state power.”¹⁷⁹ The death of the trans body, particularly the trans body of color, is instrumentalized in service of liberal institutions. In his 2017 book, *Black on Both Sides*, Snorton points out that our medicalized understandings of race, gender, and sexuality are all made possible through slavery (and it’s afterlife)’s continual supply of the medical apparatus with black bodies. In an inversion of what Stone might have meant by treating the trans body as text, the trans body of color has been so written upon that it has now been “made into a grammar for whole worlds of meaning,” and is the grounds by which both race and sex are made legible as fields of knowledge.¹⁸⁰

What these insights imply is something like the literalization of a ghost story. Here the death and super-naturalizing of the trans body is made absolutely literal rather than merely conceptual as it is in many of the preceding works. And through that literalization, we see a darker side of the supposed freedoms that manifest from phantasm. Certainly, Snorton argues that black trans bodies are rendered “ungendered” by the categorical slippages at the level of history and medicine that define not only race but sex and gender in terms of whiteness. This ungendering does have productive

¹⁷⁹ C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2013), 68.

¹⁸⁰ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2017), 11.

possibilities, as Snorton's readings of slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* demonstrate the ways in which fugitivity from slavery was sometimes rendered possibility by the way in which socially "ungendered" Black people were able to exercise a mastery of gender malleability and exert control over how they were read at moments where life and death were the stakes.¹⁸¹

And yet obviously it comes at a massive cost. If one must turn to accounts of slavery in order to articulate the productive possibilities of an ungendered body, then one can't really even pretend to say that the trade-off is worthwhile; what could "productive" possibly mean in such a context that would redeem a nightmare as great as slavery? Snorton goes on to spell out the ways in which the ungendering of black bodies persists in a representational sphere during the afterlife of slavery. He does this through pointing out the negations of blackness in trans history, emphasizing the vast number of well-known black historical figures who openly practiced transness before the often-cited "first public trans persona" of Christine Jorgensen, including "Lucy Hicks Anderson, Georgia Black, Carlett Brown, James McHarris/Annie Lee Grant, and Ava Betty Brown."¹⁸² Moving into the realm of cultural objects late in the book, Snorton discusses the erasure of Phillip Devine, a disabled black man, from the narrative of Brandon Teena, the subject of the film *Boys Don't Cry* and consequent touchstone of nascent transgender culture and theory. Devine, who was murdered along with Brandon Teena, does not

¹⁸¹ Snorton, 58.

¹⁸² Snorton, 13.

appear at all in the film adaptation of the events, nor in most recountings of the events in popular culture or academic literature, an omission that obscures the interconnections of trans and race that made both men into targets of murder. Drawing on Jennifer Devere Brody, Snorton writes that...

'Boys Don't Cry is emblematic of the way in which the radical erasure of blackness makes queer stories queerer.' The absence of DeVine from Pierce's feature is so complete that, as Shana Agid notes in the longer description of his screen-printed poster, 'The Disappearance of Phillip DeVine,' DeVine's name is not even included in the memorial text at the end of *Boys Don't Cry*, precipitating a question for the artist: '[W]hat sacrifices are made to construct lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender stores for mass consumption?'¹⁸³

This is the note that I want to end my genealogy on precisely because I think it provides a necessary complication to the treatment of materiality practiced by Grosz, Prosser, Salamon, et al. The rendering phantasmatic of the trans body might be a theoretically productive move, but it is also one with drastically painful and fatal real-world analogues for actual trans people. To take death seriously, then, as a "fertile ground," one must be prepared to grapple with its actual intolerable reality. If one is prepared to sacrifice trans lives on the altar of social gain (as it seems clear that most are), then, one must be willing to recognize the stakes of carrying that project through to its conclusion. To put this another way, as Snorton says of Black Lives Matter, actually

¹⁸³ Snorton, 178.

inhabiting a future “in which black lives will have mattered to everyone [...] effectively means the end of the world.”¹⁸⁴

I want to stress that it is imperative to understand that the super-naturalizing of trans bodies, in order to be re-purposed in a way that is actually in service of trans lives, must be challenged on all facets which stage fiendishness, magic, outsidersness, monstrosity, and phantasm as *lack* or *void* onto which hate can be projected. This is not to diminish the actuality of trans death but rather to say that if trans death is going to be instrumentalized by theorists, either directly or indirectly, we must understand it both as a loss that is inflicted on trans bodies by external power structures, and as an emergent condition of possibility—but the latter is true only when it is emergent to *trans itself*, a volitional identification with the act of abjection that enables certain powerful epistemic and metaphysical moves—never as a side effect of the violence, physical and structural, to which we are subjected.

These are the grounds on which I think we can see the coalescing trajectories of my argument about the co-development of a fascination with the Gothic and supernatural and the codification of knowledge about gender, my interventions into feminist and queer literary theory, and my interventions into feminist and queer discourse on the nature of embodiment. So much of this discourse is, once again, an attempt to render the zone of the abject livable, and to do this by resolving contradictions embedded into dualism. I contend that the resolution of contradiction by synthesis in this context is not possible and never was. In any synthetic project, such as those I’ve outlined by Irigaray, Butler, and

¹⁸⁴ Snorton, 197–98.

Grosz, a potentially useful and productive framing is produced, but in all cases, there is an excess, a remainder, that still goes uncaptured. And as we discerned in our earlier look at Krafft-Ebing, this excess is jettisoned; the subjects produced by these discourses are haunted by a ghost of this remainder, and the project of making life livable for those subjects is not a matter of producing more ghosts, but of building houses within the grounds of the abject and inviting our ghosts to live with us there. What sexual difference, materialization, and the volatile body are all concerned with is livability, but we must ask the question: what is it that has made gender variant lives unlivable? I contend that this is the very demand for intelligibility that is made not only by patriarchal power structures but by the project of synthesis itself. The project of intelligibility always produces these ghostly remainders because it constrains and limits our potential relationships to both nature and culture, when those relationships ostensibly serve as the very locus of feminist and queer theories of embodiment for decades now. At the same time, this demand for intelligibility is never truly answerable, because the very forces that demand it of us at the same time *render us unintelligible*—disembodied, monstrous, super/natural—through the process of abjection by which they define us in the first place.

This does not mean, of course, that all discourse around gender is doomed; rather it means that a discourse rooted in productive unintelligibility, one which allows for the suspension of contradiction rather than its synthesis, might be the very thing we've been gesturing at and longing for all along, but have been falling short of. The super/natural analytic of gender is strong precisely because unintelligibility and abjection are themselves products of the supernatural, and understanding gender through them is less

about redefining the project of livability away from intelligibility, respectability, and banishing our ghosts, and more about giving a home to the ghost, of inviting it back into the body and the spaces the body occupies, allowing it to transform our relationship to both. Haunting, then, is the means by which the jettisoned excess comes back into the material itself, not by way of synthesis, by in a way that animates *because* of its tensions, discomforts, monstrosity, ineffability, and so on. It is this constellation of conceptions that float about, penetrate, and inform the construction of the transsexual that I call the *haunted body*.

The Body Wants to Be Haunted

And with that, back to our rooms. We're not back in Giovanni's embrace, not quite yet, but we'll get there. Our first stop at least looks familiar. Light a candle and look at these strange patterns on the wall. The same grotesque yellow as the "unidentifiable sex" that hangs at the center of our lover's chamber. Would he like this wallpaper? Let's steal it for him.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1899)

Although its publication eludes the grasp of my twentieth century by one year, I begin with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," because it itself is a beginning. The narrator has become a sort of prototypical model of the gender-oppressed

body in American literature, and one can make a real argument that its discovery, analysis, and resuscitation by feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar in the 1970s¹⁸⁵ mark it as the origin point of feminist literary criticism writ large. And, of course, if that is true, it also marks the establishment of feminist literary criticism as inextricably bound up with the gothic and the abject, which at this point should come as no surprise to us. Beyond all else, however, I want to talk about this story precisely because the body that is revealed and theorized here is, I think, productive and generative for us; it is a body that, through its longings for queerness, for super-natural intervention, for haunting and animation by the unknown, slips beyond the discourses that were created to constrain it. It is a story that imagines the body and its role in boundary crossings with a great deal more charity than Mary Daly, even as it works in her mode: here as everywhere else I look, the super-natural register is invoked as a power that can confound gendered power dynamics and allow us to imagine what crossings might even look like. And if we can imagine a thing, well.... It is a story wherein the haunting itself, the emergent figure of the “witch in the walls” is herself co-extensive with the idea of the remainder, the thing that belies a category by exceeding its grasp, the Outsider that casts a spell on those who abjected her, the monster that returns when you least expect it.

Firstly, I want to call to our attention the intentions that are announced by the first three lines of this story. Let’s look at them closely:

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer. / A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house,

¹⁸⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate! / Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.¹⁸⁶

From the outset, in these first few lines of the story, we already have the strikingly important juxtaposition of the “haunted house” and the “proud declar[ation]” of “something queer.” And already this juxtaposition is a productive one; a desire that enfolds the super-natural and the queer is already immanently available to us. When the narrator deigns to call her house a “haunted house” only because it would “ask too much of fate,” we have the curious sense that she doesn’t seem to mean that in the expected sense of “tempting fate.” Rather, it reads as if she’s making a request.

The fear here is not of being haunted, but rather that one will be denied a haunting, that one will remain, after all, under the stylus of a man like the narrator’s husband John, who responds with shuddering revulsion to all things that fall outside of his empirical scope. He is “practical,” we are told.¹⁸⁷ He has “no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.”¹⁸⁸ The narrator for her part revels in those things. Not only is she afraid that her desire to be haunted will not be granted, she swiftly regrets mentioning any mundane or quotidian features of the house in which she will be confined, because to do so will “spoil my ghostliness.”¹⁸⁹ Such is her queer enthusiasm,

¹⁸⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” in *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings*, ed. Kate Bolick, 1 edition (New York, New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 179–96.

¹⁸⁷ Gilman, 166.

¹⁸⁸ Gilman, 166.

¹⁸⁹ Gilman, 167.

however, that this regret cannot tamp her desire for long. The very next sentence: “I don’t care – there is something strange about the house – I can feel it.”¹⁹⁰

Attending this desire to be haunted is the desire which is much more readily identified in existing critical literature on the story. The narrator’s desire to write is frustrated by John’s belief, derived from his mastery of medical sciences, that to do so will be bad for her. Moreover, the longer the narrator is held within the confines of John’s treatment, the more she loses the capacity of creation: “I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me. But I find I get pretty tired when I try.”¹⁹¹

There is substantial merit in reading these two desires, the desire to create and the desire to be haunted, as essential to one another, two pieces of equal necessity for the liberation (from physical bondage, from creative restraint, from categorical fixity) that our narrator desires. The narrator expresses both desires in language that places them outside the scope of the things John can accept – that is, outside of the grasp of empiricism and within the realm of the super-natural. The desire to create is itself a source of abjection for John; he frets over it as an “imaginative power” that dallies in “story-making” and “excited fancies” and he commands the narrator to “check the tendency” at once. “So I try,” she says.¹⁹²

It’s difficult to understand why John would be averse to “story-making” if it were not the case that stories – at least the kinds of stories our narrator seems interested in

¹⁹⁰ Gilman, 167.

¹⁹¹ Gilman, 170.

¹⁹² Gilman, 170.

writing – represented a challenge to the stability and intelligibility of his world. Through his fear, we understand the social biases on which contemporary “medical knowledge,” such as the prohibition on writing as too emotionally taxing for women, and at the same time apprehend a challenge to those biases.

That challenge, unable to manifest in the act of creation because of the narrator’s confinement, instead emerges in the queer haunting of the wallpaper itself: the wallpaper and the witch- or crone-like figure (“a woman stooping down and creeping about”¹⁹³) haunting it is a force which compels attention, but at the same time frustrates conventional pattern recognition. Its lines “destroy themselves in unheard of contradiction,”¹⁹⁴ and evince a “lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.”¹⁹⁵ As the wallpaper frustrates the narrator’s own expectations of design, and she accepts that “this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else I ever heard of,”¹⁹⁶ she gradually moves from being “positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness”¹⁹⁷ to “getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because* of the wallpaper.”¹⁹⁸ The wallpaper grows eyes that look back at you; it is not merely inharmonious but something more. “I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before,” our narrator exclaims, “and we all know how much expression

¹⁹³ Gilman, 174.

¹⁹⁴ Gilman, 168.

¹⁹⁵ Gilman, 175.

¹⁹⁶ Gilman, 172.

¹⁹⁷ Gilman, 170.

¹⁹⁸ Gilman, 172.

they have!”¹⁹⁹ The life of the haunting is an emergent force. We try to render a thing dead through understanding it as such, yet by the witch’s line of flight, it comes back to us.

In this way, the haunting, with its attendant frustration of John’s ability to know, echoes the very kinds of stories he fears his wife will write: stories that challenge him by placing her body beyond his empirical hermeneutics, and thus his social position and mastery, transforming him into the figure on the periphery of a new center that refuses to be a center (because it is rhizome).

The witch herself, the body given to the haunting, and the body that will become the narrator, is the shadow-figure behind the main pattern of the wallpaper, the thing that can only be seen from certain angles of perception. The light of the witch’s moon transforms the pattern into the bars of a prison²⁰⁰ and the witch “shake[s] the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out,”²⁰¹ and she is not alone: “Sometimes,” the narrator tells us, “I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.”²⁰² At the end of the story, our narrator achieves the desire to be haunted through the realization that the witch’s body was already her own body. It happens in the fertile space *between* two lines of text, the immanent space of darkness and silence in which the super-natural thrives: “I don’t like to look out of the

¹⁹⁹ Gilman, 170.

²⁰⁰ Gilman, 176.

²⁰¹ Gilman, 174.

²⁰² Gilman, 178.

windows even – there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as *I* did?”²⁰³

Via the recognition of this becoming, we are able to move the readings of this story beyond existing scholarship, and we gain the important ability to regard the ending of the tale as something more than a moralistic warning that locking your wife in a room is bad for her mental health. Instead, we’re invited to look at the way in which the narrator’s identification with the witch in the wallpaper, her haunting or possession by this figure that was always already her, and her subsequent “creeping” about the room is something which robs John of speech for the first time in the story, and then robs him of consciousness. First, he is shaken of his certainty, asking two questions for the first time in the story (questions that might have been more productive if asked of his wife much earlier: “What is the matter?” and “What are you doing?”).²⁰⁴ Then, he faints.

Previously, the narrator has told stories about herself within John’s own language. She asserted that it would be good for her health to write, that she might recover faster if she were in a brighter room, and so on; these stories, emerging from the desire to create, were all easily dismissed by John through an appeal to his own expertise and mastery, his greater access, as a man, to empirical knowledge. This new story, emerging from the new queer desire for a haunted body that can elude the categories of the empirical, and told in a new and inscrutable language of action energized by the super-natural, is one before which he is powerless. His status as an obstacle to the narrator, someone whose story can

²⁰³ Gilman, 181. Emphasis mine.

²⁰⁴ Gilman, 182.

overpower and silence hers, is absolutely diminished as we note the ease with which she crawls “over” his prone and silent form each time she circles the room.²⁰⁵

Although it’s easy to think of this final scene as a total mental break and to imagine the narrator’s future of being consigned to an asylum (not wholly out of the question), we also might ask: if she has really gone mad in this instance, from where do we get the story we’re now reading? In short, I think the existence of this story and the fact that we’re reading it in the first person shows us that the narrator has gained something from the body that came to her by way of the synthesis of story-telling and the super-natural; perhaps the ability to write in a new register that is less easily dismissed than that inherited from her oppressors. It is generative, then, to understand story-telling and possession/haunting as coextensive desires – their complementary rebukes to John’s form of patriarchal mastery perhaps uniting them as essential co-manifestations of the desire of queer and gender-oppressed bodies to elude definition, capture, and stagnation under empirical scrutiny.

Flannery O’Connor’s “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” (1954)

The witch has given us a much-needed mobility. Disappearing into the horizon just when we seemed to be captured, we visit yet another room, or, more accurately, a pair of them: a circus tent and a child’s bedroom, both of which stand in, in perfect

²⁰⁵ Gilman, 182.

keeping with our taste for squalor and depravity, for temples. Much like “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Flannery O’Connor’s “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” further shows us the super-natural’s entwinement with these two dominant motifs: the desire for haunting and possession, and the malleability of the (trans-)gendered body.

In the story’s very first scene, the narrator’s cousins Joanne and Susan introduce us quite bluntly to the now-common idea of gender as an enacted performance, putting on “lipstick and their Sunday shoes and walk[ing] around in the high heels all over the house, always passing the long mirror in the hall slowly to get a look at their legs,” all the while referring to themselves as “Temple One” and “Temple Two.”²⁰⁶ This act of naming is a reference to their Catholic headmaster’s instruction on what to do in the event that a man should “behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile.” All they have to do, she tells them, is yell out the talismanic phrase “Stop sir! I am a temple of the Holy Ghost!” and that this will “put a stop to it.” This juxtaposition of details shows us that, when the supernatural enters into this story, it comes in tied to a wish or desire to change the possibilities of life in a gendered body. Just as in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” or *Giovanni’s Room*, we find again the ever-present queer notion that there is something in hauntedness, possession, an infusion of magic into the body, that might protect one from a certain exercise of oppressive power. The desirous component of haunting is rendered even clearer when the story’s narrator, The

²⁰⁶ Flannery O’Connor, “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” in *The Complete Stories*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 236.

Child, repeats the phrase to themselves and is “pleased with” it, as it “made her feel as if somebody had given her a present.”²⁰⁷

Beginning with the evocation of a haunting in its very title, the investiture of a temple with a ghost, the story readily invites comparisons to our previous works of queer haunting and the haunted body. As we’ve seen through reading those, it is easy and even fruitful to read the haunted house as a metonymic stand-in for the body, a structure whose alteration by spiritual force we can accept more readily than we can the transformation of the body itself (and by extension those forces laid upon the body, such as gender). Certainly, the story is doing this kind of work. As the Child lies in their bed at night “counting the boards in the ceiling,” this act of engagement with the structure around them compels a kind of irrational fugue state in which they begin to dream of themselves occupying the world in a masculine mode, living out a fantasy of still-ungendered embodiment through which they can experience camaraderie and sociality with men:

I know them all right, she said to someone. We fought in the world war together. They were under me and I saved them five times from Japanese suicide divers and Wendell said I am going to marry that kid and the other said oh no you ain’t I am and I said neither one of you is because I will court marshall you all before you can bat an eye.²⁰⁸

What makes “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” more fascinating, however, is the way that the Child advances the imaginary work of the narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Literally, the story’s emphasis on structure as a way of containing and

²⁰⁷ O’Connor, 238.

²⁰⁸ O’Connor, 240.

transforming spirit is extended beyond the room into different localities such as the temple, the body, and the tent. When the Child thinks of their visit to the fair, they realize that “certain tents were closed then because they contained things that would be known only to grown people.”²⁰⁹ The closed tents represent a kind of veil separating the Child from domains of secret knowledge, and the Child’s grasping desire to attain that knowledge moves along a path from the physical to the spiritual:

She had imagined that what was inside these tents concerned medicine and she had made up her mind to be a doctor when she grew up. She had since changed and decided to be an engineer but as she looked out the window ... she felt that she would have to be much more than just a doctor or an engineer. She would have to be a saint because that was the occupation that included everything you could know; and yet she knew she would never be a saint. [...] She could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick enough.²¹⁰

What is staged in this evolution of thought, beyond the more obvious movement from physical to spiritual, is a movement that compellingly entwines the two: a movement from the centering of the Child’s desired knowledge in the body-as-object (the domain of the doctor) to the body as something that can be inhabited, destroyed, and altered *in a generative way*, as a way of knowing in itself (the domain of the saint and martyr). Just as the witch in the wallpaper finally compels a generative imaginative break for the narrator of Gilman’s story, a way out of the stultifying hermeneutics of the biological that enables her to write herself into being, the figure of the transsexually-coded “freak” in O’Connor’s story performs a similar function. However, because the

²⁰⁹ O’Connor, 243.

²¹⁰ O’Connor, 243.

possible venues of possession have extended beyond the house itself and into the ritual space of the temple as well as the public space of the fair and its tents which close off secret knowledges, the supernatural figure of the freak empowers a different level of transformation in relation to body and gender for the Child.

The freak's particular method of haunting their tent is described in rich detail by O'Connor: "the tent where it was had been divided into two parts by a black curtain, one side for men and one for women. The freak went from one side to the other, talking first to the men and then to the women, but everyone could hear. [...] Finally the freak left the men and came over onto the women's side and *said the same thing*."²¹¹

Several things can be observed in O'Connor's staging of this haunted space. First, of course, we have an image of the operations of power of the world in which the Child and the freak live: knowledge and the power it confers is rigidly partitioned in accordance with gender, and even when the specific form of the knowledge is identical, its method of dissemination must be absolutely controlled and constrained at the level of gender. Secondly, however, we have the miraculous image of the transsexual freak's ability to move at will to both sides of this curtain, to transgress the otherwise absolute veil of the gendered segregation of experience and embodiment, imparting knowledge as they will, all the while declaring themselves a haunted vessel, "God's creation." The Child's learning about the existence of the freak and how they fully inhabit the world of the Child's imaginary slippages of gender is a momentous occasion; afterwards, the Child lies in bed in a state of total revelry, imagining the freak's performance in remarkable

²¹¹ O'Connor, 245. Emphasis mine.

detail. At the culmination of this imagined performance, the freak announces the phrase the Child learned earlier in the day: “I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost.” In this one utterance, the freak possesses the Child’s understanding of the world, potently animating their sense of the body as something that might be occupied and transfigured by spirit, while at the same time providing a demonstration of the previously naïve-seeming talismanic power of the phrase. As the freak utters these words of power, they are indeed staving off a certain kind of oppressive power that might otherwise be wielded by the men and women who observe them.

The real transformation of the Child’s relationship to their gendered body, subtle as it may be, takes place during the climax of the story. On the way to take their cousins back to their boarding school, the Child sits in the passenger seat of the car and realizes that “with her hair blowing over her face she could look directly into the ivory sun which was framed in the middle of the blue afternoon but when she pulled it away from her eyes she had to squint.”²¹² In other words, we’re given a glimpse into a type of vision that is only attainable through a veil, a common spiritual trope, but in this case the veil carries with it explicitly gendered and bodily connotations: the sight of the sun is only possible through the feminine-coded veil of long hair.

Once the family arrives at the boarding school, however, they are compelled to sit through a long sermon. At first the Child experiences this sermon in the same kind of rote and perfunctory way that they engage in their nightly prayers, but when the priest brings out “the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, [the Child]

²¹² O’Connor, 247.

was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, ‘I don’t dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be.’”²¹³ The transsexual figure of the freak thereby catalyzes some kind of change in the Child’s fundamental perception of the world. The use of the word “ivory” unites the sun with the host in the monstrance, but one can be observed only through the veil of a gender that the Child is constantly trying to “pull away” from, and the other is something from which they cannot look away.

What has happened in the interim between looking at the sun and looking at the host? Exactly what is the nature of the spell that the freak has cast? Perhaps the agent of change here is the staggering juxtaposition of the flesh and the spirit, both within the token of the Eucharist itself, as well as in that token’s residing within the vessel of the monstrance, itself, as Stryker suggests in “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” etymologically associated with monstrosity, disclosure, and unveiling – and thereby with the freak, with the role of structures – temples, tents, houses, bodies – as vessels for intruding possessions of spirit, and with gender itself.²¹⁴

Tellingly, when the Child returns to the car and begins the long ride home, we receive a further demonstration of the change that has taken place. As the Child looks out the window, the phrasing of the sentence “she turned it toward the window and looked out over a stretch of pasture land...”²¹⁵ stands out here as particularly resonant.

O’Connor’s choice to write that the Child “turned it” (her “round face”) towards the

²¹³ O’Connor, 248.

²¹⁴ Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” 240.

²¹⁵ O’Connor, “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” 248.

window, rather than the more straightforward “she turned towards the window” comes across as clunky and unnecessary, but the attention it invites towards itself is worth noting. What has happened is that the Child’s experience of the body is now different, now somehow mediated and performed at a remove. The physical face, and by extension the head that the Child earlier associated directly with gendered embodiment by questioning how the freak could be “man and woman both without two heads,”²¹⁶ is no longer a primary determinant of one’s experience of the world, but something that can be moved, altered, and changed in accordance with a spiritual will.

The Child has, in short, become the ghost possessing and animating their own body, which now serves as a monstrosity for the self that previously resided only in the haunted imaginary spurred by counting the boards in their ceiling. Thusly possessed, the Child is capable of a new power, the ability to look at and perceive directly the sun which is now like “an elevated Host drenched in blood,” without the aid of the gendered veil of hair.²¹⁷ In doing so, they observe that it has “left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees.”²¹⁸ Where this road might lead a character like the Child, who continues to reside in the care of religious and unimaginative family members, is highly questionable. But what is indisputable is that they now see passages of egress and transformation—the witch’s flight—that were previously invisible to them. The experience of the supernatural, a possession catalyzed by experience of the transsexual

²¹⁶ O’Connor, 245.

²¹⁷ O’Connor, 248.

²¹⁸ O’Connor, 248.

juxtaposition of spiritual and bodily transformations, has literally changed their senses, their body, and their world.

James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956)

And at last we return to the world we never wanted to leave: the room that terrifies us because it knows us and shows us to our selves.

In *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, Matt Brim identifies one of the reasons I began in and return to Giovanni's room, or, why I think Baldwin is an ideal figure for talking about the kinds of categorical slippages and possibilities of emergence and immanence that I see for the trans body. "Baldwin," Brim says, "working with and beyond prescribed identity categories, takes as his most enduring subject precisely those illegitimized desires, often between men and often between races, that have been pushed to the very edge of the thinkable and there, inevitably, gripped the erotic unconscious."²¹⁹ Although he insists on speaking in Freudian language, we can live with it, because the description of Baldwin is, I think, a true one. The illegitimized desires and the occupation of the edge of the thinkable are, after all, why I read Baldwin myself.

To frame my interest more succinctly, Baldwin engages in paradox. For the queer reader, this paradox is one of identity – a queer reading of Baldwin must accept as "the

²¹⁹ Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 2.

price of the queer ticket [...] the incommensurability that is identity.”²²⁰ In other words, an understanding of queer that demands stable and fixed identitarian locations is unlikely to find such in Baldwin’s work because he deals with paradox; the concepts he employs are often in a state of becoming rather than being – their interconnections (often registered as the relationships between characters) have to be constantly in flux and held in a suspended state of permissible contradiction and ultimate unintelligibility – i.e., the witch’s grasp.

I like Brim’s book because he too reads *Giovanni’s Room* as a trans novel. He does not, however, only read it as a trans novel. In his chapter on Giovanni, Brim reads the book in three distinct ways: as a queer text, as a gay novel, and as a trans novel. He believes here that he is staging an encounter of the queer, the gay, and the trans as analytics, and showing how *Giovanni’s Room*, by virtue of being accessible to all of them, demonstrates Baldwin’s capacity for paradox, and the necessary ways in which the interpenetration of different queer identitarian discourses and methods has an animating effect.²²¹ I appreciate this approach and agree with it, but in the interest of my investment in arguing from the anti-boredom position of absolute trans centrality, would reframe this approach to say: Baldwin is always talking about being trans.

The thrust of Brim’s “queer reading” of the book seems to be that David’s ignorance about, among other things, the implications of his being a privileged white American in a foreign country and the social rituals by which male homosexuality is

²²⁰ Brim, 2.

²²¹ Brim, 56.

practiced in Paris create for him an “interpretive void” in which “the reader is thrown into a queer reading crisis.”²²² Always David is trying to understand and fix the specificities of his relationship with Giovanni: if Giovanni is a man, and the two love each other, then David himself must be a woman, he reasons, so strong is the self-preservation of his hetero conditioning. Imbued with fear at the idea of being made into a woman, David lashes out; he can’t accept the conditions of the relationship and is never fully comfortable in it, despite obviously loving Giovanni. For Brim, this indicates that the real antagonist in *Giovanni’s Room* is a pressure to fit into established categories, whether this manifests in David’s own internal turmoil, or in his inheritance of a nightmarish imperial legacy, the “overpowering American impulse to categorize, define, and thereby limit and pervert complex human emotions, desires, and relationships.”²²³ Even the ostensibly queer categories seem to Brim to be a “trap” for Baldwin: “To David’s normative mid-twentieth-century mind, only two options, heterosexuality and homosexuality, present themselves as possible futures. Yet each of these futures, Baldwin insists, is really a trap for David. The point is important for queer theoretical readings of the novel: neither straight identity nor gay identity can do justice to the complex realities of erotic life.”²²⁴

I agree with Brim that a big part of the tragedy of David’s life is his difficulty with categories, but this is the point at which I depart from his reading. Reading through the opening of the novel, as David describes his first homosexual experiences with his neighborhood friend Joe, I’m struck by the preponderance of uncertain and vacillating

²²² Brim, 56.

