UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Staking Our Claim: Self-Making, World-Making and Survival in Trans-Authored Narratives

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Comparative Literature

by

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June 2024

The dissertation of Jordan J. Tudisco is approved.

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June 2024

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DEDICATION

For all my fellow trans people; and especially those who were taken out of this world by violence and hate.

You will forever shine in the t4t constellations inside our hearts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Nothing ever happens alone, nor in a vacuum. Moving through us are ideas and emotions and thoughts sparked by a whole history of relationships, of critical connections, of other others and other uses haunting us and echoing in our voice. Without them, without you, this 'I' that I am could not have written this. Through this work, many are speaking, foraging before or alongside me; many have inspired and shaped the words on these pages, from a wide variety of vista points, perspectives, orientations, engagements, stakes, and forms of relating. Just like transness is a form of relationality, a transversal cross-becoming, a shared horizon towards which we journey, that is translated as an individual project of self-making, so is this dissertation. Although a single name will appear here as author, many are to be named, an entire web of care, holding, containing, connecting, vibrating, floating, loving gossamer without which this project could not have happened, or could not have taken the shape it currently inhabits. Here is the mosaic of people to whom I extend my thanks:

To all the transcestors who came before.

To all whose transness informs mine.

To all my t4t relationships, whether past, present, or future, whether romantic, platonic or professional, whether they worked out or ended in a breakup or a divorce; I cherish all of you to the moon and back and manifest a world where we can all thrive and live and love.

To all who said I would never make it, who tried with all their might to keep me out or push me out and whose hostility and condescension gave me enough spite to topple walls and prove them otherwise

To all my students, incarcerated and free, everywhere they now may be, who taught me as I taught them and showed me that educators can make a difference, and through whom I grew, and changed, and actualized, and found self-congruence as a teacher.

To my supporting committee, Jenn Tyburczy, Lal Zimman, Maurizia Boscagli, and Matt Richardson, who guided me through this long arduous process with benevolence, patience, and trust, whose courses will shape my research for years to come, and whose wonderful feedback will help me immensely as I journey from the dissertation to a monograph.

To all those, and especially to those who didn't make it, who made graduate school a livable place, for a little or for a long while, who shared laughters, parties, nocturnal cryfests, dog walks, donut runs, sushi venting sessions, many many drinks, holidays away from home, academic conversations, spontaneous adventures, climbing fun and gym sessions, community-building, arduous leadership and solidarity work, brazen revolts, direct actions, disruptions, and radical reimaginings of our crumbling messed up world. Without you, surviving would have felt impossible: Alice Blank, Solaire Denaud, Sarah Dunne, Elena Festa, Sage Freeburg, Azayza Jimenez, Naz Keynejad, Mariam Lmaifi, Keene Morrow, Heather Prentice-Walz, Bri Reddick, Eugene Riordan, Maxx Seijo, Azucena Trincado Murrugaren, Viviana Valle Gomez, Tandee Wang, Chloe Willis, and many, many others. Our memories are some I will cherish forever; I will always wish we had more time. May the worlds we dreamed up together one day bloom like sunflowers and bougainvillea whispering softly in the twilit air.

To the Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and especially to Craig Leets and Quinn Rioz, who provided vital

support, friendship, and training, and a space to find community, explore my gender and sexuality, and become a better teacher, mentor, communicator, event organizer, and student leader.

To professors alongside whom I learned and taught and foraged for a more complex understanding of life and the world and whose classes provided me with readings, conversations, and a sense of community that informed my thinking and personal life in more ways than one: Mary Bucholtz, Charmaine Chua, Tracy Conner, Melody Jue, Catherine Nesci, Constance Penley, Sarah Roberts, Leila Rupp, Omi'seke Tinsley, Vilna Bashi Treitler, Elisabeth Webber, Terrance Wooten.

To the Lavender Language Institute who provided me with an immense space of T4T love, learning and friendship in the Florida summer heat, a maybe unexpected space of trans thriving in Boca Raton, Florida; to the incredibly important mentors I found there who shaped my research and passion for four subsequent summers: Sika Dagbovie Mullins, José de la Garza Valenzuela, Ashvin R. Kini, Nikki Lane, William Leap, Nicole Morse, David Peterson, and Maria Amelia Viteri; and to peers from all over with whom I learned and loved and laughed and made life-sustaining nourishing memories at times when things felt especially lonely and hopeless: Archie Crowley, Gia D'Angelo, Lo Horst, Lex Konnelly, Ayden Loughlin, Darrin Miller, and Patrick Sonnenberg.

To professors and mentors at the Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis who made an early impact on me, at a time when, first-generation and plagued with an inexistant sense of higher-ed belonging, I didn't know if I could actually do this, and whose teachings and encouragements pushed me to finish my Licence in English and Russian Translation, apply for the selective Master's Program in Literary Translation, complete a second Master's

Program, and apply to go teach French for a year at UC Santa Barbara, which set me on this path towards calling the United States home: Anne Chassagnol, Marie-Nadia Karsky, Claire Larsonneur, Arnaud Regnauld, and Alexandra Saemmer.

To longstanding friends who have seen me live and survive many lives, make terribly questionable decisions, shed countless layers of skin, and who witnessed me find self-actualization and congruence, from the shy, anxious, self-conscious, depressed student that I was, struggling and surviving in Paris, to the driven, passionate, loving, confident, and empathetic teacher and researcher that I am now: Barbara Fasseur, Sylvain Lespinasse, Mariam Lmaifi, Charles Tanguy, Hippolyte Thamié,

To Isabella Restrepo, Caleb Luna and Lisa Han who provided me with invaluable help with the job market and who so generously and graciously offered to share their materials with me – I truly believe I would not have been welcomed by the next chapter of my academic journey without your support. I strive every day to mirror your solidarity and support by helping others around me.

To the Feminist Studies department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who provided me with ample mentorship and training through its Graduate Emphasis in Feminist Studies; to the Office of Instructional Development at the University of California who gave me space and opportunities to think about teaching, and pedagogy, and radical ways to be an instructor through the Certificate in College and University Teaching, the Pillars of Teaching program, and the Summer Teaching Institute for Associates.

To the institutions who funded this research through the UC Santa Barbara's Multi-Year Chancellor's Fellowship and the UC President's Dissertation Fellowship, to the ones who rewarded my orientation for just, ethical, and inclusive teaching through the UC Santa

Barbara Academic Senate's Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award and the UC Santa Barbara Graduate Student Association's Excellence in Teaching Award, and to the ones who saw and valued my deep commitment to service, diversity, and student leadership through the UC Santa Barbara Graduate Student Association's Dixon-Levy Service Award.

And finally, to my family, but especially my mom, Fabienne, for always believing in me, unconditionally, and allowing me to walk towards any future I desired.

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[ABSTRACT]

Staking Our Claim: Self-Making, World-Making and Survival in Trans-Authored Narratives

By

Jordan J. Tudisco

This interdisciplinary dissertation, titled "Staking Our Claim: Self-Making, World-Making and Survival in Trans-Authored Narratives," analyzes transness as a concept and its expression in trans-authored memoirs, poetry, and fiction. In it, I develop a trans forager methodology to underline the narrative tropes through which transness has been made legible in the 20th- and 21st-century Global North. I argue that the context of white supremacy, imperialism, ableism, and anti-Blackness through which transness came to be in 1950s America has shaped how we understand transness as a self-centered project motivated by negative affect. My research is here invested in proposing a different story of transness, one told through the centering of diverse and oft under-represented trans of color perspectives.

Chapter One, "Neoliberal Autobiographies: White-Washed Histories and The Making of the Respectable Trans Subject," centers Chase Joynt's 2022 movie *Framing Agnes* and new archival research into Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodological study in the 1950s. It highlights the heteropatriarchal, ableist, and white supremacist biases that led Garfinkel to select Agnes as the case study for his research on gender, because of her adherence to white-centric understandings of femininity, and by extension her ability to make claim to

respectable whiteness, while other interviewees, due to their non-normative racial, sexual, or disabled identity, were discarded. In Chapter Two, "Trans Evidence of Being: Autobiographical Self-Determination as Collective Practice of Survival," I examine early newspaper coverage and self-writings by Black trans women such as Carlett Angianlee Brown, Delisa Newton, Sharon Davis, and Ceyenne Doroshow to propose a counter-narrative to Chapter 1. I highlight here an understanding of transness as a relational identity geared towards care work, solidarity, and community-building. My third chapter, "Anti-Death and the Ethics of Poeliving: Trans Poetics and the Language of Collective Survival," proposes a comparative study of contemporary US and Nazi Germany by examining the poetics of survival employed and theorized by trans-of-color poets such as Ryka Aoki, Caleb Luna, or jaye simpson, and trans people who lived in Nazi-controlled Europe, such as Ovida Delect, Lucy Salani, or Liddy Bacroff. I centrally use Delect's deployment of poetry as anti-death and ethical conceptualization of poeliving to highlight poetry as a technique of struggle against the atmospheric violence that surrounds trans-of-color life. In Chapter Four, "Dreaming the Past; Remembering the Future: Apocalyptical Relationality, Oniric Transtopia and Relational Transness in Trans Fiction and Speculation," I focus on how science-fiction and speculation are used by trans-of-color authors and performers for world-making and self-making. I identify specific narrative orientations such as oniric transtopia, dis/utopia, and apocalyptical relationality as tools used to propose a communal understanding of transness that goes beyond the here, the now, and the human. Through these chapters, my intervention is not to merely add trans and trans-of-color perspectives to our fields but to make them central and fully embrace the restructuring of thought that trans orientations to life, being, time, and writing require of us.

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October 2021 – It is the beginning, but also the end; the repetition of a cycle, at once unknown and familiar. I am in Paris again, for the first time after six long years on Chumash land, in Santa Barbara.

(But after an abusive marriage, a devastating breakup and divorce, a suicide attempt, a couple of visits from the shadow people, the abandonment, alienation, and loneliness of my life in California, now with a brain forever chemically-altered by trauma and pain, was I really this same "I" that I was back then?)

I am sitting on the second floor of the Starbucks across the street from the Hôtel de Ville, at the same exact spot I had written my B.A. internship report and my two Master's theses, now trying to write the prospectus for this dissertation. I uncannily feel like I went back in time, like I have returned to some sort of origin point, and yet, the past remains gone, ungraspable, at once petrified in memory and flimsily disappearing from reality. The table now different in texture, height, and orientation, the upstairs bathroom now condemned, the flirty baristas who knew my name and order now living other lives, the sickly-sweet raspberry white mocha craved by my youthful tastebuds now a bitter black iced coffee, at once comforting my nerves and heightening my heartbeat.

I struggle to figure out what I want to say. What I want this to be. I want to do too much, write about too many things, discuss all things trans without ever leaving anything or anyone out. I want to write about self-determination, trans history and archival work from centuries past, transphobic understandings of trans-inclusivity in video games, how trans becomes synonymous with dangerous, perverted, threatening and is deployed, even when there aren't actually any trans people around, to attack establishments like Wi Spa and justify the racism at the roots of the attack.

My restless brain spirals into endless musings about my past, my future, what I have done, who I am going to be, every entanglement of issues merging with one another until writing a prospectus becomes a life-altering personal decision about how I will live and die.

Within this visible chaos, a voice cuts through.

My friend and former roommate Sylvain, with whom I am staying for a few days,

(yet another time-travelling echo as I fall asleep in the same bedroom I had lived in for the last year of my Parisian life, haunted by the heartbreak, betrayal, devastating pain, and despair that circled me like vultures when I lived there, spending hours on end contemplating how the concrete under my window would feel),

asks

(or maybe he doesn't, maybe I am only remembering it this way because my brain needs to feel like the breakthrough somehow came from elsewhere, like I was worth

helping and wasn't facing hurdles and obstacles and struggles all alone, like I always do):

"If you're doing a PhD in Literature, don't you want your dissertation to be about trans literature?"

This maybe should have been obvious from the beginning, but the answer

(yes)

became an anchor for my buzzing dancing thoughts. My previous prospectus drafts had very little to do with literature and, thinking about it, I actually wasn't aware of the current academic discourse around trans literature. Lifted fog, clearer path, the jazz music is still blaring but my brain is strangely quiet. I open a new tab and search "trans literature."

After scrolling through the results for a bit, I click on "Videos" instead of "All." And here it was beckoning, grainy rectangle frame and alluring title, the fifty-four-minute video which would become the anchoring stake of this work[1].

[1] "Staking Our Claim: Trans Women's Literature in the 21st Century," Barnard Center for Research on Women, October 18, 2012. Last Accessed on April 25, 2024 at https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/staking-our-claim-trans-womens-literature-in-the-21st-century/.

Introduction

Tourmaline, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Donna Ostrowsky, Red Durkin; Staking our Claim: Trans Women's Literature in the 21st Century
Lenni Lenape and Wappinger land (Barnard Library) – October 18th, 2012

October 18, 2012 – Lenni Lenape and Wappinger Land. It is a day of celebration, an evening of trans excellence inside the Barnard Library. Four trans women writers, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Red Durkin, and Donna Ostrowsky, perform readings of their contributions to the recently published trans collection of short stories *The Collection: Short Stories from the Transgender Vanguard*. Under the moderation of trans artist, activist, and scholar Tourmaline, they all take part in a panel discussion on trans narratives and the future of trans literature. They talk about the state of trans literature, access to publishing, what has been done and where we should be going, who is their intended audience, what motivates one to write, how much of them finds itself in their fiction, and more. Tourmaline and Ryka Aoki mention the impact of class and race on who gets to write and be published and as such, on who gets to see themselves in the things they are reading and who does not.

And, in the midst of all this, Red Durkin says something that has stayed with me since then, a central idea that I often came back to both because of the visceral disagreement I felt when hearing it and because of the set of issues and tensions that it stems from and represents. This moment became the crux, the central knot that this dissertation is working at disentangling. Thirty-five minutes or so in the panel event, an audience member asks: how do you, as writers, "interact with this legacy of a literature of memoirs that is in some way, like, very problematic?" (34:45). Durkin, who had been mentioned earlier in the question, answers first[2]. In her response, she opposes memoirs to fiction. The former is what trans people have

[2] Here is Durkin's full answer to the question that I have transcribed from the video recording of the panel: "Yeah, uh, I love being the first person answering every question *laughter*. I think that's what's been available to trans people is memoirs. There are various reasons for that. That's what publishers will publish. Publishers don't care about trans characters and literature particularly, they don't care about trans protagonists, they just need the sensational thing and it's the easiest thing to do and I think that a lot of the time when people get bitter about memoir being the only thing, it can seem that memoir is created solely out of arrogance, I think there's a flipside of the coin where memoirs are created because there aren't those other relatable experiences in fiction, the idea of creating fictitious character is almost foreign to trans authors when they sit down to write and it becomes the only story that I know how to tell that tells a trans story is my own.

And so it does take, I think, a little bit of extra work to create a meaningful trans character for literature. I wouldn't say that I have experienced any pushback other than what I have already said, which is this assumption that some part of this character is me, and maybe there are parts of this character that are me, I mean that's — but, but it's not who I am, and it's not autobiographical, it's not my story, I didn't get here by competing in the Hooters world wing-eating championship, I just want everyone to be aware of that, I got here by being very funny.

And so I guess that's kinda my opinion, memoir is the legacy of what trans people have written to date because it is what trans people have been allowed to write, and it's because it's that kind of vicious cycle where there aren't any trans narratives so the only trans narrative I know how to tell is my own. That's why I think that Topside Press is so important, because it has broken that cycle where there's actually just an investment in publishing literature from trans people about trans people that is fiction. And creating fiction I think is very important because it is one way that culture lends themselves credence both to themselves and to an external world where it's not necessarily explaining real things but it's creating, it creates culture, it creates content, it's not just a follower of culture, it's an engine of culture. It works for all people, all cultures who create their own stories, their own narratives that are fictitious, are able to expand themselves and learn from that in ways that you can't learn from memoir and you can't learn from history.

If that had been the only thing that had come out of Western culture or Eastern culture, or African culture, or any of these cultures, you would see a very — you would see those as very different, they would be far more stunted creatively and all of those cultures, because they have created fiction and use their imagination to create these things and exist in these ways, it is, they're very different and you see these differences elaborate themselves, so, I don't even know what I'm talking about anymore. Basically, we're at a point where we're pivoting away from memoir, and there will certainly always be memoir especially coming out of larger publishing houses that don't actually care about trans people, they care about what books they can sell, so it will always exist but kind of veering off from that, I think is important and necessary for trans people to find new avenues for themselves."

been writing in the past, while the latter is what trans people should be writing in the future. The former is the only thing that presumably cis publishers care about because they know it will sell, while the latter is what people who have an investment in trans literature help publish. The former is a follower of culture, that is, only able to mirror life and reality as they are, while the latter is an engine of culture, that is, able to generate new realities, new meaning, new understandings of what it means to be trans. The former is problematic, while the latter is a sign of progress and will lead to a broadening of perspectives and possibilities for trans people. This binary opposition of genres, in the totalizing terms used by Durkin, seems to preclude any other nuances: "you can't learn from memoir," as such, "we're pivoting away from [them]," and the only ones who will continue to publish memoir are "larger publishing houses that don't actually care about trans people."

Bringing a critical eye to Durkin's intervention generates a treasure trove of questions that this dissertation aims at answering: are memoirs indeed problematic, and more importantly, if so, why, how, and under which conditions? Can the memoir genre be used by trans writers in ways that are not problematic, and can memoir-writing, memoir-publishing, and memoir-reading be acts of care? On the other side of Durkin's binary, how has fiction been utilized by trans people? Did it really act as an "engine of culture," as a tool for trans people to expand notions of transness and generate new understandings of what it means to be trans? Why couldn't fiction be as problematic of a genre as memoir? And finally, beyond this memoir/fiction binary, what about other kinds of writing? What about trans people's use of poetry, of theater and performance, of art? Ultimately, this dissertation argues that analyzing trans people's use of the literary necessarily requires an intersectional approach. What allows trans people to deploy transness in different or expansive ways is not the genres

we write through; rather, we understand and orient to transness in our own specific ways because of our positionalities, experiences, and commitments to one another, and everything that these parts of ourselves afford or don't afford.

Indeed, beyond arguments about literature and genre, Durkin's response also raises a different question about the meaning and limits of a trans "we." By that, I mean: who is this "we" that Durkin constructs and imagines when stating "we're at a point when we're pivoting away from memoir"? When thinking about transness intersectionally, that is, when viewing trans people as complex individuals who are bearing the compounding brunt of several systems of oppression and whose life stories aren't just stories about cissexism and transphobia, but also about racism, xenophobia, ableism, whorephobia, sizeism, colonialism, and more, the apparent glue around the trans "we" constructed by Durkin doesn't seem to hold. On the Barnard panel, Tourmaline herself brought nuances to Durkin's claim and highlighted racism and anti-Blackness as an obstacle to writing and seeing one's story published. And a few months later, on her own personal blog[3], Janet Mock, who was in attendance that day, uttered a similar critique: it is mostly a certain kind of trans people, namely upper-class white trans people, that has been able to access memoir-writing; trans people like her, namely racialized and poor, she expressed, have not been afforded the same access to publishing, and as such, to seeing oneself reflected in the trans memoirs that were available. Mock's critique arose from experience, from embodied and lived reality. Back then, Mock herself hadn't yet published either of her two memoirs, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, & So Much More* (2014) or *Surpassing Certainty: What My Twenties Taught Me* (2017). The fact that Durkin was able to feel like memoirs had done

[3] Janet Mock's blog entry from June 5th, 2013 titled "The Gatekeeping of Trans Women of Color's Stories in Publishing": https://janetmock.com/2013/06/05/memoir-trans-women-of-color/

all they could for trans people, and that they were now to be discarded as a tool for self-writing and self-expression, betrays the whiteness of her trans experience. Far from trying to single out Durkin and blame her as an individual, I am here using her response in 2012 as a prism, as a lens to investigate how whiteness was built in transness, was its foundation, right from its contemporary birth in mid-century medicolegal discourses. In doing so, I argue that the context of white supremacy, imperialism, ableism, and anti-Blackness through which transness came to be in this context has shaped how we still understand transness as a self-centered project of the individual motivated by a need to find repair or healing from the negative affect of dysphoria. I defend that focusing on this limited white- and Western-centric understanding of transness contributes to the erasure of trans pasts which exceed the bounds defined by white supremacy. It also perpetuates trans pain and death in the present and constricts the liberatory and abolitionist potential of transness in our future. Tourmaline's and Mock's critique, and the necessary focus on how transness needs to be considered conjointly with race, class, (dis)ability, migration status, size, religion, sex work status, and so much more, are both front and center in this dissertation. In doing so, my goal is to highlight how different kinds of trans people, and especially trans people of color, have used literary expression to put forth different understandings of transness, ones oriented towards the collective, towards solidarity, love, pleasure, freedom, and survival.