²²³ Brim, 58.

²²⁴ Brim, 61.

language: with Joe, the affair begins “mysteriously, and yet aimlessly,”²²⁵ there are endless references to a nebulous “something” that happens within David, a “something monstrous”²²⁶ and “something weird,”²²⁷ something that might only be called “the power and the promise and the mystery.”²²⁸ Such a beginning augurs the condition of all of David’s relationships. He cannot maintain a clear grasp of the connections between people; they become interchangeable with one another. “As [my father] spoke of [my mother],” he tells us, “he might have been speaking of his own. [...] He spoke of my mother, then, as Ellen had spoken of her and he might, indeed, have been speaking of Ellen.”²²⁹ This dissociative liminality extends to strangers as well. David watches women on the street and says of them that their “husbands might have been their sons”²³⁰; he observes a man at the post office and says of him, “his wife might have been his mother.”²³¹ In spite of this preoccupation with what “might have been,” David laments his unsituated position within the world and attributes it to the ghastly remnants of his love for Joey, which remain “at the bottom of my mind, as still and as awful as a decomposing corpse.”²³² For this reason, he expresses a strong instrumental desire for a woman – specifically, a heterosexual relationship with a woman – to provide him the

²²⁵ Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*, 7.

²²⁶ Baldwin, 17.

²²⁷ Baldwin, 18.

²²⁸ Baldwin, 9.

²²⁹ Baldwin, 13.

²³⁰ Baldwin, 65.

²³¹ Baldwin, 90.

²³² Baldwin, 16.

stability he cannot find elsewhere: “I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be renewed.”²³³

And yet these categorical confusions and David’s queer distancing from them are not merely a feature of “erotic life,” but specifically a transsexual erotic life. To see the presence of the transsexual, we must take the moments seriously where Baldwin offers the super/natural to us. The first moment occurs early in the novel where David lets us in on the fear with which his mother manifests in his imagination. She appears in his nightmares as a zombie, described in the lurid cadence of an old EC comics writer working on *Tales from the Crypt* and getting paid by the word: “she figured in my nightmares, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and as brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive.”²³⁴

The mother’s soft and porous body is incredibly relevant here, as the liminality of the boundary between her and David is a suggestion of David’s own fears concerning his own femininity. It is, as such, the haunted body, the material invested with both meaning and transgressive power through the act of its being rendered abject and marginal. As we see throughout the rest of the novel, David is constantly terrified that Giovanni, in the course of their relationship, is seeking to haunt his own body; in other words, to make him into a woman. Cleaning up some of the trash in Giovanni’s room, he stops to

²³³ Baldwin, 98.

²³⁴ Baldwin, 10–11.

reassure himself that he is “not a housewife – men can never be housewives.”²³⁵ Later, when leaving Giovanni, Davis engages in the following heated exchange with him:

“You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money, and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little girl. That’s what you want. [...]”

“I am not trying to make you a little girl. If I wanted a little girl, I would be *with* a little girl.”

“Why aren’t you? Isn’t it just that you’re afraid? And you take me because you haven’t got the guts to go after a woman, which is what you *really* want?”

He was pale. “You are the one who keeps talking about *what* I want. But I have only been talking about *who* I want.”

“But I’m a man,” I cried, “a man! What do you think can *happen* between us?”²³⁶

David’s paranoia over being made into a girl through his relationship with Giovanni might be read as a sign of the domineering insufficiency of categories, a sign that David simply can’t imagine possibilities outside of the heterosexual pairing of one man and one woman. And yet several things make this unlikely to me. The first is the analytic we’ve been granted by Snorton, which reveals to us the inextricable relationship of trans and blackness in American culture, something which primes us to read these scenes and the scenes to follow through a racial lens that, by extension, grants David’s problems a dimension of disorientation with unmoored gender signification. As Brim suggests, the relationship between David and Giovanni is not merely gay, but also

²³⁵ Baldwin, 88.

²³⁶ Baldwin, 142.

interracial; David's fear of being ungendered or drawn into the "other gender" is plainly also bound up with his fear of sullyng his American cleanliness through sleeping with Giovanni. Womanhood, then, represents for David the possibility of absorption and redefinition that will not only destroy his manhood, but also imperil his whiteness.

The haunting presence of the transsexual is also apparent in David's horrified responses to the appearance of actual trans women in the text. When he meets a trans woman in the same bar where he meets Giovanni, his response is so bound up with the abject, and consequently the fear of what he might become, that it's worth quoting it in its repulsive entirety:

There were, of course, *les folles*, always dressed in the most improbable combinations... but they always called each other 'she.' ... I always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody, for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of them. People said that he was very nice, but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not – so grotesquely – resemble human beings.²³⁷

The fear of being recognized *as* trans is similarly overwhelming. Midway through the novel, David encounters a sailor walking down the street and imagines himself in the place of the trans woman about whom he had the above reaction; he worries that his

²³⁷ Baldwin, 26–27.

relationship with Giovanni has “made him a woman” to such a deep extent that the sailor will look at him the way he himself looked at the trans woman in the bar:

We came abreast and, as though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eyes, he gave me a look contemptuously lewd and knowing; just such a look as he might have given, but a few hours ago, to the desperately well-dressed nymphomaniac or trollop who was trying to make him believe she was a lady. And in another second, had our contact lasted, I was certain that there would erupt into speech, out of all that light and beauty, some brutal variation of “look, baby, I know you.”²³⁸

This nastiness aside, we get a *Nightwood*-ian moment where the multiple valences of the super/natural with which we are working break through David’s abjection. One particular trans woman is represented simultaneously as both monster and prophet. She approaches David in the same bar: “now someone whom I had never seen before came out of the shadows towards me. It looks like a mummy or a zombie—this was the first overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death... its eyes looking, it seemed, at something amusing within the recesses of my skull, did not leave much room for doubt.”²³⁹ She then issues a prophecy that David will go to Hell and that he will be “very unhappy. Remember that I told you so.”²⁴⁰

In all of these encounters, but especially here, we are left with a strong impression of Stryker’s monster that is not described just by its supposedly grotesque physicality, but by its capacity to unveil what is unknown. What this shows us, I think, is that fear

²³⁸ Baldwin, 92.

²³⁹ Baldwin, 38–39.

²⁴⁰ Baldwin, 40.

registers in this novel most sharply when David's sense of the stability—intelligibility—of his gender identity (as well as his race) is questioned by his identification with women and trans women, their haunted bodies materialized in the text as the porous boundaries of ghouls, zombies, mummies, and haunted houses and their ability to undermine what he imagines to be the stable boundaries of identity.

I want to return for just a moment to David's initial encounter with his putrefying mother, the fear of becoming one with her, and the concept of "filth" and "cleanliness" as concepts inflected not just with queer but racial signification. This scene in *Giovanni's Room* always reminds me viscerally of an article by Reza Negarestani, "The Corpse Bride: Thinking with Nigredo." In this work, Negarestani describes in horrible detail an ancient Etruscan method of torture, and then uses that to advance a theory of the social meaning of decay. I'll quote him at length on the specificities of the torture and allow you to draw your own associations to David's nightmare of his mother:

Jacques Brunschwig, in his 1963 essay *Aristote et les pirates tyrrhéniens*, describes the baroque details of the Etruscans' punishment. A living man or woman was tied to a rotting corpse, face to face, mouth to mouth, limb to limb, with an obsessive exactitude in which each part of the body corresponded with its matching putrefying counterpart. Shackled to their rotting double, the man or woman was left to decay. To avoid the starvation of the victim and to ensure the rotting bonds between the living and the dead were fully established, the Etruscan robbers continued to feed the victim appropriately. Only once the superficial difference between the corpse and the living body started to rot away through the agency of worms, which bridged the two bodies, establishing a differential continuity between them, did the Etruscans stop feeding the living. Once both the living and the dead had turned black through putrefaction, the Etruscans deemed it appropriate to unshackle the bodies, by now combined together, albeit on

an infinitesimal, vermicular level. Although the blackening of the skin indicated the superficial indifferenciation of decay (the merging of bodies into a black slime), for the Etruscans – executioners gifted with metaphysical literacy and alchemical ingenuity – it signalled an ontological exposition of the decaying process which had already started from within.²⁴¹

Negarestani writes that for the Etruscans, this torture technique is not about its grotesquerie, but rather about putting something right. It is about making the surface of one to be punished match what lies within them; as the body of the guilty begins to decay and turn black (a process called *nigredo*), the “ontologically registered decay was merely a superficial symptom of an already founded decay, decay as a pre-established universal chemistry.”²⁴² *Nigredo* is then figured as an “exposition of decay,”²⁴³ a reading that fixes the torturous ritual as a whole within the category of narrative: it becomes rich with symbolic value, and more importantly, it attempts to make sense of life and death in a way that is linked to a moral economy. Negarestani keeps the argument fixed in narrative assessments of the corpse as he turns to a fragment from Aristotle’s writing that references the same torture method.

For Aristotle, this method suggests an even grander narrative of order than it did for the Etruscans, as he sees within it a storied analogy of his entire metaphysical system, describing putrefaction as actually essential to continuance: “the moment when beings undergo necrosis and decay in order to remain in being... the Ideas must be founded on an

²⁴¹ Reza Negarestani, “The Corpse Bride: Thinking with Nigredo,” in *Collapse Volume IV: Concept Horror*, Reissued Edition, Collapse, IV (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 130–31.

²⁴² Negarestani, 131.

²⁴³ Negarestani, 132.

intensive necrosis and an extensive decay in order to remain in their essence... in order to be active intensively and extensively, inwardly and outwardly, the Idea must first be fully necrotized and blackened on all levels, intensively and extensively.”²⁴⁴ What Aristotle seems to be suggesting here is that the living soul must occupy something unliving (the body) in order to fulfill both its inward activity (intellection or *nous*) as well as its outward activity, the “animation of the body according to reason.”²⁴⁵ It is crucial that this occupation take place because these “inward and outward activities of the soul must be in accordance with one another in order for the world to be intelligible and, in its intelligibility, to move toward intellect in proportion to reason.”²⁴⁶

What Negarestani, and to some extent Aristotle, helps us see here, is how, read through the lens of the super/natural and the abject, the signifiers of decay and death that pervade *Giovanni's Room* become not merely the grounds but the condition for a continuity of life. This sense of the fertility of decay is in stark contrast with Brim's reading, which invokes the everpresent filth as a counterpoint to American cleanliness, but claims that it also positions homosexuality as a limiting trap because it exposes the ways in which it is “unlivable.”²⁴⁷

Let me be unambiguous: as a “homosexual” who actually lived and lives outside the comforts of American cleanliness, in the abjected margins of filth, I cannot disagree with this assessment more. Not only are such conditions livable, but for huge swaths of

²⁴⁴ Negarestani, 132–33.

²⁴⁵ Negarestani, 134.

²⁴⁶ Negarestani, 134.

²⁴⁷ Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, 63.

the world's population, they *must* be livable, because they are the only conditions to which we have access. David has choices to make here, but not all of us do. In this way, I embrace filth as fertile and animating, although not in the service of an eventual telos of "order" as it is rendered by Aristotle, but rather in the service of signifying life-as-transformation, which necessarily produces cast-off husks and dust and slime and putrefaction; these are the trans/super/natural markers by which we can know that being is really a body-of-becoming.

This difference is why David's visions must be read as more than transphobic grotesquerie. Arriving at the scummy physical and metaphysical manifestations of the super/natural trans body, we realize that this is just what real personhood is as a person inhabiting a trans body within the current structure of culture and society. Giovanni seems to understand this state of affairs and embraces it. When David first meets him, he continuously turns away to "talk to a phantom,"²⁴⁸ and David imagines that after his death, Giovanni will return to haunt him by the witch's power: "until I die there will be those moments, moments seeming to rise up out of the ground like Macbeth's witches, when his face will come before me..."²⁴⁹ Again, the fear that, like a woman or like the transsexual, his body will be haunted.

And at last we are left only with the novel's final passage and David's own face rising up before himself as he faces his body in the mirror. As with the Child's face at the end of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," David's body, learning at last what monstrosity

²⁴⁸ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 38.

²⁴⁹ Baldwin, 42.

feels like in the world after Giovanni's death, becomes both an instrument and a controlling force: "the body in the mirror forces me to turn and face it. And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery."²⁵⁰ Under these conditions he finally comes to the realization with which we opened this chapter, seeing the relationship between himself and the abject spaces he is made to occupy: the "diseased and undefinable sex" that hung in the center of Giovanni's room, the locus of all his trans anxieties, is his own: "I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife...."²⁵¹

The only knife here, of course, is his own revelatory knowledge, gained by his fellowship with monsters, about what might lie in his future if he can't outrun himself. He looks at himself in the mirror and wills himself not to undergo transformation. The fear is too great, for now. The trans body here is something that is understood to be not only monstrous in itself but remade through its relationships with the monstrous, through the calamity it is cursed to endure, through the embrace of what has been rejected and cast outside and made super-natural. In David we have a protagonist who interacts with the world through a kind of rampantly destructive privilege, but he is at the same time clearly seeking his own conditions of livability – a living that requires abjection, destruction, and remaking through a haunting by the annihilated remainder – the ghosts of our becoming.

²⁵⁰ Baldwin, 168.

²⁵¹ Baldwin, 168.

CHAPTER TWO: LOVED BY SOMETHING STRANGE: Repulsive Women and the Trans Shadow

In the previous chapter, I discussed a correspondence between an emergent interest in the Gothic and the symbology of the monstrous, the scientific development of gender, and the establishment of feminist literary criticism as a coherent field of analysis. Here, I wish to explore that correspondence further by interrogating how it influences how we make the history of women's literature writ large. In particular, I want to look at the periodization of women's literature during the ascendancy of American modernist literature in the early 20th century. There are a few compelling reasons for this period, but chief among them is the sense developed by feminist historians of the period that the unique salon culture experienced by American women living and making art in Paris between 1900-1940 was instrumental in developing a feminist (and in many cases, lesbian) socialization that made possible the emergence and distribution of women's art. When I look at this period, however, I see clearly that our emerging concept of feminine literary identity seems to have developed at the same time as a transsexual literary identity that seems to have remained hidden in plain sight for decades and is only now being resuscitated. So, the subject of this chapter will be the construction of gendered histories and the subsequent reliance on those histories as a constitutive force for what gender even means. Identity as a woman, as a lesbian, is created by the granting of narrative primacy to specific historical moments, bringing them into coherence with each other. By reading for the hidden transsexual history, however, we can interrogate not only

the act of making history, but linkages between that history and the apparently formative concept of gendered socialization. Our present magical narrative of women, purely through socializing with each other, making each other into women capable of writing women's literature and women's history might then give way to a more capacious understanding: these dens of women's socialization sure seem to have produced a lot of transsexual writers.

Transsexuals of the Left Bank

As I move forward into thinking about the links among gender, socialization, kinship, and the making of histories, I want to take a moment to reinvolve the lingering effects of dualism on these discourses. In the last chapter, I pointed out several instances of how discussions of the gendered body remain fundamentally committed to the twin principles of developing a rational resolution for the problems of dualism and creating more livable (e.g., intelligible) conditions for marginalized bodies. I bring this up because when I began to think about the role of transsexuality in literary modernism, I encountered Emma Heaney's *The New Woman*, a text which emphasizes the extent to which dualism's problematic of the relationship between body and mind/spirit remains central to these conversations.

In particular, Heaney's book begins with an analysis of Ulrich's formulation of transsexuality as having one's soul trapped in the wrong body, as I mentioned in the previous chapter. For Heaney, following the discovery of sex hormones in the field of

genetics in the 1910s, Ulrich’s formulation filled a social need as “a blunt cipher that explains the fact that definitions of sex categories change over time, often in seemingly abrupt spurts that challenge the organization of society.”²⁵² Over time, the formulation has developed a kind of abstracted embodiment of its own, being used bluntly as “an explanatory figure in stories about the general relation between bodily structures and sex identity.”²⁵³ That abstraction has enabled a certain kind of discursive move towards rationalization that should not be surprising at all to anyone who has read my previous chapter; at any historical juncture wherein the advent of new knowledges or experiences mandated a revaluation of so-called conclusive knowledge of sex, as Heaney says happened after the 1910s, the easy rationalization—easy, that is, so long as one ignores the tensions of dualism—of Ulrich’s formulation means that its allegorical abstraction of transsexual women...

...reinserts trans women into a cis understanding of sex as that understanding is adjusted to account for historical change. These conceptual orderings attribute to the experts’ trans feminine model both a kind of absolutely material ground for tropes (actual castration) and the most ideated narrative (a story of treacherous crossing). The forwarding of this story allows the writer to avoid the actual provocation of trans femininity: genitals do not ground sex in the way that cis people imagine, and all bodies can be penetrated and are thus vulnerable to social feminism. It is trans feminine life in its great diversity that presents this singular challenge to cis logic and not the modernist period’s technological innovations in endocrinology and genital surgery.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 5.

²⁵³ Heaney, 5.

²⁵⁴ Heaney, 5.

In other words, what we have is a cycle whereby the actual existence of transsexual women threatens culturally dominant explanations of gender and sex, only for an allegorical (and, it must be said, magical) abstraction of trans women, rooted in Ulrich's narrative of souls trapped in the wrong body, to emerge and provide the necessary rationalizations to ensure the continuity of those very explanations. Heaney herself attributes the persistence of this allegory not only to the rationalizing effects inherent in the acceptance of dualist propositions, but to two distinct historical moments. Firstly, to modernist texts' use of the transsexual as a disruptive emblem of traditional categories at a time when sexology and psychoanalysis alike were re-interrogating the meaning of man and woman, secondly, to queer theory's later use of the transsexual to carry out the same operation on "the limits of a previous feminism that took 'woman' as its political subject" throughout the 1990s and 2000s.²⁵⁵

I buy this, but I also wonder whether Heaney's concept of the persisting "allegorical trans woman" shows us that there was little need for queer theory to disrupt a notion of "woman" that was, in fact, already defined by its transness. Something about woman, as a historical category of analysis, being defined as inherently unnatural but also subject to these revisions that struggle to continuously recapture its excesses, suggests a similarity in the structure of oppression leveled against women and trans women alike (hence my occasional collapse of the two into the term "gender-oppressed bodies" in the previous chapter). Certainly, as the haunted body has shown us, fear has served as an

²⁵⁵ Heaney, 6.

animating force in virtually every campaign of marginalization waged against women, cis or trans.

Regardless, Heaney's text is in large part about drawing a distinction between the perpetually reinscribed medicalized concept of the transsexual and what she calls the "vernacular trans feminine," or the multiplicity of transsexual experience emerging from the vast literature of the modernist period.²⁵⁶ Although not generally recognized as transsexuals at the time, many of these figures "identified and were recognized as women. They wore dresses, plucked their eyebrows, used makeup, called themselves and each other by feminine names and pronouns, worked in feminized sectors (often as prostitutes), and engaged in sexual and other relationships in female roles."²⁵⁷ The transsexual as she emerges in our modernist literature, then, is a more richly textured figure than the sexological or psychoanalytical history of transsexuality might suggest.

And yet for decades cis scholars have been unable to see this figure, even as she stood right before them. Decades of feminist scholarship devoted to moving women authors from the margins of literary modernism have approached the omnipresent figure of the transsexual, only to shy away from here and retreat into the patriarchal discourse of rationalization and pathology. For instance, Sheri Benstock's casting of trans women as "fantastic [parodies] of womanhood,"²⁵⁸ Sandra Gilbert's sundering categorical distinction between cis women's "ceremonial androgyny" and trans women's

²⁵⁶ Heaney, 9.

²⁵⁷ Heaney, 9.

²⁵⁸ Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 258. Qtd. in Heaney, 15.

“transvestism”²⁵⁹ which “mock[s] women and reinforces a strict distinction between the subordinated female and the empowered male,”²⁶⁰ or Marjorie Garber’s sartorial reduction of the transsexual, *Vested Interests*.²⁶¹ Throughout this chapter, I will argue that this impulse to retreat into rationalizing discourse, this project of resuscitating maligned women by bringing them within the auspices of logopower’s intelligible totality, is yet another byproduct of the American fear of the transsexual that we identified in the previous chapter. Strong evidence for this is that, much as with the instances of the haunted body we just dealt with, transsexuality in modernist literature is more often than not figured in terms of darkness, night, monstrosity, grotesquerie, and so forth.

The failure of Benstock and other scholars to fully apprehend the transsexual as more than a veiled patriarchal threat is a failure of their decoding symbology: as Flannery O’Connor says of Yankees reading southern literature, they do not know the truly grotesque when they see it, and they have no comprehension of what it is signifying. And yet, in modernist literary works by queer women such as Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Ernest Hemingway, we can see the language of fear, the symbology of the grotesque, operating not just as an ordered response to the pathologically base, but as a form of magical thinking about transsexuality and its capacities for insight and transformation. I call this particular formulation the *trans shadow* within literary modernism. Something more than the allegorical abstraction that Heaney identifies precisely because of its

²⁵⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert, “Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (1980): 391–417.

²⁶⁰ Heaney, *The New Woman*, 15.

²⁶¹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York London: Routledge, 1997).

magical rather than rational figuration, the trans shadow recognizes the simple reality that Americans really are afraid of women and transsexuals alike, and that this fear shows us how few distinctions logopower makes between the two categories. As the trans shadow shows us the wielding of the transsexual for a purpose other than a retreat into rationalizing discourse, we are able to ask questions about exactly what kind of history we think we're telling when we talk about women's modernism. Over and beyond the notion that the distinctly women-driven culture of salon socialization and publication extant in Paris between 1900 and 1940 serves as an origin point for a history of "women's literature" as a coherent field, we may also see that, as Heaney herself notes, "woman has never been a cis category."²⁶²

And so I hope to chart a different history of modernist literature and its relationship to oppressed genders by use of the trans/super/natural method and its apprehension of the trans shadow. To do this, I want to begin with a breakdown of Sheri Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, which is perhaps the cornerstone of gynocentric studies of women's writing. Benstock's book is useful insofar as it gives an exhaustive account of the way in which masculine interpretations of literary modernism have obscured not just the literary contributions but the very existence of modernism's women. Many of these interpretations carry with them the weight of making history, of making pronouncements that purport to sum up the totality of the era and its cultural output. For instance, one might look at Hugh Kenner's inscription of the world of modernist writing as "The Pound Era," a period marked chiefly, in his analysis,

²⁶² Heaney, *The New Woman*, 20.

by the Classically-inspired literary contributions of five men: Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Samuel Beckett.²⁶³ According to Kenner as well as other major male historians of modernism such as Cowley and Hoffman, the forces that organize these five men into a coherent summation of entire decades of literary production are the direct (rather than indirect) experience of fighting in the first World War, and access to a Classical education which taught the languages of Greek and Latin from which the major formal and thematic influences of the period would flow.²⁶⁴ Benstock rightly points out that this historical narrative is inherently exclusionary to women from its inception insofar as women were not permitted to directly fight in the war nor, usually, to receive the Classical education in question.²⁶⁵

This is not to say that Kenner doesn't recognize the reductive nature of his own pronouncements. Indeed, his rationale for the elision of women from his history can perhaps be inferred from his take on why the poet Sappho does not often appear among the influences of male modernist writers: "men [could] find no way to relate their interest in it to other interests."²⁶⁶ Of course another way of saying this might simply be that, when one is trying to make a history, it is easier to organize the works of non-marginalized individuals into an intelligible totality; making totality is, after all, impossible when one acknowledges its remainders. Benstock considers this shunting of women (and, presumably, other minority writers) into the realm of the paracanonical to

²⁶³ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

²⁶⁴ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 28.

²⁶⁵ Benstock, 28.

²⁶⁶ Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 557.

be a “loss [that] cut women off from their literary heritage.”²⁶⁷ The ejection of Sappho from the Classical influence of modernist writers was a reflection of the ejection of women as a whole, and Benstock argues that her belated incorporation within the historical narrative created by men means very little: that act of incorporation “created a palimpsest that simultaneously revealed and rewrote the literary past. Existing under erasure in this modern text was an ancient woman, whose literary forms were barely visible under the modern chemicals used to decipher her.”²⁶⁸

Benstock goes on to position Susan Stanford Friedman in contrast to Kenner and a masculinist history of modernist writing. Friedman theorizes the origin of modernism as a...

...crisis of belief that pervades twentieth-century western culture: loss of faith, experience of fragmentation and disintegration, and shattering of cultural symbols and norms. At the center of this crisis were the new technologies and methodologies of science, the epistemology of logical positivism, and the relativism of functionalist thought.... The artist as seer would attempt to create what the culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning in the dimension of art, brought into being through the agency of language, the word or logos of the twentieth century.²⁶⁹

Central to Friedman’s account then, is the claim that there is something vital lacking from the totalizing accounts of the world suggested by western religion and science, and that this vital remainder always seems to come flowing back to us in the language of the

²⁶⁷ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 25.

²⁶⁸ Benstock, 25.

²⁶⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 97–98.

supernatural or mystical, by way of “seers.” Benstock, to her credit, makes this supernatural aspect of Friedman’s theorizing of the modern clear when she compares Kenner’s centering of “the word” in his account of modernism, as “a curiosity whose ways of meaning can be explained by scientific research: first one applies to a dictionary and next one invokes grammatical systems,” with Friedman’s use of “Word,” which is “mystical and mysterious. Its power to shape and remake the world invokes the very power of God. This Word has powers beyond the scientific and against which the powers of scientific rationalism fail: Kenner’s word can merely explain the world; Friedman’s Word can remake the world.”²⁷⁰

I appreciate Benstock’s account for its dramatic qualities, and also for her articulation of the stakes of leaving whole swaths of humanity out of one’s attempts to make a history. And yet, in many respects, her own account of women’s modernist writing which makes up the bulk of her work is, in my view, painfully reductive in its own right. Benstock’s work is exclusionary precisely insofar as it fails to reckon with the emergence of the transsexual in modernist literature that Heaney describes above. I’d like to go one step further, however, and point out that this failure to apprehend the transsexual stems in part from an inability to read the language of darkness, abjection, monstrosity, and grotesquery through which the transsexual makes herself known. As we shall see in the readings that follow, where the transsexual is seen at all in Benstock’s account of women’s modernism, she is seen only via the mask created by the fears of

²⁷⁰ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 28.

heteronormative society and the operations of logopower. The *trans shadow* remains painfully invisible.

I want to explicate these oversights by examining several works of women's writing from the era and showing the overlooked function of the trans shadow in each. But first, I think it will be instructive to see the kind of damage that is done not just to literary analysis but to history-making writ large by such oversights. In order to do this, I want to start with a quick look at certain claims that Benstock makes about the salon culture of literary Paris from 1900 to 1940.

Polycules of the Paracanonical

The desire to look at Benstock's take on salon culture stems from the linkage between the marking of histories as specifically "women's histories," and the role that socialization is thought to play in the conditions by which those histories arise. This linking between socialization and the writing of histories is of some significance both to the analysis to gender and to transsexuality specifically because of enduring debates about socialization as a constituting force of gender which trans-exclusionary feminists position as a fate more inescapable than biology itself. The supposed exposure of trans women to "male socialization" is marshalled as an even more primary distinction than hormones or chromosomes when it comes to reinforcing the strict categorical boundaries of sexual difference. In spite of the obvious absurdities of this stance, we can see the belief in socialization's relationship to gender playing out in Benstock's analysis.

Early in her text, she positions herself as a kind of champion of Natalie Barney, the host of one of the two largest literary salons at which women were encouraged to share work. “Through her salon,” Benstock writes, “Barney wielded considerable power among Left Bank writers, power often employed in the service of her commitment to feminist ideals, using the salon to introduce women writers and their work to each other and to the larger public.”²⁷¹ Tellingly, this reduction of Barney to a kind of liberal girlboss of the era is predicated entirely upon Barney’s moral and aesthetic distaste towards transsexuals. “Barney,” we are told, “spent a lifetime trying to revise the public and private images held by the larger community and lesbian women themselves,” both through acting as a “role model” whose exemplary behavior was evident in her writing “poetry in the tradition of Sappho,” and her “pioneer[ing] efforts to rewrite lesbian history and experience, to deny that guilt, self-recrimination, drug abuse, suicide, unhappiness, and psychological torment were part and parcel of the lesbian’s commitment to an alternative life.”²⁷² A key part of these pioneering efforts was, apparently, the...

...object[ion] to modes of lesbian behavior that seemed to confirm the scientific theories then prevalent. In particular, she objected to any form of dress or behavior that suggested homosexual women were really men trapped in women’s bodies. Therefore, she objected to cross-dressing, to the anger, self-indulgence, and self-pity that marked the behavior of many of her friends, and to the need to mime the male in dress, speech, and demeanor.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Benstock, 9.

²⁷² Benstock, 9.

²⁷³ Benstock, 9–10.

What is astonishing to me here is the way Benstock tries to position Barney's (and her own) attitudes towards transsexuality as a rejection of patriarchal scientific norms, all the while being blind to her own implicit mirroring in that very framework. In one breath, she rebukes transsexuals for reinforcing the blunt and reductive frame of Ulrich's body/soul split, but then accepts that in its entirety as the means by which one must interpret the cross-dressing activities (and indeed, the moral character) of the lesbians attending Barney's salons. What is crucial to observe here is the extent to which logopower obscures its operations within the desire to create a totalizing characterization of any specific population, field of knowledge, or period of history; rather than treating these cross-dressing queers as conscious actors telling us something about themselves, she reduces them to objects of analysis, and makes this reduction the cornerstone of the narrative she develops for Natalie Barney as a (cis) feminist heroine.

As we might guess, Benstock's portrayal of the other major figure in Paris' salon culture, Gertrude Stein, is substantially less charitable. Citing Stein's penchant for adopting male clothing and mannerisms as a sign of her self-centered nature and fundamental betrayal of women, Benstock contrasts her sharply with Barney, in saying that...

...Barney never used her salon to further her own career as a writer, nor did she set herself up as the center of the salon. Her purpose was to bring people together, to foster the work of other artists (many of whom were women), and to embrace the cultural life of the Left Bank community. Barney's was a feminist effort that would eventually become an endeavor on behalf of lesbian literature and art. Gertrude Stein's role was quite different. She very soon displaced her brother as the spokesperson on art and literature, placing herself at the center of the Saturday

evenings at home, gathering the men around her while consigning the ‘wives’ to other rooms, where they entertained themselves or were entertained by Alice Toklas.²⁷⁴

A great cognitive dissonance is evident in Benstock’s observation that while Stein was “unconventional in her choice of a sexual partner, in her dress, and in her writings,” the very markers of difference by which Barney became a champion of feminist rights, for Stein, “the coincidence of these oddities did not constitute a subversive feminism.”²⁷⁵ Drawing on Susan Gubar’s writings in “Blessings in Disguise,” Benstock writes off Stein’s transsexual behaviors such as cross-dressing as an “ambiguous eroticism,” “a travesty of sexual signs”²⁷⁶, that indicates “self-division, even self-contempt,”²⁷⁷ all while speaking to a “complex relation among sexual choice, social class, role identification, and intellectual endeavor,”²⁷⁸ but somehow never to the possibility of transsexuality itself. So deep is Benstock’s investment in eliding Stein’s agency in performing transsexual behaviors that she goes out of her way to employ that most feminist of critiques, insulting Stein’s appearance, noting that her male clothes were a “uniform [that] never made her look masculine... Even with her cropped hair... Stein remained recognizably a woman. [...] if Toklas’s dress was always entirely feminine, Stein’s was never altogether masculine.”²⁷⁹ This emphatic protest reaches its zenith in the following passage which

²⁷⁴ Benstock, 15.

²⁷⁵ Benstock, 175–76.

²⁷⁶ Susan Gubar, “Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists,” *The Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 3 (1981): 488. Qtd. in Benstock, 176.

²⁷⁷ Gubar, 501. Qtd. in Benstock, 176.

²⁷⁸ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 176.

²⁷⁹ Benstock, 176.

mires not only Stein's salon, her sartorial choices, her relationships, and her behaviors in the confusions of a patriarchal definition of gender, but her writing as well:

Certainly Stein evaded gender categories in her choice of dress, which was original in extending the boundaries of traditional female costuming, but both in her life and in her writing, Stein remained within the socially constructed dichotomies that distinguish the masculine from the feminine. In her personal relationships Stein assumed male authority—importantly, without having to adopt male dress as a sign of that authority—while her writing explored the polarities of a male-female dialectic in which the female labors under the male prerogative inherent in grammar itself. That she rewrote the story of a lesbian triangle (Q.E.D.) as a heterosexual triangle ("Melantha"), taking the masculine persona for herself, suggests Stein's difficulty in moving outside the gender dialectic. Although her writing does not duplicate either the tone or the content of patriarchal language, it demonstrates the ways in which the masculine prerogative of language is reinforced in the most unexpected ways. For Stein it was not clothing that marked a break with patriarchal rules, but language, and for her there is no easy equation between her form of dress and behavior and her literary and linguistic experiments.²⁸⁰

To put it bluntly, such an analysis of Barney and Stein depends entirely on a willingness to champion the feminist significance of Paris salon culture while at the same time denigrating it for its transsexuality. Indeed, Benstock later scornfully describes salons as places where “women of the demi-monde mixed with aged duchesses, in which homosexual men appeared in rouge and wigs and homosexual women wore tuxedos with monocles tucked in the pockets.”²⁸¹ It is deeply ironic to me that Benstock herself recognizes the historical elision of Sappho as a crucial impediment to the inclusion of

²⁸⁰ Benstock, 177–78.

²⁸¹ Benstock, 40.

women in earlier attempts to codify the modernist field of literature (because her absence robbed women of the same Classical influence attributed to figures like Pound and Eliot), while she at the same time elides the eruption of a transsexual culture and literature among the queer feminist population she's studying. Even while she derides Ulrich's formulation as regressive and symptomatic of patriarchy in the framing of sexual difference, she relegates Stein to exactly such an analysis, and when other writers like Radclyffe Hall took it up as a topic in *The Well of Loneliness*, she could see it only for falling for a trap.²⁸²

To avoid this mistake, we must take these transsexual authors at their own words, and view their work as facilitating the emergence of new and disruptive comprehensions of both gender *and* history. To return for a moment to Susan Friedman, I think the mystical quality invested in her "Word" suggests that what queer and women authors are offering to our understanding of literary modernism is the use of a language that resists the drive to intelligibility, that allows for a suspension rather than a resolution of contradictions, and as such allows history to be written against the grain of logopower. When Catharine R. Stimpson calls Gertrude Stein's writing an "anti-language"²⁸³ that uses words in a way that is dissociated from their conventional meanings, I think it's worth thinking of that linguistic power of dissociation and disjunction in terms of the mystical and the prophetic; certainly Stimpson does so when she regards the deviated use of language by a writer like Stein as crucial to interrogating and disrupting the

²⁸² Benstock, 51.

²⁸³ Catharine R. Stimpson, "The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein," *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (1977): 489–506.

“feminization of the mind/body problem.”²⁸⁴ What comes to mind for me here is something like John Berger’s comments on Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, in which he says that “if the skull had been painted like the rest, its metaphysical implication would have disappeared; it would have become an object like everything else, a mere part of a mere skeleton of a man who happened to be dead.”²⁸⁵ In these words, I think, we get a sense of the important work being done by the language of women modernists: subjectivity, or to put it less grossly, human life, cannot be represented by language that pretends to the objective, even in the register of description. To reduce its boundary crossings to a reification of patriarchal categories of gender, then, is nonsensical.

Stimpson’s term, “anti-language,” implicitly embeds a claim that faith in the meaning of words is one of the only things remaining intact after what we popularly perceive as the postmodern dissolution of meanings following World War I. More fundamental, however, than a faith in words and their meaning is the faith that one *can* speak intelligibly, that even if certain particular words no longer operate according to the laws previously ascribed to them, one still has the fundamental code of language from which one can rebuild coherency and totality out of the ashes of the war. This faith, to me, is what Stein is really speaking against; what can be built out of those ashes cannot be built with intelligibility in mind, or else it will instantiate the very conditions of its destruction. Her descriptions of objects in *Tender Buttons*, for example, famously invoke a sense of alien gaps in communication; a way of speaking about the world that calls into

²⁸⁴ Stimpson, 489.

²⁸⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1972), 91.

question the possibility of agreement between different phenomenological subjects about even simple matters of what a glass jug is, while at the same time it imbues those descriptions with deep personal meaning. Here, as well as in the shifting of words into her lover's mouth and memory in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*—and indeed throughout the transsexual culture and literature of the period as a whole—there is a concerted effort to construct a world, as well as a history, in which one can be seen and recognized, if never fully understood.

In doing so, Stein's writings anachronistically gesture to the "queer" rather than the identitarian. When critics, including Benstock, attempt to situate Stein within the fixed category of "early 20th-century lesbian American ex-pats living in Paris"—itself obviously a category with tons of liminality and play—they run into issues which disrupt even that loose fixity. For instance, Stein's endless references to herself as "male" within her journals and marginalia, her understanding of her status in her relationship as Alice's "husband," her use of masculine (he/him) pronouns within the home, and so on. While Benstock attempts to reduce such slippages of gender to Stein's influence by patriarchy, and her supposed ignorance of how one might make sense of lesbianism in a respectable way like Barney, rather than "becoming a man" and reinscribing the dominion of heterosexual desire, it seems plain to me that the gender-play embedded in Stein's life and writing shows that she knew what "she" was doing.

I want to quote here the opening lines of the under-read Stein work, *A Long Gay Book*:

When they are very little just only a baby you can never tell
which one is to be a lady. There are some when they feel it

inside them that it has been with them that there was once so very little of them, that they were a baby, helpless and no conscious feeling in them, that they knew nothing then when they were kissed and dandled and fixed by others who knew them when they could know nothing inside them or around them, some get from all this that once surely happened to them to that which was then every bit that was then them, there are some when they feel it later inside them that they were such once and that was all that there was then of them, there are some who have from such a knowing an uncertain curious kind of feeling in them that their having been so little once and knowing makes it all a broken world for them that they have inside them, kills for them the everlasting feeling; and they spend their life in many ways, and always they are trying to make for themselves a new everlasting feeling....²⁸⁶

To put it bluntly, this is the trans imaginary if I've ever encountered it. The feeling of a thing "done to you" at a point when you were as yet "nothing," of having been marked before you had even been formed, of having been given both a history and a destiny before you were even properly alive, and the sense that this having been done to you robs you of a sense of continuity with yourself—the "everlasting feeling"—would, I suspect, be familiar to many transsexuals. It certainly was to me. Alongside the more prominent works like *Tender Buttons* and the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein's use of language here to convey the endless circularity that comes with speculating on what might have been (or what could be) different, while trapped within a society whose categories and language permit no conceptual or material escape, attests to the kinds of

²⁸⁶ Gertrude Stein, *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 152–53.

historical and cultural interventions we might find in recovering these paracanonical works and reading them through the lens of the trans/super/natural.

To Think is to Be Sick

So without further delay, let's do just that. At the risk of continuing to harp on Benstock, her influential reading of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* is one I hope to address as the origin point of a number of misconceptions about the text.

Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936)

Published in 1936, Barnes' first novel is generally regarded as something of a *roman à clef* referencing the author's own tumultuous relationship with artist Thelma Wood. The plot, such as it is, concerns the dissolution of the relationship between two women: Nora Flood, regarded as a stand-in for Barnes herself, and Robin Vote, an analogue for Wood. After Robin begins heading out into the city each night instead of spending time with Nora, Nora seeks out the advice of a local transsexual mystic, Dr. Matthew O'Connor, who explains that Robin has begun romancing another woman named Jenny. The bulk of the novel is taken up by long dialogic exchanges between Nora and O'Connor, as Nora seeks advice on how to mend her relationship and, later, how to live with heartache, with the doctor responding with long monologues, snippets of her own personal history, riddles, and esoteric philosophy about night and darkness.

Benstock reads Nora as a woman suffering from an excess of guilt and revulsion stemming from an inability to accept her own lesbian desires. This revulsion evidently stems from society's compulsion that Nora understand herself as an "inverted woman," and Nora's chief problem is that she is cut off from her own womanhood because she accepts this patriarchal conscription of lesbian desire. Taking the genre of the *roman à clef* very seriously indeed, Benstock then extrapolates this reading of Nora onto Barnes' own life, arguing that the author's subsequent withdrawal from public life and her self-acknowledged decades of celibacy point to her being trapped in a similar conceptual bind. Nora and Barnes both require a "double image of woman that 'holds together' a fractured female identity,"²⁸⁷ and struggle to find this in Robin/Wood, both figures who are described as boyish and otherwise coded in trans masculine terms.

But, as I'm inclined to ask, what about the witch? Indeed, if we're to take the mapping of the novel onto Barnes' life seriously, then we have to account more fully for all the figures involved. The general consensus of the novel states that Barnes is Nora, Wood is Robin, Jenny is Henriette Alice McCrea-Metcalf (a literary translator who was also a partner of Wood), and the secondary character of Robin's ex-husband Felix Volkbein is Frederick Philip Grove (a Canadian novelist).²⁸⁸ Who, then, is Dr. O'Connor? As if under some nepenthine sorcery, virtually everyone who writes on the subject neglects to account for her. This particular oversight is worth bearing in mind for a point I wish to make later, but I bring it up now because it affects more than the making

²⁸⁷ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 248.

²⁸⁸ Lynn DeVore, "The Backgrounds of 'Nightwood': Robin, Felix, and Nora," *Journal of Modern Literature* 10, no. 1 (1983): 71-90.

of autofictional analogies; in the case of Benstock, it radically inhibits her reading of the text and of Nora as a character, and prevents her from reading the dark language of Barnes' world for the emergence of the trans shadow.

Barnes' earlier work teaches us to hunt for associations among women, gender crossings, and supernatural or grotesque symbols. In *The Book of Repulsive Women*, she describes her female figures as "the living dead," "dripping" and "bulging" "corpses" peopling poems with titles like "SUICIDE" and "DEATH," and having no names other than "Corpse A" and "Corpse B," no fate beyond what the patriarchy can reassemble from the matter of their dead bodies.²⁸⁹ Her *Ladies Almanack* presents a motif wherein gender crossings from the feminine into the masculine and back are marked by both access to power and by monstrosity, cursing, and damnation: women who make such crossings "have had a Testes of sorts, however writed and awander; that indeed she was called forth a man, and when answering, by some mischance, or monstrous fury of fate stumbled over a womb, and was damned then and forever to drag it about, like a prisoner his ball and chain, whether she would or no."²⁹⁰ I bring this imagery of transsexual monstrosity up because it represents another instance of cis critics like Benstock encountering a transsexual sentiment and diminishing it as a sad reification of patriarchal boundary-making.

It's only by acknowledging that that we can make sense of what Benstock does to Dr. O'Connor, issuing a Janice Raymond-esque condemnation of the novel's Tiresian

²⁸⁹ Djuna Barnes, *The Book of Repulsive Women: And Other Poems*, ed. Rebecca Loncraine (1915; repr., Manchester England: Carcanet Press Ltd., 2006).

²⁹⁰ Djuna Barnes, *Ladies Almanack* (1928; repr., New York: NYU Press, 1992), 53.

oracle. O'Connor, she writes, "transforms [her]self into a woman by adopting her adornments – her powder, lipstick, nail polish, perfume – and in doing so calls attention to woman's role as ornament in society: she is decorative... inessential."²⁹¹ Casting Nora as a woman divorced from her capacity to understand her own womanhood by the specter of depraved gender-confusion embodied by O'Connor and Robin,²⁹² Benstock sees O'Connor's role as one of a dark sorceress who "requires woman's dress to perform onanistic rites,"²⁹³ working a Circe-like enchantment designed to "render Nora mute" through enacting a performance which "parodies woman's language, steals her stories and her images."²⁹⁴ As if the trans shadow's existence could not be more plain, she goes on to refer to O'Connor (and Gertrude Stein!) as "vampire women," enacting a slow death upon lesbians by the gender confusion that they sow, and their perversion of femininity through the adoption of masculine signifiers:

Although a "sham," a doctor who is not really a doctor, O'Connor serves as a fallen version of society's representative. Robin is unprepared to meet his gaze, is vulnerable to that gaze: "The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a 'picture' forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger. [...] Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers."²⁹⁵ The doctor's gaze and ours prey on this woman, her vulnerable beauty a reminder that in the past she has been forced to submit to man's will, has been

²⁹¹ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 257.

²⁹² Benstock, 257.

²⁹³ Benstock, 263.

²⁹⁴ Benstock, 266.

²⁹⁵ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (1937; repr., New York: New Directions, 1961), 37. Qtd. in Benstock.

"eaten" by him, her blood dripping from his lips. (Here the image of blood is reinforced by the fact that Dr. O'Connor has used the occasion of tending to the ill woman to borrow her lipstick to replace the "line of rouge across his lips"; this image of "blood on the lips of our forefathers" recalls the male fear of female power—of the mother as a devouring vampire.) Juxtaposed against Barnes's claim that Stein "ate" her brother, the image of eating those who are vulnerable is particularly barbarous. We remember too Natalie Barney's horror at the vision of Alice being consumed by an ever larger and less mobile Gertrude Stein. Vampire women are frequent characters in Barnes's work; they have learned their methods from the patriarchy (as Gertrude Stein learned hers). Robin Vote, unfortunately, has too often been mistaken for a vampire woman, a representative of the world's evil. This victim, however, has been mistaken for the victimizer.²⁹⁶

The problem here, of course, is that Benstock fails to read the trans shadow that so clearly animates works like *Nightwood* or *The Book of Repulsive Women*. Unable to read the dark signifiers of the abject and the monstrous as anything but the graveyard of the patriarchy, she fails to see the forms of life that are asserting themselves right in front of her.

A trans/super/natural reading of *Nightwood* which understands the synergy between the book's transsexuality and its darkness offers an alternative. Looking at the work through this frame, we might do well to spend more time on the sheer strangeness of the plot's central conceit: not the collapse of a relationship itself, but the search for the counsel of a transsexual oracle to help one survive that collapse. There are two major encounters between Nora and the oracular doctor throughout the book and a close reading

²⁹⁶ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 255.

of them shows the way in which light and darkness, the titular Night, is used as a motif for discussing the emergence of forbidden knowledge from a position of social marginalization. When Nora first comes to the doctor's chambers, she makes her intentions utterly clear: "Doctor, I have come to ask you to tell me everything you know about the night."²⁹⁷

Upon asking O'Connor why it is that Robin flees her bed and heads out into "the night" every evening, the doctor describes the allure of the night as a space of the undecided and undetermined, in opposition to the calcifying logics of the daylight, which is associated with patriarchal institutions like Christianity: "The very constitution of twilight is a fabulous reconstruction of fear, fear bottom-out and wrong side up. Every day is thought upon and calculated, but the night is not premeditated. The bible lies the one way, but the night gown the other."²⁹⁸ Here we can see that the actual instantiation of fear in this text is not the phantasm of the predatory transsexual or a "vampire woman," but darkness itself, which at the same represents the path to *literally* transformative queer knowledges:

'Listen! Do things look in the ten and twelve of noon as they look in the dark? Is the hand, the face, the foot, the same face and hand and foot seen by the sun? For now the hand lies in a shadow, its beauties and its deformities are in a smoke —there is a sickle of doubt across the cheek bone thrown by the hat's brim, so there is half a face to be peered back into speculation. A leaf of darkness has fallen under the chin and lies deep upon the arches of the eyes; the eyes themselves have changed their colour. The very mother's

²⁹⁷ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 79.

²⁹⁸ Barnes, 80.

head you swore by in the dock is a heavier head, crowned with ponderable hair.²⁹⁹

These transformations are more than an alternate episteme accessible to the denizens of the night, however; in the calculus of the mystical doctor who fashions herself as a “nocturnal hag,” they represent a space wherein the necessity of literal material transformations can be imagined, actualized, regretted, lost, and won. I quote the following long passage in its entirety because of its absolute centrality to the concept of the trans shadow (as well as to appreciate its status as possibly the first direct and explicit portrayal of gender dysphoria in American fiction):

‘Ho, nocturnal hag whimpering on the thorn, rot in the grist, mildew in the corn,’ said the doctor. ‘If you’ll pardon my song and singing voice, both of which were better until I gave my kidney on the left side to France in the war—and I’ve drunk myself half around the world cursing her for jerking it out—if I had it to do again, grand country though it is—I’d be the girl found lurking behind the army, or up with the hill folk, all of which is to rest me a little of my knowledge, until I can get back to it. I’m coming to something. Misericordia, am I not the girl to know of what I speak? We go to our Houses by our nature—and our nature, no matter how it is, we all have to stand—as for me, so God has made me, my house is the pissing port. Am I to blame if I’ve been summoned before and this my last and oddest call? In the old days I was possibly a girl in Marseilles thumping the dock with a sailor, and perhaps it’s that memory that haunts me. The wise men say that the remembrance of things past is all that we have for a future, and am I to blame if I’ve turned up this time as I shouldn’t have been, when it was a high soprano I wanted, and deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king’s kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner? And what do I get but a face on me like an old

²⁹⁹ Barnes, 85.

child's bottom—is that a happiness, do you think? [...] God, I never asked better than to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar. Is it my fault that my only fireside is the outhouse? And that I can never hang my muffler, mittens and Bannybrook umbrella on anything better than a bit of tin boarding as high as my eyes, having to be brave, no matter what, to keep the mascara from running away?³⁰⁰

As Nora begins to understand Robin's similarity to O'Connor as a denizen of the night, she recognizes that, like the doctor, Robin has had to pass through a kind of death in order to access the necessary powers of darkness, that she is "outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrous vain."³⁰¹ Through this, Nora begins to understand Robin's transsexuality and the difficulties of keeping her confined to a place of daylight in which her essence is fixed as feminine. "I have been loved," Nora announces, "by something strange, and it has forgotten me. [...] It was me made her hair stand on end, because I loved her. She turned bitter because I made her fate colossal. She wanted darkness in her mind—to throw a shadow over what she was powerless to alter—her dissolute life, her life at night; and I, I dashed it down."³⁰² Startlingly, in Nora's very own words, she pronounces herself as the very antithesis of Benstock's reading of the text; far from the experience of a transsexual partner divorcing her from the understanding of her own womanhood, she has come to understand herself in relation to "something strange," a new and different type of life that is both akin to and dissimilar from her own life as a cis lesbian. She even goes so far as to

³⁰⁰ Barnes, 90–91.

³⁰¹ Barnes, 146.

³⁰² Barnes, 155–56.

recognize that her “cho[osing] a girl who resembles a boy” has implications for the exercise of patriarchal power within the auspices of queer relationships.³⁰³ O’Connor supports this understanding and issues a statement against the imposition of stultifying fixity upon transsexual life through its reduction to a fetishized object of queer attraction:

...what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read. The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace—neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan! We love them for that reason. We were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in boy or girl, for in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince—and not a man. They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting; it was inevitable that we should come upon them, for our miscalculated longing has created them.³⁰⁴

Nonetheless, the vivifying powers of darkness are summoned forth once again. For even if love within these constrictions represents a kind of death, a nullification of strangeness, as Nora claims,³⁰⁵ it is also understood that this death—the existential marginalization of transsexuality under a regime that can only conceive of crossings as subjections to intelligibility—is, once again, the source of a kind of power. As Nora says of the doctor

³⁰³ Barnes, 136.

³⁰⁴ Barnes, 137.

³⁰⁵ Barnes, 137.

at their last meeting, “You know what none of us know until we have died. You were dead in the beginning.”³⁰⁶

To be clear, Barnes’ vision of transsexual darkness is not entirely liberatory, as the starkest representations of transsexuality in the novel correspond with the moments of greatest abjection and despair. Moments of transsexual recognition and its attendant grief are staged as encounters with the oppositional magic of the church. It is at these encounters on the boundary between the inside and the outside that the curse and the pleasure of transsexual embodiment seems most plain, as Robin enters a church in the middle of a prayer only to be caught in the gendering gaze of a group of monks: “As if some inscrutable wish for salvation, something yet more monstrously unfulfilled than they had suffered, had thrown a shadow, they regarded her, to see her going softly forward and down, a tall girl with the body of a boy.”³⁰⁷ This scene resonates with one of O’Connor’s formative experiences: “kneeling in a dark corner” of a church, exposing her penis, crying “What is this thing, Lord?,” and pronouncing herself a “permanent mistake.”³⁰⁸ And both scenes seem to inform the book’s difficult ending, wherein, after many years of fruitless searching, Nora finds Robin in an otherwise empty church, locked in an ambiguous, bestial interaction with a dog that seems to represent at the same time a triumphant transgression of societal values, debasement and dehumanization within society, and even the potential for a kind of monstrous coupling and rebirth. (Whatever it

³⁰⁶ Barnes, 152.

³⁰⁷ Barnes, 45–46.

³⁰⁸ Barnes, 131–32.

is, it is an interaction so thoroughly transsexual that Nora herself cannot even behold it; she faints immediately upon walking into the church.)

One last aspect of the book that I want to discuss is the recurring symbol of the doll. It's worth discussing as an example of how the trans/super/natural analytic and its apprehension of the trans shadow can make use of one of a difficult novel's strangest signifiers when it seems that other approaches fall short. The doll factors into the story as a token of love that Robin seems to give all of her female partners early on in their courtship; Nora explains its significance in lesbian relationships as a symbol of "the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane..."³⁰⁹ Tellingly, Robin cannot help but destroy these dolls as she begins to feel the strictures of cis lesbian relationships encroaching on her transsexual life. During a fight with Nora, she "picked up the doll and hurled it to the floor and put her foot on it, crushing her heel into it; and then, as I came crying behind her, she kicked it, its china head all in dust, its skirt shivering and stiff, whirling over and over across the floor, its blue bow now over, now under."³¹⁰ O'Connor compels Nora to question the deeper significance of the doll to Robin by drawing comparisons between the treatment of a doll with the treatment of transsexuals by cis society, remarking that "the last doll, given to age, is the girl who should have been a boy, and the boy who should have been a girl! [...] The doll and the immature have something right about them, the doll because resembles but does not contain life, and the

³⁰⁹ Barnes, 142.

³¹⁰ Barnes, 147.

third sex because it contains life but resembles the doll.”³¹¹ Benstock—and any reader who is not attuned to the trans shadow of the novel—is fundamentally unable to reckon with the capacious textual meaning of the novel and its signifier of Robin’s transsexual grief and rage. She reads O’Connor’s words as “an indictment of homosexuality,” referring to the doll as “the image of lesbian death”³¹² failing to realize that Barnes is not invoking terms like “immature” and “third sex” within a scientific or analytical register, but in a space of darkness where their situation suggests new contexts. Crucially, in her own reading of the scene, Benstock utterly elides O’Connor’s statement that Nora’s “love of that last doll [the transsexual Robin] was foreshadow in her love of the first,” the unsexed toy she received as a child, and in which she recognized herself.³¹³ She has to make these elisions because she cannot understand Nora’s continual assent to O’Connor’s wisdom on the matter of gender as anything but Nora’s status as “a product of the puritan ethic,” being exploited at the hands of a predatory man; in doing so, she reduces her lesbian protagonist to the same kind of doll, infused with the same kind of tokenized innocence and ignorance that Nora unwittingly projected upon her transsexual partner. Moreover, she purposefully ignores the insights which paint O’Connor as deeply attuned to feminist knowledges, and the acts of feminine sociality that render her most human.

In closing this reading, I want to briefly return to my above point about the character of O’Connor being the only one with no specific real-world analogue in the

³¹¹ Barnes, 148.

³¹² Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 260.

³¹³ Barnes, *Nightwood*, 148.

general schema of the novel by which its characters are mapped onto Barnes' own life. I want to think about this fact in conjunction with the nature of the two major dialogues in the book, which in some sense resemble a dialogue only in the Socratic sense; for the most part, they seem to follow a rhythm whereby Nora issues a singular sentence or question, only to be followed by paragraphs of text from O'Connor. In a certain sense, O'Connor is, like Socrates in the Platonic dialogues, the work's most robustly realized character, and the only one not drawn directly from life. It is fascinating to me, then, to imagine Barnes conceiving this work and writing it as a kind of spell, the summoning from the darkness of the particular transsexual phantasm she felt she needed to speak to the condition of her relationship to Thelma Wood. Upon the doctor's first introduction in the text, Barnes writes that "[her] fabrications seemed to be the framework of a forgotten, but imposing plan; some condition of life of which [she] was the sole surviving retainer. [Her] manner was that of a servant of a defunct noble family, whose movements recall, though in a degraded form, those of a late master."³¹⁴ I can't help but read this description as drawing a correspondence between the doctor and literature itself; in particular modernist literature which, like the doctor, employs an array of linguistic signifiers and themes cobbled together from a social order that seems to be rapidly receding into darkness and unknowability. In this correspondence, then, we see the transsexual's unique position as a figure by which histories are made: both our own historicizing projects by which we make modernism and women's literature as coherent fields, and the work of queer modernist writers like Stein and Barnes to assemble a workable and livable

³¹⁴ Barnes, 30.

history out of the fragments of their society into something more representative of their own queer relation to gender.