To do so, each of my chapters will return to this panel as its point of departure to articulate interconnected arguments about trans use of the literary for world-making, self-making, and survival. For instance, chapter One, "Neoliberal Autobiographies: White-Washed Histories and The Making of the Respectable Trans Subject," stays with Durkin's premise according to which trans memoirs and life stories have been problematic. However,

instead of blaming memoirs for being an inherently flawed genre, this first chapter aims at untangling why and how trans memoirs have become a normalizing force for trans cultural discourses. By examining a moment of our contemporary Western trans history, the 1950s, when nascent narratives about transness started to solidify themselves in medical, legal, and social discourses, the first part of this dissertation highlights the selection process that was at play and that favored a singular kind of trans story, thus turning it into the only possible normative trans story for subsequent generations of trans people. To do so, this chapter centers Chase Joynt's 2022 movie *Framing Agnes* and new archival research into Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodological study in the 1950s. It highlights the heteropatriarchal, ableist, and white supremacist biases that led Garfinkel to select Agnes as the case study for his research on gender, because of her adherence to white-centric understandings of femininity, and by extension her ability to make claim to respectable whiteness. His other interviewees, on the other hand, were discarded and their files left to rust away in a file cabinet, due to their non-normative racial, sexual, or disabled identity, or because their articulations of transness were too collective and communal and went against neoliberal understandings of gender and sexual identity as characteristics of the individual. This in turn informed the trans history one typically remembers in the West and the narrative tropes circulated by popular trans autobiographies, which in turn influenced the expectations publishers and readers have of who a trans person is and what a trans life story looks like, which in turn limited access to publishing and erased trans people who understand their transness otherwise.

To provide a counter-narrative to this first chapter, chapter Two, "Trans Evidence of Being: Autobiographical Self-Determination as Collective Praxis of Survival," focuses on

Tourmaline's and Janet Mock's critiques of Durkin's position against memoirs. My work here turns to narratives of the self written by Black trans people to propose a counter-narrative to my first chapter and demonstrate how memoirs can act as anti-normative tools and can further expansive notions of transness that are not turned towards cis expectations. To do so, this chapter builds upon C. Riley Snorton's groundbreaking work on the racial history of transness and his conceptualization of fungibility, transitivity, and fugitivity, to articulate how transness, when intersecting with specific histories and experiences of captivity, criminalization, and surveillance, can become a tool of survival, liberation, and abolition. Here, I see writing, and life writing more specifically, both as a literary "technique of struggle" which help trans people of color survive within the "atmosphere of violence" they are under in 20th-century and contemporary United States (Stanley 2021) and as "evidence of being" (Bost 2018), as a way to fight against erasure, invisibilization, and assimilation into the cisheterosexual gender order. With this in mind, the chapter closely looks at early articulations of Black trans selfhood in the 1950s and 1960s press from Black trans women such as Carlett Angianlee Brown and Delisa Newton. It then turns to two published autobiographies written by Black trans women: Sharon Davis's *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood* (1985) and Ceyenne Doroshow's *Cooking in Heels* (2012). In doing so, it highlights how these autobiographies are used to resist any individualistic neoliberal project of the trans self and instead strive towards grounding transness through critical embodied connections, solidarity-work, and collective survival.

Departing from memoir-writing, chapter Three, "Anti-Death and the Ethics of Poeliving: Trans Poetics and the Language of Collective Survival," looks at trans people's use of other genres of writing for self-making and world-making. Taking a step away from

Durkin's memoir/fiction binary, this chapter pauses for a bit to think about two of the other trans people featured on the Barnard panel: Ryka Aoki and Donna Ostrowsky. Six months or so after her participation in the Barnard panel, Ostrowsky tragically passed away due to suicide, an unfortunately not-so-uncommon consequence for many trans people trying to survive the atmospheric violence of contemporary United States. Two years later, Aoki publishes a collection of poems dedicated to Ostrowsky and to Alexis Rivera, another of her trans friend who died in 2012 from complications related to HIV/AIDS. The way-too-common passing of our trans kin and Aoki's use of the poetic to memorialize her friends and survive through grief are here used as a point of entry to think about trans people's use of poetry as a survival strategy, as a literary technique of struggle. This chapter proposes a comparative study of two time periods often connected materially, affectively, and rhetorically in contemporary Western trans discourses: that of the contemporary time period in the U.S. and Europe and that of Nazi Germany. In doing so, I am invested in examining how trans people then and now have theorized and practiced poetry and writing in the face of intense violence and ever-present death. This chapter first underlines several trans people who had to flee Nazi Germany or survived the concentration camps of the Holocaust such as Jewish-German t4t couple Charlotte Charlaque and Toni Ebel, French poet Ovida Delect, or Italian activist Lucy Salani, among many others. These trans survivors all used writing or art to live through Nazi Germany or its aftermath and to find pockets of joy and pleasure. Exploring Delect's articulation of poetry as anti-death and development of an ethics of poetic living as its analytical lenses, this chapter forages for bridges and echoes between Delect and the trans poetics of survival employed and theorized by contemporary trans-of-color poets such as Ryka Aoki, Caleb Luna, Coyote Park, or jaye simpson. By doing so, I here reiterate a

core truth: we've always been here and will always be here. And although the atmosphere of violence around trans life and trans life of color has been constant and pervasive, the joy, pleasure, love, and freedom that we have been able to collectively find, create, imagine, dream, remember, and share with each other has equally been a staple of trans existence.

Finally, Chapter Four, "Dreaming the Past; Remembering the Future: Apocalyptical Relationality, Oniric Transtopia and Relational Transness in Trans Fiction and Speculation," moves to the genre of fiction to explore its use as a trans literary technique of struggle. Here, I critically investigate the tensions found within the pivoting towards fiction that Durkin called for and how it has been enacted in the last few years. Echoing the first chapter, this last chapter underlines that, because the whiteness of memoirs has not been specifically investigated in depth, the pivot towards trans fiction remained essentially white. As such, fiction as an "engine of culture" did not necessarily produce the broadening of trans perspectives that Durkin may have hinted at on the Barnard Library panel. Very recently however, several trans-of-color anthologies of fiction, science-fiction, and speculative fiction have been published such as Ellyn Peña's, Jamie Berrout's, and Venus Selenite's *Nameless Woman: an Anthology of Fiction by Trans Women of Color* (2018), Joshua Whitehead's *Love After The End: an Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction* (2020), or Coyote Park's *Behind Shut Eyes: QTBIPOC Dream Anthology* (2021). This chapter examines these anthologies, both as a space of critical connections which can help us think about transness relationally, and as a repository of trans-of-color literary techniques of struggles which use science-fiction, fiction, and speculation to broaden contemporary understandings of transness and create worlds and selves in ways that go beyond the here, the now, and the human. More specifically, this chapter identifies three specific lenses in these

trans narratives. First, *dis/utopia*, as coined by DM Rice in the short story "Apocryphal" (2018), complicates the utopia/dystopia binary and sheds light on the nuanced layers within how we imagine otherwise, the opacity in our dreams of futurity, and what our desires for other realities reveal about our relationship to the here and now. Within these nuanced layers, trans fiction, science-fiction, and speculative fiction, through their deployment of futurity and imagination, also emphasize our differing relationships to the end of the world and to the apocalypse. In trans-of-color fiction, the apocalypse is not necessarily a feared future; rather, it can act as a known past, as the foundation for existence and being, as the life one is currently living. This divergent way to relate to the apocalypse also reshuffles how one relates to others, to oneself, and to the world; I here analyze both of these ways of relating under a common orientation that I call *apocalyptic relationality*. Finally, this chapter underlines the crucial role played by dreams in trans of color fiction writing, and more specifically in the writing of Indigitrans and Two-Spirit authors and artists. Dreams can act as bridges between different timelines, different realities, different versions of ourselves, and different levels of our consciousness. Theorizing about dreams in conjunction with Howard Chiang's concept of transtopia as a way to historicize gender mutability and gender transgression beyond a Western concept of transness, I here develop a lens of *oniric transtopia* that emphasizes dreams as a trans literary tool explored by Black & Indigenous trans people to think about non-linear futurities and co-existing realities. In highlighting these three literary tools, I argue that they all utter new moods and orientations towards transness as a project of relational living and collective liberation that goes against normative and white supremacist neoliberal understandings of transness as a project of individual self-making.

A Note on Methodology

Throughout my time in grad school, both in France for my two M.A.s in Literary Translation and in Digital Literature and Writing and in the United States for this Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, my relationship to research and writing has changed extensively. Although my commitment to trans research remains unfaltering, my orientation to academia and to the fields within it has shifted. Not finding any home or sense of belonging anywhere, not wanting to be disciplined by any disciplines, not wanting my queer perspective to be bent back straight, I remained in transit, ever moving between fields, through a myriad of theoretical methods and frameworks, beyond boundaries I couldn't really see nor understand, doing things I did not know could ever be seen as controversial, untraditional, or "not literature." Being both the first in my family to ever go to college and the first to ever move abroad, let alone to the United States on another continent, there was a lot that didn't make sense at first in this new life I've been living, and honestly, a lot too that still does not make sense.

But rather than being afraid, rather than devouring academic rule books and guides to know the lay of this new land I had to navigate, I followed my inner compass, moving theoretically between fields and disciplines and physically between buildings and floors on campus with my instincts, commitments, and desires as my north star. I embraced my inability to notice the invisible thresholds that are crossed, the artificial rules that are broken, the untold shoulds that are ignored. I tried my best to safeguard and foster this inner voice, this guiding principle, by finding others with a similar orientation to the university, by reading them, listening to them, self-reflecting through them, being in community with them, as we navigated this hostile space that wanted so much to convince us that we shouldn't even

be here in the first place. And writing, on my own time and in my own voice, became a nourishing way to remind myself of who I was, of what I felt, of how I existed beyond what academia wanted to force me to be. I needed to code-switch, to be able to speak the language that would open doors and windows, to wear the mask that would signal "ok, they're one of us, we can leave them be," to make believe that the transformation was complete. But vitally, I needed to refuse becoming the mask, to remain always in translation, to keep past versions of myself close to heart, to not become of the place that relies on our destruction to perpetuate and subsist. In this dissertation, my poems and autoethnographic reflections, untranslated or never fully translated into the language of academia, act as such refusal; they might be jarring, but they are key for me to make the dissertatorial work mine. Similarly, these personal pieces connect you readers to a myriad of trans selves that I have been, at different points of my life. Far from heeding the call to disavow some of these past selves, and to use this work as a space of transformation, a portal through which my student self would become a scholar or a professor, I here keep in touch with this never-ending process of becoming, with all of who I have been, with all these me that still exist inside me, and bare to you, the struggles, obstacles, pain, and trauma, but also the joys, hopes, dreamings, and pleasures, that have molded me. The beginning of this introduction is an example of such an honoring of student life and struggle, of a moment that maybe should be hidden to perform ease and expertise, but whose erasure would be such deep self-betrayal. And through this difficult learning process of showing such care, patience, compassion, forgiveness, and love to my trans selves, whether child, teenager, student, survivor, married, divorced, or grad student selves, I am hoping to mirror here how to care for, build critical connections with, and love trans others everywhere, and through all that they are.

As part of this years-long ongoing process, I purposefully reshuffled the compartmentalization and priorities the university was expecting me to have. I refused to believe that teaching and service were separate from my research and obstacles to my true purpose. Instead, I threw myself in the pit, body and soul, for my students, for my peers, for all of us who wouldn't survive by remaining separate, alone, individual scholars with individual research projects. I taught every single quarter, every summer, even when on fellowships, in French, in Comparative Literature, in Linguistics, in Feminist Studies, in Global Studies, growing and learning from my students, forever invested in their success and happiness first, in helping them navigate academia without being crushed by it, without becoming a mere tool of it. I worked for the Graduate Student Association, for the Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, for the Vice-Chancellor of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, for the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center's Prison Correspondence Program, for the School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society (SKILLS) Program, for the Queer and Trans Graduate Student Union. My embodied experience of these spaces; my affective response to the struggles of others seeking help and community through these organizations and programs; my frustration and rage at the university's responses, at the bureaucratic obstacles, at how easily many administrators translate human experience and pain into numbers, cost, and figures; my own despair and hopelessness, caused by my treatment as a specimen (Musser 2015), reactions of shock, surprise, horror, laughter perpetually reminding me that I was a mere guest in these admin spaces, one that should represent but not speak, one that could pretend to make a difference but ultimately wouldn't be allowed to — all these became fodder for research, foraged emotions and knowledge turning into teachers and acting as fuel, tinder, flint, nourishment for the fire at the

foundation of my thrashing around in this life. All these taught me to mood-switch, to inhabit the university subjunctively, that is, to embrace "provisional and partial inhabitations that are structured by uncertainty" but also characterized by "an investment to change something" (Desai and Murphy 2018: 26). A change, it seems more and more clearly, that needs to come about sooner rather than later, and through radically shifting the logics of the university, destroying its foundation, and building something else, something otherwise, rather than merely reforming and renovating its walls. It is increasingly clear that universities are made for pain, for violence, for death, both outside of their walls and within, on their own student population. We're past any attempts at home-staging this haunted place; it's time to burn it all down.

This shifting orientation to academia, research, teaching, and service translates itself in this dissertation and in the research methodology I have been thinking through and developing, one that I call a trans forager methodology. I here follow Jack Halberstam's move to define scavenging, or a scavenger methodology, as a queer methodology. Indeed, because queer subjects "have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior" (1998: 13), it has been necessary to combine methods from diverse disciplines or fields of study, in ways that may sometimes conflict or contradict, in order to scavenge for their parts and build from them. With this in mind, a trans forager methodology similarly strives to build connections and meaning through echoes, hauntings, and happenstance. Rather than relying solely on systematicity, disciplinary coherence, and systems of academic citationality, it constructs meaning by happening upon seemingly disparate elements and connecting them emotionally and critically[4]. However, instead of

[4] This orientation to and praxis of research and writing is a mainstay of queer studies. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Tendencies*, for instance, which connects poetry, scholarship, memorial pieces, and autobiography, and

continuing to build upon the metaphor of the scavenger, who feeds on carrion or refuse, on discarded elements with seemingly little use, I here chose to opt for the metaphor of the forager who, through an extensive knowledge of their environment, finds elements from the land that may appear of little use to the untrained eye, but that will help their survival. Switching to this metaphor of foraging ties it to a specific history and political relation to the land and to white supremacist capitalism. It also highlights the intimate connection required between the forager and their environment. When conducted in an unfamiliar environment, foraging can be a dangerous activity. Distinguishing between nourishing or medicinal plants or fungi and poisonous or deadly ones necessitates to be in deep relationship with one's environment and ecosystem. It requires to be in tune with the histories of the land, the sustained relations of co-dependencies that have built themselves through centuries of knowledge passed down from generation to generation. Because of the necessary disconnect to the land that white Western extractive capitalism thrives upon, foraging has often remained an anti-capitalistic tool of survival used by populations thrown to the margins of society by white supremacy, colonialism, extractivism, and capitalism: runaway slaves, marooned communities, Indigenous peoples, and all those running away or thrown out from the neatly defined bounds of white capitalist society.

Even today, foraging remains a tool of survival used by underserved communities around the world: Black and Indigenous Southerners knowing how to find, prepare, and cook the otherwise poisonous pokeweed, Native Americans all across Turtle Island fighting to regain, conserve, or act upon their rights to the land and to ethical and sustainable foraging,

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discusses topics as varied as Diderot, spanking, breast cancer, the AIDS epidemic, Divine, or Henry James, is a good example of how a radical orientation to queer politics can act as the queer connective tissue between scavenged elements.

or Palestinians foraging akkoub and za'atar on their own traditional and ancestral homeland despite intense surveillance and criminalization from the Israeli government (as shown in Jumana Manna's 2022 film *Foragers*). Because foraging allows us to find sustenance outside the usual bounds of capitalist markets and white framework of property, in a way that does not require money to buy food or land to grow food on, and as such may allow people to refuse or limit participation in traditional labor markets, it is a practice of survival that has often been targeted for criminalization. On surface level, this criminalization is often framed under ecological pretenses, to protect endangered plants, for instance, or to label an entire area as a conservation zone that should be left untouched. By examining both the history behind anti-foraging laws and their contemporary deployment across the world, it becomes clear, however, that this criminalization of foraging is deeply anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-poor. In his 2018 article, Baylen J. Linnekin explains, for instance, that anti-foraging laws were used to push Native Americans off their traditional and ancestral lands, prevent newly-freed African-American people to find subsistence on their own and tie them back to the plantation as their only means of survival and employment, and forbid poor rural Americans from complementing their farming with foraging and hunting (1011-1014). Today, these laws continue to prevent foraging across the United States and many more also specifically criminalize foraging in urban settings, with practices such as gathering plants in parks, picking fruits off of fruit trees lining up streets and avenues, or even dumpster diving and collecting refuse and garbage leading to fines and arrest in some cities and states. These laws have devastating effects on those who rely on these activities to survive in urban spaces and predominantly target homeless people via means of surveillance, control, and punishment (Mitchell and Heynen 2009). The criminalization of foraging is far from being a

U.S.-specific issue and is used as a colonial tool around the world: for instance, the Israeli government frequently uses "nature protection laws" to exclusively target and arrest Palestinians who forage for za'atar and akkoub, two herbs that have traditional ancestral uses in Palestinian cooking (as noted in Rabea Eghbariah's research). On top of being targeted by white capitalist legal systems which prioritize an extractive relationship to the land and what it produces, foraging has also been co-opted and white-washed so that white folks with little relation to the land can forage as a hobby and write guides and books about it while Black, Indigenous, and racialized foragers are criminalized and cast at the margins of online foraging communities.

Because of this, this use of foraging as methodology explicitly fights against this co-optation and white-washing, so as to not become a tool of it. As an academic method, it centrally sees foraging as a method of survival within a system built upon our suffering and death and translates it as a method of writing, reading, and relating that explicitly dismantles the ivory tower while allowing one to survive within it in the meantime. This dissertation sees foraging as a Black, Indigenous, and racialized methodology, that is necessarily anti-colonial, liberatory, and abolitionist. Just like foraging remains an anti-capitalist anti-extractivist practice tied to an intimate knowledge and relation to the land, a methodology of foraging also refuses the extractivist nature of academia and academic research and instead relies on intimacy and relationality to gather knowledge, embodied, felt, and otherwise. Writing poetry or sharing aspects of my own life is one of my ways to build such intimate relationships with you all. A method of foraging does not take knowledge out of communities for the sole profit and advancement of the extractor, but rather is fed by and feeds the community through critical connections and intimate emotional ties to our

environments and the people within it. As such, foraging as an academic methodology relies on a deeply intimate ecosystem that is known and felt and acts as the nourishing earth for the growing of meaning and life.