Benstock, for her part, categorically denies Barnes' dalliances with transsexual feelings, writing that she "did not see transvestism as a restoration of the 'primordial chaos,' nor did she envision a 'genderless' world of androgyny; for her, the 'third sex' was a patriarchal creation that further bounds homosexuals—men and women alike—to the heterosexual paradigm."³¹⁵ Here, Benstock is obscuring that the 'third sex' invoked by Barnes and O'Connor is not identical to that employed by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. Rather, they seem to disparage the 'third sex' as a stand-in for the very notion that there might be some definitive rationalistic accounting of sex by which queerness and transsexuality might be rendered fully coherent and intelligible (and thus destroyed). What they seem to sense, in my reading, is that the night and its hags represent an outside to the world of such lists and enumerative categorization, and that while this outside threatens the stability of O'Connor's life, it also grants her the magical and oracular powers by which she becomes a peer to the women in her life. In other words, that which makes the transsexual also makes the witch.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* (1941-1961)

³¹⁵ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 266.

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein recalls a conversation with Picasso in which the two of them remark on the work then being written by Ernest Hemingway (her first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*), elegizing the phantasm of a great work that she will not ever be able to produce: “what a book, they both agreed, would be the real story of Hemingway, not those [she] writes but the confessions of the real Ernest Hemingway. It would be for another audience than the audience Hemingway not has but it would be very wonderful.”^{316 317}

This teasing tone seems to have colored much of the relationship between the two writers. In one of her private letters, Hemingway remarked of Stein...

Gertrude S. I was very fond of and god knows was loyal too until she had pushed my face in a dozen times. Last time I saw her she told me she had heard an incident, some fag story, which proved me conclusively to be very queer indeed. I said You knew me for four or five years and you believe that? Oh it was very circumstantial, she said. Just how completely credible and circumstantial it was. Poor old papa. Well I'll probably read it in her autobiography that you had a piece about in N[ew] Yorker. I never cared a damn about what she did in or out of bed and I liked her very damned much and she liked me. But when the menopause hit her she got awfully damned patriotic about sex. The first stage was that nobody was any good that wasn't that way. The second was that anybody that was that way was good. The third was that anybody that was any good must be that way. Patriotism is a hell of a vice. Mabel

³¹⁶ Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas Illustrated* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 256.

³¹⁷ Interestingly, this is not the only place in *Toklas* where Stein speaks about the capacity of art to reveal the unseen, to render the invisible visible through a mystical process. When Picasso first attempts to paint her portrait, he must stop, lamenting that “I can’t see you any longer when I look.” (66) And yet, after completing *The Making of Americans*, she “came back to Paris under the spell of the thing she was doing,” (71) and on her return, Picasso is suddenly able to finish her portrait, filling in the details that he could not previously see.

Dodge is a hell of a rival. America's legendary women sweepstakes.³¹⁸

Like much of Hemingway's life, her relationship with Stein has been too frequently read through the mistaken analytic of her supposed masculinity. Benstock, for instance, calls upon this very letter to note that "Stein's hint at Hemingway's own latent homosexuality had struck the mark and [Hemingway's] admission of attraction to her may be a defensive effort to maintain [her] heterosexuality...."³¹⁹ She seems to take great interest in Hemingway's anger that she had "been displaced by a woman" in Stein's graces (the aforementioned Mabel Dodge), and that "Hemingway found [her] two closest friends among lesbians."³²⁰ In spite of this pronouncement of interest, however, she declares that "The implications of this observation are by no means clear."³²¹ This act of demurring seems to me preposterous. Once again, a critic of literary modernism is ignoring the specter of the trans shadow despite its glaringly obvious presence. That is to say, Hemingway's relationship with Stein seems clearly to be suffused with a transsexual fear: she's scared of being attracted to Stein because Stein is like a man, and Hemingway only likes women; by the same token, Stein is attracted to Hemingway, and this is scary because Stein is only supposed to like women, among whose number Hemingway does not count herself. This dynamic, in which relationships are animated by a tense fear of transsexual slippages, colors how I interpret Stein's exchange with Picasso. Remarking in

³¹⁸ Ernest Hemingway, *Ernest Hemingway Selected Letters 1917-1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (1981; repr., New York: Scribner, 2003), 387-88.

³¹⁹ Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1900-1940*, 172.

³²⁰ Benstock, 173.

³²¹ Benstock, 173.

poetic terms that Hemingway is missing something fundamental about herself—“[she] has a certain syrup but it does not pour”³²²—the two friends lament, “what a story that of the real Hem, and one [she] should tell [her]self but alas [she] never will.”³²³ The following is my reading of that very story.

Hemingway began writing *The Garden of Eden* in 1941 and would continue making updates for the next twenty years until her death by suicide. By 1961, the work totaled more than 2400 manuscript pages, and its eventual posthumous publication in 1986 required Hemingway scholar Tom Jenks to cut that number down to roughly one-tenth of its scope. The topic that beguiled and perhaps eluded Hemingway for two decades is one shared in common between this text and her other major posthumous novel, *Islands in the Stream*: transsexuality.³²⁴ Or, as Hemingway scholars seemingly feel obliged to call it: androgyny. The surface level of the plot involves a married couple, David and Catherine, traveling across Europe after having married. As David struggles to begin writing a third novel, he occupies his time writing a sustained narrative of his travels with Catherine. As time goes on, Catherine begins to display transsexual behaviors: she adopts a male manner of dress, cuts her hair short, and most significantly, enacts an enduring sexual fantasy with David wherein he becomes “her girl,” Catherine, while Catherine herself adopts the persona of Peter. Eventually, these behaviors spill over from the realm of sexual fantasy into waking life as Catherine identifies more and more

³²² Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas Illustrated*, 258.

³²³ Stein, 256.

³²⁴ Rose Marie Burwell, *Hemingway: The Postwar Years and the Posthumous Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 88–91.

with a male existence. At some point, the couple meet a third woman, Marita, who joins them as both of their lovers, and David begins to write a series of stories recalling his childhood in Africa with his father, a big game hunter. While Marita loves these stories, Catherine rebukes them, urging David to return to his writing of their narrative, which has come to include an account of her life as Peter. When David fails to oblige, she seizes the manuscripts of the Africa stories and burns them, shortly after which she leaves David in order to receive psychiatric care.

Presenting the story in these terms makes it perhaps unsurprising that the majority of the scholarship on the book reads its thematics of “androgyny” in a way that foregrounds sharp distinctions between the male and the female, and ultimately reifies the Hemingway mystique of raw masculinity. In Rose Marie Burwell’s text on the posthumous novels, she argues that the book is fundamentally about “protecting the masculine text,” here represented by the African stories, from the intrusive and corrupting influence of the feminine.³²⁵ She reads the conclusion of the (Jenks edition of the) novel, wherein David begins rewriting the African stories which Catherine burned as one in which David “symbolically kills” both Catherine and the feminine within himself in the name of being able to produce meaningful, masculine art.³²⁶ This take is shared by Hilary Justice, who notes that the African stories are a way for David to “avoid the neurotic, intrusive female presence” of Catherine,³²⁷ as well as by James Nagel, who emphasizes

³²⁵ Burwell, 100.

³²⁶ Burwell, 107.

³²⁷ Hilary Justice, ed., *Bones of the Others: The Hemingway Text from the Lost Manuscripts to the Posthumous Novels* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2006), 71.

the stories and their sharp declarative language as the only way in which David can escape from the fantasies woven by Catherine and live a meaningful life grounded in reality.³²⁸

When critics do recognize androgyny in the text as more than a subversive attack on the masculine, they tend to sublimate its presence into mere metaphor, such as when Ryan Hediger describes Catherine's transsexual behaviors as working "in parallel with David's work with language,"³²⁹ her own attempt to use her body as a canvas on which to create art, having been excluded from the literary world by virtue of her (presumed) sex. Burwell considers it "unfortunate" that the presence of "androgynous sexual activities" in the novel distracted critics and readers from the African stories' status as an "objective correlative of David Bourne's independent attempt to resist the cultural constraints of family, gender, and race."³³⁰ In her reading, this context reveals the text's transsexuality to be a mere gross indulgence standing in the way of art, an "obsession with sensual exploits which includes cross-dressing and tanning, as well as attempts to satisfy with food and liquor their insatiable hunger to transcend their mortality through creation."³³¹ Ultimately, she draws on Mark Spilka's work to declare *The Garden of Eden* an "attempt to render aesthetic growth through sexual metamorphosis and to recognize in the final novel the author's long struggle with [her] own androgynous inclinations."³³²

³²⁸ James Nagel, "The Hunting Story in the Garden of Eden," in *Hemingway's Neglected Short Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Susan F. Beegel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 337.

³²⁹ Ryan Hediger, "The Elephant in the Writing Room: Sympathy and Weakness in Hemingway's 'Masculine Text,' *The Garden of Eden*," *Hemingway Review* 31, no. 1 (2011): 85.

³³⁰ Burwell, *Hemingway*, 99.

³³¹ Burwell, 99.

³³² Burwell, 108.

Such sublimated readings seem to understate both the extent to which Catherine is not playing around, ignoring or pathologizing the various passages in which she declares that she really is a boy, as well as the importance of transsexual behaviors in Hemingway's actual life. When writers like Burwell and Spilka make claims that Hemingway's relationship to androgyny "was crucial to [her] creative strength throughout [her] life,"³³³ they seem to be diminishing the relationship's actual effects, which extended far beyond creative capacity. Without belaboring the point, so much has been written about this in biographies of Hemingway that it strains credibility to compartmentalize her transsexuality as a force working only in service of a masculine aesthetic. Kenneth S. Lynn's major biography, for instance, makes much of Hemingway's attraction to lesbian women (Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes), including her own wives who for the most part made Hemingway the sole "exception" to their homosexuality.³³⁴ These relationships were also known to involve what Spilka calls "androgynous sexual practices,"³³⁵ or sexual encounters in which Hemingway desired to "role-play" as a woman.³³⁶ Evidence for these practices can also be found in Mary Welsh Hemingway's memoir, in which she describes a 1953 fishing trip during which Hemingway expressed the desire to be named Kathrin,³³⁷ and to have her ears pierced.³³⁸ On this same trip, Mary, like the Catherine in *Garden of Eden*,

³³³ Mark Spilka, *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* (Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, c1990., 1990), 336, find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE000862568.

³³⁴ Kenneth S. Lynn, *Hemingway* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 311–14.

³³⁵ Spilka, *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny*, 281.

³³⁶ Spilka, 9.

³³⁷ Mary Welsh Hemingway, *How It Was* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), 179.

³³⁸ Hemingway, 173.

adopted the name “Peter” and their sexual practices involved extensive “fantasies” of feminization on Hemingway’s part.³³⁹ The desire to cross gender manifests in areas other than the purely sexual: in a phone call with her transsexual daughter Gigi, who was arrested in Florida for entering a women’s bathroom, Hemingway was said to have remarked, “Listen, Mr. Gig, I can remember a long time ago seeing a girl on a street in Paris and wanting to go over and kiss her... I wanted to get that lipstick smeared all over my lips, just so I could see what it felt like.”³⁴⁰

What, then, would it take for critics to encounter the events of *The Garden of Eden* as more than a fascination with “androgyny,” and to name them what they are: one of modernist literature’s most direct encounters with transsexuality? For one, they would have to move beyond the pathologizing impulse. One of the only critics I’ve found to consider the real possibilities of Hemingway’s transsexuality, Valerie Rohy notes that her most prominent critics can never seem to move beyond considering the emergence of transsexuality in her life and fiction “essentially and irremediably pathological.”³⁴¹ Indeed, Lynn pronounces all of this “deviationism,”³⁴² while Spilka calls it a “wound,” an “identification with women and with the female within oneself [that] felt now as an almost intolerable vulnerability, a hidden emasculation, a secret loss of male identity, a self-betrayal,”³⁴³ and Carl Eby disparages it as “transvestic pornography.”³⁴⁴ It is no

³³⁹ Hemingway, 352.

³⁴⁰ Paul Hendrickson, *Hemingway’s Boat: Everything He Loved in Life, and Lost* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 384.

³⁴¹ Valerie Rohy, “Hemingway, Literalism, and Transgender Reading,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 57, no. 2 (2011): 148.

³⁴² Lynn, *Hemingway*, 540.

³⁴³ Spilka, *Hemingway’s Quarrel with Androgyny*, 222.

wonder, then, that cis critics witness the transsexual resonances of Hemingway's life and work again and again and yet seem unable to move beyond analyses so facile as to say that Hemingway's primary concern is protecting the masculine quality within her writing. The effects of patriarchy (and transphobia alike) are glaringly obvious in the reality that any reading of Hemingway's work which takes seriously an urge to surrender to the feminine casts the feminine as a threat.

Well, then, there's nothing for it but to turn the trans/super/natural analytic upon *The Garden of Eden* and see what the trans shadow is trying to tell us. Right away, we can find a motif of light and darkness, and the latter's role in facilitating magical transformations, embedded into the very rhythm of the book. Until the African stories enter the text, *The Garden of Eden* is constructed as a series of alternating episodes in which, during the day, David and Catherine swim in the ocean, tan themselves, and drink a startling abundance of alcohol. At night, however, changes begin to take place. The first such change occurs after Catherine has her hair cut short, in a masculine style, and makes the mystical pronouncement thereafter that "I'm a girl but now I'm a boy too and I can do anything anything anything."³⁴⁵ That very night, she and David have sex in a scene that compellingly combines transsexual gender crossings, the blurring of identity, and an emphasis on our non-familiar symbology of darkness, shadow, the moon, death, and wickedness:

³⁴⁴ Carl P. Eby, *Hemingway's Fetishism: Psychoanalysis and the Mirror of Manhood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 245.

³⁴⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *The Garden of Eden* (1946; repr., New York: Scribners, 1986), 15.

“Dave, you don’t mind if we’ve gone to the devil, do you?”

“No, girl,” he said.

“Don’t call me girl.”

“Where I’m holding you you are a girl,” he said. He held her tight around her breasts and he opened and closed his fingers feeling her and the hard erect freshness between his fingers.

“They’re just my dowry,” she said. “The [haircut] is my surprise. Feel. No leave them. They’ll be there. Feel my cheeks and the back of my neck. Oh it feels so wonderful and good and clean and new. Please love me David the way I am. Please understand and love me.”

He had shut his eyes and he could feel the long light weight of her on him and her breasts pressing against him and her lips on his. He lay there and felt something and then her hand holding him and searching lower and he helped with his hands and then lay back in the dark and did not think at all and only felt the weight and the strangeness in side and he said, “Now you can’t tell who is who can you?”

“No.”

“You are changing,” she said. “Oh you are. You are. Yes you are and you’re my girl Catherine. Will you change and be my girl and let me take you?”

“You’re Catherine.”

“No. I’m Peter. You’re my wonderful Catherine. You’re my beautiful lovely Catherine. You were so good to change. Oh thank you, Catherine, so much. Please understand. I’m going to make love to you forever.”

At the end they were both dead and empty but it was not over. They lay side by side in the dark with their legs touching and her head was on his arm. The moon had risen and there was a little more light in the room. She ran her hand exploringly down over his belly without looking and said, “You don’t think I’m wicked?”

“Of course not. But how long have you thought about that?”³⁴⁶

The two begin to refer to these episodes of transition in explicitly magical terms as “the dark magic of the change.”³⁴⁷ Recalling the haunted body, Catherine refers to the

³⁴⁶ Hemingway, 17.

departure of Peter in the daylight with language recalling possession, saying “I’m your good girl come back again,”³⁴⁸ and promising that she “won’t let the night things come” into the daylight.³⁴⁹ Here we have the sense not only that night and darkness occasion a kind of death that induces forbidden transformative knowledges, as we had from Dr. O’Connor in *Nightwood*, but also that the darkness affords the possibility of a physical, material change as well, something like a monstrous transformation.

Eventually, however, these transformations do begin to spill over into the light. Catherine undergoes “the change” again, telling David that she had no choice, she “had to” be a boy, and that she wants to partake in everyday activities as a transsexual, such as “going to the Prado to see all the pictures as a boy.”³⁵⁰ Embracing this transformation leads to happiness for Catherine, as she announces in terms that might now be called something like gender euphoria: “This morning everything I did felt so right and happy, so clean and good in the daylight.”³⁵¹ Giving lie to the reading that her behavior can be reduced to mere fetishistic dalliances with androgyny, she fully identifies as a transsexual man and expresses heartbreak at her inability to live as a woman:

“You aren’t really a woman at all,” Marita said.
“I know it,” Catherine said. “I’ve tried to explain it to David often enough. Isn’t that true, David?”
David looked at her and said nothing.
“Didn’t I?”

³⁴⁷ Hemingway, 20.

³⁴⁸ Hemingway, 20–21.

³⁴⁹ Hemingway, 22.

³⁵⁰ Hemingway, 56.

³⁵¹ Hemingway, 66.

“Yes,” he said.

“I did try and I broke myself in pieces in Madrid to be a girl and all it did was break me in pieces,” Catherine said.³⁵²

This is the point in the text where critics, with their impulsive pathologizing, generally begin to interpret what’s happening to Catherine as a cataclysmic break with sanity that challenges David’s masculinity. And yet such readings overlook a simple fact of the text: David *likes it*. After Catherine convinces him to adopt a dyed feminine hairstyle, he regards himself in a mirror and the following scene unfolds:

“So that’s how it is,” he said to himself. “You’ve done that to your hair and had it cut the same as your girl’s and how do you feel?” he asked the mirror. “How do you feel? Say it.”

“You like it,” he said.

He looked at the mirror and it was someone else he saw but it was less strange now.

“All right. You like it,” he said. “Now go through with the rest of it whatever it is and don’t ever say anyone tempted you or that anyone bitched you.” [...]

He looked at the face that was no longer strange to him at all but was his face now and said, “You like it. Remember that. Keep that straight. You know exactly how you look now and how you are.”

Of course he did not know exactly how he was, but he made an effort aided by what he had seen in the mirror.³⁵³

What to do, however, with the African stories? At roughly this point in the novel, David abandons writing the narrative of his and Catherine’s trip and begins writing the short story that critics identify as his last desperate attempt to hold onto masculinity against Catherine’s corrupting femininity. The story concerns an episode from David’s

³⁵² Hemingway, 192.

³⁵³ Hemingway, 84.

youth wherein he sees an elephant when he's alone at night, and then tells his father and his father's hunting companion, Juma, about it the next day. The three of them proceed to track the elephant, and David grows increasingly regretful for having told them about the elephant, upset that he was instrumental in its death simply because he told them about it. It's worth noting that Catherine, in a rage because David has stopped writing the narrative which includes her, diminishes the African story in terms that should seem totally familiar to anyone who has ever witnessed Hemingway's dismissal as a mere masculinist writer: the original narrative, she says, is "certainly much more interesting and instructive than a lot of natives in a kraal or whatever you call it covered with flies and scabs in Central Africa with your drunken father staggering around smelling of sour beer and not knowing which ones of the little horrors he had fathered."³⁵⁴

There is a clue embedded in this scene, however, which speaks to the intertwining in Hemingway's work of the masculine narrative and her transsexuality. When David protests that he stopped writing the Catherine narrative because he "didn't want to get the work mixed up," Catherine responds, "but it's you who mixed it up."³⁵⁵ In the scene where David first begins writing the story, it is hard not to recall Stein's admonishment that Hemingway would never write the story about the "real" Hemingway:

You'd better write another story. Write the hardest one there is to write that you know. Go ahead and do that. [...] He put the note and the key in his pocket and went back into the work room and sat down and wrote the first paragraph of the new story that he had always put off writing since he had known what a story was. He wrote it

³⁵⁴ Hemingway, 188–89.

³⁵⁵ Hemingway, 190.

in simple declarative sentences with all of the problems ahead to be lived through and made to come alive. The very beginning was written and all he had to do was go on. That's all, he said. You see how simple what you cannot do is?³⁵⁶

Indeed, reading for the trans shadow shows us that the African story is itself a story about gender crossings that happen as a consequence of knowledge gained through things seen in the darkness, and the subsequent corruption of those things when brought to the light. At the point of the story where the hunting party finally catches up with the elephant that David has seen, he feels a profound sense of regret and sympathy for the elephant, regretting that he has taken something of the darkness and brought it to the light: "I saw him in the moonlight and he was alone... The bull wasn't going to do anyone any harm and now we've tracked him to where he came to see his dead friend and now we're going to kill him. It's my fault. I betrayed him.... I'm going to keep everything a secret always.... You never should have told them. Never, never tell them. Try and remember that. Never tell anyone anything ever. Never tell anyone anything again."³⁵⁷ While the night is a space where dark transformations can take place, the light is a place of violence, filled with masculine sensibilities towards which David reacts with contempt: "If they kill him, Juma will drink his share of the ivory or just buy another god damn wife."³⁵⁸ Finally, David stages the encounter with the elephant in terms of a permanent transgression of the boundaries of gender, after which his father tries and fails "if not to

³⁵⁶ Hemingway, 108.

³⁵⁷ Hemingway, 181.

³⁵⁸ Hemingway, 181.

convert him to bring him back to *the boy he had been* before he had come to the knowledge that he hated elephant hunting.”³⁵⁹

Far from being a masculine text that David must protect at all costs, the elephant story is one wherein he comes to acknowledge his own feminine transsexuality, finally expressing an identity with Catherine in terms that border on the esoteric and the insensible: "Catherine was not his enemy except as she was himself in the unfinding unrealizable quest that is love and so was her own enemy.”³⁶⁰ In fact, when we consider that Hemingway’s “provisional ending” for the novel was excluded from the published text, we might regard *The Garden of Eden* as published as a masculine text that the editors and critics wished to protect against the transsexual menace of Hemingway’s actual manuscript. Of course, as I’ve shown, the trans shadow finds a way through. The ending in question takes place on a sunny beach after Catherine was returned from some kind of extensive psychiatric care, possibly electroconvulsive therapy intended to cure her of her deviant behavior. Having been brought into the light, the two seem to have lost their hold on the transformative powers of the darkness. Catherine looks at her own breasts with a sense of despair: “they’re still good.... Though good for what is something else.”³⁶¹ Finally, she asks David to join her in death if the world of the light attempts to eradicate her transsexual darkness again:

³⁵⁹ Hemingway, 200. Emphasis mine.

³⁶⁰ Hemingway, 193.

³⁶¹ Ernest Hemingway, “Garden of Eden Typescript,” c. 1950s, 2, Stories and Manuscript Fragments, Series 1.2 Box MS48, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Ernest Hemingway Collection, Personal Papers (#104).

“If it goes bad again so I’d have to go back to the place can I, may I, do it the way Barbara³⁶² did? I don’t mean in a dirty place like Venice.”

“I couldn’t let you.”

“Would you do it with me?”

“Sure.”

“I knew you would,” she said. “That’s why I didn’t like to ask.”³⁶³

Despite this dismal ending for a transsexual romance, I can’t be so certain that David and Catherine meet a bad fate. Reading throughout the novel, I find that on the innumerable occasions on which the couple sun themselves on a beach or go swimming, they make some commentary about how the sun is rendering them “dark,” a quality that will take them away from other people.³⁶⁴ In other words, they recognize themselves, on some level, as so fundamentally transsexual that even attempts to be in the light cannot hold them for long, and will in fact drive them deeper into the darkness; unable to be rendered intelligible by the best efforts of Catherine’s doctors and Hemingway’s critics, they will always live as remainders in the darkness of the space outside.

There is something unifying in the works I’ve looked at in this chapter, which I read as these authors making use of the autobiographical—that is to say, the personally historical—in order to imagine some new history in which their own painful entanglements with transsexuality make sense to them. In this, there is some resonance with the overarching form of modernist literature that draws on the subjective to disrupt

³⁶² This refers to a character deleted from the published version of the novel: a woman involved in a relationship with a transsexual woman named Nick, who ends up committing suicide.

³⁶³ Hemingway, “Garden of Eden Typescript,” 5.

³⁶⁴ Hemingway, *The Garden of Eden*, 30.

or at least express a lack of faith in the totalizing visions of the world offered by modernity and logopower. I thusly see these works as something like a reinscription of Benjamin's conception of history as a piling up of disaster out of which one seeks to construct a pattern.³⁶⁵ Stein, Barnes, and Hemingway read to me like figures who stand in the field of rubble beheld by the Angel of History, and who, looking at the past, see only a story that excludes themselves. They are consequently driven, through the linguistic possibilities of fiction and experimental autobiography, to either re-narrativize the past, or to rewrite the past entirely, creating a space for themselves in it. For Stein, this means placing herself in the eyes of others who can retroactively "see her" at a time when she was not seen. For Barnes, it means using fiction to imagine perverse and multitudinous embodied relationships to love and gender. For Hemingway, it means making real the darkness in which she can live another life she imagines to be closed off to herself in the light of her career as a cultural avatar of masculinity. None of them seem concerned with dealing with history as a coherent resuscitation of past "truths" in any empirical sense, but rather as the invocation of a truth that can reflect their own lived experiences, centering around the crisis points of their misrecognition by the world.

Thus, the trans shadow that is made evident in their works is, for me, a way of not just recording or rewriting history, but of inventing history anew, appending entirely new categories of being to it, as a way of writing one's self into being in a world whose intelligible totalities lack a place for one. It shows us, among other things, that there is no

³⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 253–64.

history of modernist literature that is not a history of transsexual literature, no history of women's literature that is not a history of transsexual women's writing. The trans shadows shows us a history of American writing that goes beyond pushing for an equal place for women in the totalizing history of logopower, and instead invokes the kind of demonic power that Sylvia Wynter describes in "Beyond Miranda's Meanings"—writing that disrupts reason's hold on the inscription of history altogether, ferociously attacking the stability of totality in all of its iterative permutations.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁶ Maria Helena Lima, "'Beyond Miranda's Meanings': Contemporary Critical Perspectives on Caribbean Women's Literatures," ed. Carole Boyce Davies et al., *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 1 (1995): 115–28, doi.org/10.2307/3178321.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BEAST WHO SHOUTED ‘I’D FUCK ME’ AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD: Horror Cinema and the Transsexual Gaze

In this chapter, I want to consider a different form of the intertwining of gender variance and the supernatural in American culture. While, as I’ve shown, close readings are useful for drawing out these associations in different schools of American literature, it might also be worthwhile to take a look at a distinctly American genre that wears its mark of monstrosity and the supernatural on its very surface: horror cinema. At the same time, as with the body and socialization/kinship in prior chapters, the locus of this chapter will be one of the other “constituting forces of gender”: the gaze, both in the sense of its historical understanding as a social mechanism of inscribing and creating gender and in the sense of its use as a tool for the analysis of gendered dynamics in cinema, particularly horror cinema. In unpacking all of these connections, I’ll employ my super/natural analytic to develop a new sense of the “transgender gaze” and what it can tell us specifically about visual *representations* of gender variance in the American imaginary.

Please, Mr. Chainsaw, Make Me a Woman!

The gaze, particularly as it applies to cinema, was popularized in the West by Laura Mulvey’s now-famous “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she argues that the apparatus of cinema occupies one of two distinct modes of identification

when it “looks” at women: the punitive gaze or the fetishistic/scopophilic gaze. Both of these work in conjunction with a presumed male viewer to perform a kind of dark legerdemain: the transformation of female subjects into objects through a process that Mulvey herself identifies as “magic.”³⁶⁷ Mulvey derives much of her argument from a psychoanalytical framework, stressing the role that desire plays in shaping the visual language of cinema, and by extension, the unconscious reception of cinema and the meanings that it makes for those who view it. For Mulvey and the many psychoanalytic feminist film critics who have followed in her wake, the visual mode itself – historically associated with masculinity, physically distanced, and often devoid of reciprocity between the looker and the one looked at – is one that innately occupies a position of predatory male desire.^{368,369} As a consequence, the language of cinema itself is structured by the gaze: male viewers evidently cannot help but identify with the predatory pleasures offered through the cinematic gaze, while female viewers are compelled to see themselves through a dehumanizing and thus transformative lens. Their pleasure is only accessible, then, by crossing over and occupying a male way of seeing.³⁷⁰ The gaze, at least as it’s known to us in its most popular formulation, therefore works as a confluence of magic, history, desire, the body, the senses, and other forces, which work together to constitute gender, chiefly via the cultural apparatus. But what is probably already obvious

³⁶⁷ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 6–8, doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

³⁶⁸ Mulvey, 11.

³⁶⁹ Naomi Scheman, “Thinking about Quality in Women’s Visual Art,” in *Engenderings: Constructions of Knowledge, Authority, and Privilege* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 159.

³⁷⁰ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 11–17.

is that my investment in its importance as a constituting force lies squarely in this little-emphasized element of “crossing over.”