By proposing foraging as a trans methodology, I see trans subjects and trans ways of being, seeing, experiencing, feeling, and theorizing the world and the self as voluntarily discarded and relegated to the outskirts of capital and the normative system of gender, sexuality, and self-relation that it relies on, to the 'unknown' realm of the 'wilderness.' Just like the material and ecological 'wilderness' is an invention of white supremacist extractive capitalism to craft an other faraway and scary space that is up for grab and needs to be discovered and subsequently controlled, destroyed, or contained, no matter how intimately known and related with this space might be by racialized others, I here see trans ways of being as inhabiting a space of symbolic 'wilderness' that is equally an invention of white supremacy and the strict normative system of (cis) gender it relies on. Normative transness as we know it is the translation by patriarchal and white supremacist medicolegal systems of these trans ways of being from this space of symbolic wilderness into a neatly contained and bound form that is acceptable and less threatening for white cisheteronormative capitalist society. While it will indeed address this form of translated transness into its first chapter, this dissertation will otherwise mainly focus on the trans ways of being, seeing, experiencing, feeling, and theorizing the world and the self that have not been fully captured by white capitalist normativity. It is both for this reason and because these forms of transness often center positionalities and experiences that are racialized and othered by white supremacist extractive capitalism that a trans forager methodology is necessary. A trans forager methodology, because of its historical and cultural ties to Indigeneity, Blackness, and

racialized ways of relating to the world and to others, also ensures an intersectional focus on othered ways of being and relating that helps counteract the co-optative, appropriative, extractive tendencies of academia, academic pursuit, and academic writing.

For these reasons and many more, I also see this trans forager methodology as a form of gender nourishment, as a way to feed one's gendered self while facing the starvation and impoverishment forced onto us by cisgenderism and the (always already white) gender binary order. By examining how trans literary and artistic expression enacts specific forms of self-making and world-making, and thus become tools for trans survival, this dissertation, as itself a form of trans expression, enacts what it highlights and becomes such a tool. Dissertations extract knowledge, energy and ideas and often require one to perform expertise and propose original, novel contributions, in the hope for validation and accreditation. As such, they are often painful, difficult, and stressful projects that may lead their authors to feel depleted, exhausted, emptied. At the very least, these are tensions I have myself felt during this long process of thinking and writing and moving towards the work you are reading, tensions you can witness in the reflective piece that opens this introduction. It has been absolutely vital for me to find a way to transform this emptying process into a fulfilling one, to go from depletion to nourishment, to find out ways to make this work. For me, this meant refusing to ignore the deeply emotional aspect of this work: the anger, the joy, the sadness, the hope, the heartbreak, the envy, the fear, and all the other affective responses I had to reading and analyzing the works highlighted here. Because I am trans, writing about the lives and experiences of trans people who have been and are still met with violence and death brings up a lot of things that may resemble my own life and experience, hauntings and resonances that may echo very specifically inside the holes and cavities within me. Academic

writing often expects distance and objectivity; but I refuse. Instead, as you may already have noticed, this work features a whole spread of affective interactions: poems, autoethnographic musings, memories and dreams that are borne from this work and have held my hand through it, emotions-in-process crystallized through creativity and self-reflection. In return, my hope is that, by turning the writing of this dissertation into a trans project of gender nourishment in this way, the reading of it, too, can become such a project for you.

Just like the trans literary and artistic production featured that I critically examine, which acts as tools of trans survival, as trans techniques of struggle, but cannot offer a full escape out of the atmosphere of violence trans people live in, this dissertation too is only a partial tool against the violent atmosphere of academia. Although it can bring gender nourishment to the acts of writing and reading, a trans forager methodology cannot entirely shield writers and readers from the pain and suffering caused by the act of translation required from academia as a cis-centric white supremacist system. Trans ways of being, seeing, feeling, and theorizing have to be foraged within an atmosphere of extreme violence that cannot be ignored. We thus will have to discuss death, murder, and suicide, physical and sexual violence, medicolegal violence, criminalization and incarceration, pathologization and internment, erasure and invisibilization, and more. All are very difficult topics and themes that are commonly experienced by trans people, and especially so by trans people of color, disabled trans people, trans people who are or have been sex workers, trans people who are or have been incarcerated, and trans people who are or have been migrants. Facing this pain, feeling some of it, and not shying away from it, not trying to escape from it or avoid it, is necessary to honor the lives and experiences of these trans people. However, this pain is not all-encompassing; it is not the end-all-be-all of trans living. Instead, this work forages, both

in the archival record and in the published works of trans people themselves, to find joy, euphoria, love, freedom, pleasure, and other forms of gender nourishment cultivated from within the atmospheres of violence surrounding trans life. My own creative contributions, namely the poems and autoethnographic pieces that act as pauses, interludes, moments of tenuous breathing, mirror this act of foraging to locate such forms of gender nourishment in my own life. I hope this can feel nourishing to you too and utter forward an invitation for you to practice foraging as a trans methodology in your own life, writing, and reading.

A Note on Genre

As just mentioned previously in my note on methodology, what you are reading here is built from materials foraged in multiple settings and contexts: from trans literary and artistic production, from documentaries and movies about trans people, from academic writing and articles, from archives and online databases, from social media, from my own daily life, everyday thoughts, hopes, fears, and dreams embodied and felt within my flesh. As such, the results of this foraging come in different forms and through different genres of writing, as featured at the beginning of this introduction, which turns this dissertation into a patchwork, a work of polyphony, harmonious for some, dissonant for others.

The different sections of this polyphony are all framed by poems that I wrote while writing each of these sections. Poetry is often what would come out of me first on those days when, sitting all day at a coffee shop, rattling my iced coffee in my hand or sipping carefully on a scalding-hot rose latte, I forced myself to stop avoiding and to face writing and all the feelings stirred by it. On those days when the world felt so heavy, when I found myself buzzing with a pain so grand it could collide universes or bubbling with a rage so large it

could collapse empires. On those days when, sadly, writing felt pointless, when I would question the point of it all, the use of this life, the meaning of this existence, the limits of this shell of a body I inhabit, the cost of this work. Poetry was a salve, some gauze on the wound, the whistling anger and hurt seeping out to avoid bursting at the seams, the necessary first step for me to feel things through before mood-switching into the dissertatorial voice. These poems are thus informed by the life I lived at the time of each chapter, not only by what I read, watched, and researched *for* the dissertation, but also by what I lived, academically and personally, how I lived, through the everyday, the large-scale, and how they intertwine with each other, and with whom I lived, built critical connections and community, and found growth and self-congruence. I would also note that my thoughts often arise with a certain rhythm, tidbits of meaning coming up in twos or threes, wordplay and echoes and pauses and repetitions building layers within the words. Sound means a lot for how I make sense of the world, which words connect in my brain due to patterns in their syllables, consonants, vowels, or intonations. As such, I recommend reading my poetry out loud, feeling the shape of words on your lips, the movements that the tongue draws in your mouth, the dance your breath dances through you.

The introduction and every chapter also often begin with and are interspersed with personal reflections, autoethnographic pieces of sorts. As I already mentioned before, these tend to connect the different timelines, layers of realities, and versions of me that arose in me while writing, memories, future projections and speculations, dreams and nightmares, known facts about what could have been or hauntings of what actually was in another reality, rewritings of the past and self-exploration of who I am, was, will be, or could have been. These passages are all written in indented single-spaced paragraphs, in order to highlight the

change in orientation, tone and mood. I decided against providing any analysis or explanation of these poems and personal reflections. Just like I foraged to find meaning and nourishment inside all I read, watched, listened to, searched through, felt through, and lived, I invite you reader to forage inside this work to find the meaning and nourishment you echo with, are haunted by, or feel compelled towards. After all, these meanings, and not those I would project onto my own work, are what matters.

At its core, this project is ultimately yours too.

May 2024 – The stakes are too high.

Narratives act as stakes, as wooden poles or metal rods, around which we organize events, through which we make sense of the world and of our self. We sort things out, we line them out, we discard elements that would weaken the overall structure. We grow around the stake and make it integral to our existence, to our survival.

But stakes also bind. They become the organizing principle that keeps us straight, upward, hard, immobile, with all the pains of having to be this way and this way only. They can help build fences to cordon off, to keep out, to cage in. They can divide the land to make it governable. They tie us down in one place and allow the fire to lick at our heels, kiss our calves in a torrid flash, ignite our hips with a blinding pyre, and engulf our heads, hair turned to crackling crowns around our skulls, until we're nothing but, not even a name rolling under a whispering tongue in sweet sweet memory, just dust.

Stakes is how I see narratives; sold as necessary supports to make sense of oneself and one's life, promised to be generative possibilities, broadening horizons, and providing conditions to survive and thrive. But double-edged. A salve that poisons. A piece of wood that kills. Especially for witches and vampires and other monsters in all their queer and trans articulations.

The stakes are too high. Even writing this dissertation feels like a stake in my heart.

Trans people and trauma survivors are faced with a similar "imperative to tell" (Laub 1995, 62). We are told that stories, narratives, are necessary to our survival. We are told that we need to make ourselves and our experiences intelligible to the world, to listening witnesses, that only that will bring about the fullness of our selves, a life unshattered. That we need to dig a hole to uncover where to plant the stake that will help us grow; "one has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (ibid). A stake to hold our pieces together, a narrative to organize our memories around in a nice and neat line. A straight line.

But how does one follow an imperative to tell while existing subjunctively? How can one mood articulate itself through another?

you planted me into the ground
framed me and staked me
out i hoped of shimmering tendrils and shoots
iridescence arborescence claiming futuritree
the straightness of the stake held me in place
became me constitutive the skeleton of
my story growing strong planted in my heart
so narrowly held i couldn't
move nor go nor grow beyond what you
had decided was me
so when the fire broke out
when my calves and ankles started to be licked
by red tongues hammering; h a m m e r i n g
the stake held me in place in space
in time / and i burnt *i burnt*
incandescent frame around me becoming
the only thing one could see
i screamed but no
sound

the stake had bent my queer lungs linear
so that only rehearsed refrains could
congratulations you said
you are shining bright a flame a beacon
trailblazing at the stake

Chapter 1 – Neoliberal Autobiographies: White-Washed Histories and The Making of the Respectable Trans Subject

The Stake and the Frame[5]

Stake

Noun

1. a strong wooden or metal post with a point at one end, driven into the ground to support a tree, form part of a fence, act as a boundary mark, etc.; a wooden post to which a person was tied before being burned alive as a punishment; a long vertical rod used in basket-making.

2. a metalworker's small anvil, typically with a projection for fitting into a socket on a bench.

3. a territorial division of the Mormon Church under the jurisdiction of a president.

4. a sum of money or something else of value gambled on the outcome of a risky game or venture.

5. a share or interest in a business, situation, or system.

6. prize money, especially in horse racing.

7. a horse race in which all the owners of the racehorses running contribute to the prize money.
plural noun: Stakes

8. a situation involving competition in a specified area.

Verb

1. support (a plant) with a stake or stakes.

2. gamble (money or something else of value) on the outcome of a game or race.

3. (informal, North American) give financial or other support to.

Frame

Noun

1. a rigid structure that surrounds or encloses something such as a door or window; a metal or plastic structure holding the lenses of a pair of glasses; a case or border enclosing a mirror or picture; the rigid supporting structure of an object such as a vehicle, building, or piece of furniture; a boxlike structure of glass or plastic in which seeds or young plants are grown.

2. a person's body with reference to its size or build.

3. a basic structure that underlies or supports a system, concept, or text; short for frame of reference; the genre or form of a literary text determining its expected style and content; an enclosing section of narrative, especially one which foregrounds or comments on the primary narrative of a text.

4. (Linguistics) a structural environment within which a class of words or other linguistic units can be correctly used.

5. a single complete picture in a series forming a movie, television, or video film; a single picture in a comic strip; a graphic panel in a display window, especially in a web browser, which encloses a self-contained section of data and permits multiple independent document viewing.

Verb

1. place (a picture or photograph) in a frame; surround so as to create a sharp or attractive image.

2. create or formulate (a concept, plan, or system).

3. (informal); produce false evidence against (an innocent person) so that they appear guilty.

4. erect the framework of a building

[5] The definitions in this section have been copied from Oxford Languages as they appeared in Google search results for each of these words. They are meant to be kept in mind as the supporting fabric of this chapter, a haunting and dissonant chorus.

Tourmaline, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Donna Ostrowsky, Red Durkin; Staking our Claim: Trans Women's Literature in the 21st Century
Lenni Lenape and Wappinger land (Barnard Library) – October 18th, 2012

October 18, 2012 – Lenni Lenape and Wappinger Land. It is a day of critique, an evening of trans disavowal inside the Barnard Library. Four trans women writers, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Red Durkin, and Donna Ostrowsky, alongside trans artist, activist and scholar Tourmaline, are asked to think about their relationship to memoirs, framed by the asker as a problematic genre. It is in this context, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, that Red Durkin responds and rejects memoirs, characterizing the whole genre as a mere "follower of culture," as something "you can't learn from," and that only "larger publishing houses that don't actually care about trans people" want to publish. Although my disagreement was instinctual, a sort of automatic response when hearing her utter the words, I believe it important to pause for a while first and investigate what may have led the asker to present memoirs as problematic and Durkin to agree so wholeheartedly. While this chapter

does discuss trans memoirs per se in its latter half, it first inquires about trans narratives more broadly and explores how contemporary understandings of transness have come about. Although trans memoirs did reproduce and circulate these notions of transness, they were not necessarily the first locus of their development; rather, our definition of transness was informed by a different setting and mode of communication, that of the spoken face-to-face interview between trans people and medical or sociological researchers. I am not saying here that this context is where transness originated. After all, many of us have understood that something about ourselves wasn't cis long before we had to articulate it to someone else. However, I do believe that specific things happened in the examination room. Some narratives were favored, some were rejected; elements of the favored narratives were highlighted, some were erased; and all of this deeply influenced how transness is understood, even today. Importantly here, I want to use the frame and the stake as my analytical through lines to ask: what has led trans people to *frame* themselves in the way they have? How did the contextual frame of the in-person interview with a cis medicosocial authority influence how we understand transness? What was, and still is, at *stake* for some of us to frame ourselves in this way? That is, what are the outcomes desired or needed by trans people when we frame our transness in the way we do? Which framings have successfully led to these outcomes, and which have not? And finally, what are the problems with these framings, what are the limits of this representation that could lead us today to state that there is a problem with the way trans people tell their own stories?

In order to do so, this chapter returns to an often-discussed figure of contemporary U.S. trans history: that of Agnes. Agnes was a patient of Dr. Robert Stoller, a psychiatrist who conducted research on gender at the University of California, Los Angeles. She was also

the case study for Harold Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). As such, she became a foundational figure whose life narrative, or rather how the cis researchers heard and understood her life narrative, influenced and informed how gender identity and gender-affirming care were theorized and put in practice. Since then, much has been said and written about Agnes. Recent archival finds by Kristen Schilt and Chase Joynt shed new light on Agnes, however, and revealed that several other trans people were also interviewed and studied by Harold Garfinkel. As you will see in this chapter, Agnes is now framed and surrounded by these other trans people whose existence, names, and stories we had no knowledge of, until now. This framing reveals a lot about the process that led transness to be defined in the way it has in the contemporary Western world. For me, these other people make Agnes into an even more interesting site of trans knowledge production that is worth re-exploring. Here, I'm inviting you to join me as we explore again this moment of our trans archival past.

Framing Agnes

> November 2009 – I first encountered Agnes on a French blog about trans topics, when, in college at 17 and living alone in Paris, I was devouring everything trans with the desperation of someone lost in need of an anchor to stake themselves into the ground, yearning for a skeleton to frame the flesh, the feelings, the words, into someone. She was a transsexual, the French transphobic website had stated, who lied her way into getting access to treatment and care she was not entitled to and did not deserve. She was the point of reference, the living proof that trans people are nothing but self-centered narcissists who lie, manipulate, deceive, cheat, and bend reality in order to get what they want, with no regard to the objective truths of the world around them. Despite the hate, disgust, and anger in the words on the screen, I was in awe. "Wow," I thought to myself, "she did it. In spite of all odds, of everything telling her she was impossible, she claimed her truth and beat the world at the very game it forced her to play." My tiny and cramped bedroom on the sixth floor of 116 rue Glacière had never felt so big and full of possibilities. Imagining myself as Agnes, tears of relief started to pearl down my face.

Screenshot from Chase Joynt's and Kristen Schilt's *Framing Agnes* (2018) – Opening scene with Chase Joynt as Harold Garfinkel and Zackary Drucker as Agnes

2017 – Trans filmmaker and professor Chase Joynt and University of Chicago professor of Sociology Kristen Schilt are going through the large archive left at UCLA by famed sociologist and ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel after his death in 2011. Their hope is to find new archival documents about Agnes, the trans woman interviewed in the late 50s by Garfinkel who became famous in trans and academic circles when featured as a case study in his 1967 *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. After several months organizing the archive, their optimism is slowly fizzling away, when they suddenly come across a "large metal filing cabinet that had long been rusted shut." Prying it open, what they find surpasses anything that any trans archival scholar could have ever dreamt of. In addition to the entirety of Agnes's case file, transcripts and original tape recordings of the interviews included, they find the files and recorded interviews of 8 other gender non-conforming individuals who

never made it into any of Garfinkel's publications or publicly available records of his research[6].

2022 – These findings are now featured in two of Chase Joynt's movies: the short documentary *Framing Agnes* (2018), from which the screenshot featured at the beginning of this chapter is taken, and the feature-length documentary *Framing Agnes* (2022)[7]. Both are based on archival materials and contain re-enactments of the interviews, now re-imagined as TV talk show segments inspired from the late 1950s *The Mike Wallace Interview*, from contemporary trans performers such as Zackary Drucker (as Agnes), Angelica Ross (as Georgia), Jen Richards (as Barbara), Max Valerio Wolf (as Henry), Silas Howard (as Denny), and Stephen Ira (as Jimmy), while Chase Joynt himself plays Harold Garfinkel-meet-Mike Wallace, thus transing the role of the usually cis researcher/interviewer. While Agnes had long been thought to be an exceptional case of a trans individual in 1950s California and had been given a unique status similar to Christine Jorgensen's, *Framing Agnes* now places her back into frame. Not only was she part of a larger group of gender non-conforming folks interviewed by Harold Garfinkel, she also now appears as living at a vibrant moment, surrounded by a broader community of trans and gender non-conforming people that existed at the time and that these interviewees mention and refer to. The documentary also aims at making visible the connections that exist between transness in the past and in the present. The video starts with Zackary Drucker as Agnes and Chase Joynt as Harold Garfinkel sitting on opposite sides of a table. Garfinkel is reading his notes while Agnes puts on make-up. The words "Los Angeles, CA, 2018" appears on the screen and

[6] Although they are briefly mentioned when Garfinkel writes about Agnes: "Nor would she consider talking with any of the other patients that I mentioned to her who we were seeing who had experiences similar to hers." (1967: 131)

[7] This chapter's analysis is based on the short version of *Framing Agnes* (2018) unless stated otherwise.

while the color image gradually turns to black and white, the years roll back to 1958 and the angular roundness of a TV frame appears, creating a clear linear connection between Garfinkel's interview of Agnes, caught on tapes that are playing in the background of various scenes of the short film, and the time of the performance. The documentary, however, is careful to destabilize the one-to-one connection often expected in the genre of the reenactment. For instance, Joynt explains in the documentary that he decided to replace the therapeutic office (as the setting in which the original tapes were recorded) with the set of a talk show, inspired by the Mike Wallace interviews, which took place between 1957 and 1960, the same years Harold Garfinkel was at UCLA, allowing for a myriad of other connections to occur, as trans people have often featured heavily in the genre of the talk shows[8], starting with Mike Wallace interviewing Christine Jorgensen in 1959. In several other instances, shots of Zackary Drucker getting ready backstage and talking about her own life story are shown alternating with shots of Zackary Drucker as Agnes narrating her life story. While this part of the documentary opens with Drucker mentioning her birth year and Agnes's birth year and emphasizing the "44 years difference between [them]," a lot of the subsequent alternating shots are used to create a kind of connection between the two. Zackary Drucker's discussion of having to be an adolescent boy and the bullying that ensued in high-school, for instance, is immediately followed by Agnes stating she had to drop out of school because her high-school degree would not have been very useful to her with a name on it that was not hers.