To see clearly what I’m talking about here, it’s worth looking at one of the texts in which the gaze became a dominant framework for discussing cultural representations of the monstrous and the supernatural: Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1993). Clover’s work is widely considered one of the most important texts in scholarly investigations of gender in the horror genre, and its arguments rely heavily on Mulvey’s, especially as they invoke the process of viewer identification with the dominant figures in a horror narrative: monsters and their victims. Mulvey’s formulation in which gendered identifications are both actively and passively embedded into cinematic language takes on another dimension of political significance in Clover’s work precisely because activity and passivity are now imbued with life or death stakes: to be active is to be a monster or a killer, and to be passive is to be a victim.

It’s from this foundation that Clover derives her most significant and enduring critical contribution: the figure of the “Final Girl.” The Final Girl is, put simply, the trope of the one woman who tends to survive until the very end of a horror film, especially those of the slasher genre in which a group of teenagers is systematically stalked and murdered, one by one.³⁷¹ As the woman who ultimately overcomes the predatory masculine force of the monster, the Final Girl makes an interesting case study for Clover

³⁷¹ To Clover’s credit, the prevalence of this trope cannot be overstated. Prominent examples include Olivia Hussey’s character in *Black Christmas* (1974), Marilyn Burns in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* (1978), Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* (1979), Adrienne King in *Friday the 13th* (1980), Heather Langenkamp in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and countless others.

because she complicates the process of looking and desiring that is formulated in Mulvey's cinematic gaze. The gist of Clover's argument is that because the Final Girl is so often depicted via masculine coding (masculine social traits, behaviors, appearance), she becomes something unique: a masculine-feminine site of identification for *male* viewers in a way that slips outside of the typical male-gaze modalities of punishment or scopophilia.

The Final Girl, Clover writes, is "boyish."³⁷² She is "feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males, the terrors and masochistic pleasures of the underlying fantasy, but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality.... To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development... is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particular grotesque expression of wishful thinking. She is simply an agreed-upon fiction and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of perhaps timeless dishonesty."³⁷³ As this passage suggests, Clover derides feminist recuperations of horror on the grounds that, while feminism has "given a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge," the *appeal* of the Final Girl, the way that she enacts *desire* within the cinematic gaze, is still purely designed to appeal to a masculine viewer.³⁷⁴ The primary means by which this sublimation of feminine anger into

³⁷² Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film - Updated Edition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 53.

³⁷³ Clover, 53.

³⁷⁴ Clover, 4–5.

masculine desire operates is through the literal and figurative masculinization of the Final

Girl:

The fact that female monsters and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behavior (and often even name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself—that there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female, and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in a male. Sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender, not the other way around. A figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers. And a figure is not a psychokiller because he is a man; he is a man because he is a psychokiller.³⁷⁵

What is most interesting to me here is Clover's invocation of a specter of gender fluidity that she doesn't quite seem to know what to do with. Although Clover identifies the gendered crossings that are inherent to Mulvey's concept of the gaze, whenever these crossings are brought up, they are almost immediately reinscribed into a binary conception of gender that stems precisely from a failure to take transness seriously. This failure is most evident in her subsequent descriptions of the monsters and killers in horror cinema and what happens when they run afoul of the Final Girl. While "the killer's phallic purpose, as he thrusts his drill or knife into the trembling bodies of young women, is unmistakable," his "masculinity is severely qualified: he ranges from the virginal or sexually inert to the transvestite or transsexual, and is spiritually divided... or even

³⁷⁵ Clover, 12–13.

equipped with vulva and vagina.”³⁷⁶ At the same time, “the gender of the Final Girl is... compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance, her apartness from other girls, sometimes her name. At the level of the cinematic apparatus, her unfemininity is signaled clearly by her exercise of the ‘active investigating gaze’ normally reserved for males and punished in females when they assume it themselves.”³⁷⁷ As these two cross-gendered forces collide, when “in the final scene, she stops screaming, faces the killer, and reaches for the knife... she addresses the monster on his own terms... The Final Girl has not just manned herself; she specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with.”³⁷⁸ In other words, we’ve come a long way, through a number of psychic and epistemological identifications that dance gaily over the borderlands of gender, just to end up in a place where the old binaries are viciously rearticulated – wherein women are not only turned into male surrogates, but the terms of discourse also dictate that as one figure becomes male, the other must become unmanned, as if we have an intellectual duty to preserve some kind of invisible ledger sheet of binaristic gendered balance.

What I think Clover’s analysis misses is that, although she is describing a monstrous frontier in which a kind of epistemic violence is carried out on a viewer, it is not so simple as the subjugation of the feminine into a masculine mode of brutality. Rather, what mainstream viewers find monstrous is *that the crossing can happen at all*. Both Clover and Mulvey are confronted with this crossing, but ultimately find ways to

³⁷⁶ Clover, 47–48.

³⁷⁷ Clover, 48–49.

³⁷⁸ Clover, 49.

rationalize it, to reduce it back into a cohesive and totalizing narrative of binary gender antagonism, via the discourse of psychoanalysis. Clover, for her part, dives deep into the concept of “one-sex reasoning,” the psychoanalytic insight which explains that, while scientific discourses recognize multiple sexes, the “popular mind” still operates in accordance with “one-sex thinking” in which women are understood, even if unconsciously, to be incomplete men.³⁷⁹ This mode of thinking would seem to be a fruitful one by which to analyze horror, shot through as it is with gendered violence and anxiety. Indeed, Clover makes just such a claim when she writes that “stories of werewolves, vampires and other undead, and possession (by incubus, succubus, dybbuk, Satan) are stories that stem from the one-sex era, and for all their updating, they still carry with them, to a greater or lesser degree, a premodern sense of sexual difference.”³⁸⁰ “The world of horror,” she writes...

...is in any case one that knows very well that men and women are profoundly different (and that the former are vastly superior to the latter) but one that at the same time repeatedly contemplates mutations and slidings whereby women begin to look a lot like men (slasher films), men are pressured to become like women (possession films), and some people are impossible to tell apart (the figure in *God Told Me To* who is so genitally ambiguous that the doctor did not know what sex to assign, the pubescent girl in *Sleepaway Camp* who turns out to be a boy, the rapist in *The Incubus* whose ejaculate consists of equal parts of semen and menstrual blood, and so on). The one-sex model is echoed not only in horror's bodily constructions, however; it is also echoed in its representation of gender as the definitive category from which sex proceeds as an effect—and in its deep interest in precisely such

³⁷⁹ Clover, 14.

³⁸⁰ Clover, 15.

"proceedings." If such fantasies are regressive by the lights of psychoanalytic theory, they have a long and distinguished pedigree.³⁸¹

But isn't it telling that Clover draws upon these specifically trans and gender nonconfirming representations of horror in order to make her point about the massacre of sexual difference in the name of masculine dominance? Mulvey herself predicates much of her theory of the gaze on the same signifiers; the woman's "lack of a penis" being "the material evidence on which is based the castration complex" and the thing by which "the meaning of a woman [in the psychoanalytic regime] *is* sexual difference."³⁸² But then, as Clover points out, it's not the lack of a penis, but the sudden unexpected *appearance* of one on the supposed signifier of sexual difference that acts as the real catalyst for horror, revulsion, and anxiety in the viewer: the aforementioned final shot of *Sleepaway Camp*, Norman Bates's crossdressing in *Psycho*, and so on. What they point to, over and over again, yet consistently fail to grapple with, is that it really is all about the "crossing over."

³⁸¹ Clover, 15–16.

³⁸² Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 13.



Figure 1: Angela, as Clover puts it, “turns out to be a boy,” Sleepaway Camp (dir: Robert Hiltzik, 1983)

In the case of Clover, this oversight at times becomes so egregious that one begins to see the magic at work in the act of mystification: it is not simply that Clover doesn't consider the trans analysis to be worthwhile, but that she literally seems *unable to see it*, as if it has been magically obscured from her perception. She is certainly *aware* of the crossing over as a central dynamic of her work – consider that the chapter in which she first formulates the idea of the Final Girl is famously titled “Her Body, Himself” – but at the same time seems entirely blinded to the existence of gender nonconformity not merely as a midpoint, or a site of violence enacted upon one of the two binary genders, but as a purposely embodied state of existence in and of itself. For example, pages upon pages of Clover's analysis focus on the character of Leatherface from the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* franchise, and in particular, she very astutely conveys the psychodynamics of an episode in the second film wherein Leatherface holds her saw near the crotch of the Final Girl, Stretch, only for Stretch to employ a “desperate gambit: ‘You're really good,

you really are good, you're the best,' she repeats; and indeed, immediately after ejaculation Leatherface becomes palpably less interested in his saw."³⁸³ But in the course of the same analysis, she writes that Leatherface never "shows overt signs of gender confusion," only a "cathexis to the sick family – in which the mother is conspicuously absent but the preserved corpse of the grandmother... is conspicuously present – [that] has palpably arrested their development."³⁸⁴

This statement is astonishing to me. Not because it takes something mysterious and reductively rationalizes it via the psychoanalytical mode – as I've noted, I expect that at this point. Rather, it's notable chiefly because it plainly overlooks one of the most extreme examples of gender crossing in all of horror. Leatherface, the figure who Clover claims shows no signs of gender confusion, is the subject of an extended sequence *in the very film Clover is writing about* in which she places food on the table for the family and then retires to a nearby room to apply eyeshadow and lipstick before taking a seat at the table herself (Figure 2). By the time Leatherface reappears in 1994's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation*, she has taken the act of transition even further, wearing a wig stylized in the manner of the stereotype of a conservative Texan housewife, a lace gown, and a pair of false breasts (Figure 3).

³⁸³ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 28.

³⁸⁴ Clover, 27.



Figure 2: Leatherface applying makeup. The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (dir: Tobe Hooper, 1974)



Figure 3: Femme Leatherface in Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation, (dir: Kim Henkel, 1994)

At this point, I would expect a second or third-wave feminist analysis like Clover's to acknowledge these gender crossings and to employ the TERF logic of

painting them as regressive, as a mere cliched masculine fantasy of assuming the female role. What is truly interesting to me is that she doesn't employ this logic because she doesn't seem to notice the gender crossings at all. By pointing them out here, I contend that what she views as a unilaterally sinister desire to destroy femininity embedded in the language of horror is actually a much more nuanced expression of anxiety that comes out of the depiction of sexual liminality, and from the generalized desire to / anxiety about becoming unstuck from gender altogether.

It is precisely this rupture, these significant lacunae in the work of the dominant theorists of the gaze as it applies to film, horror, and gender, that raise questions for me. For one, I want to discover why we have been able to make these oversights for so long. Further, why we seem compelled to rationalize the mysterious via Freudian and Lacanian terms; what it is that we gain by retreating from the mysterious and liminal to the rational and binary? Everywhere I look in the use of the gaze to analyze gender, I see figures approaching the precipice of the super/natural and then stepping back into rationalizing discourse in one form or another. What, then, are we really *using* the gaze for? For those of us who want to use gendered analysis for some ostensibly liberatory purpose (a group in which I, of course, include Mulvey and Clover), what is it that we've missed?

Representation Will Not Save You

It seems to me that the first step in developing a super/natural analytic of the gaze is to return to the juncture before the rationalization and reduction occur: those moments

where Mulvey acknowledged the *magic* at work in the process, the means by which light on a screen can carry out *transformations of subject into object* in a way that entails real world material consequences. In staging such a return, it's important to note that while Mulvey is our most popular proponent of the gaze as a way to explore gender, she is not the first.

Beauvoir, for instance, made considerable use of the gaze as a force constitutive of gender in *The Second Sex*, and, interestingly enough, did so in a way that at every turn acknowledged its magical implication. In a chapter on the childhood of young girls emphasizing the existentialist concept of gender as structured through social experiences rather than existing as an innate quality, Beauvoir writes of the gaze as a “magic” force that performs this structuring, one that both allows a child to encounter herself (albeit an “alienated form” of herself) and inscribes boundaries around her capacities.³⁸⁵ Following an account of the child’s confrontation with herself in a mirror, becoming aware of herself as a body in the world, she writes of the “magic of the adult gaze” as “capricious; the child pretends to be invisible, his parents play the game, grope around for him, they laugh, and then suddenly they declare: ‘You are bothersome, you are not invisible at all.’”³⁸⁶ This particular example is important for Beauvoir not just because it highlights the structuring capacity of the parent and their interposing will on the child’s imaginary of herself, but because it emphasizes a relationship between the bounding, the parental, the erotic, and the mystical or magical that, for Beauvoir, is encouraged in the

³⁸⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 285.

³⁸⁶ Beauvoir, 285.

introspective and interior-focused social rearing of women, yet discouraged in the action-oriented rearing of young boys.

This magic, which for Beauvoir even comes to infuse the language spoken by women, has a multitude of effects. It is on the one hand “petrifying” and solidifying in the sense of making good subjects out of young girls: “subjected to [a lover’s] gentle authority, she will find the same security as in her father’s arms: the magic of embraces and gazes will petrify her back into an idol.”³⁸⁷ Yet, it also connects a young girl to a historical lineage of magic, to concepts of an earth-centric feminine paganism that we will later come to recognize as vitally important to mid-century American feminism. Writing of the roles of women in “primitive” social organizations that are nonetheless perpetuated into her twentieth century, Beauvoir writes that...

The life of the clan is thus maintained and extended through [women]; children, herds, harvests, tools, and the whole prosperity of the group of which they are the soul depend on their work and their magic virtues. Such strength inspires in men a respect mingled with fear, reflected in their worship. [...] Supreme idol in faraway regions of heaven and hades, woman on earth is surrounded by taboos like all sacred beings—she is herself taboo; because of the powers she holds, she is seen as a magician or a sorceress; she is included in prayers, and she can be at times a priestess like the druids among the ancient Celts; in certain cases she participates in the government of the tribe, and at times she even governs on her own.³⁸⁸

For all the faults of goddess feminism (chiefly the essentializing reductions and rationalizations of some of its major priestesses), Beauvoir’s invocations here are of

³⁸⁷ Beauvoir, 285.

³⁸⁸ Beauvoir, 79.

interest to anyone thinking about the role of the gaze – its physical and cultural, as well as historical, operations. Beauvoir’s gaze is not just constitutive of a body with (gendered) meanings, but of a body suffused with real magical powers, a body with the power to affect, define, and even overturn social relation via the meanings that are (sometimes violently) read into it.

bell hooks develops similar expansions of the gaze and its transformational relationship to the body in her work on cinema. In 1992’s *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, she writes about the ways in which Mulvey’s formulation of the gaze in cinema falls short for black women viewers. “I remember,” she says, “being punished as a child for staring, for those hard intense direct looks children would give grown-ups, looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority. The ‘gaze’ has always been political in my life.”³⁸⁹ Drawing upon this historical association of the gaze with resistance and defiance, in addition to and in excess of the desire that Mulvey centers, she cites the “oppositional black gaze” as being foundational to the establishment of independent black cinema, a grounds of cultural production where “looking was [in addition to visual pleasure] also about contestation and confrontation.”³⁹⁰ She thereby places the black woman viewer outside of Mulvey’s logics of pleasure specifically because there was no readymade identification between the feminine subject on screen and the feminine subject embodied by said viewers, noting that...

³⁸⁹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.

³⁹⁰ hooks, 117.

...it is only as one imagines 'woman' in the abstract, when woman becomes fiction of fantasy, can race not be seen as significant. Are we really to imagine that feminist theorists writing only about images of white women, who subsume this specific historical subject under the totalizing category 'woman,' do not 'see' the whiteness of the image? It may very well be that they engage in a process of denial that eliminates the necessity of revisioning conventional ways of thinking about psychoanalysis as a paradigm of analysis and the need to rethink a body of feminist film theory that is firmly rooted in a denial of the reality that sex/sexuality may not be the primary and/or exclusive signifier of difference.³⁹¹

For me, hooks' disjunction between the subject on screen (that subsequently becomes the object of scholarly analysis) and the subject as lived offers another missing piece of the puzzle, a gesture towards the questions I asked earlier about why we seem to have the compulsion to retreat into rationalizing discourse in order to squash analytics of difference that exceed simplistic binaries. It is impossible, of course, to entirely export hooks' race-centric analysis for the project of discovering the centrality of transness in cinematic representations of gendered monstrosity, but she does allow us to see more clearly that the monstrosity we witness is not in the subjugation of women writ large, but rather is something that emerges from the denial of the malleability and slipperiness of "woman" as a category.

hooks takes this further, noting that black women viewers of cinema "provide new points of recognition" through simply bringing a fundamentally different subjectivity to the role of spectator; they "embody Stuart Hall's vision of a critical practice that

³⁹¹ hooks, 124.

acknowledges that identity is constituted ‘not outside but within representation,’ and invites us to see film ‘not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation *which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are....*’³⁹² Compellingly, this critique offers us a fracturing of the monolith of visuality and representation upon which so much of film criticism is built. Just as hooks notes that the above practice of spectatorship and representation functions as a “process whereby we see our history as counter-memory... a way to know the present and invent the future,” we can understand more about the position of gender nonconformity within the dominant analytics of the gaze.³⁹³

It is not a question of mere representation that we’re working with: insofar as criticism can be aimed towards liberatory ends, it is not the case that such ends can be attained by advocating for more trans characters who *don’t* cut people apart with chainsaws. And although the material conditions of trans lives are vitally important, it’s not even the case that those ends can be achieved by demanding more representation of trans characters written and created by trans people who are paid for our efforts.

Given this diminishment of the importance of representation, I want to take a moment to address Jack Halberstam’s efforts to articulate a “transgender gaze” in his book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. He develops his concept of the transgender gaze through a sustained critique of Kimberly Pierce’s 1999 film, *Boys Don’t Cry*, a purported biopic of Brandon Teena, a transgender man

³⁹² hooks, 131. Emphasis mine.

³⁹³ hooks, 131.

murdered (along with Phillip DeVine and Lisa Lambert) in 1993. Halberstam focuses his attention on one particular scene in the film during which Brandon is subjected to the brutalizing experience of being forced by several cis men to remove his clothing in a bathroom so that they can “confirm” his “actual” gender. During this scene, Brandon is shown looking into a mirror and for the duration of the scene, he seems to exist outside of himself, existing in another place and time and observing the events in the bathroom as if they are happening to someone else. While the scenes are undoubtedly meant to invoke a sense of traumatic dissociation, and do so to great effect, Halberstam reads the sequence as a “shot/reverse shot... between the castrated Brandon and the transgender one, the transgender gaze [being] constituted as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places (at least) at the same time, one clothed and one naked.”³⁹⁴ But what two places does Halberstam mean? It seems as if he defines the transgender gaze here chiefly by its capacity to paradoxically incorporate the discordance of the cis perspective and the trans perspective all at once.

I’m deeply fascinated by Halberstam’s assertion that the problem of transgender representation in film is that it is by and large a “projection of rationalization” and “trivialization” by which transgender lives are radically reduced to simplistic explanations emerging from a discourse of binary gender.³⁹⁵ As my pushing back on the work of Mulvey and Clover indicates, I’m also concerned about the ways in which gender variance or deviance is rationalized, how swiftly it becomes incorporated into a

³⁹⁴ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 88.

³⁹⁵ Halberstam, 55.

totalizing discourse that ultimately shores up the edges of an eroding cis world order. But while I'm a fan of paradoxes and contradictions, I do think that there is a certain sharp misery to the experience of living in a way that is perpetually flanked by cis perceptions of the world and myself, and I'm surprised by Halberstam's articulation of a transgender gaze here because it would never occur to me to consider those flanking cis perceptions as part of *my own* gaze or perceptual apparatus. While I take Halberstam's point that "the shot/reverse shot involving the two Brandons serves both to destabilize the spectator's sense of gender stability and confirm Brandon's manhood at the very moment that he has been exposed as female/castrated," I have to question what the ultimate usefulness is of privileging cisgender perspective in a trans analytic.³⁹⁶ In the next section, I'll demonstrate where I think this privileging causes Halberstam's analysis of an important cultural object of gender-horror to fall short. Nonetheless, this *is* Halberstam's emphasis. While he acknowledges the "competing sets of motivations for the representation of a transgender life by nontransgender people," calling such works a "project of stabilization" in which "the destabilizing effects of the transgender narrative are defused by establishing the transgender narrative as strange, uncharacteristic, and even pathological," it is questionable whether or not his modeling of the gaze really eludes such stabilization itself.³⁹⁷

And so I try to consider these three expansions as working with and off of one another: Beauvoir's use of the gaze as simultaneously petrifying and animating, making

³⁹⁶ Halberstam, 54–55.

³⁹⁷ Halberstam, 54–55.

meaning in a way that fixes while at the same time investing with a feared cultural power; hooks' use of the gaze as defiant, oppositional, and generative of knowledge about new subjectivities; and Halberstam's tension over the rationalizing and stabilizing impetuses of trans representation. In doing so, I want to assert that in developing a new theory of the transgender gaze (or more precisely in my case, a gaze concomitant with the thoroughly trans super/natural analytic), something more is at stake in the question of representation. This recognition begins to explain the enormous oversights on the part of prescient critics like Clover: visibility (literally, the ability to see a thing, the ability to use Beauvoir's magic words, "you are not invisible" on any given subject) is not a matter of representation but a matter of what can or cannot *be* been. Visibility through representation doesn't matter if those representations are smoke and mirrors, an illusion created by a fearful magician, as so much horror cinema might be. The real magician looks, and *by the act of looking*, makes the unseen seen, makes a thing so by the seeing of it.

It is on these grounds, then, that I call yet another formulation of the gaze, this one recognized by Sarah Kofman in her analysis of Francisco Goya's *Witches' Sabbath* (1798).



Figure 4. *Witches' Sabbath*. Francisco Goya, 1798.

In this painting, Kofman notes, the eyes are “turned not toward some present object, but toward something absent, threatening, and unnameable... the luminosity of intelligence and science has given way to the obscurity of the night and the expression of anxiety.”³⁹⁸

The unnameable something on which their gaze is fixed is the absence outside the boundaries, the thing which forces us to recognize the insufficiencies of our categories. It is in their honor then that I name my own trans/super/natural analytic of the gaze the *witch's gaze*: a modality of visibility, framing, looking, and recognition which goes beyond the question of good and bad representation towards an apprehension of what is

³⁹⁸ Sarah Kofman, “Conjuring Death: Remarks on The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolas Tulp (1632),” in *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 240.

created, what is in fact *summoned forth* by the mass cultural staging of American fear of the transsexual.

Akin to Stryker's comments on the excess that is given unintentional form and life by the operations of the surgeon's scalpel who sought only to create a recognizable and intelligible representation of gender, this staging produces its own excess, a shadow that becomes a part of what transsexuality *is*, and has to be reckoned with on the terms of its existence rather than whether or not we find it appealing and attractive. That the fearful cinema of the cis attempts to hide these living shadows—our newly born siblings—from us is the problem. This, then, is what we have to do with horror cinema; to belligerently cast it as trans cinema not so much because of its (faulty, unglamorous, dehumanizing) representations, but because of the inextricable transness of the fears embedded in the specific illusions that it conjures. And our first step in forcing this transition on horror cinema is to make it look directly at those very things it hoped to render invisible.

Goodbye Horses, Hello Kings of Hell: Manifesting the Witch's Gaze

Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018)

Like other genre classics such as Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*, *Hereditary* tells the story of a nuclear family threatened by demonic influence. The film opens with the funeral of the maternal grandmother, Leigh, and as the story unfolds, we gradually

learn that in life, Leigh was the head of a sinister magical cabal devoted to cultivating a suitable human host for one of the eight kings of Hell, the demon Paimon. Working with the cabal, Leigh offers up her own grandchildren to serve as host for the demon: first, her granddaughter Charlie, and after she proves to be an unsuitable host, her grandson Peter.

This “unsuitability” of the granddaughter Charlie to serve as a host for the king of Hell is the facet of the film that I want to emphasize in this reading. Charlie’s visual representation throughout the film is one that is probably familiar to many trans people who recall experiencing bodily dysphoria at a young age – she is socially withdrawn, spends a great deal of time in a world of imaginary friends, and seems unwilling to wear any clothing other than an enormously oversized hoodie that obscures the shape of her body. Charlie’s gender ambiguity is foregrounded in an early conversation between her and her mother Annie (Leigh’s daughter).

Consoling her daughter over the passing of her grandmother, Annie says to Charlie: “You know you were her favorite, right? Even when you were a little baby, she wouldn’t let me feed you because she needed to feed you. Drove me crazy.”

To this, Charlie responds: “She wanted me to be a boy.”³⁹⁹

Tellingly, Annie’s immediate response is: “You know, I was a tomboy when I was growing up. I hated dresses and dolls and pink.”⁴⁰⁰

If the hoodies and isolation were not indicator enough, this exchange would certainly prove familiar to a trans viewer. The scene is striking for the way its characters

³⁹⁹ Ari Aster, *Hereditary*, Drama, Horror, Mystery, Thriller (A24, PalmStar Media, Finch Entertainment, 2018).

⁴⁰⁰ Aster.

seem to be talking past one another. All Charlie has actually said is that her grandmother wishes she had been born a boy, and Annie's response is to immediately reassure her that it's okay to be a tomboy. Annie's reassuring impulse that seeks to fix Charlie as a tomboy (a comprehensible and acceptable form of gender variance that one might grow out of) rather than as a transsexual is a flagrant example of what Halberstam termed the "stabilizing response" to transgender lives, except in this case it's not even subtext; it is rendered textual in exactly the way the same stabilizing response might be carried out in the context of an actual nuclear family dealing with a child showing signs of gender variance. Couched in a cloak of love and acceptance is the reassurance that one's sense of dysphoria can be rationalized away, that one needn't actually transition, that one can simply be a tomboy, or perhaps, an effeminate male. So deep is this anxiety that it ruptures to the surface of the film even when the character in question has not herself verbally expressed any kind of trans desire at all.

As it turns out, this projective anxiety about Charlie's gender proves to be central to the film's plot. At the end of the first act, Charlie suffers a traumatic death. After this act, which sunders the family and forces them all into grief-stricken isolation from one another, Charlie's brother Peter begins to undergo horrific supernatural experiences that mark him as having been chosen as the new target host for King Paimon. As Peter begins to adopt many of the physical, verbal, and sartorial eccentricities demonstrated by Charlie earlier in the film, we are given to understand that Charlie's behaviors, the source of so much trans anxiety, were actually the consequence of possession by Paimon. Here we have something similar to but at once pointedly different from the stabilizing or

rationalizing impulse of cis representations of transness: a hysterical embedding of trans behavior in the realm of the unstabilized and irrational that attributes it to demonic possession. Indeed, *Hereditary* “moves past” the worn out trope of the “man in a dress” who is explained away by appeals to psychoanalysis to express trans anxiety through a significantly older – and decidedly more honest – modality: supernatural fear.

Indeed, late in the film, we are shown a grimoire offering details on the demon Paimon himself. This text tells us that, in spite of possessing an androgynous appearance coupling a “female face” with “masculine pronouns,” Paimon is nonetheless definitively “a male and is thus covetous of a male body.”

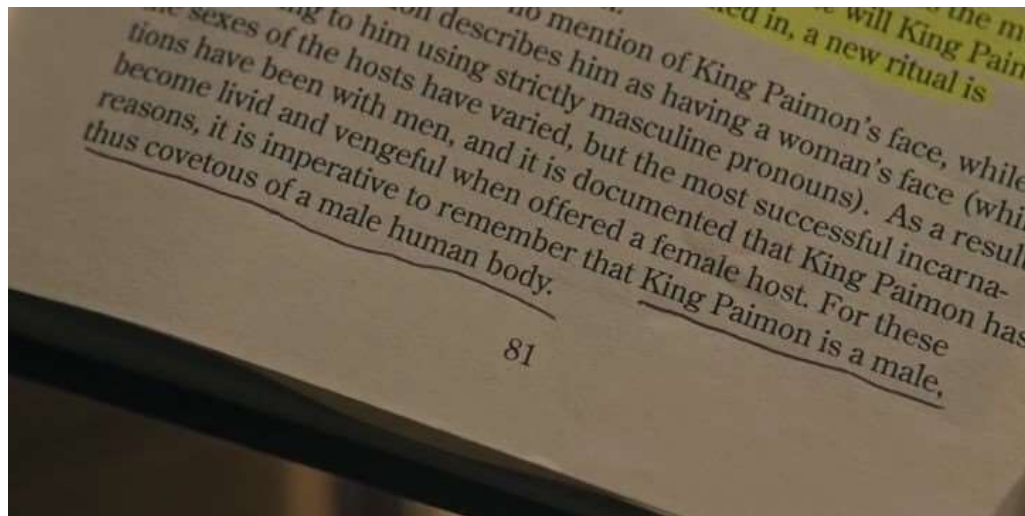


Figure 5: Grimoire in Hereditary, (dir: Ari Aster, 2018)

This last statement is remarkable to me. The claim that one is “male and thus covetous of a male body” is intelligible *only if read through a transgender lens* that

understands essence and body as malleable and potentially mismatched parts of a whole. Here, however, it becomes the essential characteristic of an archdemon.

As the film goes on, we begin to understand that the magical cabal of which Leigh was a part orchestrated Charlie's death because Paimon found her body unsuitable to his preferences and requires transition into a "male" body, that of her older brother Peter. In the final moments of the film, as the ritual is completed and King Paimon fully takes over Peter's corporeal form, the cabal addresses Peter by Charlie's name, saying: "Charlie... you're all right now. You are Paimon, one of the eight kings of Hell. [...] We've corrected your first female body and give you now this healthy male host. We reject the Trinity and pray devoutly to you, great Paimon. Give us your knowledge of all secret things."⁴⁰¹

Clearly, this is one of the *most trans things ever captured on film*. *Hereditary* is absolutely suffused with tropes of trans monstrosity. Borrowed directly from the school of *Psycho* and *Sleepaway Camp*, we have the notion of a matriarchal figure creating transness through manipulation, forcing children into opposing gender roles in order to satisfy her own ego. Throughout the film, Annie's grief over Charlie's death is staged as a destabilizing influence on the family; frequent references to her earlier bouts with schizophrenia and paranoid delusions dominate the table conversation and fix her as a chief agent in the family's collapse. When she first begins to dabble in magic and experiences something like success in contacting Charlie's spirit from beyond the veil, she tries to show evidence—a book that Charlie has written in—to her husband, only for

⁴⁰¹ Aster.

him to refuse to look. In an extremely frustrating scene, he literally refuses to incline his head a few degrees in order to look at, and thereby lend credibility to, his wife's assertions about what is happening in their lives. This is useful to behold because we can see the film directly telling us what it's willing to look at and what it's afraid to look at; what it hopes to make visible (family drama) and what it hopes to obscure (the essential root of transsexuality at the core of the film's anxieties).

So forceful are these cis anxieties that the film has to conceive of transsexuality not merely as "unnatural," but as the result of demonic influence. The panic over transition in this film invokes the same fears that color trans people's lives in the real world: the idea that transition is physically and psychologically traumatic, that it destroys healthy families, that a child transitioning is equivalent to the old child dying, and so on. Moreover, it seems to operate on the fear that transsexuality is something that can be done *to* you, that it's akin to a possession that will mark your unwitting body with a spiritual and moral meaning beyond your control.⁴⁰² Of course, this fear of one's body being marked with meaning is exactly the process I've identified in the assignation of meaning to trans bodies back in chapter one. It's worth noting the way this film conjures the shadows up, however, as we can see them even now moving in the world around us. The notion that transsexuality can be done to you as a consequence of your moral or spiritual vulnerability is the implicit justification for innumerable laws—hundreds of

⁴⁰² It may also be worth examining the film's visual motif of miniatures, the scale model representations of living spaces that Annie creates as part of her art career. They seem to carry the suggestion of subjects living under a false dollhouse model of freedom; truly a conservative American anxiety concomitant with themes seen elsewhere in the film.

them introduced into state legislatures in 2021 and 2022 alone—seeking to legally prevent children from obtaining the forbidden knowledge in a variety of restrictive ways.^{403 404}

While prescient, this is by no means new. Earlier in this text, I noted a similar attribution of transness to an ill-conceived dabbling with sinister magic and witchcraft in an excerpt from *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which in its own right could serve as a kind of summary of the plot of *Hereditary*. And yet, just as with Clover’s oversight of *Leatherface* and the true anxieties embedded in her figure of the Final Girl, no one seems to be able to see it. At the time of this writing, having looked through volumes of scholarship and criticism devoted to this highly-praised and award-winning film, I was not able to locate a single published article addressing the transgender themes in which the film is awash from start to finish. And so, even as American horror cinema continues its persistent linkages of gender variance and monstrosity, evolving it into forms so new that they are in fact extremely old, the critical application of gendered criticism, centered on the gaze, seems unable to recognize the absolute centrality of the transsexual in our literature and cinema.

⁴⁰³ “Legislative Tracker: Anti-Transgender Legislation Filed for the 2022 Legislative Session,” *Freedom for All Americans* (blog), accessed February 17, 2022, freedomforallamericans.org/legislative-tracker/anti-transgender-legislation/.

⁴⁰⁴ At the risk of dating my work, I’d like to note that in the two weeks between turning the first draft of this dissertation into my co-chairs and preparing the final draft now in the middle of March 2022, Texas governor Greg Abbott has issued a legal directive whereby Child Protective Services must treat the administration of trans healthcare to a minor as a form of child abuse, and the Idaho state legislature is considering a law that would mandate life imprisonment for providing trans healthcare to a minor.

Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990)

Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* has been subjected to queer controversies ever since its release in 1991, most of them centered around the character of Buffalo Bill. The ostensible "villain" of the film, Buffalo Bill is a serial murderer whose modus operandi is the skinning of his victims. In the course of her conversations with the imprisoned psychiatrist-turned-cannibalistic-murderer Dr. Hannibal Lecter, FBI trainee Clarice Sterling eventually tracks down and kills Buffalo Bill after discerning that the skinning of his victims is prelude to his ultimate goal: the construction of a "woman suit," an armor of human skins stitched together that he believes will allow him to transform himself into a woman. As such a synopsis no doubt makes clear, the character was the locus of considerable pushback from the gay and lesbian community at the time of the film's release, and in recent years has been the focus of intense scrutiny by the transgender community.⁴⁰⁵

A brief Google search for "silence of the lambs trans" will reveal a plethora of blog posts and Medium articles in which self-styled queer media critics ruthlessly castigate the film for its heinous representation of trans women. I'll point out a few of the most noteworthy here. Shortly after coming out as a trans woman, Lily Wachowski invoked the film in a statement, saying that "though we have come a long way since *Silence of the Lambs*, we continue to be demonized and vilified in the media where attack

⁴⁰⁵ A fairly detailed synopsis of some of the contemporary protests from the gay community can be found in Jack Halberstam, "SkinFlick: Posthuman Gender in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*," *Camera Obscura* 27 (1992): 37–52.

ads portray us as potential predators to keep us from even using the goddamn bathroom. The so-called bathroom bills that are popping up all over this country do not keep children safe, they force trans people into using bathrooms where they can be beaten and or murdered. We are not predators, we are prey.”⁴⁰⁶ What stands out to me as interesting here is the invocation of *Silence of the Lambs* as an established nadir in the lives of trans people, an absolute low point for the zeitgeist to which we can say, even as we are beset by actual oppressive legislation, at least we’re past *that*. The fears and anxieties around trans people embedded in the film resonate throughout the rest of her comment as well, and she’s quick to cite the reality that trans people are far more likely to be the subjects of violence than the perpetrators thereof, placing herself and by extension the rest of us on the “right side” of that fear and anxiety.

Drew Gregory, writing for *Autostraddle*, describes the uniquely trans experience of watching cis people all over social media transform themselves into “the opposite gender” by use of face-swap apps, and cites the frequency with which such people then make a joking reference to Buffalo Bill.⁴⁰⁷ Her point is that Buffalo Bill is – or at least was for many years – most people’s immediate cultural touchstone for a trans woman. When imagining a person assigned male at birth donning the clothing, bodily traits, and affectations culturally associated with femininity, many Americans might not have had a model other than Buffalo Bill upon which to base their comparison – a fact that has done

⁴⁰⁶ Tracy Baim, “Second Wachowski Filmmaker Sibling Comes out as Trans,” *Windy City Times*, March 8, 2016, windycitytimes.com/lgbt/Second-Wachowski-filmmaker-sibling-comes-out-as-trans-/54509.html.

⁴⁰⁷ Drew Gregory, “Why Do So Many People Have Goodbye Horses as Their Tinder Anthem?,” *Autostraddle*, June 13, 2019, autostraddle.com/why-do-so-many-people-have-goodbye-horses-as-their-tinder-anthem/.

no favors at all for the circulating reputation of real world trans women. Gregory's analysis of the film claims that "Buffalo Bill and Hannibal Lecter represent the two types of 'men' TERFs fear" with the cultured and authoritative Hannibal taking on the role of a "father figure... patriarchy incarnate," and Bill taking on the role of "the intruder, a man adopting femininity so he can sneak into womanhood."⁴⁰⁸ But only one of these figures, she argues, gains his fearful power through a transgression of the stable and rational categories of binary gender; Hannibal the father is a known villain we're long accustomed to fighting, while Bill is a more insidious threat who comes to us in the (cartoonishly inept) guise of our sisters. This concatenation of fears, according to Gregory, means that the film's "thematic core is transphobia."⁴⁰⁹ "There's a reason," she writes, "why Bill's defeat marks a happy ending, even as Hannibal escapes to live another day."⁴¹⁰

It goes without saying, then, that Buffalo Bill, if not the actual nadir of life on earth for trans women, is nonetheless an example of extremely "bad representation." So bad, in fact, that real world trans women have almost certainly suffered fatal violence as a result of his characterization, and that's not a fact that I want to dispense with lightly. When I talk about enjoying the sight of myself conjured up as a fearful object by culturemakers, I mean it. But it's also merely my favorite choice out of the many bad positions available to me. Even so, I don't let it be casually known to other trans women that I happen to love this film; it's something that I generally share only with people that

⁴⁰⁸ Gregory.

⁴⁰⁹ Gregory.

⁴¹⁰ Gregory.

I actively trust. Within trans circles, I'd estimate the damage to social cache being roughly as bad as if I told someone I voted for Trump. Nonetheless, I'm a firm believer that we can't help what we love and that we should lean into our particular dooms, so here we are: reckoning with this amazing and amazingly grim film and what I think it really means for us and for an American engagement with transsexuality writ large. The question is: what does a trans feminism that incorporates the shadow self of Buffalo Bill look like?

In the years before his death, Jonathan Demme sought to defuse some of the controversy around his work by first saying that he “welcomed” the backlash from the queer community, and then by disputing the idea that Buffalo Bill is a trans woman at all. “He didn’t wish to be another gender,” Demme is quoted as saying, “He didn’t really have a sexual preference. He loathed himself – he wanted to transform himself so that there was no sense of him in the ‘new’ him [and] becoming a woman... that was his method of doing it... He wished he was a woman not because he always wanted to be a woman. This was another way to escape.”⁴¹¹ Clearly, there are some issues here. While one might admire Demme’s head-on addressing of the representation issue, his argument that Bill “didn’t really have a sexual preference” has nothing to do with matters of gender variance, and his protest that “he wished he was a woman not because he always wanted to be a woman” shows a fairly limited imagination for how trans women might come to

⁴¹¹ Curtis M. Wong, “Jonathan Demme ‘Applauded’ the LGBT Backlash Against ‘Silence of the Lambs,’” *Huffington Post*, July 22, 2014, huffpost.com/entry/silence-of-the-lambs-lgbt-criticism_n_5609372.

an understanding of ourselves. But most interesting, I think, is that Demme's words echo those of the film itself.

In one of the film's most famous exchanges between Clarice Starling and Hannibal Lecter, Lecter intimates to Starling that Buffalo Bill is looking to "transform himself." Although Lecter has not yet mentioned it, Starling's response is to immediately assume that Lecter is referring to transsexuality. She rebukes: "There's no correlation in literature between transsexualism and violence. Transsexuals are very passive."⁴¹² But ah, says Hannibal, there's the rub: "Billy is not a real transsexual."⁴¹³ Indeed, even as the film depicts Bill with all the tropes and trappings of American culture's longstanding fear of and revulsion towards gender variance, it likewise tries to deny Bill the right to this identity. He has applied to Johns Hopkins and other major centers for transsexual surgery, Hannibal tells the audience, only to be denied. So, we have it straight from the cannibal doctor's mouth: Bill isn't a transsexual, he's just crazy. Of course, as Drew Gregory points out in her critique, "in 1991, I could have been denied medical transition simply because I'm not heterosexual."⁴¹⁴

And so, emerging from this controversy around representation, we have fairly compelling questions about why the film cannot take ownership of this central fear upon which it's founded; it's terrified of trans women even as it refuses to make that acknowledgement and does everything in its power to claim that the particular trans

⁴¹² Jonathan Demme, *The Silence of the Lambs*, Crime, Drama, Thriller (Strong Heart/Demme Production, Orion Pictures, 1991).

⁴¹³ Demme.

⁴¹⁴ Gregory, "Why Do So Many People Have Goodbye Horses as Their Tinder Anthem?"

woman of whom it's afraid is not a *real* trans woman. In order to address this, however, we have to draw upon my above analysis of the gaze to move beyond the question of representation, and to ask: what can be seen, and what cannot be seen?⁴¹⁵ What specific act of mystification is being performed here, and what does it want to prevent us from seeing? To put it bluntly, the medical apparatus and the fearful magician have always been equally pitiful gatekeepers, and I see no reason why we should take them seriously. In other words: Buffalo Bill is definitely a trans woman.

But this is hard for us to admit. After all, she kills people! Hardly a desirable role model. I want to take a quick look at one of the most frequently cited queer analyses of the film, again by Jack Halberstam. Written in 1992, at the height of the initial controversy surrounding the film, Halberstam's article argues that the film's obsession with skin and surfaces tracks with a post-Arendt conception of monstrosity that dislocates it from some kind of detached innate quality of evil and locates it in identity: "we wear monsters like skin, they are us, they are on us and in us. Monstrosity no longer coagulates into a specific body, a single face, a unique feature, it is replaced with a banality that fractures resistance because the enemy becomes harder and harder to locate and looks more and more like the hero. What were monsters are now facets of identity; the sexual other and the racial other cannot be separated from self."⁴¹⁶ The reading as such becomes

⁴¹⁵ An example, perhaps, of the kinds of dead-ends that framing these issues as a matter of "representation" leads us into is the recent announcement that the new television remake of *Silence of the Lambs* will attempt to offset the harm done by the portrayal of Buffalo Bill via the hiring of a trans actress, Jen Richards, to play an undisclosed role: Curtis M. Wong, "'Silence of the Lambs' Spinoff Tackles Buffalo Bill Problem by Adding Trans Character," *Huffington Post*, February 2, 2021, huffpost.com/entry/clarice-silence-of-the-lambs-spinoff-transgender-character_n_6019b0a6c5b69137248d7f6c.

⁴¹⁶ Halberstam, "SkinFlick: Posthuman Gender in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*," 38.

a sort of sidestepping of contemporary controversies of representation, as Halberstam expresses his desire to “resist the temptation to brand the film as homophobic because gender confusion becomes the guilty secret of the mad men in the basement” as “the film indeed demands that we stay at the surface and look for places where the surface stretches too thin.”⁴¹⁷ Notably, Halberstam addresses some of the film’s most “offensive” moments of representation and comes to a similar conclusion as myself:

And yet the gender trouble that Buffalo Bill represents, as he [sic] prances around in a wig and plays with a poodle named Precious, cannot be simply dismissed. It seems to me that *The Silence of the Lambs* emphasizes that we are at a peculiar time in history, a time when it is becoming impossible to tell the difference between prejudice and its representations.⁴¹⁸

Here, I feel that Halberstam draws close to my understanding of representation; that the issue is less one of whether or not cultural objects depict a “positive” or “negative” representation of a particular marginalized group, but that the issue of representation is pointedly more about what can or cannot be seen at all; what is obscured and what is revealed. Unfortunately, Halberstam seems to fall prey to the primary illusion of *Silence of the Lambs*, its desire to show us a trans woman and tell us that we’re not looking at a trans woman. It is the same kind of stabilizing or rationalizing move he will later decry in his chapter on Brandon Teena, but what seems to obscure it for him here is exactly the application of his own transgender gaze to the project: by letting in the cis

⁴¹⁷ Halberstam, 41.

⁴¹⁸ Halberstam, 41.

perspective, he reinforces the mystification impelled by the “representation” of Buffalo

Bill. “I would agree,” he writes...

...with Hannibal Lecter’s pronouncement that Buffalo Bill is not reducible to ‘homosexual,’ or ‘transsexual.’ He is indeed a man at odds with gender identity or sexual identity and his self-presentation is a confused mosaic of signifiers. In the basement scene he resembles a heavy metal rocker as much as a drag queen and that is precisely the point. He is a man imitating gender, exaggerating gender and finally attempting to shed his gender in favor of a new skin. Buffalo Bill is prey to the most virulent conditioning heterosexist culture has to offer. He believes that anatomy is destiny.⁴¹⁹

It is plain from his language here that Halberstam believes he is resisting a stabilizing and “reductive” reading of Bill. But what he seems to have overlooked by adopting the cis perspective (indeed, the perspective of the medical apparatus that delineates whether or not a subject is “truly” transsexual) is that Bill’s “confused mosaic of signifiers” is not (or not only) evidence of her failure to adhere to a specific regime of queer identity markers, but a mark of the mystifying hand. It is evidence of the cis desire to expel its anxieties while remaining distant therefrom, to, again, show us a trans woman and tell us not to worry, it’s okay to be afraid of her because she’s not *really* a trans woman.

One might look more deeply at the issue of Bill’s “confused mosaic of signifiers.” One of the real benefits of the witch’s gaze here—that is to say, of taking Bill seriously as a trans woman, by antisocially welcoming her into the fold, by resisting the need to

⁴¹⁹ Halberstam, 41.

resolve seeming contradictions, by being willing to sit with unresolved dualities—is that we’re able to see patterns in the mystical arrangements, those very contradictions and dualities that are projected onto her by the film. One of the most pressing of these is the film’s obsessive juxtaposition of Bill with the American flag, something almost wholly unnoticed by critics. When Starling first investigates an undiscovered victim of Bill’s at the prodding of Hannibal Lecter, she enters a storage facility where she will find the body in the back of a hearse draped in the American flag:



Figure 6: American hearse containing the body of a decapitated transsexual in *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

Shortly thereafter, we see Bill at her workstation, the American flag pinned above a tableau of other imagery related to transformation:



Figure 7: Bill at work, *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

And of course, at the very end of the film, after Bill is shot in her basement by Starling, we linger on a shot of the American flag, illuminated by the shattering of a darkened window:



Figure 8: The fog of war, *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

Of considerable importance, I think, is that as we watch Bill dying on the floor as Starling stands over her, her body and clothing itself recall the flag:



Figure 9: Blue and white corner, red and white stripes; *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

Those who have noticed this iconography write that it represents a kind of uniquely American worry about serial murders, about the ways in which the American social fabric itself breeds violent misfits who live amongst us without our knowledge. And yet this overlooks several key points. The first is that the flag itself is associated with the other points of our central triad – trans woman, FBI agent, and cannibal alike. In the case of Starling, an agent of the US government, this association is not terribly surprising, but when Lecter murders a police officer and arranges his corpse in a gruesome totem-like display with the flag, we're compelled to investigate the actual distance – or lack thereof – between these three figures more deeply:



Figure 10: Lecter's America, *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

But sticking with Bill herself for a few moments longer, it's worth noting that her juxtaposition with the flag is troubled by the appearance of other striking symbols. Chief among these is the revelation that she sleeps with a swastika quilt:



Figure 11: Bill's swastika quilt, *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

Tellingly, the appearance of the swastika quilt serves as a kind of out for many critics who interpret the flag motif as marking Bill as the symbolic nexus of specifically domestic American worries. Not only do they latch onto that, but they also latch onto this WW2-era propaganda poster that is seen in Bill's basement late in the film:



Figure 12: AMERICA: Open Your Eyes, The Silence of the Lambs, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

Patrick Marlborough, writing for *Vice* in 2017, notes that “it is hard not to see the woman-killing, basement-dwelling, skin-stitching Buffalo Bill as a cartoonish projection of modern misogyny, something that Demme presciently ties to white nationalism. Bill’s home is replete with Neo-Nazi iconography, and one poster echoes alt-right Twitter memes, reading: ‘America: Open Your Eyes!’”⁴²⁰ In the British Film Institute’s prestigious journal, *Sight & Sound*, Lizzie Francke writes that “Starling... ventur[es] into America’s secret darkness, from Lecter’s hellish dungeon, where all the sins of repression threaten to erupt, to Buffalo Bill’s underground cavern, where a neo-fascist poster exhorts ‘America: Open Your Eyes.’ Here, most disturbingly, Demme invites the audience to

⁴²⁰ Patrick Marlborough, “Silence of the Lambs Is Still Powerful 26 Years Later,” *Vice*, April 26, 2017, [vice.com/en/article/kbvxfj9/re-watching-silence-of-the-lambs-in-2017](https://www.vice.com/en/article/kbvxfj9/re-watching-silence-of-the-lambs-in-2017).

crawl under the killer's skin, illuminating Starling with the festering green spotlight of Buffalo Bill's envious gaze."⁴²¹

The problem with these takes is that, disastrously, they get the basic facts wrong! Fortunately, in doing so, they serve as clear indicators of the mystification embedded in the problem of "representation" that I've been referencing all along. The poster in Bill's basement is not in fact a piece of fascist propaganda, but the opposite. A cursory internet search – of Google, not even JSTOR! – reveals that the poster was designed by French artist Jean Carlu at the behest of Francis Brennan, the art director for the decidedly-American *Fortune* magazine, where it appeared as seen below, appended with an artist's statement urging America to end its isolationist policies and take the Nazi threat seriously:

⁴²¹ Lizzie Francke, "The Silence of the Lambs Archive Review: Jodie Foster in America's Underworld of Desire," *Sight & Sound*, November 6, 2017, www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/silence-lambs-jodie-foster-america-underworld-desire.



Figure 13: Fortune magazine, August 1941.

Only one other scholar (so far as I can tell), Miri Nakamura, seems to have identified the poster correctly, and for her it “serves as a criticism of America’s total war in the name of ‘democracy.’ [...] It calls for America to become more aware of its international politics; to open its eyes.”⁴²² While Nakamura offers a valuable insight that expands Bill’s “confusing mosaic of signifiers” beyond the shrunken sphere of specifically domestic concern, I want to focus on the contradictions in place here, the ones not noticed by critics who incorrectly identified the provenance of the poster. It seems clear that those who notice Bill’s flags but not their relationship to Starling and Lecter’s flags, as well as those who notice Bill’s swastikas, but not her anti-fascist imagery, are engaged in what Halberstam called the project of stabilization, the desire to

⁴²² Miri Nakamura, “Buffalo Bill Meets Madame Butterfly,” in *The Silence of the Lambs: Critical Essays on a Cannibal, Clarice, and a Nice Chianti*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 156.

render the figure of Bill the trans woman into a reductive allegory, a safe boy to hate for queers and Americans alike. But having seen the contradictions and the unsettling juxtapositions ourselves, what can we say about them?

It is clear that Bill's position in the film and in the critical discourse is as a safe site on which to project a *mélange* of anxieties, the absolute worst possible things that the cis American liberal imaginary can conjure up: misogynistic, appropriating a queer identity while at the same time 'making a spectacle of it,' violent, fascist, representative of the failure of American infrastructure and the post-Reagan degradation of the social safety net, of America's foreign interventionism, poor, rural, low-class. For one who takes a perverse pleasure in seeing the fears of the cis imaginary laid bare in monstrous representations of gender variance, this *mélange* is a real treat, as we get to see the cis American imaginary linking gender variance not just with violence and monstrosity, but with the absolute dissolution of the liberal nation. (And what might Beauvoir say about the function of this gaze that inscribes a repressive meaning on a woman's body at the same time that it animates that body with an overwhelmingly destructive power?)

This ability to let contradictions float in their suspended state without reducing them or resolving them (if we can call the outright overlooking of crucial facts about cultural objects, such as the provenance of Bill's poster or Leatherface's clearly transsexual inclinations, a "resolution") is what is lacking in previous formulations of a transgender gaze, and what is made clearer by the witch's gaze that willfully adopts Bill as our own. The witch's gaze—that is to say, the true transgender gaze—then, is not about a divided temporality or enfolded a discordance of trans and cis perspectives into

one unifying image or sequence, but about a mystical dissolution of categories that upends the notion of “representation” itself. I say again that representation does not make things seen, it makes *decisions* about what can and cannot be seen, and as the transgender gaze becomes super/natural in its scope, it makes seen what lies beneath the fears and anxieties in American cultural objects that give us trans representations like Buffalo Bill. It is more than “bad representation.” It’s a kind of wish: a wish to make sense of the cis imaginary’s greatest terror, to contain it, and at the same time, to be destroyed by it.

To say more on the unarticulated relationships among Bill, Lecter, and Clarice that I referenced above, their interconnection is at once the most overlooked and queerest thing in the film. Volumes of feminist analysis have been produced about the film that (rightly) speak to the important representation of Starling as a female agent navigating a world of varyingly vicious men. But again, the question here is not about good and bad representation, but what is revealed and obscured. With this question in mind, I return to one of the opening scenes of the film, where Starling first meets Hannibal Lecter.

On her way to Lecter’s cell, Starling has to walk down a long hallway past other inmates, one of whom, named Miggs, hisses at her that he can “smell her cunt.” When she speaks to Lecter himself, he first expresses his dismay that “[FBI Director] Jack Crawford sent a *trainee* to me,” and then asks her to recount what Miggs said to her. When Starling tells him the truth, he replies, “I myself cannot.” Lecter’s olfactory acumen remains a significant subject throughout the rest of the scene, however, as he tells Clarice that he can smell that she uses “Evyan skin cream. And sometimes you wear L’air

du Temps... but not today.”⁴²³ Watching this scene unfold through the legitimate transgender gaze is astonishing. The emphasis on scent and Lecter’s judgment takes the foreground and we’re forced to reckon with the substance of what he’s saying to Starling: critiquing the way she puts on women’s fashion (“good bag and cheap shoes”), her voice (“... that accent you’ve tried so desperately to shed...”), her scent and, pointedly, what he *cannot* smell about her, even the emphasis he places on the word “trainee” with its sonic similarity to “tranny.”⁴²⁴

My point here isn’t is to say that Starling is trans, but that it is abundantly clear to the witch’s gaze that *the film is treating her as if she is*; Lecter’s dismantling of her recent ascent to the middle class is not merely gendered but specifically transgendered, as he invokes specifically trans anxieties. We thusly cannot avoid seeing that the film’s strong feminist overtones are and have always been deeply colored by an anxiety not just of patriarchal assaults on femininity, but on the deeply-rooted American anxiety of gender liminality; Starling and the film’s fear isn’t just that she won’t make it in a man’s world, but that in order to do so, she will accidentally “cross over,” and find herself fallen outside of the safe and rational categories of binary gender.

Moreover, the flag motifs uniting these three characters, as well as Lecter and Clarice’s inescapably queer coding – I mean, come on, he notices the quality of women’s shoes while she spends the film rebuffing male advances, hanging out in bathrobes with her friend Ardelia, and is uh, played by Jodie Foster – dislocates the film’s queer core

⁴²³ Demme, *The Silence of the Lambs*.

⁴²⁴ Demme.

away from Buffalo Bill herself and onto a pointedly queer triad. We're then compelled to read the film less as a cis feminist artifact and more as an anxiety-ridden meditation on gender liminality in which an upper-class gay man employs the services of a working-class lesbian to hunt down and eradicate a trans woman who has slipped out of the restricting grasp of the medical apparatus and its sanctions. Armed with this understanding, we can see the cinematic gaze operating in infinitely more interesting configurations.

The gaze has always represented an important facet of criticism of *Silence of the Lambs*, especially in its feminist analyses. The act of looking (of “coveting,” as Lecter describes it near the end of the film) is central to many important sequences, from Lecter’s own unblinking stare...



Figure 14: Hannibal Lecter, *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

... to the key moment when Starling is left alone in a room full of West Virginian sheriff's deputies...



Figure 15: The gaze at work, *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

... to the film's climactic scene in which Bill watches an unaware Clarice through night-vision goggles.



Figure 16: Bill watches Clarice in *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

As I've suggested, however, the feminist core of the film is and has always been constructed upon a bedrock of trans anxieties, and that applies doubly to the way we see explicit operations of the gaze in the film. Watching the film recently, I was struck by the presence of mannequins in Bill's house. Their existence is diegetically explained on the grounds of Bill being a seamstress (of sorts), but their specific configuration in the filmic frame is worth noting:



Figure 17: Bill's mannequins in *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

All three of the mannequins (their color motifs in red, white, and blue – another appearance of the overlapping signifier of the flag) are arranged looking into mirrors. Looking at itself in a mirror is, of course, the exact opposite of what a mannequin is supposed to do. Typically speaking, a mannequin serves as an idealized mirror for *us*, a way for us to imagine ourselves as a somewhat idealized subject wearing a particular fashion or adopting a particular posture. By gazing into mirrors themselves, the mannequins draw attention to themselves and become an emblem of total reflexivity: they are models looking at models, absolutely vacant Subject positions with no actual subjects waiting to occupy the roles they represent. At the end, during the sequence in the basement, Clarice unknowingly encounters the mannequins in the darkness, yet another element of estrangement from the typical purpose of the mannequin: to be looked at.