[8] In *Weird and Wonderful: the Dime Museum in America*, Andrea Stulman Dennett traces interesting legacies between contemporary talk shows and the dime museums and cabinets of curiosities from the 19th century which were providing entertainment through the display of people characterized as freaks. Research such as this provides compelling avenues of inquiry to explore the reasons behind trans people's frequent apparitions on talk shows in the late 20th century.

In some ways and despite this attempt at connecting Agnes to other trans people, Joynt's two documentary films do reiterate the usual narratives about the singularity of Agnes. Their title, for instance, continues to center Agnes as the titular figure of these files, only allowing the other eight gender non-conforming people to frame her and her narrative. As mentioned earlier, Agnes is the starting point of the documentary. The end of the documentary also focuses on her: Agnes stands up and leaves the set while Garfinkel still speaks in the background; she gradually enters back into color as she exits the set, showing the connection between Agnes and Drucker as trans women in Los Angeles, but continues walking all the way to the door. Agnes now turned Drucker looks back one last time before slamming the door behind her. Over her exit, one can hear Angelica Ross talking about how, as trans people, we have often struggled to have the rights to define ourselves, and that this task of defining was often given to academics and doctors and others. Drucker's/Agnes's leaving the set while these words are uttered can symbolize a refusal for trans people at large to continue to be externally defined as we have in the past.

At first glance, the documentaries also participate in perpetuating Agnes's characterization as a dishonest individual. The brief description of the film on its website, for instance, states rather binarily that the documentary "confronts the legacy of a young trans woman forced to choose between honesty and access."[9] This characterization of trans people as deceivers (Bettcher 2007) is a sticky trope with a long and complex history, but Garfinkel's characterization of Agnes has often loomed large within it. This trope has influenced how the medical world and society have treated us for decades and transphobic claims that trans people craft false statements or lie to access spaces or services we are not

[9] https://www.framingagnes.com/

entitled to are commonly found in popular discourse to this date[10]. Agnes and the complicated tension between truth and lies, honesty and deception, or transparency and opacity that she can be seen to represent has been the topic of quite a fair amount of academic research (Denzin 1990, Rogers 1992, Raby 2000, Armitage 2001, O'Brien 2016, Schilt 2016). The discovery of these never-before-seen archival materials and the making of these two documentary movies continue to make Agnes a generative site to think through trans narratives and their framing as lies or truths. Jules Gill-Peterson herself reminds us very aptly in the trailer for *Framing Agnes* (2022): "this whole thing is a lie, (…), this passage is a lie, it is not telling the whole story." Indeed, the Western medical system and its biased foundational understanding of the body and the mind, the binary division of the sexes, the essentialized idea that Agnes had to exhibit "female" qualities, had to be "120 percent female," in order to be seen by Garfinkel as a "natural" woman, the genre and form of the medical transcripts kept by doctors and psychiatrists, and more; all are lies, or at least, all color the truth in very particular ways[11]. Moreover, not everyone's truth comes with the same consequences. In the late 90s, Riki Anne Wilchins asked: "What Does It Cost to Tell the Truth?" and highlighted the high stakes that come with the telling of one's truth, especially "if your sense of self [does not match] closely with the cultural grid of what you should mean" (1997: 40). More recently, Tourmaline, Eric Stanley, and Johanna Burton also explored the dangers and trappings of visibility, legibility, and representation in their anthology *Trap Door* (2017) and reminded us that the systems in place can render us visible and target us at the same time as they invisibilize, erase, and deny our existence.

[10] The documentary *Disclosure*, for instance, shows the perpetuation and legacy of this trope in trans representation on screen.
[11] Garfinkel himself disclosed in his book that he had lied to Agnes several times too to pass as a knowledgeable expert and save face (1967: 163-164)

Thinking through tensions between truth and lies, transparency and opacity, the autobiographical and the fictional, the real and the speculative, the past and the future, the self and the other, is a common thread pulled throughout this entire dissertation. But my interest in *Framing Agnes* (2022) in this first chapter also lays elsewhere. When Joynt and Schilt's recent archival work revealed that Agnes, despite her celebrity status as a rare and unique case, was far from being alone, and that eight other gender non-conforming people had been part of Garfinkel's study in the late 1950s, the case of Agnes, to me, suddenly raised a different question: why was she selected by Garfinkel to represent this entire study? Why was Agnes chosen to be highlighted, her narrative turned into the archetypical foundation for many trans narratives to come, while others were invisibilized and kept secret, tucked away in a large metal filing cabinet that would end up forgotten and rusted shut? Why and how was she *framed*, that is, selected and isolated from the rest of the interviewees to become a case study and receive care? What allowed her to become a frame of reference while other trans people from the 1950s were left out, cast to only remain off-frame for decades? Why Agnes, and not Georgia, Barbara, Henry, Denny, or Jimmy? And, importantly, which alternative genealogies and histories of transness have been obscured by the privileging of Agnes's story? Later in this chapter, I turn to highlighting the narrative constraints through which someone like Agnes had to make sense of herself, constraints that many trans people had to respect in the following decades. I do so in order to argue that this normative genealogy of transness perpetuates harm onto trans folks because it consists in a framework in which the very properties and conditions of a narrative expected to lead to care and healing are violently containing and limiting trans expression in ways that perpetuate trauma and pain. I call this framework one of *cruel healing*.

The Crafting of Normative Respectability

> May 2022 – I am sitting at a coffee shop sipping my usual iced Earl Grey tea, on the phone with a friend to talk through my ideas for this chapter. The Sicilian blood in my veins has my hands activated and flying around my face as I speak, red painted nails and gold-and-silver jewelry shining in the sun in shimmering choreography. Three old people stopped their talking and nibbling at dry scones to stare at me, too loud, too present, too alive. The daggers thrown at me shout how dare you say trans out loud, be trans out here, break the frame, remind us we could have been, otherwise. In my ear, my friend's voice brings me back in focus, accusing me with a question: "Why are you so invested in blaming Agnes for the narrowness of our transness?"

But I am not. Blaming trans individuals for their choices and survival practices is the last thing I wish to do here. I am not interested in questioning trans people's motives and reasons for narrating their lives in the way they had to in order to make sense of a world who did not want them to exist. I am invested, however, in examining the tropes and archetypes that have emerged from the repetitions of these early narratives of transness. I inquire here about the foundational systems of oppression that have informed early forms of contemporary trans expression and colored their understanding of the self and the human. I am not pointing fingers at Agnes, the trans woman, but at Agnes, the frame of reference, and at Agnes, the narrative stake, as they were understood, interpreted, and recorded by Harold Garfinkel. I do so in order to argue in this chapter that only certain kinds of trans people were able to produce narratives of the selves that constructed them as respectable trans people worthy of care and rights. Another disability, or the perception of it, a racialized positionality, an activity deemed disrespectable such as sex work or another criminalized activity, or a pathologized sexual orientation or sex practice would all shatter the fragile sculpture that trans people had to mold themselves into in order to be allowed to exist and live. So, while the trans people who successfully did so are not necessarily to be blamed as individuals, we need to question the legacies left by their stories, and the obsession that the

cis world has towards them, in order to shed light on other truths about transness and other lives worth living. The problematic foundation of this specific kind of autobiographical narrative that trans people have been allowed to inhabit may be what led Red Durkin to condemn the genre of memoirs entirely and to relegate it as a "follower of culture," a reactive genre that cannot generate imaginative or speculative realities. A much closer examination is needed, however, in order to avoid the scapegoating of genre or narrative form and focus instead on the larger overarching structures and systems that have shaped transness as it emerged. As chapter 2 will show, and as Henry's statement in *Framing Agnes* exemplifies ("The only thing that keeps me going these days is writing my autobiography"), writing the self and narrating one's own life through the genre of memoirs can be a powerful tool for survival. Memoir writing can be utilized in ways that go beyond the seemingly narrow linear truth-telling nature of early trans memoirs and should not be rejected wholesale, as this rejection perpetuates structures of oppression by preventing trans people who still are silenced, invisibilized and erased to share their voices and stories.

But back to Agnes for now.

While scholars such as Paul Preciado have claimed Agnes to be a subversive figure representing "the seeds of rebellion (…) that will infiltrate the pharmacopornographic power" (2013: 381) as well as "a cheap, auto-experimental form of do-it-yourself bioterrorism of gender that we—in reference to the politics of free software management—could call copyleft gender politics, a cellular micropolitics that looks beyond the politics of representation for leakage points in the state's control" (ibid: 388), I instead here wish to highlight the normative frames Agnes was able to tap into through her privilege as a white, middle-class, attractive, respectable girl. I am interested in examining both what Agnes *did* in

the examination room, more specifically the "anticipatory following," as Garfinkel defined it, that allowed her to "permit[] the environment to furnish her the answers to its own questions" (1967: 147) and to craft her own self-narrative *in situ*, and who Agnes *was seen to be*, which formed the preconditions, the pre-requisite to her ability to play the examiner's game. I then also look to Joynt's *Framing Agnes* to find potential explanations for the discarding of other interviewees that existed in Garfinkel's archive but outside the frame of Agnes.

I here follow in Jules Gill-Peterson's footsteps, who, in 2018 already, complicated Preciado's claims and explained in *Histories of the Transgender Child* that Agnes "hardly occupied a subversive position within the racialized politics of plasticity" (123). Indeed, her overall prettiness and the normative femininity she embodied, which relied on a demure sexuality afforded by middle-class whiteness and thin privilege, was heavily emphasized by Garfinkel, who took note of her appearance (her "thin shoulders, ample breasts, and narrow waist") when they first met. Garfinkel also commented on Agnes's subtle make-up ("no makeup except for lipstick") as well as the appropriateness of her attire and manner; she distinguished herself from "transvestites and women with disturbances in sexual identification" because she did not show "any hint of poor taste," her appearance being neither "garish [nor] exhibitionistic" (1967: 119). Although Garfinkel only explicitly compares Agnes to other people who, according to him, display pathologized gender or sexual identities, his appeal to concepts of taste or appropriateness to form his overall positive judgment of Agnes is also based on aesthetics of femininity and respectability which hold whiteness at their core and are necessarily anti-Black and anti-Brown. Exhibitionism or garishness, for instance, the two descriptors that would have negated Agnes's claims to "natural" femininity, are often used in white-centric perception to refer to the "aesthetics of

excess" (Hernandez 2020) displayed by Black and Brown women and femmes. It is specifically Agnes's ability to align herself with white middle-class aesthetics of attractiveness and femininity, facilitated by her "peaches-and-cream complexion" and her "long, fine dark-blonde hair," (Garfinkel 1967: 119) that caught the attention of white cisgender heterosexual middle-class doctors and researchers and made her into a subject worthy of care and rights. Even Agnes's ability to access the large quantity of hormone pills that changed her body in ways that were so interesting and mysterious to doctors and examiners and that allowed her to provide evidence for her claims of intersexuality relied specifically on her whiteness and middle-class status[12]. The Stilbestrol pills had been prescribed to her own mother after a panhysterectomy, which could only happen because her mother was deemed worthy of medical care and treatment and had access to medical doctors and pharmacists she could afford. Agnes would forge her mother's signature and steal money from her purse to buy the pills herself, which she managed to do for years without eliciting suspicions. The familial relationship, the availability of these substances in the private home, and Agnes's ability to work the system in the way she did all relied on a set of various privileges afforded to her by the framework of white American middle-class suburbia. These privileges all contributed to make Agnes a prime choice for Garfinkel and others and formed the foundation from which Agnes was able to tell a convincing story of femininity that was legible as "natural" for the doctors and researchers.

In addition to her various positionalities, Agnes's claims to respectable femininity and care relied on both her being *unique*, that is, unlike any other people, and *normal*, that is, just like any other people. Indeed, the stances Agnes inhabits during the interviews both

[12] Indeed, Agnes only disclosed self-administering hormones years after receiving care from UCLA; Robert Stoller's account of this disclosure was copied by Garfinkel in an Appendix to his Chapter 5.

demonstrate a need for distanciation from any other non-normative person that Garfinkel brings up (Christine Jorgensen, his other patients, a group of seventeen people seeking castration, homosexuals and transvestites more generally, etc.) and a persistent attention to describing herself as a regular, normal girl. Garfinkel explains that Agnes refused to compare herself to these other people or meet and talk to them; in his words, she even found the request for comparison "repulsive" (1967: 131), a term used by Garfinkel to describe Agnes's affect every time non-normative sexuality or gender identity came up in conversation[13]. Similarly, in *Framing Agnes*, when asked by Garfinkel if she had ever been romantically involved with a woman, Agnes appears flustered and stumbles on her word before blurting out "I don't understand the line of questioning." It seems that Agnes was very acute here in her understanding of the stakes that such questions had; being potentially grouped with other categories of individuals deemed to be abnormal or deviant was a clear threat to being perceived by Garfinkel and other medical doctors and researchers as a "normal" woman suffering from an affliction and needing care and medical attention (a framing of intersexuality that is in and of itself ableist and the foundational core of much violence and trauma perpetuated on people with intersex conditions). Agnes couldn't be trans, nor could she be gay; she had to frame herself as a cisgender heterosexual woman, as a respectable individual who could be a patient and a customer in a neoliberal medical system. According to his account of the interviews, Garfinkel was able to tune in to these positioning strategies and did notice that Agnes was crafting a specific autobiographical narrative, that of a "120 percent female" as he puts it (129), by erasing certain parts of her history and

[13] According to Garfinkel, Agnes for instance told her boyfriend Bill that the condition that afflicted her was "repulsive," and that if she were to show him her genitals or have intercourse with him, he would find her "repulsive" too (159). She also expressed anxieties about whether Bill was indeed straight or not and according to Garfinkel, found the possibility "repulsive" and an absolute obstacle to a long-lasting relationship (160).

emphasizing others. Specific elements of her story such as her dislike of games associated with her gender assigned at birth, a demonstration of normative gender roles and qualities aligned with her gender identity, or a complete disinterest in and desexualization of her genitalia all have been foundational tropes in trans narratives and normative understanding of what transness or a trans story are. He was also aware of the fact that she would often use his questions, and the context around them, to figure out the desired answer and narrate the right story, something he coined as "anticipatory following." This idea complicates Durkin's description of the autobiographical narrative as a "follower of culture" by shedding light on the various ways in which an autobiographical account is not just a mere retelling of events that happened, but is instead an active construction, a generative process aimed at producing a specific narrative that is context- and audience-based. Garfinkel also lists seven specific areas that he identifies as "secrets" that Agnes managed to keep despite his insistent questioning[14]. These were all critical areas that both Agnes and Garfinkel knew, it seems, could influence whether Agnes would be a recipient of care or not:

> It is of additional interest that despite such assurances Agnes could not ask me, apparently *knew* she could not ask me, nor would I have been prepared to tell her truthfully whether or how the decision to operate would be changed if she disclosed the answers to the seven points that we wanted her to tell us about but on which we could get no information from her. (164)

[14] "(1) the possibility of an exogenous source of hormones; (2) the nature and extent of collaboration that occurred between Agnes and her mother and other persons; (3) any usable evidence let alone any detailed findings dealing with her male feelings and her male biography; (4) what her penis had been used for besides urination; (5) how she sexually satisfied herself and others and most particularly her boyfriend both before and after the disclosure; (6) the nature of any homosexual feelings, fears, thoughts, and activities; (7) her feelings about herself as a 'phony female.'" (161)

Interestingly, the refusal to disclose requested information here becomes the necessary condition for care to be given and Garfinkel's awareness that these seven areas were strategically kept undisclosed is not necessarily the deal-breaker that one may expect it to be. Reading about Agnes makes it clear that the trans life narrative's goal is not necessarily to provide a factual account of events, but rather to fulfill the expected criteria imagined by the cis researcher. Although the trans person seems to be expected to continuously claim truths about their self and their life, the belief in these truths does not seem to be a necessary condition for the researcher to respond to the narrative with a provision of care. Garfinkel's response to her, both the behavior he displayed towards her in their one-to-one interactions[15] and his ultimate decision to support her access to medical care, thus did not seem to entirely rely on Agnes's ability to craft a narrative he believed. Instead, it was also influenced by the fact that Agnes, as a younger attractive white middle-class woman, could be mapped onto normative interactions and relationships in which Garfinkel, as an older educated white cisgender heterosexual man, would be expected to help, provide care, or "save" the young and attractive middle-class white woman that Agnes was from her affliction.

Rusting Away: Alternative Trans Narratives Expelled

Georgia, Barbara, Henry, Denny, and Jimmy, Garfinkel's other interviewees found in the archive by Joynt and Schilt, could not inhabit the same positionalities and interactional

[15] Garfinkel exhibited behaviors that align with how he would treat other women in his life: "for example, holding her arm while I guided her across the street; having lunch with her at the Medical Center; offering to hang up her coat; relieving her of her handbag; holding the automobile door for her while she entered; being solicitous for her comfort before I closed the auto door and took my own seat behind the wheel" (133). Although he does see her appreciation of these behaviors as part of her narrative of the "120 percent female," the fact that he did all of this for her demonstrates that he saw her as a respectable woman worthy to be taken care of and treated like any other respectable woman. Both these behaviors and the elements that led him to deem Agnes worthy of them rely on cultural understandings of gender and gendered relationships specific to Western middle-class whiteness.

patterns with Garfinkel that Agnes did and did not necessarily keep the seven areas mentioned earlier secret. As such, they did not follow the untold expectations laid out in the researcher's mind, and either did not attempt or couldn't make themselves understandable to Garfinkel as respectable individuals, worthy of care, which can be a potential explanation for the different treatment their case and case files received by being kept out of Garfinkel's publications and into a forgotten file cabinet for decades. Two of the other interviewees, as they are portrayed in *Framing* Agnes (2018), especially stick out in reason of the identities and experiences they expressed in their interviews: Denny and Georgia.

Denny was white and middle-class and potentially would have been able to craft a respectable narrative similar to Agnes's, but he did not try to distance himself from other people with non-normative gender or sexual identities nor did he desire for his body to be surgically "corrected." Indeed, Denny states in *Framing Agnes* (2018): "I've always been connected to the gay world. I made friends with all the butches and the diesel dykes in college" (18:02). Denny also mentions Henry[16], one of the other interviewees, in his interviews and states that they are both friends. Being in community with other gender non-conforming people probably disqualified Denny in Garfinkel's eyes, as Agnes had to express many times on record that she didn't know anyone like her and systematically refused to meet anyone. In addition, the website for *Framing Agnes* (2022) indicates that Denny was "uninterested in pursuing surgery, as he [didn't] want to lose access to the lesbian

[16] Although discussing him is beyond the purview of this chapter as it currently stands, Henry represents an interesting point of reference for discussions of transness and disability. Indeed, in his interview with Garfinkel, Henry mentions his mental health issues and suicidal thoughts, stating "the only thing that keeps me going these days is writing my autobiography" (22:50). Although Henry does express that transphobia, and his inability to find employment due to the 'F' on his license, are in big part responsible for his state of mind and emotional suffering, Garfinkel may have seen Henry's mental health issues as an obstacle preventing him from ever re-entering the normative cisheterosexual marketplace. This echoes later medical norms requiring trans people to seek therapy for long periods of time and verify the absence of any comorbidities with other pathologized states of mind before authorizing transition care.

community." This would put him in clear contrast to Agnes who desired a physical remedy to her condition and who wanted to integrate cisgender heterosexual society. In addition, his emphasis on a need to remain in community with other queer and trans people, who were deemed deviant or ill in 1950s understandings of gender and sexuality, refuses any assimilationist demand. Transness here is not an individual problem in need of medicalized care and healing; instead, it is first and foremost deeply relational and remaining in community is the utmost priority. Denny's expression of a trans identity that refuses repair, whether understood in medical or social terms, conflicted with the opinions of cisgender medical experts, who saw their role as someone who could facilitate a trans person's return into "normal," that is cis, hetero, middle-class, respectable, white society. This refusal on Denny's part can explain why his story was left out of the official account, as its presence would have allowed an understanding of transness that wouldn't be medicalized or controlled by medical frameworks.

Georgia, on the other hand, aligned herself narratively to Agnes and their respective accounts of their youths and lives share some commonalities. Similarly to Agnes, for instance, Georgia states in *Framing Agnes* (2018) that "[she's] always known" (13:57) and never questioned it. She is married to a man; she wants a family. In some respect, she follows the norms of respectability of the time even more than Agnes because she was raised in her father's church doing evangelical work and reads her bible regularly (Agnes, on the other hand, disclosed to Garfinkel that she no longer believed in God). However, anti-Blackness prevented her from ever being seen as respectable, no matter her attempts, and the harassment she experienced was constant and pervasive. She recounts, for instance, that one day she went to see her husband play a baseball game wearing "a pair of capris" and

"Japanese flats" (16:18) when the Vice police questioned her gender and arrested her for solicitation. Georgia didn't need to do anything or act in any way, and her attempts at dressing modestly were unsuccessful; her mere presence as a Black trans woman was inherently enough to be sexualized by the presumably white Los Angeles policemen and be arrested. Suspicion of solicitation is a constant tool of policing, surveillance, and containment that Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Asian trans women find themselves under and having to navigate, an issue that has been discussed under the shorthand "walking while trans" in more recent years (Edelman 2014, Easterbrook-Smith 2020). Georgia also does not distance herself fully from other non-conforming individuals. While Agnes was very invested in presenting her boyfriend, Bill, as very masculine and very straight, Georgia explains that she had "to find a man that likes that sort of thing" (19:14), a statement that Garfinkel could have interpreted as an admittance that her husband was not fully straight, or the "120 percent male" that Agnes was set to present to him. In addition, Georgia also shows that she thinks about more than herself; while she also expresses, like Agnes, a desire to receive medical care for her condition, she does not see it as the only potential use of the study she is a part of. Individual benefits she could receive were not the only thing on her mind, she instead expressed a deep care for an imagined community of others like her: "I have a feeling that what I talked about today will be useful for many generations" (25:20). Here, just like Denny, Georgia frames transness in a deeply relational way and shows a commitment to other trans people above all else. Admitting seeing oneself as part of a longer history of gender non-conforming individuals, however, clashed with the untold expectation requiring presenting oneself as just another cisgender heterosexual person seeking a reparative return into cisgender heterosexual society. Although Georgia was hoping to be a voice for other

people like her who would exist in the future, Garfinkel decided otherwise and silenced her instead, leaving her interview records and case files in a file cabinet for decades, eclipsed by Agnes and the very specific medicalized narrative of white middle-class respectable transness that she represented.

Trans Narratives and Cruel Healing

> This person was in a straitjacket, and the straitjacket was the culture around them.
>
> Zackary Drucker about Agnes, *Framing Agnes* (2018)

> Narrative composes the self. Conforming the life into narrative coheres both "lives" on either side of transition into an identity plot. This is not simply to remark autobiography as healing (although, particularly given the autobiographical requisite in the clinician's office, the therapeutic function of the return to narrative does need remarking) but autobiography as constitutive. Autobiography reconciles the subject to [their] past and in so doing allows a self to be instated in the present.
>
> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998:120-121)

> Healing is marked by a reintegrated authorial voice that can assert of this reconstructed life narrative: 'I believe in my truth' (Fraser 1989:235).
>
> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (2008:123)

As we have seen, some trans people, such as Georgia and Denny, were prevented from having their stories told and from accessing the care they desired, because the crafting of trans respectability relied on positionalities they did not occupy or strategic narrativization of the self they did not follow. I am now turning to examining the high price at which managing to narrate oneself following cis medical expectations came. Even though the ability to do so was definitely a form of privilege that allowed for the granting of rights and care that were refused to others, there were still negative consequences of having to mold oneself into a narrative that would match the untold expectations of this cis listener.

Although this narrative was required in order to be granted medical care and as such, was presented as a source of healing from the trauma of trans life, I argue that the constraints placed on what the narrative was allowed to say inherently perpetuated violence and trauma onto trans individuals. This framework of healing is what I name "cruel healing" insofar as a teleological healing or healed self in the future is promised to come only through the violent reframing of one's life according to specific narrative requirements. I here focus on how cruel healing operates in the context of trans people's access to medical care, but I believe it to be a useful framework to think through trauma narratives at large, which have been defined structurally by trauma theory in ways that I find narrow and limiting.

As mentioned earlier, there were many normative untold expectations from cis researchers and medical experts and very high stakes which shaped how trans people were able to frame who they were and what their lives were like. This necessity to make oneself legible and understandable by the cis world (the "straitjacket" that Agnes was in, according the Zackary Drucker) forced many trans people to evacuate certain specificities of their lives that would have shattered these narratives and led them to be refused care or visibility, as did happen for Georgia and Denny. For instance, Agnes couldn't express any interest in homosexuality and had to distance herself from gay people and other people seen as non-conforming or deviant. She couldn't mention having felt any attraction towards women and had to turn down that question very abruptly; only claims to straightness could allow her to receive the care she wanted. In addition, Agnes had to rewrite her past in order to highlight and emphasize its feminine elements. She rewrote her childhood as a girl who never was asked to be grouped with other boys, and had to put forward, just as Georgia did, an identity as a woman that always was. As such, she never "realized" she was a woman, she never had

to self-reflect and question her gender identity; she was always already a woman. Everyone else was mistaken and needed to realize it, but she knew. This process of self-identification and self-determination is the main mode through which transness is understood, and, although the fluidity of identity is more accepted than it used to, this conviction in one's gender from childhood has been one of the foundational tropes of trans stories. The emphasis on specific gendered elements from childhood that align with one's gender identity is also part and parcel of many trans narratives, with the child self's personality traits, activities, relationships with others, or self-perception all having to be opposed to everything associated with one's gender assigned at birth. Discomfort, or at least, disinterest in one's body and especially in one's genitalia was also a clear element that Garfinkel focused on and one around which Agnes had to reassert time and time again how she related to her body. While Georgia mentions how constant harassment and violence was the worst part of her life, Agnes states that "this [her condition] is the utmost complication." This prioritization in the archive of Agnes as someone whose narrative describes the trans body as the "utmost complication" favors an understanding of transness that necessarily requires dysphoria and a discomfort in one's body, which are often seen to be a foundational core of trans identities and experiences[17].

And finally, as we already discussed earlier, the understandings of the trans condition circulated by and through the frame of Agnes also relied on the specific positionality she inhabited as an attractive white middle-class able-bodied girl which allowed her to present herself as respectable and worthy of rights and care. Examining the media representations of

[17] There are still many debates among trans communities between some trans people (often called transmedicalists) who believe that transness necessarily requires dysphoria and a desire for surgical transition while others express the need to move away from such a pathologizing and medicalizing discourse about transness.

three white trans women, Christine Jorgensen, Charlotte McLeod and Tamara Rees, Emily Skidmore similarly demonstrates that they all "were able to articulate transsexuality as an acceptable subject position through an embodiment of the norms of white womanhood, most notably domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality" (2011: 271), a constructed subject position that Skidmore names the "good transsexual." Skidmore does point to differential treatments between Jorgensen, McLeod, and Rees, due to differences in embodiment (facial features, hair color, height and frame), celebrated or shamed past activities (Jorgensen was a successful GI, McLeod deserted the army), or adherence to middle-class decorum, but their whiteness, and their rejection of other gender non-conforming individuals, were key tools to facilitate their acceptance (albeit in always limited, contested ways). Indeed, Christine Jorgensen, for instance, was very careful to separate herself from other people deemed sexually deviant and expressed many times negative views towards people who are queer or practice sex work. In her 1967 autobiography *Christine Jorgensen: a Personal Autobiography*, Jorgensen recounts a scene where she was approached by another man before she transitioned and was still socially a man. Being on the receiving end of the expression of a same-sex desire was met with intense physical disgust, and, running away from the man, Jorgensen puked over the edge of the pier (83). Jorgensen also expresses disgust towards sex workers when, in an interview with Roy Ald in September 1954, she states: "these people make me sick." Similarly, in an autobiography released in the *Mr.* magazine in December 1956, Charlotte McLeod expresses being appalled at queer people for "their insincerity, insecurity, and promiscuity practiced among them" (McLeod 1956).

Charlotte McLeod (October 2, 1955), Christine Jorgensen (August 7, 1954), and Tamara Rees (July 28, 1955); Photos found on the Digital Transgender Archive.

As such, whiteness, heterosexuality, middle-class-ness, able-bodiedness and attractiveness all became foundational to understandings of transness and to facilitating the telling of one's story, as they were all privileges that would orient someone differently towards the medical system, which sees some people as patients worthy of care, and others as problems or deviances in need of correction. In addition, individualism and the rejection of an actual or potential trans community were required as well. Of course, attractive white middle-class able-bodied trans people like Agnes or the three trans women highlighted in Skidmore's article also suffered from discrimination, transphobia, and violence, especially from the medical system, but were able to capitalize on the privilege of some of their positionalities to access certain things, such as medical care, hormones, or fame[18] that other trans people couldn't access in the same ways. Looking at trans people who were able to publish their stories and find some visibility, for instance, one needs to wait until 1985 to read the first trans autobiography written by a Black trans woman, Sharon Davis's *A Finer*

[18] Of course, fame, as an extreme form of visibility also contains its fair share of violence and trauma, as the hypervisibility of this position also allows for targetability and vulnerability.

Specimen of Womanhood, while memoirs from white trans women can be found in the 30s (Lili Elbe's *Man Into Woman* in 1933), the 50s (Tamara Rees's *Reborn* in 1952 and Roberta Cowell's *Roberta Cowell's Story* in 1954), the 60s (Christine Jorgensen's *A Personal Autobiography* in 1967[19]), the 70s (Canary Conn's *Canary: the Story of a Transsexual* and Jan Morris's *Conundrum* both in 1974) and the early 80s (Ovida Delect's *La prise de robe* in 1982).

Many, if not all, of these stories contain some or all of the tropes identified in Agnes's narrativization of her own life. This is the case because the main goal of these narratives was not necessarily centered on trans individuals themselves, whether the narrative's author or their trans readers/listeners, but rather on a cis audience that had a very different stake in the story. After all, the medical provider or the psychiatrist were often one of the first audiences to which the story of transness had to be delivered, and this early presence of a cis audience controlling the questions and the consequences of the telling of one's story had a profound impact on which stories could be told and which stories should remain hidden. In this context, transness thus came about as a deeply relational identity, one that relied on non-trans people's recognition of one's transness through a set of previously-defined narrative criteria. In addition to the presence of a cis audience leading to trans autobiographies adopting an explanatory tone and making themselves legible only through what a non-trans person could understand, I also believe that another factor leads trans stories to fail to provide the processing and healing that they are framed as providing. Prosser, for instance, as expressed in the quote opening this section, identifies the autobiographical both as healing and constitutive because it resolves a lack of coherence between past self and present self, or a

[19] In France, another publication about French trans woman Coccinelle, Mario Costa's *Coccinelle est lui* was published in 1963, but her own autobiography wasn't published until 1987.

break in the wholeness of one's self (Prosser 1998). This directly follows ideas of trauma that one can find in psychoanalysis and trauma theory (Freud 1920, Luckhurst 2008) as an event that breaks through the psyche's protection and shatters the self; under this framework, the retelling of a linear narrative of the traumatic event allows for a putting back into place of the shattered pieces and allows the traumatized subject to regain their wholeness. The issue of seeing trans autobiographies as healing has already been highlighted by Kadji Amin:

> Prosser does not consider the fact that if the retrospective construction of a coherent transsexual plot narrative proves healing to some, it is at the expense of episodes, or even fleeting moments, that would fracture or exceed it. To transsexual or transgender people for whom such episodes are critical and thus impossible to excise or reinterpret without doing violence to experience, the generic and temporal conventions of autobiography may prove singularly confining and distorting, and the genre itself may replicate, rather than heal, the coercions of the medical demand for 'proper' transsexual narrativization. (2014; 220)

I fully agree with Amin's questioning of the healing nature of autobiographies and am similarly arguing that this requirement to leave out "episodes, or even fleeting moments, that would fracture or exceed" the linear coherent plot and "do[] violence to experience" is what constitutes this framework as one of *cruel healing*. I am here building from Lauren Berlant's discussion of cruel optimism to highlight a similarly violent system in which the promise of a seemingly positive process – optimism for Berlant, healing in our case – is used to keep people within systems of harm and oppression. I refuse to join Amin or Durkin, however, in blaming or rejecting the genre of the autobiography itself. Autobiographies need not follow the generic and temporal conventions that would force trans individuals to leave out parts of

ourselves or our experiences, and the second chapter of this dissertation will investigate examples of trans autobiographies which are not invested in the same narrativization of transness as the one highlighted here. Furthermore, I believe that the traumatic event which trans individuals use autobiographies to heal from has been misidentified in the literature. Prosser's argument, for instance, identifies transitioning, or the gap between pre-transition self and post-transition self, as the traumatic event itself, an idea that is echoed by cis researchers and medical providers as seen in *Framing Agnes* (2018) when Garfinkel asks Agnes or Georgia if they are not afraid of the complications or suffering that a medical transition could mean. Transitioning, however, understood as a "change" of identity from the perspective of cis onlookers, is not necessarily what constitutes trans trauma for trans individuals. As already highlighted previously, for some trans people, our identities have never changed, as we have always seen ourselves as our gender identity and not as the gender that was assigned to us at birth. For other trans people, changing and fluid identities are inherent part of our understanding of gender and does not constitute a traumatizing or violent event at all. Both Agnes and Georgia, for instance, explain to Garfinkel that medically transitioning is not what frightens them; instead, it is either their condition and the dysphoria surrounding it (for Agnes) or the harassment and discrimination (for Georgia) they experience that constitute trauma. The transition itself, the "change" of identity, might be traumatizing for the cis world at large, as it shatters the belief in the immutability of gender and sex, but it does not seem to appear as such for trans individuals themselves. If stepping away from the normative understanding of the self as unique, whole, and unchanging, and of temporality as a teleological line going from the past and into the future, autobiographies are perfectly capable of providing stories of transness that do not follow the requirements, the

"narratemes of transness," that were expected by the medical world. For trans people whose integration into respectability (as facilitated by the privileges of whiteness, middle-class-ness, able-bodiedness, and prettiness) was impossible or not as easily possible, memoirs have long been tools for different kinds of expressions that were not tied to the same expectations and goals as for trans people able to tap into white respectability in order to access care and rights. This dissertation will now turn to such trans individuals who have written memoirs and autobiographies that stray away from the goal to constitute a respectable and whole individual trans self, but who instead used them to find community, help others survive, provide community mourning and processing, imagine future survival, or speculate about other ways to be and thrive, just like Georgia hoped that the life story she shared to Garfinkel would "be useful for many generations."

Chapter 2 – Trans Evidence of Being: Autobiographical Self-Determination as Collective Practice of Survival

Being in Practice: a Practice of Being[20]

Being

Noun

1. existence; being alive, living.

2. the nature or essence of a person.

3. a real or imaginary living creature or entity, especially an intelligent one.

Verb

1. exist; be present

2. occur; take place; occupy a position in space; stay in the same place or condition; attend; come; go; visit

3. having the state, quality, identity, nature, role, etc., specified; cost; amount to; represent; signify; consist of; consistute.

4. (informal); say

Verb

1. used with a present participle to form continuous tenses

2. used with a past participle to form the passive voice

3. used to indicate something that is due or destined to happen; used to express obligation or necessity; used to express possibility; used to hypothesize about something that might happen

4. (archaic); used with the past participle of intransitive verbs to form perfect tenses

Practice

Noun

1. the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it; the carrying out or exercise of a profession, especially that of a doctor or lawyer; the business or premises of a doctor or lawyer

2. the customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing something; an established method of legal procedure

3. repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill so as to acquire or maintain proficiency in it; a period of time spent practicing an activity or skill

Verb (US spelling of practise)

1. perform (an activity) or exercise (a skill) repeatedly or regularly in order to acquire, improve, or maintain proficiency in it.

2. carry out or perform (a particular activity, method, or custom) habitually or regularly; actively pursue or be engaged in (a particular profession or occupation); observe the teaching and rules of (a particular religion)

3. (archaic); scheme or plot for an evil purpose

[20] Just like in Chapter 1, the definitions in this section have been copied from Oxford Languages as they appeared in Google search results for each of these words. They are meant to be kept in mind as the supporting fabric of this chapter, a haunting and dissonant chorus.

Tourmaline, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Donna Ostrowsky, Red Durkin; Staking our Claim: Trans Women's Literature in the 21st Century
Lenni Lenape and Wappinger land (Barnard Library) – October 18th, 2012

October 18, 2012 – Lenni Lenape and Wappinger Land. It is a day of abandonment, an evening of trans fracture inside the Barnard Library. Four trans women writers, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Red Durkin, and Donna Ostrowsky, alongside trans artist, activist and scholar Tourmaline, are asked to think about their relationship to memoirs. Earlier, we stayed with Durkin and investigated her resistance towards memoirs. We underlined how one can describe memoirs as problematic due to the white neoliberal respectability embedded at the foundation of transness and of trans narratives of the self. However, we also demonstrated how this is not a necessary feature of trans autobiographical narratives; rather, white neoliberal respectability was the tool used by some trans people to make themselves legible as people worthy of care and rights, which appealed to the sensibility of white cisheterosexual middle-class male doctors and researchers developing theories of gender and transgender. These narrative tropes also appealed to cis publishers and were circulated in

many trans memoirs. This problematic aspect, however, is not a necessary feature of the memoir genre. As we touched on in the previous chapter, many trans people such as Georgia or Denny, and many others, crafted life narratives that proposed something else, that oriented to a different understanding of transness as relational and community-oriented, but these narratives were suppressed and cast aside. As a result, very few non-white, non-middle class, non-heterosexual trans people have been able to publish their memoirs (and this was even more so the fact in 2012), and those who did, have not necessarily been known, have not become incorporated in our understanding of what transness is and trans lives are to the same extent as white middle class trans memoirs.

In this context, Durkin's rejection of memoirs, uttered through a trans collective "we," bears the question: who is this "we" in need of a pivot? Who is this subject located at the specific literary crossroads where memoirs are now obsolete, and fiction holds the promise of trans expression? By leaving this "we" unquestioned and monolithic, Durkin's call enacts a fracture and leaves behind trans folks of color and trans people who cannot or do not orient their transness through white cisheteropatriarchal norms of respectability. By presenting memoirs as passé, as obsolete, Durkin's implication is that everything possible through the literary genre of memoir has been done; thus, any upcoming autobiographies would just be repetitions and solidifications of stories always-already uttered. Here, the monolithic universalized "we" of transness finds its limit in the dark spot created by the belief that whiteness holds about its own invisibility. Several decades of white respectable trans people being able to write their own autobiographical stories is seen as the full landscape of transness, as all that can be said and done. Other stories of transness, other orientations to transness and to the memoir genre, other articulations of the self and of the

world, are not even imagined to be possible. But this inability to imagine beyond whiteness is not an accurate view of the trans literary landscape. Few trans memoirs of color had been published by 2012, but those few still existed and are worth emphasizing; and since then, many more have been published, proving how expansive and important memoirs are as a literary tool of self-making, world-making, and survival.