Figure 18: Clarice and the mannequins in *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

On one level, what we have here is an absolute representation of what Halberstam recognized as the confusing tangle of signifiers that are heaped upon the figure of Bill. The self-reflexive vacant stare of the mannequins is a testament to emptiness, a visual analogue of the concatenation of contradictions made possible explicitly because the film goes out of its way to evacuate and deny the actual core of Bill's trans identity. Having performed this evacuation, this looking away from its real object, the core of its motivating anxieties and fears, the film is itself lost in a darkened basement of its own unconscious, unsure of itself, and eternally fixed in a staring gaze, looking for something it has prevented itself from seeing.

Except for the following moment:



Figure 19: The mannequin looks on as Bill dances in *The Silence of the Lambs*, (dir: Jonathan Demme, 1991)

In this central moment of the film, we see Bill donning pieces of the suit she is creating, putting on makeup, repeating the phrase “Would you fuck me? I’d fuck me,” and dancing to the song, “Goodbye Horses.” This is, far and away, the scene most often cited by critics as being the pinnacle of the film’s transphobic representations. It forms the centerpiece of Drew Gregory’s aforementioned piece in *Autostraddle*, even, indicating a certain conceptual identity between the song itself and Bill’s unenviable position in the popular consciousness. And yet, in this scene alone, unique from all others in the film, *one of the mannequins has turned around*, turned away from its mirror, to watch Bill’s dance, arms open in an accepting embrace.

If the mannequins represent a kind of self-reflexive and empty model, a circularity of mainstream logics of gender and its desire to reproduce good subjects, the

model in which the cis look for themselves and yet cannot really find themselves, then we have to read this moment as absolutely crucial. It represents a rare moment when the self-reflexive vacancy of the cis apprehension of gender variance has, for once, been shattered, a new model having been created. Applying something like Halberstam's transgender gaze to this scene, one could not help but notice the totality of contradictory impressions—the mannequins and their reflections juxtaposed with Bill herself—representing both Bill's subjectivity and the subjectivity of cis anxiety all at once. But this is totally insufficient. In the witch's gaze, we see what ruptures through from this suspension of symbols, the ungraspable excess that compels the one mannequin to turn herself around and bear witness. If the mirror can only offer a statement of reality – a “you must be me, this is who you are” in the literal, visual, and disciplinarian senses all at once – then the mannequin sees that Bill offers something else: a statement of trans will to power, of entirely self-contained generative and reproductive power—“I'd fuck me”—which finally does offer something new entirely.

Just what that something new is perhaps remains to be seen, and there's no guarantee that the transformative power it bears is one that can actually be endured in this world. To live with shadows, to incorporate their dark magics into the way we are compelled to live, is hard work. But what matters is that it is there and has always been there for those able to look with a gaze that sees the unbreakable linkages between terror, anxiety, and love. Such is the merit of the witch's gaze which sees the transgender gaze not as a trauma-centralizing enfolding of discordant world perspectives—a pitiful compromise between cis “reality” and trans subjective experiences—but as an act of

magic in its own right. The witch's gaze, then, is a demarcation of psychic territory in the realms of the unpleasant and monstrous, a vicious desire to possess and haunt the most vilified subjects, and a will to power that finally does begin to fulfill the rotting promise of queer theory, revealing that on some level at least, what is needed for liberation really can be imagined into existence.

CONCLUSION: Witchcraft, Second Wave Feminism, and the History of Things to Come

“I have spoken of the Goddess as psychological symbol and also as manifest reality. She is both. She exists, and we create her.”

—Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*⁴²⁵

In the preceding chapters, we turned the trans/super/natural method upon American literature and film and in the process developed three tools of analysis by which the magical operations of the margin—the means by which those relegated there by logopower are made both monstrous and magical, and the relation this has to revolutionary politics—might be made more clear: the haunted body, the trans shadow, and the witch’s gaze. Here at the end of the work, I want to take stock of the directions these tools are pointing me in the future: the doors they are opening, and what they are suggesting I might find there.

In my chapter on the history of transsexual literary modernism, I made it clear that the act of history by which we imagined into being a coherent tradition and field of women’s writing was, at the same time, inscribing a transsexual remainder that is essential to its own identity. In other words, the history of women’s writing has always been a transsexual history.

What that chapter also revealed, thanks to the other tools of the trans/super/natural method is that that history has also always been a supernatural one, shot through with a

⁴²⁵ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess: 20th Anniversary Edition* (HarperOne, 1999), 95.

deeply paganistic and irrational influence that stands in opposition to the patriarchal employ of reason through logopower. I began this work with an anecdote about the witch as well as theorizing about the figure of the witch as a conceptual persona by which to understand the relationship between being and becoming that shape the transsexual experience. Perhaps not surprisingly, the witch continued to show back up, all through the writing of these chapters: as the frightening but disruptive figure who breaks the patterns by which the body is constrained in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” as a catalyzing force for the transsexual magic at work in *Hereditary*, and virtually everywhere in the women’s salons and cultural productions of ex-patriate Paris. I say “not surprisingly” in part because, as I began this work, I listed a variety of feminist and queer analytics that employ the witch as a supernaturally disruptive figure. As she shows up perpetually in our art, so too does she show up in our thinking, though we don’t always name her as such.

In this conclusion, I want to take seriously the notion that the history of transsexuality has also always been a magical and supernatural history, and more specifically, a history of the witch. As I intimated in my second chapter, part of the point of rethinking histories formulated around marginalized identities is demonstrating that history in the hands of the witch works in a kind of omnidirectional way, that it not only describes what has happened, but that in the act of that description, it is doing a kind of conjuring, speaking something (such as a concept of transsexual modernism) into existence in the present moment by speaking it into existence in the past in such a way that the foundation upon which its present existence relies suddenly appears from a state

of invisibility, or perhaps even non-existence. This nonlinear inscription of the historical foundation of ideas (and people) is a concept with a greater resonance for me than I was able to cover in that chapter, and I want to take these various understandings we've come to over the course of this work in order to think more deeply about how history works for the transsexual witch, and the ways in which we work forward and backward in time, creating a "history of things to come."

As I'll make clear once again below, the witch is no arbitrary choice—she is and has been utterly essential to the structure of feminist and queer analysis. That her work is sometimes obscured through a rationalist impulse is of no consequence: the witch endures. So much of the history we call into being as feminist and queer scholars depends upon the necessarily spiritual acts and ways of thinking that the witch (and the transsexual) represents: a capacity to speak to the past in order to alter the future, a spell aimed at reshaping the boundaries of the natural by letting the super/natural back into places from which we have been expelled. It is senseless, then, to pretend as if the scholarly analysis of gender and gender variance does not demand a super/natural way of thinking, a practice of relationality that draws upon not just spiritual belief but spiritual praxis rooted in the transformative capacities of the margins, ritual and performance, community and coven. It is for this reason that I want to conclude with an in-depth look at the consequences of the transsexual witch's approach to history, its implication for the transsexual body's relationship to both space and time, as well as a brief sketch of how these implications have already played out in one field-defining historical moment: the rise of second-wave feminism in the United States.

The witch's continual haunting of our fields and their objects suggests that the work at hand requires a willingness to be so methodologically perverse as to appear pugnacious—or even insane. To put it even more simply: the practice of witchcraft, like the practice of transsexuality itself, is incompatible with rationality as an ordering logic of history; this incompatibility renders its practice both necessary and also demeaning. Well, let us be demeaned.

The Witch and Transsexual Space-Time

In the introduction of this work, I spoke briefly about Sylvia Federici's invocation of the witch as a figure for producing a feminist analysis of capitalism. In particular, I touched upon the frequently elided magical claim that is center to her work; that adopting a feminist analytic, grounded in witchcraft, allows us to fundamentally reshape the relationship between our bodies and the world. In particular, it allows us to challenge an existing patriarchal history of the body that passes through the philosophy of Descartes and the politics of Hobbes to present the body as a kind of machine uniquely adapted to the performance of labor (and, for women, the reproduction of labor-power). Federici takes up the work of Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James to articulate the oppression of women in patriarchal society as stemming not just from residual feudal power relations, as Engels posits, but rather from the way that capitalism makes the oppression of women *essential* and *necessary* to its operation via our role at the center of the

production and reproduction of “the most essential capitalist commodity: labor power.”⁴²⁶ Federici calls this an act of mystification on the part of capitalism, arguing that capitalism “does not recognize the production and reproduction of the worker as a social-economic activity, and a source of capital accumulation, but mystifies it instead as a natural resource or a personal service.”⁴²⁷ I wonder, however, whether this really constitutes an act of mystification or not. Isn’t what she’s really describing a kind of *excessive materialization* of the act of reproduction, a rendering of it as natural and inevitable that in fact erases its more mystical, spiritual, and social dimensions? What does it mean to be “mystified... as a natural resources,” as she writes? It seems to me there is some kind of unacknowledged and productively unresolved contradiction here, and it is from this contradiction that she is able to make her more magical claims about the witch’s body: that the prevalence of witch hunts in societies where women are enslaved suggests that it is more than the body which has to be dominated. Rather, there is a remainder left behind when the body is dominated that must itself be subjugated, and that remainder is a spiritual one, articulating both the body’s relationship to the land via spiritual practice, and the body’s non-mechanistic capacity for malleability and transformation.⁴²⁸

I bring up Federici’s claims about the body’s relationship for space because I want to use it as a model for talking about the late 1990s – early 2000s interest of queer theorists in theorizing the queer body’s relationship to *time*. In many of the central works of that period, I think that queer theory is (or was) attempting to invoke the witch’s

⁴²⁶ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 8.

⁴²⁷ Federici, 8.

⁴²⁸ Federici, 8–13.

relationship to history described above, in order to say things about queer experience it wasn't previously able to say. A crucial part of this is the realization that these works on time and temporality tend to engage with queer art as an archive, not just "queer histories." This turning to art is important to me because there's a sense in which queer theory has tended to view history as something like both an archaeological site and a rescue mission: the goal was to read queerness into the events and personages of the past in order to accomplish a re-writing that suggested "we have always been here." As I hope my use of the trans/super/natural method to read American fiction has made clear, I think the work of the witch is fundamentally different. Having "always been here" accomplishes two things: first, it naturalizes queer life in order to make us acceptable within the natural order (thinking here of Lisa Duggan's "homonormativity"⁴²⁹), and second, it actually *restabilizes* the idea of the possibility of an objectively truthful history. Even as it purports to be challenging such notions, the 'we've always been here' narrative doesn't undermine the project of objective historicizing in any foundational way; it simply suggests that the previous account of history had mistakes, and now we've corrected those mistakes, and history is okay again. We've made it intelligible, and fought for our rightful place within the totality of logopower. I won't have it!

In Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, he seems uninterested in finding lost pieces of a stable history, but in theorizing the ways in which queer life, like magic, can experience time and history differently. (As this

⁴²⁹ Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism* (Duke University Press, 2002), 175–94, doi.org/10.1515/9780822383901-008.

conclusion will make clear, he is able to write this book at all only because of the ways in which feminist witches laid the groundwork of theorizing not by historical resuscitation, but by historical invention, doing the work of history through mystery and relation, rather than a pretense to truth.) Halberstam begins his work by relying on that most monstrous of the queer magicians: the transgender person. He writes that our bodies are a “contradictory site in postmodernism” because the gender fluidity we embody is both liberatory in a conceptual sense, while also possessing all the potentials of a commodity form; we are “subjects of resistance [that] are neither fixed nor fluid, but both and more. And this ‘more’ involves a sense that resistance is resistance to both fixity and to fluidity.”⁴³⁰ Halberstam discusses trans representations in art as a way of showing what is stuck between the alluring potential of infinite flexibility and the desire to have some livable and recognizable identity, a space where the transgender person is compelled to make like a witch and “create an alternate future while rewriting history.”⁴³¹

Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, deals less directly with trans bodies, but does do strong work by introducing concepts like “chrononormativity,” or the way that time is employed to reorient the human relationship towards the body through normalizing a cultural sense of the distribution of time itself, all with the intent of rendering the body maximally productive under capitalism.⁴³² When she writes that “the advent of wage work, for example, entailed a violent

⁴³⁰ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 30.

⁴³¹ Halberstam, 77.

⁴³² Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), 4, doi.org/10.1215/9780822393184.

retemporalization of bodies once tuned to the seasonal rhythms of agricultural labor”⁴³³

she is speaking along the same lines as Federici, whether she recognizes it or not, showing us that the witch is never merely metaphorical, but represents a real ontology, a mode of being, a way of knowing and of producing knowledge, a way of relating not just to space and land but to time and to history. Looking again at queer art (chiefly poetry and film), Freeman is able to imagine a “counterpolitics of encounter in which bodies, decomposed by the workings of experimental film and literature, meet one another by chance, forging – in the sense of both making and counterfeiting – history differently.”⁴³⁴

In the act of turning to the past, she argues, we find/imagine/re-make those things which have been “bound,” which have been made intelligible and comprehensible by a logic that grants everything, including white gays and lesbians, a “market niche” and show how they expand beyond those niches, with meanings that were not only not exhausted by market logics, but which hadn’t even been imagined until now. This act of excavation, bound up with an imaginative attitude towards the people and objects of history, is what she calls “temporal drag,” the point at which queer self-presentations, performed either via the reconfiguration of the body or through art, involve the piling up of “outdated rather than just cross-gendered accessories, whose resurrection seems to exceed the axis of gender and begins to talk about, indeed talk back to history. This drive to figure, along with our drive to love, survive, and mourn, is part of ‘our history,’ or at least our way of

⁴³³ Freeman, 3.

⁴³⁴ Freeman, *Time Binds*. p. xi.

becoming and being historical.”⁴³⁵ In these explorations of queer time, I think, we can find a succinct presentation of the reasons why the cutting-edge transsexual and the ancient witch are not such distinct creatures.

This concern of mine is precisely why time and history are such important analytics, and the witch such an important figure, for doing work in trans theory. Much like queer theory, trans studies has long been mired in the recuperative mode I identified earlier, the force of which is the avowal that “we’ve always been here.” Here, I’m thinking of things like Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History*,⁴³⁶ as well as Leslie Feinberg’s “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come”—the latter of which is the work credited with coining the current meaning of the term “transgender,” and which also performs a mythic history in which Achilles, Dionysus, Heliogabolous, and Joan of Arc were all figures within a coherent history extending all the way up to Christine Jorgensen.⁴³⁷ Vastly more important to me than “always having been here,” of course, is “having always been here in a way that allows me to stay here now and be here in the future,” a goal against which I think the idea of a stable undifferentiated history is positioned. After all, Dionysus also shows up in Janice Raymond’s work, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* as a villain, a male god whose feminine dress marks him as a “boundary violator,” showing us that the queer “dissolution of all boundaries” embodied by trans people is a male plot to replace women

⁴³⁵ Freeman., p. xxi.

⁴³⁶ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017).

⁴³⁷ Leslie Feinberg, “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 205–20.

with a master race of surgically-constructed “super women.”⁴³⁸ The transsexual cannot argue, I think, on the grounds of science, nor on history-done-as-science. We have to look elsewhere – perhaps in other temporalities, such as the temporality of the witch.

Susan Stryker does make some excellent contributions to this looking-elsewhere, I think. Besides her amazing Frankenstein essay which I quoted at length in my introduction, her introduction to the *Transgender Studies Reader Volume 1*, on the matter of “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” argues for the radical de-objectification of trans knowledge. “No voice in the dialog,” she writes, “should have the privilege of masking the particularities and specificities of its own speaking position, through which it may claim a false universality or authority. [...] Soma, the body as a culturally intelligible construct, and techne, the techniques in and through which bodies are transformed and positioned, are in fact inextricably interpenetrated.”⁴³⁹ Going further, this is linked to knowledge’s relationship to time and history as well: the act of doing history with the goal of “functional coherences or formal systemizations” (e.g., the goals of logopower) means that (as she quotes Foucault as saying), “a whole series of [trans] knowledges... have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges, naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.”⁴⁴⁰ These are, Stryker says, “precisely the kind of knowledge that transgender people, whether academically trained

⁴³⁸ Raymond, “Sappho by Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist.”

⁴³⁹ Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” 12.

⁴⁴⁰ Stryker, 13.

or not, have of their own embodied experience, and of their relationships to the discourses and institutions that act upon and through them.”⁴⁴¹

The relation of history, the need for a magical approach to it, and the problem of definition is further made clear by Rita Felski in “Fin de Siècle, Fin du Sexe,” in which she writes about the various ways in which trans bodies have figured into debates over the “end of history”—either in the apocalyptic sense imagined by Baudrillard, or the liberatory sense imagined by Haraway. Felski argues that trans studies reveals that gender has always been “both essential and impossible for feminism” because of the ways in which feminism wishes to contest its reality and use it as a material cause of oppression at the same time.⁴⁴² I like this idea for troubling the notion that early feminism had a clear and biologically essential understanding of gender that was only disrupted by queer theory, ignoring both “the contestatory relationship of nineteenth-century feminist discourses to dominant male-centered philosophies of history” as well as “feminism’s always already conflictual relationship to the male/female divide.”⁴⁴³ Significantly, this “similar oscillation between affirmation and negation also typifies the condition of history, which flickers persistently on our horizon in a movement of simultaneously doing and undoing.”⁴⁴⁴ Felski is ostensibly talking here about postmodernity, as I said, but her invocation of contradiction, of simultaneous doing and undoing, also shows the action of trans witches at work. In this way, a serious accounting of trans knowledges,

⁴⁴¹ Stryker, 13.

⁴⁴² Rita Felski, “Fin de Siècle, Fin Du Sexe: Transsexuality, Postmodernism, and the Death of History,” *New Literary History* 27, no. 2 (1996): 347.

⁴⁴³ Felski, 348.

⁴⁴⁴ Felski, 347.

dependent upon an understanding of the trans body which allows for contradiction rather than fixity, is not about demonstrating an end to history, reaffirming a gender binary, or simply asserting that “we’ve always been here.” Rather, it calls into question how gender is always constructed by the stories we tell about it, and our own situation within those stories, the history we *conjure* rather than the one we excavate.

The witch and the transsexual, then, are figures who tell us interesting things about how the body exists not only in space, but also in time, and the ways in which *either* of those relations might be rendered more malleable than we initially think. As the trans/super/natural method has shown us across the preceding three chapters, the transsexual body is not just an instrument upon which histories (a history of medicine, a history of rights, a history of political movements, a history of fear and trembling) are *done*, but an instrument by which those histories are *made*, and made to serve the specific ideological ends of logopower. The figure of the witch, who, again, has appeared so often in our analyses of the gendered body thus bears a relationship to history—specifically, to history’s role in making gender, feminism, transsexuality, queerness, etc.—that it bears a much deeper analysis than I’m able to give it here. While I hope to explore this relationship more deeply in a future work, I want to conclude here, as mentioned above, with a kind of forward glimpse at the witch’s creative relationship to history via one of its most explicit and enduring manifestations to date: second-wave American feminism.

How the Witch Makes History

The best thing to happen to magic is its falling into the hands of queer women. Until about the 14th century, the practice of “high magic” in Europe was a literary art, with spells and rituals inscribed in grimoires that were both expensive to own and which required substantial education in order to read; for these reasons, it was a practice that largely excluded women.⁴⁴⁵ Worse, high magic as recorded in grimoires all the way up to the 20th century is not only inaccessible to women, but *actively opposed to us*. The author of the *Sworn Book of Honorius*, one of the most popular grimoires of the Middle Ages, assures the reader that the angel who dictated the magic book to him assured him “that it shulde be delyveryd to no woman” lest we turn its power towards diabolical ends; moreover, the author declares that the practicing magician “muste utterly forbere the company of women all there intycements.”⁴⁴⁶ This latter requirement was seen as second in importance only to attending confession as a means of preserving the soul of the magician from sinister influence. France’s *Petit Albert*, the preeminent example of that country’s grimoire publishing craze in the 19th century, contains magical incantations to address the need to “Moderate the Female Sex Drive,” “To Determine and Protect Chastity,” “To Know is a Girl is Pure or Corrupted,” “To Restore Virginity,” “To Prevent Your Woman from Fornicating,” “To Rejuvenate Wrinkled Skin Due to Childbirth,” and “To Cause a Girl to Dance Naked.”⁴⁴⁷ Likewise, *Le Grand Grimoire* attests that those who master its occult secrets will gain the Solomonic powers to “have the love of any girl

⁴⁴⁵ Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41–42.

⁴⁴⁶ David Rankine and Paul Harry Barron, *The Complete Grimoire of Pope Honorius* (circa 17th c.; repr., London: Avalonia, 2013).

⁴⁴⁷ Author Unknown, *The Petit Albert: The Marvellous Secrets of The Little Albert: English Edition*, ed. Tarl Warwick (circa 18th c.; repr., CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

or woman you want,” to compel women to “submit” to you, and to gain control over women’s ability to conceive children.⁴⁴⁸

Once women did begin to get our hands on grimoires after the advent of printing, the attitudes of high magicians and church officials towards us got no better. In fact, access to grimoires only made us increased objects of suspicion. It is recorded that “when questioned by the Inquisition, Father Cesare Lanza... spoke freely about what he saw as the diminished power of ancient, high magic, and made the telling comment, ‘Today a lowly little woman does more than all the necromancers accomplished in the ancient world.’”⁴⁴⁹ Owen Davies also notes that “the female magician named Catherine Trianon,” who would later go on to attempt the magical assassination of Louis XVI along with famous 17th-century sorceress and abortion provider Catherine Montvoison, and “who lived together as ‘man and wife’ with another cunning-woman, was described as having more learning ‘in the tip of her finger’ than others acquired in a lifetime.”⁴⁵⁰

I take time to document these attitudes not because I find them surprising, but just to establish a contrast with the radical turn towards women’s liberation that witchcraft and its practitioners took in the 20th-century in the United States. This turn can be traced to 1968, when a group of socialist feminists including Robin Morgan, Judith Duffett, Peggy Dobbins, and others, split from the New York Radical Women collective in order to establish a group committed to intersectional practice between feminists and left wing

⁴⁴⁸ Aaman Lamba and Baal Kadmon, *The Complete Illustrated Grand Grimoire, Or The Red Dragon: Interlinear Edition, French to English*, ed. Arundell Overman (circa 19th c.; repr., Aaman Lamba, 2020).

⁴⁴⁹ Davies, *Grimoires*, 82.

⁴⁵⁰ Davies, 82.

political radicals.⁴⁵¹ This group was to be called W.I.T.C.H., a polymorphous acronym that means different things at different times, including Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, Women Inspired to Tell their Collective History, and Women Interested in Toppling Consumer Holidays.⁴⁵² W.I.T.C.H. was devoted to theatrical shock tactics intended to raise public consciousness, and engaged in tactics such as laying a curse upon Wall Street and leading a revolt against cosmetics manufacturer Revlon’s headquarters, before “going out in a blaze of confusion at a bridal industry fair at Madison Square Garden” where the group released a horde of rats upon the attendees.⁴⁵³ Yet like the witch herself, the group enjoyed several reincarnations, with Chicago and Washington, D.C. covens emerging throughout the 1970s, along with “Red W.I.T.C.H.,” a socialist-leaning coven founded in Berkeley by Laura X.⁴⁵⁴ The Trump campaign and presidency also catalyzed the brief rebirth of a Chicago coven,⁴⁵⁵ as well as the resurgence of a Boston coven,⁴⁵⁶ both dedicated to theatrical displays of political action.

W.I.T.C.H.’s choice of symbol was far from accidental, and drew upon several decades of historical work linking the witch to women (as the class most virulently persecuted during the European witch hunts of the Middle Ages), as well as to traditions of grassroots political action and resistance. I’ll offer here a brief overview of that history. In his exhaustive treatise on 20th-century American pagan practices, *The Triumph*

⁴⁵¹ Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York, NY: The Dial Press, 1999), 49.

⁴⁵² Brownmiller, 49.

⁴⁵³ Brownmiller, 50.

⁴⁵⁴ Mary McGill, “Wicked W.I.T.C.H: The 60s Feminist Protestors Who Hexed Patriarchy,” *Vice* (blog), October 28, 2016, [vice.com/en/article/43gd8p/wicked-witch-60s-feminist-protestors-hexed-patriarchy](https://www.vice.com/en/article/43gd8p/wicked-witch-60s-feminist-protestors-hexed-patriarchy).

⁴⁵⁵ witchchicago, “W.I.T.C.H. Chicago Coven, 2015 - 2017,” Tumblr, accessed February 11, 2022, witchchicago.tumblr.com/.

⁴⁵⁶ “W.I.T.C.H. Boston,” October 23, 2017, web.archive.org/web/20171023221212/witchboston.org/.

of the Moon, Ronald Hutton describes a wealth of anthropological work carried out in the early 20th century which suggested the existence of an ancient matriarchal religion devoted to Goddess worship,⁴⁵⁷ ultimately positing “a single great world spiritual system, based upon divine revelation, of which the main religions practiced by civilized humanity during historical times all contained traces.”⁴⁵⁸⁴⁵⁹

This work was then used to provide an analysis of Medieval European Christian hysteria over the witch, particularly the Witchcraft Act of 1736, which “repealed all the early modern statutes that had prescribed penalties for using witchcraft and made it an offence to *call* somebody else a witch.”⁴⁶⁰ A distinct turn-about from the earlier witch hunts in which countless souls were executed for the practice of witchcraft, the post-Enlightenment attitude was one of rigorously enforcing a non-belief in magic, with Hutton calling the 1736 act a “heavy-handed piece of Enlightenment rationalism, based upon the premise that witchcraft and magic were illusory, and that the public needed to be weaned away from a belief in them,”⁴⁶¹ an effort to “stamp[...] out belief in magic altogether.”⁴⁶²

From such proposed linkages, the witch came to be seen as a powerful counter-cultural symbol whose interest for women’s liberation could not be ignored. Matilda Joslyn Gage’s *Woman, Church, and State* (1893), put forth the notion that the ancient

⁴⁵⁷ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37.

⁴⁵⁸ Hutton, 11.

⁴⁵⁹ For a more exhaustive account of these sources, see Chapter Two of Hutton’s book, “Finding a Goddess,” which traces the development of the ancient goddess religion hypothesis through the work of G.D. Hornblower and E.B. Renaud in 1929, Harold Massingham in 1932, and A.L. Armstrong in 1939.

⁴⁶⁰ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon Publisher*, 107.

⁴⁶¹ Hutton, 107.

⁴⁶² Hutton, 134.

goddess religion had been associated with a predominately matriarchal ancient society as well, and that medieval Christianity's opposition to this matriarchy had resulted in the deaths of some nine million witches during a period known as "The Burning Times."⁴⁶³ Charles Leland's *Aradia: Gospel of the Witches*, another best-seller, creates a mythopoetic origin for the witch as practitioner of the ancient goddess religion and scourge of the ruling class alike.⁴⁶⁴ In this telling, humans gained the power of witchcraft as a gift from Aradia, a supernatural figure born from a coupling between the Greek goddess, Diana, and the Christian angel, Lucifer. She grants humans this gift for the explicit purpose of slaughtering the landlords who had turned land into commodity, bidding them to worship Diana and share the secrets amongst themselves each month beneath the new moon until the last of the landlords lies dead.⁴⁶⁵ (Leland, for his part, claimed the work to be no mere parable, but rather a transcription of a handwritten grimoire gifted to him by a European witch by the name of Maddalena.⁴⁶⁶)

Historians and anthropologists such as Margaret Murray carried this association even further. Murray's books, including *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921)⁴⁶⁷ and *God of the Witches* (1931)⁴⁶⁸ were massive best-sellers—uncommon for works of academic anthropology—precisely because they told a damn good story. As Hutton puts it, they “embedded the putative medieval witch religion in a much richer context of

⁴⁶³ Matilda Joslyn Gage, *Woman, Church, and State* (1893; repr., Amherst, N.Y: Humanities Press, 2002).

⁴⁶⁴ Charles Leland, *Aradia: Gospel of the Witches* (1899; repr., Blaine, WA: Phoenix Publications, 1990).

⁴⁶⁵ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon Publisher*, 144.

⁴⁶⁶ Hutton, 144.

⁴⁶⁷ Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe: The Original Text, with Notes, Bibliography and Five Appendices*. (1921; repr., New York: Aziloth Books, 2019).

⁴⁶⁸ Margaret Murray, *The God of the Witches* (1931; repr., New York: Galaxy Books, 1970).

associations, linking it with fairy stories, the Robin Hood legend, surviving folk customs, and historical figures,”⁴⁶⁹ and appealed...