As mentioned in the introduction, I am not alone in raising such critiques of Durkin's position. Tourmaline responded to Durkin right there on the Barnard Library panel and discussed the racism, transphobia, and misogynoir of the publishing world which has historically limited trans expression to normative white middle-class subjects. In addition, Black trans author and activist Janet Mock, in attendance that day, took to her blog a few months later to specifically respond to this position against memoirs. She wrote:

> Many trans folks have been able to hear their story told through other trans folk in literature who have represented them and resonated in some way. Yet the stories that have dominated this genre have nothing to do with me. I, a young, poor-raised, multi-racial trans woman, did not have access to stories because the stories I craved did not exist, and the ones that did exist are consistently being erased. And because I didn't have examples of women like me who made it through it was difficult to imagine a future beyond what I was living. (Mock 2013)[21]

Here, Mock offers a much more complex view of the role that memoirs can have for trans people, and especially for trans people of color or any trans person that has not been able to find resonance in anything they have read. Instead of only being turned towards the past and merely mirroring reality (a "follower of culture" in Durkin's words), memoirs can also open

[21] Quoted from Janet Mock's blog entry from June 5th, 2013 titled "The Gatekeeping of Trans Women of Color's Stories in Publishing": https://janetmock.com/2013/06/05/memoir-trans-women-of-color/

up new avenues, render things possible, and make new kinds of livable lives known. It actually allows readers to think about trans living beyond one's own, acting as trans "evidence of being" (Bost 2018), providing new possible futures, generating new kinds of realities for readers. Through this different perspective on memoirs, we can also see divergent understandings of transness as a project and as an orientation to the self, the world, and life. Indeed, Mock's emphasis on the reader's perspective and her focus on how memoirs can help readers tackle feelings of isolation and create a community of trans people with shared lives, struggles, and futures, contrast heavily with Durkin, whose writer-centered perspective highlights the fact that writing memoirs may not really serve the author, may not really allow them to expand their thinking about transness. While Durkin imagines transness and trans writing as something one does or is with oneself, Mock's expanded horizon focuses instead on trans writing as a communal project, as a tool of collective survival, which is exactly what we'll explore together here.

On top of this fundamental difference, by imagining trans-authored memoirs to only be about one's transness, Durkin's position crucially lacks intersectionality, which Mock calls into question by emphasizing that for some trans people, "our stories aren't just about gender" (Mock 2013), that is, gender as an identity category and experience neatly separated from other elements that inform how one is read and treated by the world such as race, disability, size, class, sexuality and more. These stories "are about the shaming of our color, about the way the world views us as less valuable, about how we're told to pull ourselves up and when we resort to the necessary acts of survival, we're told to be quiet. Some of our stories are about how even in spaces of community we're silenced" (Mock 2013). Here Mock's naming of these different layers of erasure and silence may echo Melvin Dixon's

powerful invocation of the double-cremation that Black gay men have been facing in 20th- and 21-st century America, and especially during the Harlem Renaissance and AIDS crisis (Dixon 2000), double-cremation that "threaten[s] to render black gay personhood [and here black trans personhood] as an impossible mode of being" (Bost 2018: 3) but that has been resisted against through various "evidences of being" notably writing, activism, and memory work.

Importantly, bringing an intersectional perspective to trans memoirs is not just an additive process, it is not about viewing these stories as stories about gender plus race plus class plus sexuality plus disability plus sex work plus etc. Instead, an intersectional approach here emphasizes that all these categories of identity and experience are informed by one another, are co-occuring and co-constructed; they are co-constitutive of one another and cannot be neatly separated from one another. For instance, race is a "metalanguage" because of "its powerful, all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality" (Higginbotham 1992). Because the African slave trade and chattel slavery are foundational to the world-wide contemporary structuring system of race, Blackness is an especially profound gendering and ungendering process (Spillers 1987). And as a consequence, "gender and sexuality are essentially always already raced, and race is always already gendered and sexualized" (Bailey and Stallings 2017: 615). Gender and sexuality are not only powerful processes of racialization, at once racializing and racialized; they are also multi-pronged colonial tools. Contemporary notions of normative gender and sexuality (the gender binary, heterosexuality, cisgenderism, monogamy, the subordination of women, sex as procreation, marriage) are all settler-colonial tools that have solidified white Western colonial gender (Lugones 2008),

sexuality (Meiu 2015) and sex/love/intimacy (TallBear 2018) as natural truths. Feminism, in its white Western occurrence, has also circulated a colonizing notion of womanhood and gender, insofar as the realities and experiences of women from the Global South have been articulated through and framed by the historical understandings, material realities, and political interests of women in the Global North, something that Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes as "discursive colonization" (Mohanty 1984: 333). On the other hand, non-normative genders and sexualities, when moored in white Western understandings of the self, have also required a racialized Other and have used anti-Blackness, racism, and settler colonialism as primary avenues to make claims to normative whiteness. For instance, in *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (2011), Scott L. Morgensen shows how modern queer politics in the United States articulated themselves through white settler colonialism and through the disavowal of Indigenous and non-white Others. Similarly, Kira Hall's chapter "Boys' Talk: Hindi, Moustaches, and Masculinity in New Delhi" (2009) highlights how, in the context of a transnationally-funded sexual diversity NGO in New Delhi, the adoption of a Western lesbian identity and understanding of same-sex sexual attraction (expressed through the use of English) relied on the rejection of a local 'boy' identity and understanding of sexuality as gender eroticism associated with AFAB masculinity, rural India, and a lower socio-economic class (and expressed through the use of Hindi).

Such issues of discursive colonization have also been explored when it comes to transness. Our discussion of Agnes in the previous chapter can be understood under this framework, insofar as her transness was articulated through notions of white respectability and through a refusal to be associated with anyone deemed non-normative in terms of gender

and sexuality. Skidmore (2011) has also shown how white transgender people like Christine Jorgensen, Charlotte McLeod, or Tamara Rees relied on the rejection of other gender-variant bodies. The figure of Christine Jorgensen also quite literally supplanted other local stories[22]: indeed, Snorton (2017) describes how Black trans woman Ava Betty Brown was described as a "Chicago version of the Jorgensen story" by the *Chicago Daily Defender* on April 4, 1957. Moreover, Jorgensen's iconic power was international: indeed, Jones' (2023) discussion of Mexican trans woman Marta Olmos underlines how the figure of Christine Jorgensen quite literally replaced other local Mexican stories of gender transitions, with Marta Olmos being described in the press as impersonating Jorgensen or the story of transmasculine Nuñez in a February 10, 1954 article in *Magazine de Policía*, being accompanied by pictures of Jorgensen, but none of him. In Taiwan as well, newspaper articles dubbed Xie Jianshun as the 'Chinese Christine,' thus supplanting Jianshun's specific story as an intersex person wishing to remain a man with a global white framework of gender transition and medicalized womanhood (Chiang 2017). In addition to Jorgensen becoming the white frame of reference in international coverage of transness, this white normative transness also became recorded and circulated in sociomedical research as the only way to be trans and has acted as a foundation for the inscription of transness as a medical condition in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which itself has informed the development of international standards of transgender care such as the ones published by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (formerly known as the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association). This globalization and transnational circulation

[22] Jorgensen's name really took on a symbolic life of its own; for instance, in 1970, vice-president Spiro Agnew called GOP Senator Charles E. Goodell, the "Christine Jorgensen of the Republican Party", for which Jorgensen demanded an apology on October 10, 1970, which Agnew formally refused on October 12th of the same year (New York Times, 1970).

of how we understand what trans means and what trans care should look like have promoted a culturally- and historically-specific white Western notion of transness into a singular definition which ends up fighting against or supplanting racially- and culturally- specific local understandings of non-normative gender and gender transgression (as discussed in the Brazilian context in Borba 2017, for instance). This circulation of frameworks and templates of transness is accompanied by the circulation of white Western bodies across the world. Within this system of world-wide trans medical tourism, financial means, Western imperialism, whiteness, and Euroamerican citizenship facilitates travelling abroad. Indeed, while white trans women like Christine Jorgensen and Charlotte McLeod were able to find surgical care in the early 1950s in Denmark (or in the Netherlands for the case of Tamara Rees), black trans women like Carlett Angianlee Brown or Ava Betty Brown weren't allowed such travel. For the case of Carlett Angianlee Brown, extreme hardship in finding employment and successive fines due to the criminalization of her living as a woman forced her to postpone her travels to Denmark, despite having renounced her U.S. citizenship to become a Danish citizen and access such medical care (Snorton 2017: 158). For Ava Betty Brown, by the time she sought such medical care in 1954, Denmark had changed their laws to prohibit such international travel for, as Danish Parliament member Viggo Starcke put was quoted saying in a May 29, 1954 *Pittsburgh Courrier* article, all "the prospective Christines" (Snorton 2017: 162). Later, trans women like Jan Morris, Coccinelle, Bambi, or April Ashley all were able to travel to find medical care with Dr. Georges Burou in Casablanca, Morocco. The legacy of such practice continues to this day with many white Euro-American trans people flying to Thailand to access medical care, the tensions of which are examined in depth in Aren Aizura's *Mobile Subjects* (2018).

It is precisely to fight against this colonizing, homogenizing, whitening force behind transness that this chapter now turns to the memoirs and stories of Black trans people. In doing so, it forages for specific orientations and perspectives that such trans people hold and highlights the potential that the memoir genre still contains, if depleted of its investment in normative, white-centric, respectable, neoliberal self-making. Here, I do wish to counter the genealogy of normative transness Agnes and other white respectable trans people have created and open up transness to other narrative definitions and orientations. However, I do not wish to necessarily propose a counter-genealogy *per se*, as this would only reproduce the dynamics of selection, privileging, and exclusion on which tracing genealogies and narrative traditions are founded. I am not foraging for others trans ways of being, seeing, experiencing, feeling, and theorizing the world and the self only to bind them in a field of contained transness where they can easily be reproduced and consumed. Rather, I wish to highlight the breadth of trans existence, being, and survival, as well as the ways in which transness can be a project of the communal and the collective, and as such a deeply relational state of existence. In doing so, this chapter, and all that are celebrated within, show that the normative neoliberal individualism of trans memoirs is a feature of their whiteness, and not a feature of trans self-making itself. That is not to say that only white people can craft such normative narratives and trans identities: Julian K. Glover for instance highlights how Black trans women Laverne Cox and Janet Mock herself "engage transnormative respectability politics through their adherence to heteronormative sexual scripts" (2016: 340) and as such articulate their Black trans womanhood in ways that align with white normative transness. It is also important to note that the normative definition of transness borne from and defined by Agnes's legacy and the alternative understandings of transness foraged in this chapter are not

mutually exclusive and completely separate from one another. Instead, these discourses are complexly entangled; alternative understandings of transness navigate the overarching normative discourse and incorporate, refuse, or subvert elements from it into their own lives and life stories[23].

With that in mind, this chapter now turns to narratives of the self written by Black trans women to examine the different ways in which transness has been and can be deployed relationally towards community-building, solidarity work, and collective survival. First, building from our previous discussion of Georgia, it examines early narratives by Black trans women including 1950s, and 1960s newspaper coverage of the stories of Carlett Angianlee Brown and Delisa Newton, as well as the earliest known Black trans autobiography, Sharon Davis's *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood*, published in 1985[24]. In doing so, I highlight how, although they all had to strategically adopt some of the whitened norms of transness, Newton, Brown, and Davis also expressed a commitment to transness as a critical connection to other trans or gender non-conforming folks. I argue that this commitment is a core foundation of Black trans life narratives and could be thought of as a form of T4T (trans for

[23] Similarly, although this is not the focus of this chapter, normative transness is acutely aware of trans deployments or orientations that are not fully subsumed under it and routinely morphs and alters itself in order to digest and co-opt them or parts of them.

[24] These trans people are far from being the only ones one can find in the archival record. C. Riley Snorton notably discusses other examples of Black people who "made us of gender fungibility as a contrivance for freedom" in order to escape capture and re-enslavement in the 19th century: Clarissa Davis of Virginia, alias Mary D. Armstead; Maria Ann Weems of the District of Columbia, alias Jo Wright; Ellen Craft of Georgia, alias William Johnson; Harriet Jacobs, who discusses her practice of gender crossing under the pseudonymous protagonist Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861); or Mary Jones, also referred to as Peter Sewally, who was a sex worker tried for and convicted of grand larceny in 1836 (2017: 57–58). Snorton also examines the mid-20th century news coverages of Black trans women Lucy Hicks Anderson (who lived in Oxnard and as such is also an important piece of our local 805 history), Georgia Black, Ava Betty Brown and Black trans man James (Jim) McHarris (2017: 143). Complicating a Black/white racial binary, other trans people of color have been the focus of scholarly research: Chiang (2017) centers Taiwanese intersex/trans woman Xie Jianshun while Jones (2023) highlights Mexican trans woman Marta Olmos Ramiro. Skidmore (2011) discusses both Marta Olmos Ramiro and Asian trans woman Laverne Peterson.

trans) relationality. To further this discussion of transness as relational and oriented towards community, solidarity and collective survival, this chapter then turns to a case study of a more recent autobiography written by a Black trans woman: Ceyenne Doroshow's *Cooking in Heels* (2012). I argue here that the articulation of such an understanding of transness can be seen through a refusal to adhere to white norms of respectability, both in terms of how transness is articulated, and how the life narrative is structured formally and temporally. I also explore how this T4T relationality is supported by a wide array of T4T praxes that are grounded in embodied acts of care.

Relational Transness in Black Trans Women's Life Narratives

Contrary to Agnes, Christine Jorgensen, or Charlotte McLeod, who, as we saw in Chapter 1, distanced themselves from other folks with non-normative genders and sexualities in order to orient themselves as just another respectable white cisheterosexual young woman, other trans folks from the time were not crafting their transness as an individual experience necessarily separate from other non-conforming folks. Although not always, most of these trans folks were people of color, who, I argue, were already kept out of neoliberal respectable whiteness due to their racialization, and as such were not necessarily seeing it as a potential avenue to use to articulate their trans identity in ways that would be acceptable by society at large. Looking at narratives of the self by Black trans women found in the 1950s and 60s press reveals an orientation to transness as a relational identity that contains a deep commitment to a collective of other people deemed deviant or a refusal to erase one's transness through assimilation into cis womanhood, something that I explore here as an example of T4T relationality. Of course, these Black trans women still had to articulate their transness in

ways that could be legible to society at large and as such, often relied on tropes about their natural womanhood, or expressed a desire for key elements of cis white womanhood (such as heterosexuality, marriage, domesticity, and motherhood), but they importantly did so, without rejecting non-normative gender and sexual practices that would fall today under the umbrellas of queerness, transness, or sex work. Later, in 1985, when the first Black trans autobiography was published, this commitment continued to be at the center of an expression of a Black trans identity. This coupled with the continued presence of this commitment in contemporary memoirs hints at the possibility for the memoir genre to be deployed in non-neoliberal, non-individualistic ways. Let us now turn to these narratives.

"I feel that female impersonators are being denied their right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Jet 1953e): Carlett Angianlee Brown and T4T solidarity

Carlett Angianlee Brown as pictured on page 32 of *Jet* Magazine on July 16, 1953

On June 18, 1953, six months or so after the *New York Daily News* front-page story about Christine Jorgensen titled "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty" (White 1952), *Jet* magazine started to cover the story of Carlett Angianlee Brown, a 26-year-old East-Coast-based shake dancer and professional female impersonator, after she revealed her plans to "go to Europe in August for an operation to become a woman so that [she] can marry a U.S. Army sergeant," which would make her "the first Negro 'transvestite' in history to transform [her] sex" (Jet 1953a). At first glance, her story shares some similarities with the white respectable trans stories narrated by the likes of Jorgensen or Agnes. For instance, by identifying the reason behind her seeking transition as wanting to be able to marry an American soldier stationed in Germany, Sgt Eugene Martin, Brown inscribes herself in the heterosexual matrix and in a respectable frame of state-sanctioned relationship and domesticity. Solidifying her entry into normative heterosexual womanhood, in the second article about her, Brown also projects herself into future motherhood and adds that she is seeking "an operation to have female ovaries transferred to [her]" so as to "fulfill [her] lifelong ambition to have children" (Jet 1953b). In addition, Brown frames her transness as natural and biological, just like Agnes would do some years later, (an articulation we might nowadays place under the intersex umbrella). Indeed, she not only states that a doctor explained her trans condition because of the presence of "female glands," but also describes being afflicted by "chronic rectal and nasal bleeding" occurring "regularly each month" and "last[ing] for three days," a sort of transing of menstruations wherein her body goes through its own version of menstrual cycles using alternative channels, her anus and nose becoming alter vaginas. Instead of following the recommendations of the doctor, who proposed to remove her female glands, Brown wished to remove her sex organs through surgery and projected a trajectory similar to that of

Jorgensen. Interestingly, although Brown does name Denmark, the country where Jorgensen underwent surgery, and Dr. Christian Hamburger, the surgeon who performed Jorgensen's surgery, Jorgensen herself is not named in this first coverage of Brown's story. Jorgensen's name actually won't be referred to by *Jet* magazine until Brown herself mentions her in the second article as both the reason for her struggles ("after the Christine Jorgenson [sic] affair, the United States refuses to give an American citizen the permission to alter his sex") and a sort of gold standard she will surpass both biologically and domestically ("Brown also stated that [she] is going one step further than Christine Jorgenson [sic] [by] undergoing an operation to have female ovaries transferred to [her]") (1953b). In the context of 1950s press coverage we described earlier in this chapter, where Jorgensen had become an iconic replacement for all trans stories, even those of trans women of color like Marta Olmos Ramiro or Xie Jianshun, this absence becomes significant and gives support to Snorton's discussion of the "impossibility of a 'black Jorgensen'" (2017: 157) because of how "Jorgensen's spectacularized transsexual 'freedom' was tethered to equally robust representations of racialized unfreedom" (160). Looking at the coverage of Black trans women from 1950s and 60s that we still have access to, none of them were ever described under this exact moniker of a "Black Jorgensen." Ava Betty Brown is the only Black trans woman to be directly compared to Jorgensen when the *Chicago Daily Defender* described her story as the "Chicago version of the Jorgensen story" (1957), but she importantly became the Chicago version, not the Black one, a linguistic refusal demonstrating once again this impossibility.

As we mentioned earlier, Carlett Angianlee Brown's projections, to find medical care abroad and even surpass Christine Jorgensen as a Black trans woman, would remain

impossible and coverage from *Jet* would keep reporting on Brown's encounters with several pushbacks. First, Brown was required by Denmark or Germany to become a citizen of their country in order to be eligible to undergo surgery there, which also meant renouncing American citizenship (1953a). These citizenship issues were not faced by white trans women like Jorgensen, whose parents' Danish nationality and the presence of relatives still living in Denmark facilitated her travel there without disclosing surgery as a motivation, or McLeod who, although not a Danish citizen, managed to undergo surgery there unofficially and free of charge "on a kitchen table at midnight" (*Richmond Times* 1954). Despite successfully being granted Danish citizenship, receiving a passport in her new name, and planning to board the S. S. Holland on August 2, 1953 (*Jet* 1953b), Brown never made it. *Jet*'s following coverage highlights the ways in which Brown's existence was criminalized in Boston and how her lack of funds made her unable to pay for her $5 bail and forced her to sell her blood and plasma for survival (1953c). Four days after her original travel date, *Jet* announced Brown's decision to postpone her trip to Denmark to undergo a "face-lifting operation" (1953e); two months later, however, Jet would report that Brown had to delay her plans indefinitely and move to Iowa to become a cook at Iowa State College's Phi Kappa House because the U.S. government forbade her to leave the country before she paid $1,200 back in income taxes (1953f), and this even though Brown was not officially a U.S. citizen anymore. After that, Brown disappears from the public eye, and her future as a stateless Black trans woman in a majority-white rural state like Iowa[25] remains unclear.

Evidently, her Blackness was an important reason why Brown faced so many obstacles and was not able to realize her project of transition as she had planned. Her

[25] The Iowa State Data Center reports that the 1950 census recorded that 99.3% of the Iowa population was white.

criminalization and bouts with the police as a Black trans woman were made clear right from *Jet*'s second installment. After mentioning wanting to get married and have kids, Brown is described trying to materially perform white respectable womanhood by going "shopping for a wedding gown in downtown Boston" (*Jet* 1953b: 27). When attempting to try one on in the ladies room, Brown is barred from doing so by a store detective and is finally "ejected from the store by a policeman" (ibid). A couple of weeks later, Brown is reported to have spent the night in jail "for masquerading in female attire" (*Jet* 1953c: 20) and had to be bailed out by John Blackwell, her personal manager, because she was herself unable to pay the $5 needed. Described as "virtually destitute" and stating that "things are awfully tough in Boston" (*Jet* 1953c: 21), Brown also hints at her inability to find employment despite seeking "professional engagements in Boston or New York as a female impersonator" or being willing to "work [her] way abroad as a ship's mess attendant" (ibid); she has to sell her own blood and plasma to survive, and later will find more secure employment only because "'a long lost cousin,' an unidentified white teacher, sponsored [her]" (*Jet* 1953f). The mention of her sponsor's whiteness, and her description of him under familial terms, hints at the fact that it is only by framing herself as being more in proximity to whiteness that Brown was able to find employment.

The atmospheres of violence surrounding Brown were deep and intense, and yet, in the midst of them, we can locate brief moments of community and solidarity. Although Brown had no issue distancing herself from Jorgensen and identified her both as an issue and as someone she would best and surpass, she never expressed such a rejection or distanciation from other gender non-conforming folks or practices seen as sexually deviant. As mentioned earlier, she for instance didn't hide her employment as a "professional female impersonator,"

which was included in the first story *Jet* wrote about her (1953a), and reiterated her seeking such employment later on (1953c)[26]. Although the clubs she worked at and the other female impersonators she worked with were never mentioned, we do have some glimpses of her ties to such a community. Indeed, on July 16, 1953, we can find Carlett Angianlee Brown featured in *Jet*'s "This Week's Best Photos" section with a picture titled "Leg Technique" (the cropped version of which is included above). In it, Brown, in an unnamed Boston nightclub, is wearing a woman's skirt suit and a pair of black heels, for which, we are told, she was arrested later that night. But in this picture, for a moment, the criminalization and pathologization of her attire and trans identity are suspended. She has not been arrested yet nor turned into an individual deviant. Instead, she is surrounded by a community of people (two Black women on her left, one Black man on her right, and two other men, maybe Hispanic, maybe white, right behind her), identified by *Jet* magazine as her "friends" (1953d: 32) and to whom she acts as a teacher. Although we cannot know if these people were trans like her, and/or were fellow female impersonators, Brown is teaching them the "correct technique for displaying legs" (ibid) and none of them seem to be reacting negatively to this lesson, or to her attire. Her role as a teacher also positions her as an expert and a reference as someone who can embody proper femininity, and, more importantly for our conversation, as someone who is turned towards others and remains in solidarity, despite the negative view society has on nightlife and female impersonation.

Three weeks later, Brown verbalizes her commitment to other female impersonators: "I feel that female impersonators are being denied their right of life, liberty and the pursuit of

[26] On the other hand, Jorgensen had been adamant about never wearing women's clothing until her sex was changed on her official documents, thus crafting her identity of a law-abiding citizen and distancing herself from cross-dressers or female impersonators who were breaking the law.

happiness when they are arrested for wearing women's clothes–especially when they are minding their own business[27]" (1953e: 19). Here, although Brown does not include herself in the category "female impersonators" and uses the plural third-person pronoun "they" instead of the plural first-person pronoun "we," her statement remains one of solidarity, especially in the context of repudiation professed by other mainstream trans figures from the time. Because Brown, as a trans woman, is herself identified several times in *Jet* as a female impersonator, I am understanding this statement as an expression of trans-for-trans, or T4T, solidarity. This statement, combined with Brown's role as a trans community teacher memorialized by the picture discussed above, demonstrates an orientation to transness as relational and communal, and not as an individualized project of the self. In complex entangled ways, it is likely that this refusal to project a future womanhood that would be separate to that of female impersonators contributed to prevent Brown from ever realizing her post-operative trans self. Through her statement, Brown's claims to her own constitutional rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" become understood as being deserved by all female impersonators, and not only just by her as a respectable heterosexual woman with a biological, natural claim to womanhood and normative desires for monogamous marriage and motherhood. Importantly however, her incorporation into the paradigm of respectable womanhood was always impossible due to her Blackness, as "Brown and the 'female impersonators' she names are figured as outside – in excess of –" (Snorton 2017: 160) this paradigm. Indeed, her constant harassment and criminalization by the white police state wouldn't necessarily be solved by undergoing surgery in Denmark, as

[27] This aside, "especially when they are minding their own business" powerfully encapsulates Georgia's story of police harassment, suspicion of sex work, and arrest, as well as the pervasive surveillance, policing, and threat experienced by many trans women of color.

the transgression of rigid gender norms was not her only offense. Instead, her Blackness within the white supremacist context of the United States would always tether her to a state of being always already deserving of suspicion, surveillance, containment, and violence, and to a womanhood and femininity always already deemed excessive, deviant, and abnormal. Although pushing her even further away from a promised but always incomplete potential incorporation into respectable womanhood (another form of cruel healing or repair), this solidarity with other people whose gender and sexual identities or practices are deemed deviant by normative white colonial scripts of gender and sexuality also becomes a survival practice, a technique of struggle, a fostering of T4T relationality and horizontality that can provide moments of pleasure, joy, and freedom within an overall state of violence. This deployment of transness as a work of community-building and solidarity is what allowed Brown's picture to become a pause in the police apparatus, a moment of held breath and radiant smiles during which Brown was not masquerading, impersonating, or posing as a woman, but simply *was* a Black woman with a gorgeous pair of legs and the expertise to showcase them.

"I want to do something for the other people in this world who should have the surgery" (Newton 1966b: 69): Delisa Newton and T4T Care

Fast forward thirteen years or so during which we hope Carlett Angianlee Brown found sustaining pockets of joy, pleasure, and freedom in her newfound opacity and managed to survive through these many tumultuous years in an anti-Black America hell-bent on preventing or slowing down the many changes demanded by the American Civil Rights Movement. It is now 1966, the year when the Black Panther Party was founded by Huey P.

Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. It is also the year when, for the first time, a Black trans woman is given a thirteen-page feature to tell her own story in her own voice, over two monthly issues of *Sepia* magazine in April and May (Newton 1966a, 1966b). She also graces the cover of the April issue, her before and after photos taking the entire bottom half of it, right under the other two headlines "Robert C. Weaver: First Negro in President's Cabinet" and "The Flying Nesbits: a Sensational Company of Amazing Acrobats" (*Sepia* 1966).

Delisa Newton as pictured on page 66 of *Sepia* magazine in May 1966

This Black woman's name was Delisa Newton; she was born in New Orleans in 1934, from a Haitian mother and a Baptist minister father who left when she was three, and was one of nine siblings (four brothers and five sisters). At 14, Newton leaves home and joins the Army where, after being sent overseas, she had her first relationship with a man, an older white officer. After being discharged and returning to the U.S., Newton decides to go to school for nursing, meets her next boyfriend, Jack, with whom she stays four years. After Jack hits her and breaks her cheekbone, Newton meets a doctor who not only cares for her injury, but also

feminizes her nose, gives her hormone shots, and supports Newton's access to surgical care by finding her a California doctor willing to make her "the first and only Negro sex change in the world" (Newton 1966b: 67).

Newton had already found herself in the press prior to this, when two articles were released about her in the weekly supermarket tabloid *National Insider*: "My Lover Beat Me" on June 20, 1965 and "Why I Could Never Marry a White Man" on July 18, 1965 (*National Insider* 1965a, 1965b). However, these two articles in the mainstream press did not allow Newton to narrate her life in her own voice and instead framed her through stereotypical racist tropes of Black womanhood and Black couples: Newton became reduced to a sexually deviant woman, unsuccessful at heterosexual monogamy, victim of violent Black men and yet unwilling to cross the race line and be with a white man. Here, the question of readership becomes significant: as readers of *National Insider* were in majority white, Newton's Blackness became heavily loaded with negative stereotypes within a racist American grammar that overly defined her and erased her specificity. Skidmore (2011) also highlights that because white anxieties about safeguarding the white supremacist racial order often focus on the naturalization of white womanhood as a universal ideal and on the demonization of black masculinities, the cases of Black trans women, like Newton, who could be understood by transphobic society as Black men trying to inhabit normative – and thus white – womanhood, were especially dangerous and had to be violently rejected or ridiculed. Although today some Black trans women may be able to be accepted or celebrated by solidifying their transness through trans-normative gender and sexual scripts, this acceptance still relies on the extreme violence and death inflicted on other Black trans women. This violence is facilitated by and expressed through intersecting transphobic, sexist, and anti-

Black tropes (also known as transmisogynoir) that can be tied to the ones expressed in this mid-century coverage of Black trans womanhood and its fear of racial dis-/re-order.

On the other hand, *Sepia*, as a magazine centering the lives and achievements of African Americans, was primarily read by Black people, and as such was not as invested as the mainstream press in the upholding of racial hierarchies through the policing of gender and sexual identities and practices. This shared racial identity between Newton and her readers could form the foundation for Newton's transness to be understood within a shared struggle against white supremacy and anti-Blackness that her readers could resonate with. Newton's life narrative indeed highlights racism as a huge obstacle in her life, even more so than transphobia. The second part of her narrative for instance directly begins with an explicit naming of how racism made her access to medical care even more difficult than for other white trans people: "Because I am a Negro it took me twice as long to get my sex change operation as it would have a white person" (Newton 1966b: 66). Newton describes how (assumedly white) doctors had very little "sympathy and understanding" for her specifically because of her race: "You people are too emotional for such an ordeal," she remembers one doctor telling her (ibid). This statement inscribed the symbolic whitening of transness we described in Chapter 1 in very material terms for Newton, barring her from accessing much needed medical care. Within a gendered racial order that ascribes rationality, knowledge, and stability to white heterosexual men, only white trans women, understood as coming from, and inhabiting a space adjacent to, proper white manhood, were rational and strong enough to go through the "ordeal" of transness. Later, Newton explains that medical racism was not the only kind of discrimination she faced and expresses that her race also made finding employment extremely difficult, despite her education and degree. Even if she

were to find a medical doctor willing to provide care to a Black woman like her, the racial discrimination she faced on the job market would slow down her ability to raise the funds necessary to undergo surgery.

Newton's narrative is one of the earliest accounts we have that directly addresses, in a trans person's own voice, the specific ways in which race, and more specifically Blackness, interacts with and influences one's own experience of transness. Her narrative also highlights converging commitments to white respectable femininity and domesticity, which may at first glance seem in tension with her critique of white supremacy and anti-Black racism. Indeed, in the first half of her narrative, Newton expresses a strong attraction to domestic roles and tasks from a young age: "I wanted to help in the kitchen, join in the house cleaning, cook, bake" (Newton 1966a: 9). Later in the narrative, she is shown in a white tank top and black skirt, holding a broom, in a photograph labeled "A picture of domesticity, Delisa sweeps floor of her apartment" (13) and many other photographs represent her in the home. If some of the other pictures do emphasize her singing career or her "genuine curves" (14), it is always with a certain demureness, Newton's poses or outfits never being too suggestive or revealing: Newton is a "lady [who] sings the blues" (12), not a cabaret performer or an impersonator. Although this alignment with domesticity and white respectable womanhood is not uncommon for trans women, Skidmore (2011) highlights that it was rare for *Sepia* to focus on African-American women as representatives from the domestic sphere, instead preferring to showcase Black women's professional or artistic achievements. As such, Newton's strategic use of domesticity was quite significant. Adhering to norms of white bourgeois femininity became the necessary foundation for Newton to be able to launch her critique of whiteness, a position and mode of relation that Skidmore (2011) highlights as one

of disidentification, following Muñoz's definition of it as a "mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (1999: 11).

It is also through disidentification that we may understand Newton's position regarding gender and sexuality. Indeed, at first glance Newton seems to follow the distanciation strategy we've highlighted in other trans women from the mid-century: the first part of her narrative does not name other queer or trans people and despite describing early encounters with men, she never labels these desires or relationships as homosexual. She does not seem to be in community with any other queer or trans people and rather lives of life surrounded with other straight people. She fully subscribes to heterosexuality and expresses a deep longing for being able to marry her first lover, the white officer, so that she could accompany him anywhere he was sent. Although she does admit to wearing women's clothes before undergoing surgery, she never recounts any episode of having been perceived as an impersonator or a cross-dresser, instead saying that "no one questioned [her] garb" (1966a: 12). She even states that her second boyfriend, Jack, fully accepted her, regardless of official documents: "I don't care what your birth certificate says (…) You're a woman," and the fact that Jack was "rougher" and married to a cis woman before being with her symbolically constructs him as a heterosexual man similar to the 120% male that Agnes constructed in her narrative (ibid). All of this, coupled with her description of unfortunately too common experiences of sexism that "are problems for every woman" (1966b: 70) draws the portrait of a rather normative straight woman who is in alignment with other women through these shared struggles.

In the second half, however, Newton launches a rather detailed critique of how people with non-normative gender and sexual identities or practices are treated; the middle of page 69 reading: “Society is wrong” (Newton 1966b). Far from using her adherence to normative cisheterosexual tropes of femininity as a reason to disavow others, she instead, through disidentification, used it as a strategic tool to remain legible as a woman while also remaining in community and solidarity with other queer and trans people. While Newton does state that she is perfectly content and has done all she needed to do for herself, she does not forget others who are in situations similar to what she lived through: “I want to do something for the other people in this world who should have the surgery” (ibid). Newton’s language remains invested in some degree of linguistic separation and indexes her as distinct from the “they” of “the homosexuals and Lesbians, the people who are the wrong sex” (ibid), only using “we” to imagine a collective humanity who is changing people’s bodies. Through such strategies, she uses her position of relative acceptance as a woman to critique the transphobic and homophobic social scripts through which queer and trans people become oppressed and rejected legally, medically, and socially and instead, through speculation, proposes a new world: “There should be a fund and clinic where sexual ‘misfits’ can be physically and psychiatrically examined. Those who can be helped by psychiatrists to adjust to their problems without surgery – and these are the majority – should receive the treatment at reduced cost. For the very few who need surgery, the sex change operation should be performed at a fair price, not for the terribly expensive fees the doctors get today” (ibid). Although this imagined world remains within the known bounds of medicalized transness, Newton still proposes here, through her own practice of T4T care, a new articulation of trans medical care that would not rely on financial incentives as a counter to social stigma, but

rather on actual care, on a desire to help, and on the fulfillment of a "right to [surgery] and the happiness it will bring" (ibid). Her imagined alternative also reinforces that transness is not the utmost complication (as Agnes would tell Garfinkel), is not the problem to be solved; rather, how society treats trans people is what needs to be fixed. This critique of how social acceptance influences medical practices and access to care ("The only reason the surgery is so costly is because it is not generally accepted by society") is quite material and highlights how T4T solidarity, by actively calling for change, can be a powerful tool to improve trans material realities. Newton's focus on the affective change (the happiness) which comes as a consequence of surgical care may echo Carlett Angianlee Brown's defense of female impersonators' right to the pursuit of happiness. It also provides a powerful counter to the negative depiction of trans lives as filled with sadness and pain and focuses instead on the sharing of happiness through T4T relationality. Newton herself is happy, but she is not trying to hoard this happiness. Instead, she is trying her best to share this happiness to other trans people. Newton's narrative here crystallizes how, for some, transness is not just a project of individual self-making, but necessarily orients relationally, through the T4T deployment of solidarity or the expression of communal struggles shared due to one's race or gender.

"If possible, then I wish my book to give the courage to others" (Davis 1985: *vii*): Sharon Davis and the Trans Autobiography as a T4T Tool of Hope and Freedom

Let's hop into our trans time machine, fast-forward twenty years or so. Back into the shadowy gaps of the public archive, Carlett Angianlee Brown and Delisa Newton are getting old, we hope, and continuing to build relationships that feel life-sustaining, their joy and

pleasure a middle finger to the white supremacist transphobic United States. It is now 1985 and although the racial structure has subtly shifted since the 60s, its core anti-Blackness and white anxieties about racial order remain the same. It is the year when, on May 13th, the Philadelphia Police, under orders from Mayor Wilson Goode, commits an act of domestic terrorism against the Black liberation group, MOVE, and drops two bombs on the home shared by its members at 6221 Osage Avenue, killing eleven people, including five children, destroying 65 other houses in the neighborhood, and displacing hundreds of people. It is also the year when the first autobiography by a Black trans woman, Sharon Davis's *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood*, is published as a book, more than fifty years after the first known trans autobiography, Lili Elbe's *Man Into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, which was published posthumously in 1933.

Sharon Davis as pictured on page 28 of *Jet* magazine on October 10, 1983

At first, Davis's autobiographical narrative may not seem to differ so much from other trans memoirs published earlier in the 20th-century. Born in 1956 in Wilmington, Delaware, Davis always knew she was different, and "always enjoyed wearing female clothing and going out dressed as a woman at every opportunity" (Davis 1985: 1). Davis is straight, she is in a committed heterosexual monogamous relationship, she wants to get married, would love to be able to bear children; she's educated and seemed to be loved and accepted by all, even white people. The five-page spread about her in *Jet* in October 1983 contains pictures emphasizing her heterosexuality and domesticity (Moore 1983: 29–31), as well as claims to naturalized womanhood after a test revealed she had female chromosomes (30). The narrative is linear and interspersed with photographs of Davis, in line with Lili Elbe's or Christine Jorgensen's narratives which also included many pictures of their authors. As such, the goal of the narrative may appear to be one of respectable self-making, of inscribing the self into normative scripts of heterosexual femininity; and the first two chapters of Davis's autobiography, titled "Individuality" and "Who Am I?," seem to support this orientation to the self. However, Davis departs from such an individualizing notion of white respectable transness right away as her life story highlights her experience of incarceration and her survival practice of sex work while being incarcerated in the next two chapters, and her employment as an exotic dancer later in the narrative. Inhabiting a similar mode of being as Delisa Newton, Davis, through disidentification, at once constructs herself as being a part of normative middle-class (white) scripts of gender and indexes herself instead as someone deeply subjected to anti-Black racism, intensely critical of how things are for trans people and for Black people, and strongly committed to T4T solidarity and care.

Indeed, just like Georgia thirty-ish years prior, Davis's narrative is framed by an explicit orientation to an imagined community of trans people. Her preface explicitly states that the reason behind her narrative is a deep desire to help others: "The aim of my story is to provide courage and offer hope (…) I wish my book to give the courage to others" (Davis 1985: *vii*) and the afterword end by reiterating such a commitment: "I can only hope another's life has been made easier by reading my documented experiences" (47). Even her section titled "Individuality" contains a requirement of solidarity and community: "I must lend a helping hand" (*ix*) and the first page of the actual autobiography restates this goal: "I wanted to share my story to help others. Although it has cost me a lot mentally and psychologically, I refuse to become a follower. So now I must become a leader." (1–2). Such a commitment to other trans people was expressed by Davis even before her autobiography was published. For instance, she shares a *Delaware Valley Defender* article published while she was writing her memoirs which already highlighted that "[she] has done several dozen interviews to help others such as herself" (16). On October 10, 1983, Davis also appeared in a five-page spread about her life in *Jet* magazine which stated such a goal behind her book: "To aid others who are going through the private turmoil she endured, Ms. Davis recently penned a book, *A Finer Specimen of Womanhood*" (Moore 1983: 28).