...to so many of the emotional impulses of the age; to the notion of the English countryside as a timeless place full of ancient secrets, to the literary cult of Pan as its deity, to the belief that until comparatively recently, Christianity had represented only a veneer of elite religion covering a persistence of paganism among the masses, and to the characterization of modern folk customs as survivals from that paganism. Furthermore, it appeal[ed] not just to the emotions but to common sense. The notion that witch trials had resulted from some kind of collective madness, propounded by most experts in the subject, seemed much more far-fetched than the suggestion that they represented the persecution of an actual rival religion...⁴⁷⁰

Artists and poets (chiefly gay ones, as we shall soon see) also contributed to this historical concatenation. Hutton traces this history as well through works such as E.M. Forster's *The Longest Journey*, George Russell's poetry, D.H. Lawrence's *In the Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, all of which reference a "great mother goddess," who had become "one of the principal cultural images of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She and the modern age had taken shape together, in polar opposition to each other, and truly she needed no tangible monuments as she existed so firmly in the hearts and minds of poets, novelists, polemicists, and scholars alike: the natural world itself had become her shrine."⁴⁷¹ Hutton identifies this artistic lineage as reaching its popular zenith in 1948 with the publication of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, noting that "Graves was

⁴⁶⁹ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* Publisher, 197.

⁴⁷⁰ Hutton, 199.

⁴⁷¹ Hutton, 42.

determined that his readers should not treat it as a personal poetic reverie but as an authentic work of history... he treated his Great Goddess as a counter-cultural deity, who stood for values and associations opposed to those dominant in the European cultural world for most of recorded history...⁴⁷²

It is out of this history that W.I.T.C.H. and other mid-century American feminists drew a powerful symbol for their cause, putting forth the witch as an organizing emblem of women's unity and liberation. One of W.I.T.C.H.'s publications of the time made this linkage between witchcraft and women's liberation not just clear but existentially mandatory: "If you are a woman and dare to look within yourself, you are a Witch. ... You can form your own Coven of sister Witches... You are a Witch by being female, untamed, angry, joyous, and immortal."⁴⁷³ Their manifesto, published in 1968, states:

WITCH is an all-woman Everything. It's theater, revolution, magic, terror, joy, garlic flowers, spells. It's an awareness that witches and gypsies were the original guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression – particularly the oppression of women – down through the ages. Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, nonconformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary. (This possibly explains why nine million of them have been burned.)⁴⁷⁴

What is of incredible note to me, however, is that this history which constitutes such an important pillar in American feminism is either factually wrong or, in many

⁴⁷² Hutton, 50.

⁴⁷³ Quoted in Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 208.

⁴⁷⁴ Quoted in Adler, 181.

cases, completely made up. Even as the narrative of the ancient Goddess religion, its persistence as a cult of witches, and the subsequent persecution of those witches by patriarchal powers was taken up as a founding myth of mid-century American feminism, the work of Murray and other individuals fell under harsh criticism. Works such as Norman Cohn's *Europe's Inner Demons*⁴⁷⁵ or Jacqueline Simpson's "Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her and Why?"⁴⁷⁶ accused Murray of unduly generalizing widespread religious practices from extremely localized historical records. Matilda Joslyn Gage's widely cited figure of nine million women having been killed during "The Burning Times" was found to stem from a discredited 1784 analysis by Gottfried Christian Voigt,⁴⁷⁷ and scholars argued that a more accurate figure for the number of dead women was a "mere" 60,000⁴⁷⁸ to 100,000.⁴⁷⁹ Gerald Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* and *The Book of Shadows* (1954), two of the most influential texts for reviving an interest in neopagan practices in the West throughout the 1960s and 70s, provide an illuminating example of the mythopoetic (rather than historical) basis of much of witchcraft's relationship to women. By Gardner's own account, he wrote these books, which purport to trace the history of European witchcraft back to ancient Goddess religions as well as provide spells that anyone can perform on their own at home, after traveling to England in the 1940s and meeting a witch by the name of Dorothy Clutterbuck, who inaugurated him into an

⁴⁷⁵ Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁴⁷⁶ Jacqueline Simpson, "Margaret Murray: Who Believed Her, and Why?," *Folklore* 105 (1994): 89–96.

⁴⁷⁷ "Berlinische Monatsschrift," 1796 1783, 28 v.

⁴⁷⁸ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁴⁷⁹ Anne L. Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1995).

ancient series of mystical rites, eventually allowing him to join a coven of powerful witches whose spellwork was instrumental in defeating the Nazis.⁴⁸⁰ Recognizing the world-transformative power of their magic, Gardner wished to share it with the world through writing, but the act of doing so made the others nervous, and caused them to retreat from public sight, where they can no longer be contacted, and all historical records of their existence have been destroyed.^{481 482}

And yet in certain important respects, the spurious facticity of this history hardly seemed to matter. As Owen Davies says of Gardner, “in creating the *Book of Shadows*,” he was “merely following the long tradition of grimoire formulation, making false attributions, providing false histories, and compiling spells and rituals from unacknowledged sources. In this sense, the *Book of Shadows* has both a venerable history and legitimacy in magical tradition.”⁴⁸³ In a sense, he had “produced the first ‘pagan’ grimoire in more than a millennium...”⁴⁸⁴ Maybe more importantly, as Hutton notes, the “self-image of the witch” that became available to American women at this time “formed a crucial function in nerving people up to crash the barriers of convention... it was

⁴⁸⁰ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon Publisher*, 205.

⁴⁸¹ Hutton, 205.

⁴⁸² It’s not lost on me, of course, that maybe the critics of these sources protest too much and that there is more accuracy to the history than meets the eye. While Gardner’s claims of consorting with a cabal of witches who interested him with their ancient secrets strains credulity, it is worth noting that many of the critiques of Margaret Murray’s work contain language that would be familiar to any woman facing criticism within a conventionally masculine field. Even the generally fair-minded and curious Ronald Hutton polices her work on the grounds that she adopted a “hectoring” tone when criticized by colleagues (*Triumph*, Chapter Ten). Ultimately, even the most vicious critiques of Murray don’t impugn her basic methodology of deriving her claims from primary historical records such as trial records and contemporary reports; they simply argue that she has interpreted those sources incorrectly. While worth noting, however, for our purposes, the matter of facticity is largely irrelevant; what matters is the strange forwardly-generative power the right kind of history can have when employed at the right place and time.

⁴⁸³ Davies, *Grimoires*, 271.

⁴⁸⁴ Davies, 271.

seeking to drive a battering ram against the boundaries of the present, and of the possible.”⁴⁸⁵

Indeed, regardless of the historicity of their notion of the witch, the writers who followed in W.I.T.C.H.’s wake in the emerging feminist movement of the early 1970s were eager to take up the witch’s symbolic power as a figure who is persecuted yet perpetually enduring. I speculate that one reason for this is precisely because of the piecemeal reimagining of the past that W.I.T.C.H. engaged in the same “false accusations” and “false histories” by which Davies characterized Gerald Gardner.⁴⁸⁶ Why, though, would such a practice be of appeal to women in the mid-20th century? Beauvoir asks a question in *The Second Sex* that I think gives us a clue. She asks “what is a woman? ... the fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male.”⁴⁸⁷ Later, she points out that “women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat.”⁴⁸⁸ Taken together, these statements suggest that the cultural defaulting of the male perspective, and therefore of male history, has left a major gap of recognition for women looking to the “known history” of the world. Unable to find ourselves in the past,

⁴⁸⁵ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon Publisher*, 236.

⁴⁸⁶ Davies, *Grimoires*, 271.

⁴⁸⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 5.

⁴⁸⁸ Beauvoir, 5.

we must piece together—or outright invent—a history that accounts for our condition in the present.

And invention is exactly what many American feminists did throughout the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, in *Beyond God the Father*, our friend Mary Daly writes that “the role of the witch... was often ascribed to social deviants whose power was feared,” and positions this deviance in opposition to a tradition of phallocentrism stemming from Aristotle, and passing through Aquinas, Freud, Erikson, and Jung, to name just a few.⁴⁸⁹ Femininity, then, can only be defined in terms of this deviance inherited from the witch, and adopting that mantle is said to be “the beginning of liberation.”⁴⁹⁰ She even invokes our primary example of the magical thinking that suffuses Western analyses of power when she writes that she writes that this position of deviance grants one special insights, and a power akin to prophecy:

Margaret Murray pointed out that the word ‘witch’ is allied with ‘wit,’ basically meaning *to know*. The witch’s knowledge has always been that of one who foretells. In addition, Murray indicated that when this is done in the name of one of the established religions, it is called prophecy, but when divination is done in the name of a pagan god it is called ‘mere’ witchcraft. This kind of prophetic knowing is characteristic of the women’s movement. The knowledge that women are now acquiring is an experiential knowledge that drives beyond the inane ‘goodness’ of the victimized ‘honest matron’ (or respectable suburban housewife or docile nun).⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (1973; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 64.

⁴⁹⁰ Daly, 65.

⁴⁹¹ Daly, 66.

Later, Daly engages in some alternative historicizing of her own, hypothesizing that Joan of Arc must have been a witch, receiving divine instruction not from the patriarchal Christian god but from the original matriarchal Goddess; the thrust of this hypothesis being that women's liberation demands becoming "Antichurch," devoting one's self to the path of the witch:

As Antichurch, the women's revolution is an affirmation of Joan's escape from patriarchy. It says 'No' to whatever there was of cooptation and ambivalence imposed upon her fate. Above all it says 'No' to her imposed 'sainthood' and 'Yes' to her real sainthood—her transparency to the power of be-ing which made her life a sign-event, expressing the witch that burns within our own true selves. Joan's potential stature was reduced by the patriarchal imagination into that of the Virgin-Warrior who aids men to fulfill men's goals. The witch that burns without our being will have to bring out that potential stature, repudiating ambivalence and servitude, refusing the tortures and degrading honors which are their only rewards.⁴⁹²

Elsewhere, Andrea Dworkin takes up the witch's cloak for herself when she devotes a chapter of *Woman Hating* to reiterating Murray's mythology and providing a close-reading of the 14th century witch-hunting manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Her reading demonstrates the obsession of witch hunters with the witch's purported ability to make men's penises either fall off or disappear into an alternate dimension, beyond all hope of medical or magical recovery.⁴⁹³ She too, positions the tragedy of the Burning Times as one of the loss of a history of women's special knowledge and insights, which are only now, through the feminist movement, being reclaimed.

⁴⁹² Daly, 149.

⁴⁹³ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (1974; repr., New York: Plume, 1991), 118–50.

The mythology was further bolstered when Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English introduced the notion that the witches persecuted in the witch hunts were not only members of an established witch-cult, but also had been traditional healers and midwives; such a move linked the oppressors of the church with contemporary patriarchal concerns, and brought a component to feminist witchcraft which we might now term biopolitical.⁴⁹⁴ And although by now the idea of an ancient goddess who had been the object of widespread worship was not new, the idea was reintroduced into the popular vernacular by Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman*.⁴⁹⁵

The most significant writer to emerge from this period in my estimation, however, is Starhawk. An itinerant lesbian mystic moving about California's bay area, Starhawk published *The Spiral Dance* in 1979, a crucial work which affixes a spiritual and political practice to the model developed out of the lineage of W.I.T.C.H. (and by extension Murray, Leland, Gardner, etc.). The work is significant to me not just because of the way Starhawk foregrounds the melding of the spiritual and the political that characterizes revolutionary work (in other words, the way that she engages in magical thinking), but also how she acknowledges the power of the mythopoetic as a complementary strain to the historical in developing this mode of thinking. Even the otherwise staid and conservative Hutton seems utterly ensorcelled by her charms: "It is difficult to take notes from [Starhawk's] books without copying entire sentences, so perfectly are her thoughts expressed and so marked is her genius for aphorism. A clear and melodious prose is

⁴⁹⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York City: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2010).

⁴⁹⁵ Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, First edition (New York: Mariner Books, 1978).

enhanced by an underlying passion of feeling, so that her sentences seem to heave with emotion.”⁴⁹⁶

In *The Spiral Dance*, Starhawk draws upon sources like *Aradia* to theorize the Goddess (of what was by now called “Goddess feminism”) as a unifying source of power for all those committed to the overturning of oppressive power structures. Later, she writes that the practice of magic grants one the capacity not merely to interpret the unconscious (as in psychoanalysis), but to speak back to it “in its own language” (a turn that brings to mind the Marxist edict that the point of philosophy is not to interpret the world, but to change it, only this time turned inward).⁴⁹⁷ Crucially, when addressing the question of the literal truth of these models, she argues that “the value of magical metaphors is that through them we identify ourselves and connect with larger forces; we partake of the elements, the cosmic process, the movements of the stars.”⁴⁹⁸ Here, she invokes, I think, something like the use of magical thinking in queer (and especially transsexual) life to re-narrativize one’s own history, to re-write the connections one has with the world, and to “identify ourselves.”

Starhawk’s later works, *Dreaming in the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* in 1982 and *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* in 1988, further articulate the political dimension of magic. Here, she develops a theory of power that seems proto-Foucauldian in that it conceives of power not as an exclusively top-down arrangement, but as a distributed nodal network of relations. In order to attain personal

⁴⁹⁶ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon Publisher*, 345.

⁴⁹⁷ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 45.

⁴⁹⁸ Starhawk, 221.

liberation within such a network, one must manifest “power-from-within” by way of magical practice; in so doing, magic gains the power to change not just one’s self, but one’s culture as well. This “power-from-within” is linked to “the mysteries that awaken our deepest abilities and potentials,”⁴⁹⁹ and shares much with “power-with,” a “social power” founded in “the influence we wield when among equals.”⁵⁰⁰ Both are positioned against “power-over,” which is “linked to domination and control” and...

...comes from the consciousness I have termed estrangement: the view of the world as made up of atomized, nonliving parts, mechanically interacting, valued not for what they inherently are, but only in relation to some outside standard... the consciousness that underlies power-over sees the world as an object, made up of separate, isolated parts that have no intrinsic life, awareness, or value. Consciousness is fragmented, disconnected. [...] relationships between objects are described by rules. We believe that we can, in the end, find rules to describe all things and their relationships, to predict what they will do, and allow us to control them. The language of power-over is the language of law, of rules, of abstract, generalized formulations enforced on the concrete realities of particular circumstances.⁵⁰¹

Starhawk’s explication of power-over is of special interest to me for two key reasons. The first, which may be obvious, is that it seems to describe in some ways a power akin to what I’ve been calling logopower, a force that works through its rendering the multiple into the unitary, of casting away that which falls outside the realm of the rationally intelligible. “The consciousness that underlies power-over,” she writes, “sees

⁴⁹⁹ Starhawk, *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1989), 9.

⁵⁰⁰ Starhawk, 9.

⁵⁰¹ Starhawk, 9–14.

the world as an object, made up of many separate, isolated parts that have no intrinsic life, awareness, or value.”⁵⁰² The second is that, besides prefiguring Foucault in her earlier work, here the analytic of magic, of the super/natural, seems to have allowed her to independently arrive at an analysis of the operations of power and ideology that tracks with Louis Althusser’s theories of the ideological state apparatus and its material enforcement through the repressive state apparatuses:

We live embedded in systems of power-over and are indoctrinated into them, often from birth. In its clearest form, power-over is the power of the prison guard, of the gun, power that is ultimately backed by force. Power-over enables one individual or group to make the decisions that affect others, and to enforce control. Violence and control can take many forms. Power-over shapes every institution of our society. This power is wielded in the workplace, in the schools, in the courts, in the doctor’s office. It may rule with weapons that are physical or by controlling the resources we need to live: money, food, medical care; or by controlling more subtle resources: information, approval, love. We are so accustomed to power-over, so stepped in its language and its implicit threats, that we often become aware of its functioning only when we see its extreme manifestations. For we have been shaped in its institutions, so that the insides of our minds resemble the battlefield and the jail.⁵⁰³

Magic, then, is a robust method of knowing if it can imagine in such specificity not just the operations of power, but a potential antidote thereto. Describing power-over’s liberatory alternative, power-from-within, Starhawk writes that it...

...stems from a different consciousness – one that sees the world itself as a living being, made up of dynamic aspects,

⁵⁰² Starhawk, 14.

⁵⁰³ Starhawk, 9.

a world where one thing shape-shifts into another, where there are no solid separations and no simple causes and effects. In such a world, all things have inherent value, because all things are beings, aware in ways we can only imagine, interrelated in patterns too complex to ever be more than partially described. We do not have to earn value. Immanent value cannot be rated or compared. [...] The language of power-from-within is poetry, metaphor, symbol, ritual, myth, the language of magic, or ‘thinking in things,’ where the concrete becomes resonant with mysteries that go beyond its seeming solid form.⁵⁰⁴

I think what we end up with in Starhawk’s analysis is something like the most stark and honest rendition of the magical thinking I identified as ever-present in our own work. She has clearly delineated the powers that operate both on the inside and the outside of the traditional paradigm of marginalization, and also explicated a mechanism of mystery and surprise that grants the powers of the marginalized their political efficacy. In describing her contested ground on the barrier between the inside and the outside as the space of “mystery,” she declares this borderland “the edge where power encounters power, for mystery is the arising of powers that are uncharted and untamed, that will not follow the logic of naked force, and so act in unexpected ways. Mystery is surprise.”⁵⁰⁵

When the modes of knowing and becoming associated with marginalization encounters power, she argues that it has the power to briefly stun and reconfigure the hierarchies of power. Early in *Truth or Dare*, she relates an anecdote that demonstrates this, describing a moment wherein she and several other women have been jailed following a political demonstration. Many of the women are arguing with one another

⁵⁰⁴ Starhawk, 15.

⁵⁰⁵ Starhawk, 4.

about the specifics of whether or not one should talk to the police when they see an officer moving to beat one of their number with a baton. Acting on what she describes as a kind of pure intuition, the other women surround the threatened woman in a circle and begin chanting. Uncertain of how to respond to such a display, the officers back off for a moment, confused as to what they are witnessing, which is time enough to move their friend to safety. “In that moment in the jail,” she writes, “the power of domination and control met something outside its comprehension, a power rooted in another source. To know that power, to create the situations that bring it forth, is magic.”⁵⁰⁶

Here, then, Starhawk is unique in affixing the name “magic” to this power that we believe arises from the margins, and positions it in stark opposition to the totalizing logics of logopower: “the mysteries are what is wild in us, what cannot be quantified or contained. [...] To practice magic is to tap that power, to burrow down through the systems of control like roots that crack concrete to find the living soil below.”⁵⁰⁷ Elsewhere, she furthers this characterization by describing magic as “the technology of power-from-within... the art of changing consciousness, of shifting shapes and dimensions, of bending reality.”⁵⁰⁸ Attempting to elucidate the mechanisms by which the insight of the margins affects material political reality, something that all too many of us gloss right over as if it is *not* a mystery, she writes that:

To practice magic is to bear responsibility for having a vision, for we work magic by envisioning what we want to create, clearing the obstacles in our way, and then directing

⁵⁰⁶ Starhawk, 5.

⁵⁰⁷ Starhawk, 6.

⁵⁰⁸ Starhawk, 15.

energy through that vision. Magic works through the concrete; our ideals, our visions, are meaningless until they are in some way enacted. So, if our work is to evoke power-from-within, we must clearly envision the conditions that would allow that power to come forth, we must identify what blocks it, and create the conditions that foster empowerment. Give a world based on power-over, we must remake the world.⁵⁰⁹

As one last point in favor of Starhawk's description of the magical operations of our political theorizing, she recalls my own point earlier in the introduction to this work where I pointed out a racial divide between theorists like Dubois and Anzaldúa who are willing to invoke the mystical and esoteric in their description of marginalized consciousness, versus white academics who seem to founder in our search for a rationalizing intelligible discourse. In no uncertain terms, Starhawk tells us that "the spiritual/political split is a problem of white people. The dominant culture can afford to cast power purely in terms of power-over, for it has as its disposal the backing of that power: the guns, the prisons, the laws, the economic wealth."⁵¹⁰ Citing a number of revolutionary political movements outside the United States whose practitioners (generally women and queer people) draw upon non-Western spiritual and religious traditions, she concludes that "the debate about the linking of the spiritual and the political too often takes place in terms that discount or make invisible the experience of the nondominant world. Such cultural imperialism is itself a form of racism."⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁹ Starhawk, 8.

⁵¹⁰ Starhawk, 17–18.

⁵¹¹ Starhawk, 19.

In closing, when Starhawk describes the relationship between power and our overriding belief that the world is mechanistic and fully intelligible, that one can find rules that exhaust all meanings, categories that contain all phenomena, allowing both total prediction and total control like LaPlace's Demon, what she is talking about is logopower. She is also showing us, then, what it is that the supernatural threatens within the hegemonic order of things. Here we can imagine, to give just one example of logopower's manifestations, its relationship to imperialist practices and instrumental rationality: the compartmentalization of humans into self and Other, subject and object, comes from this notion that the worth of other humans can only be recognized in so far as they are able to be instrumentalized towards some productive end. It is easy to see how alternative valuations of the human (of women, of queer people) such as that suggested by the supernatural knowledge of "power-from-within" present dire stakes to logopower's image of a world wherein every component must be instrumentalized towards the ends of a generalized intelligible science of bodies, of society, of work, of power, and of history.

Even ostensibly leftist practices of totalizing intelligibility, such as historical materialism, are revealed by Starhawk's incantations to rely on exactly the same instrumental understanding of the human. For all its laudable ambitions, it requires us to imagine, against all our experience, a world in which the spiritual and the political, the spiritual and the material, are totally distinct categories; a world in which to be truly human, our consciousness must at all times be rooted in an objective mode of inquiry of the world and its history. When we assert the truth of propositions that depend upon a

marginalized subjective knowledge, we get called insane by conservatives, and politically unserious by our own colleagues. This is the effect of logopower, then, within both the imperial and the historical materialist modes: it upholds as the only valid subjectivity one which has totally evacuated the subjective in hopes of possessing a fundamentally unattainable objectivity. Subjects are only subjects when we act as objects. Talk about dark magic.

I've spent so much time on Starhawk precisely because I think she is a prime example of how to carry forward the work of the trans/super/natural method. Not just in the sense that she is a feminist who does work with a supernatural bent, but because of what she reveals about the centrality of the supernatural not only to feminist and queer analytics as I've done here, but to history itself, taken more broadly. In this work, she seems to have enfolded many of the elements of my method such as emphasizing emergence and contradiction to make bold claims about the objects of analysis we hold most closely. Besides her theory of power, Starhawk has articulated a socio-economic theory of the witch hunts that massively anticipated (by 17 years) Sylvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* by arguing that the persecution of witches "shattered the peasant's connection with the land, drove women out of the work of healing, and imposed the mechanistic view of the world as a dead machine."⁵¹² In her ideas about life and animacies that I glossed above, she suggests Povinelli's work on geontologies, Mel Chen's work in animal studies, and Kim TallBear's work on the "life / not-life" binary and its relation to indigenous populations. Importantly for me, she also continues to

⁵¹² Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark : Magic, Sex, and Politics* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997). p. xii.

emphasize the role that contradiction, playing with the tension between literal and symbolic truth, and personal narrative play in knowledge production. I don't mean to suggest here that Starhawk is the sole progenitor of all of these ideas, but rather that her work shows us how dependent feminist and queer analysis have been not just on magic and the supernatural, but on the specific modes of mythopoetic historicizing that emerge from that dependence.

As one last gesture towards how all this might change how we think about the ways we employ history towards revolutionary ends, I'll quote Hutton, who, at last coming out of his trance, attempts to critique Starhawk, by demonstrating that he just doesn't get it. He tries to find logical holes and "contradictions"⁵¹³ in Starhawk's work and declare her an "unoriginal thinker."⁵¹⁴ He is wrong on the count of originality, as I pointed out with her analyses of distributed power and her socioeconomic interpretation of the witch hunts, and concerning contradiction, he fails to understand that this is the point. He writes that "just as she blurred answers to the questions of whether magic literally worked or deities really existed, so she seemed to tell readers that it did not ultimately matter whether her view of the past was objectively correct; the crucial issue was that belief in it would make the world a better place."⁵¹⁵ In saying that facticity is not Starhawk's concern, he is correct, but he fails to see that this is the very aim of magic for Starhawk, and that the history magic invokes, is not a scientific enterprise devoted to producing a narrative that can purport to explain the world via an internally-consistent

⁵¹³ Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon Publisher*, 349.

⁵¹⁴ Hutton, 350.

⁵¹⁵ Hutton, 350.

totality of interlocking principles, but rather a mode of thinking and knowledge production in which contradictions can sit beside each other, each contributing something vital to an overall more nuanced and deeper understanding of messy and incoherent things like human beings. And, if second-wave American feminism is any indication, magic's use of history is one which can catalyze an entire decades-long political revolution.

Closing the Circle

Historians of magic make much of how the pseudo-historical “lineage” of modern paganism, with its combinations, transformations, and artful fabrications, is exactly in keeping with the constructed lineages of not just older magical practice, but with those of any major world religion. For me, however, the *imagined historical*, or the *witch's history*, has an additional register of importance. One does not tend, in my experience, to weave new narratives out of thin air for no reason at all. Stories tend to appear, and to be read, because they are needed; because they respond to an existing linguistic or categorical deficit of thought in a way that nothing else can. In Book IV of the *Liber Aba*, *MAGICK*, Aleister Crowley famously defines magic as “the art or science of causing change in conformity with will,” as well as “the science of understanding oneself and one's condition... the art of applying that understanding in action.”⁵¹⁶ When we consider

⁵¹⁶ Aleister Crowley, *MAGICK in Theory and Practice* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle, 1991), 131–33.

the real, tangible spread of pagan witchcraft today, isn't manifesting change in accordance with will, by way of the literary, exactly what Leland, Murray, Gardner, and countless others have done? When I think about the ways in which my own personal history has had to be re-interrogated, re-understood, and subsequently rewritten by will and action, I have to ask: isn't this also what being a transsexual is? Living as we do in the borderlands of mystery, is it even possible to talk about the experience of transsexual life in a fully coherent or rationalistic way? What do we have other than the magical?

So what, then, must a real trans/super/natural history look like? As the witch has shown us, it must not be merely descriptive and concerned with facticity, but rather embrace its conjuring and manifesting power as well. It must be not merely observed as such, but actively employed, as an act of the will to power. I realize the extent to which the notion of history as invented narrative rather than objective record goes against the grain of academic traditions, and yet, if nothing else has convinced to this point, I'll simply point out that we can see the dark work of history being written around us at this very moment. The placing of transsexual lives into the category of a social "debate," as if we were objects rather than living beings; the ascendance of right wing conspiracy theories that are employed daily to justify the systematic dismantling of democracy; the right's purposeful redefinition of words and concepts such as their recent co-opting of "critical race theory"—the summoning of a phantasm by which they have won at least several governorships and stand to win much more by the end of this year... all of these are examples of the power of "making history" not just to describe but to conjure into being. The wicked priests of logopower spend every waking moment telling stories to

justify “the things to come” over the next several decades and calling it history. This laying of ideological groundwork is happening whether we like it or not. Of what use is a moral commitment to objective accuracy, itself utterly impracticable and debased as I and hundreds of other feminist scholars have been showing for more than half a century now? We need to cast better fucking spells.

Learning such spells, then, is the task of the trans/super/natural as I move on to my next work and explore how we might “create better histories of the things to come.” The method must evolve and explore several avenues to see what might be done to make the transition from analytic to practice. Among these avenues might well be a deeper study of the role witchcraft and the supernatural have played in feminism, a more deeply transsexual analysis of witchcraft and the supernatural’s capacity to allow for a suspension of contradictory elements within the auspices of “identity,” a further exploration of art’s capacity to create representation that is not merely reflective but creative in the sense of the will to power—in other words, what useful monsters might we create for ourselves, and a deeper look at the social form of the coven as models for hermetic communities engaged in artistic production and knowledge production. And, especially, as the trans/super/natural comes to bear on forward-looking topics, I expect to learn more of the role of the transsexual and the witch in advancing beyond the mechanistic and deterministic conception of biology upon which the witch’s great efforts of the 1970s have come to falter. That faltering makes it plain to me that if there is to be a feminist analytic that means anything at all to the specific epistemic and political challenges of the 21st century, it must be both transsexual and magical alike.

Well, then: so mote it be.

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Biography

Caoimhe A. Harlock is a writer, artist, Hekatean priestess, and teacher. Her work brings together feminist studies, queer theory, 20th century American literature, and longstanding intersections of spirituality and political praxis. She received her Bachelors in English and Philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin, and her Masters and doctorate in English from Duke University, where she was a recipient of the James B. Duke Fellowship. Outside of academia, she has published fiction and graphic fiction with a number of outlets including *Evergreen Review*, *Honey Literary*, *Gathering of the Tribes*, and Diskette Press. She hails from the swamps of Florida and, at the moment at least, resides in Durham, NC with her partner and a small menagerie of pets.