This expression of transness through T4T relationality is consistent throughout Davis's entire narrative. Far from trying to distanciate herself from other trans people, she instead constantly discusses their existence in Delaware or around her and the relationships she had with them: "Christine Jorgenson [sic], Jan Morris, Dr. Renee Richards, and Canary Conn" (Davis 1985: 3), "ten transsexuals whom I know in the state of Delaware who have had their surgery completed [and who] are all white and wish to live very private lives as

heterosexual women" (14), "a preoperative transsexual" who helps her go "from the hospital back to [her] apartment" (21), "many other transsexuals in the world" (21), "eight preoperative transsexuals" that she helped to succeed (22), "a transsexual program (…) in 'Philly'" (29), "at least 126 others [like her]" (34), and "my brothers and sisters who need me" (36). With all of these people in mind and with her goal to help others, her memoirs, rather than a simple expression of the self used for self-centered needs, becomes a tool for others, a literal resource. Although Davis does address a potential cis readership, she is also writing for her trans readers and thinking very directly and materially about what they need. Indeed, Davis's autobiography contains both a "Tips I Didn't Have" section (38–40), which lists twenty pieces of advice that Davis wish she had received during her transition, and a contact list of "Available Surgeons for Pre- and Postoperative Transsexuals" (51).

Importantly, Davis's deployment of trans relationality through T4T solidarity is neither colorblind nor monolithic, and she is instead quite aware of how different life can be for Black trans women due to how transmisogyny violently intersects with anti-Blackness. For instance, although Davis mentions that financial means is the biggest obstacle to medical access for trans people in general, she also adds that "it is the black ones who have to wait so long or miss out completely" (14), thus highlighting the racial disparity that exists within the trans community. As a result, although she does know about ten white trans people in Delaware, Davis also underlines that she is the first known Black one in the state. However, she states, there are many black transsexuals, they just don't have the means to seek medical care. Later, when discussing her work as an exotic dancer, Davis discusses how one of her colleagues outed her to customers; her transphobia, however, wasn't shared by the men, who all flocked to her out of curiosity, with some even defending her womanhood. Later, Davis

adds: “Believe it or not, I was never once faced with anyone calling me horrible names or singled out due to my secret surgery” (44). Instead of transphobia, it is racism that was a bigger issue in her career. Not only would she often be the only Black dancer employed, “never [running] into more than one other black dancer at any one given time or evening” (43), but she would also often be “hearing remarks about [her] being black and a few racial slurs” (44). Just like Delisa Newton before her, Sharon Davis here constructs solidarity with other Black readers, cis and trans, through a shared experience of anti-Blackness, and exemplifies what Mock had critiqued in Durkin’s rejection of memoirs: “For some of us, our stories aren’t just about gender” (Mock 2013). Here, the trans memoir does not serve to inscribe transness into white respectable neoliberal individuality; instead, it acts as a tool to deploy transness relationally for community-building and solidarity work, as well as a mode of disidentification that allows for the critique of the systems of oppression that trans people, and especially trans people of color, have to navigate. These three examples from three different decades (the 50s, 60s, and 80s) demonstrate that this key definitional difference in transness was inscribed in Black trans narratives right from the beginning of modern Western trans discourses and has been a constant core aspect of these narratives decades after decades.

August 13, 2022 — The smell of garlic and chorizo fills the air as sizzling sounds inundate my kitchen. Splatters of oil make my skin tingle for sharp seconds; heat flaring and pearling sweatdrops on my forehead.

I am behind writing but I convince myself this is all part of the process, a vital step to connect to the embodied knowledge on the pages. Ceyenne Doroshow's *Cooking in Heels*, read and re-read and filled with sticky notes and tabs, is open on the countertop, small blue squares lined up under the name of each recipe.

Today is Ceyenne's Mouth-Watering Paella (78-79), her signature dish, which is also featured on the cover in a large stainless-steel skillet next to Ceyenne herself, sitting on the beautiful kitchen island, donned in a blue cardigan, black shirt and pants, and red high heels, a large shiny ring on her ring finger and pearl bracelets at her wrist. Yesterday was her Nya's Devilled Eggs (30-31), named after her daughter; last week her Davaney's Stuffed Shells "Aunt Do" (58-60), inherited from her aunt.

Just like for Ceyenne, for me too food is relationship, food is connection, food is family; and love is consistently its seasoning. Recently though, my tears have also been flavoring my cooking. I am honored to be able to receive Ceyenne's love through her recipes; but I am equally heart-broken not to have anyone to cook with and for. Ever since my partner left me and moved out of our t4t home, this oversea kitchen, thousands of miles away from most my family and friends on another continent, just does not feel the same; cooking more akin to mourning than celebrating.

(Summers are the worst. I feel so utterly alone.)

But food always connects, to where I've been, to what hurts and heals, to who I am because of who I am in relation with. The paella I am cooking ties me back:

to the paella my mom would always make, to how she taught me spice, color, smell, and taste were the best recipe you could have, teaching you to just know what looks right and what needs more;

to the paella my grandfather would cook for us every summer, sizzling pan in the warm lakeside evening air, until he chose alcohol and medication on the cold damp forest floor over us;

to the paella we ate in early September after my uncle's funeral, his Spanish wife fighting the rest of our Italian family for this dish, its tastelessness only rivaling my uncle's insipid meanness before stomach cancer caused by years of eating canned foods and army rations made fear turn him into a loving child again;

to the paella I had in Madrid the summer before I moved to Turtle Island, surrounded by quick-burning friendships, the carefree tang of a three-week summer school filled

with 3-am-heart-to-hearts in a stifling heat not even the coldest sangria could fight buzzing through phantom threads of transness all around me.

to this paella I'm cooking which probably won't be as good as any of these other paellas (except the funeral one, for sure). But the pan, I borrowed from one of my very good grad school friends, now back in Europe after an absolutely harrowing time in Santa Barbara. The silicone spatula, I bought with my mom at Ross, her favorite American store, during one of her visits. The culantro I just chopped is from a Publix on Cherokee and Congaree land while on a t4t visit to Columbia, South Carolina to see one of my longest-standing academic friends, birthday sunflowers and baroque-patterned suit on a midnight Waffle House run with their wonderful friends forever etched in my memory. And the recipe, I received as a trans gift of love from Ceyenne Doroshow herself.

My transness is the critical connections I have made along the way. The t4t love all around.

Ceyenne Doroshow: Autobiographical and Embodied Solidarity Through Cooking

Ceyenne Doroshow as pictured on the website of Gays and Lesbians Living in a Transgender Society (GLITS), the organization she founded and of which she is the Executive Director

Last time jump of our journey together in this chapter, forward to the 21st century. If Carlett Angianlee Brown, Delisa Newton, and Sharon Davis, are still alive, joyfully aging in opacity away from the visibility of the public eye, they are now respectively 97, 90 and 68 years old. Almost forty years have passed since our last stop in the timeline; once again, there have been many changes, in the terminology we use, in the technology we can access, the community we can build, the boundaries we draw around transness; and yet, some things are constant in the raciosexual grammar of the United States and the atmospheres of violence remain thick around Black lives, trans lives, and Black trans lives. Community and solidarity are ever needed to struggle against such violence and find pockets of joy, pleasure, freedom.

Fighting against such atmospheres of violence is Black and trans activist, author, and educator Ceyenne Doroshow. You may know Doroshow as the founder of GLITS (Gays and Lesbians living in a Transgender Society) in 2015, an organization centering Black trans leadership and empowerment and dedicated to providing crisis support, healthcare and health resources, and housing especially to Black trans people, trans sex workers, and trans incarcerated people, and to all LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC folks in the NYC area and across the United States. GLITS also extends their resources and care globally by providing support to asylum seekers, especially those impacted by multiple axes of oppression and marginalization. In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic which disproportionately impacted incarcerated and houseless folks, among others, Doroshow and the entire team at GLITS worked to bail LGBTQIA+ incarcerated people out of jail and found them safe and secure housing through Airbnb. In addition, GLITS successfully raised two million dollars that allowed them to buy a 12-unit building, the GLITS House, which opened in November 2020 in Queens, New York to provide housing to homeless LGBTQIA+ community

members. GLITS' current project is to build and develop their own health center that would be community-designed and center trans, and especially Black trans, needs. Doroshow is also known for having co-organized the Brooklyn Liberation March, a silent march for Black trans lives, on June 14, 2020, alongside Black trans activist and writer Raquel Willis, Black drag performer West Dakota, the family of Iyanna Dior, a young Black trans woman who survived a beating by a mob of mostly Black cis men on June 1st of that year, as well as many other activists from organizations such as the Marsha P. Johnson Institute, the Okra Project, and Black Trans Femmes in the Arts.

Lesser known, however, are Doroshow's memoirs, *Cooking in Heels: a Memoir Cookbook*, published in 2012 through the Red Umbrella Project, a sex workers rights non-profit organization founded in 2010 by former sex worker, activist and writer Audacia Ray. *Cooking in Heels* contains forty-three recipes, divided into four categories: appetizers, entrees, side dishes, and desserts. Choosing to narrate one's life through a cookbook may seem like an odd or unexpected choice, but research has long shown that cookbooks are far more than just collected recipes; instead, they reveal a lot about the people who write them and the norms and expectations of the society they lived in. While some have used cookbooks for research on the gendered history of food and cooking (McFeely 2001, Theophano 2002, Haber 2003, Neuhaus 2003, Schenone 2004), others have focused on how cookbooks reveal complex dynamics about race, gender, and class (Inness 2006) or how the publication of *The Gay Cookbook* in 1965 can offer an interesting entry into discussions of gay domesticity and "camp" culture as it was set off by Susan Sontag in 1964 (Vider 2013). It can be argued that cookbooks are powerful tools of self-making and world-making whose seemingly neutral and apolitical form allows their authors to subtly propose political

orientations to the world and its structuring forces. In addition, because cookbooks are often a symbol of domesticity, they become a very significant choice of genre for Black trans women, who, as we've discussed prior in this chapter, have a lot at stake in articulating their relation to white gendered norms of respectability and domesticity. As a Black trans woman with a history of drug use, homelessness, sex work, and incarceration, Doroshow's use of gendered domesticity is especially powerful in critiquing the raciosexual status quo.

The recipes chosen by Doroshow reveal a lot about her and her life. A lot of them are indubitably Southern and many have a Caribbean twist, showcasing Doroshow's cultural heritage beyond her birthplace of Brooklyn, New York. Doroshow's inscription into this familial heritage is also underlined by her dedicating the cookbook to "Grandma Evelyn and Grandma Bessie" (Doroshow 2012: 5). Virtually all of the recipes are family-size, yielding enough food to feed between four and twelve people and indicating that these aren't just recipes to feed the self, but ones to feed the community. This attachment to others and to the community around Doroshow also appears in the way the recipes are named. Indeed, twenty of the forty-three recipes are named after someone, a family member (blood or chosen), a friend, a neighbor, someone with a deeply shared history. Two of the fourteen "tips" offered by Doroshow in some of her recipes also mention children who can help with the cooking, or who will beg you to cook more of the recipe for them. All of these contribute in representing Doroshow as part of a vibrant community of people who love and support her, and whom she loves and supports through food. This critical connection to others through sensorial, embodied practices such as cooking and eating puts forth a deeply relational aspect of Doroshow's life as a Black trans woman. Her acts of solidarity and support are quite literally life-sustaining. Extending these culinary gifts to readers through the publication of her

cookbook becomes an invitation for others to take on such a nourishing role in their community and expands transness as a relational state committed to community-building, nourishment, and survival.

Beyond the recipes, Doroshow also provides readers with a 11-page narrative of her life, as well as five short entries about five of the loved who have recipes named after them ("My Lovely Daughter Nya," "Brittany's Story," "Aunt Do's Story," "My Cousins K.C., Alex, and Eric," and "My Mother, Flawless Sabrina"). These more clearly autobiographical parts contain a lot of elements hinting at how Doroshow, just like Delisa Newton or Sharon Davis before here, crafts her woman self by orienting to normative gender scripts of femininity, while also subtly disidentifying with white norms of gendered respectability and domesticity. As the title of that section tells us ("How I Got Here: Through the Kitchen and Beyond"), yes, it is indeed through cooking and being in the kitchen, through normative feminine activities, that Doroshow crafted a lot of her sense of self. But she's also so much more than that, and these white norms of respectability and domesticity cannot subsume her.

Importantly, *Cooking in Heels* provides a holistic description of cooking as an act that cannot be simply resumed to femininity, nourishment, and care. For instance, Doroshow's love for cooking came from a very young age, and, we are told, was responsible for a lot of the transphobic hate she experienced as a kid. Her parents would never allow her in the kitchen, because they thought it was not a place nor an activity for a boy. All of these contribute to reinforcing cooking as a normative feminine act, and yet, Doroshow also complicates this picture by telling us her own grandfather was a chef, who surpassed her grandmother in his cooking abilities. Throughout her life, cooking continues to occupy such an ambivalent place as an activity laden with contradictory meanings. For instance, after her

parents get divorced and Doroshow is left to fend for herself with her abusive father, cooking becomes both a buffer against violence, because her father needs someone to cook for him, and a trigger for violence, because her father refuses to accept the femininity that he perceives as part of this act of cooking. Indeed, Doroshow tells us: “In one way, the kitchen was like my heaven. (…) But it was also the place where I got my beatings” (Doroshow 2012: 13). Here, domesticity is sharply described as both a safe space and a dangerous one to inhabit.

Elsewhere, Doroshow also subtly disidentifies with the norms of family that are embedded within the domestic sphere. Although Doroshow’s cooking does become enacted in her life through the familial sphere, as Doroshow cooks both for her abusive father and for her grandparents, who represent the only supportive affirming space in her life (her grandmother was the first one to give her make-up or styling advice, for instance), cooking also becomes the avenue that allows her to find other spaces of support and community. Indeed, it is thanks to her cooking skills that she becomes hired at the bar 96 West as a teenager. There, she meets other, mostly older, gay men and trans women, who show her, simply by existing, that surviving is possible. From this experience, Doroshow queers, or transes, the meaning of family and realizes that “family didn’t have to mean the people I was born to. Family could be the people I bonded with, the people who looked out for me. Since then, I have grown family where it needed to grow” (15). This redefinition of family, although far from being novel, contributes to Doroshow’s disidentification with and subversion of the normative family sphere within which cooking acts as a gendered form of care.

Later in her life, cooking, through its normative power as a form of respectable femininity, continues to help her find community and survive. For instance, when Doroshow was homeless and using drugs, her drug dealer provided her with a roof over her head for a little while because she "would cook for him and [she] would babysit and make meals for his kid" (ibid: 16). In the men's shelter she was forced to live in, Doroshow's cooking and "help with the breakfast preparation and clean up" (ibid) allows her to pass as a staff member and avoid transphobic mistreatment for a while. It is these acts of cooking and caring that motivate a staff member to help Doroshow become an actual institutional aide. And even later, when she is doxxed, arrested and incarcerated in a men's prison for twenty-eight days because of the criminalization of her sex work, it is once again cooking which becomes her main tool of survival. She ends up housed in a cell next to Drew, the nephew of her former drug dealer (the one she would cook for), who starts asking her tips on how to improve the food they are served in jail. Although jail doesn't offer much to help her spruce up the food they are given, Doroshow still manages to materially improve the quality of life within the jail. And soon, she starts talking about food and cooking with everyone around her, which leads them to think about something else than their everyday life of incarceration, surveillance, and violence. Importantly, cooking here becomes both a way to foster relationships in the here and now of the cell row, but also to others, the "mothers and grandmothers" who cooked food for us "when we were little" (21). Here too, Doroshow's role was a relational one, acting both as a crux connecting everyone together and as a mirror for past relationships of care. This deep relationality also had a partial humanizing effect, both on Doroshow and on the other men in the jail, for the representatives of the white supremacist prison-industrial complex and its dehumanizing and destructive reach. Indeed,

Doroshow tells us, even the correctional officers "were impressed" and "started to bring [her] snacks and ingredients to improve our food" (21). And it is from these important moments of community-building within the incredibly intense atmosphere of violence of the U.S. jail and prison system that Doroshow's *Cooking in Heels* was born, representing a promise that Doroshow made to Drew.

Throughout Doroshow's life story, we can see that cooking, thanks to its normativizing effect as an act of respectable femininity, complicated the otherwise negatively-viewed spaces that she inhabited. Cooking as a form of care gave her some value and clashed with other identities that society views as worthless. Because she was cooking and caring for others, she couldn't be "houseless" but was necessarily a "staff member"; she couldn't be just a "drug addict," but was someone with "something soft in [her]" (16); she couldn't be merely an "inmate," but was someone "special" (20) who was "working some kind of magic" (21). Interestingly, "sex worker" was the only position she was viewed as that cooking did not seem to impact; despite being know to her neighbors as "the nice lady with the big family who would cook for them all the time" (19), they all turned on her as soon as her arrest by the police made the news. And yet, instead of using this normative power within cooking as a way to distance herself from people deemed non-normative due to their gender, sexuality, sexual practices, or drug use, Doroshow systematically reiterates her commitment to and relationship with these people that white supremacist respectable society systematically wants to cordon off, contain, and erase. For instance, when discussing her drug dealer, Bernie, Doroshow goes against society's view of drug dealers "as really bad for the community, and especially for kids" (16). Instead, she remains in relation with him, and understand the material realities that have led him to drug dealing: "Bernie was in a tough

place in his life. He needed to provide for his son, and he didn't want to see everything be terrible. He was a good man" (16). When she is in the men's shelter and passes as a staff member, Doroshow does not use her newfound role to distanciate herself from other houseless people in the shelter or to present herself as different and better than them. Instead, she would be "very caring with the other clients" and "would help the elderly" (16) for instance by "feed[ing] a man whose hands shook too hard to hold the spoon" or "comb[ing] down an old arthritic man's hair" (18). In her narrative, Doroshow's existence as a Black trans woman is perpetually oriented relationally as "helping people, especially helping [her] trans sisters, has been such an important thing to [her]" (18); and as we've discussed, this relationality not only helped others survive materially and emotionally, but also assisted Doroshow and opened doors and opportunities.

In guise of a concluding paragraph, I will say: white trans people, we need to do better. If this chapter was able to show that transness does not have to be an identity oriented towards neoliberal self-making and respectability as channels for acceptance and potential assimilation, it is also sadly quite obvious that many white trans people are still heavily invested in this form of transnormativity. And while I truly believe in transness as relational, as a commitment to our communities, and as a deep expression of love and solidarity, if white trans people do not make this necessary political commitment, the emotional labor of such a relational transness will continue to fall on the shoulders of those who are the most oppressed, and who do not have the privilege and luxury granted by whiteness to pander to normativity and respectability in hopes of being fully assimilated. I am hoping this chapter can be as much an honoring of Black trans womanhood, and of the heavy labor of care and love that often comes with it, as a call for white trans people to divest from whiteness and use

our transness as a radical tool to dismantle the systems that keep all of us, but especially some of us, apart and in pain.

let the feelings move through you like
water through a river to the sea, but
let them erode, slowly, little by
little the colonial foundation within you
let them change
you, move you
as they move through
you, let the pain,
the heartbreak, the rage, the despair
& the hopelessness radicalize you
into refusal,
into resistance,
into revolution.

our revenge and rage will taste
like the flames in our bellies
the grieving in our hearts
immolation.

let the fire licking his body lick your eyes
awake to the world
let the water grow abolition inside you
like watermelon seeds
across time

Chapter 3 - Anti-Death and the Ethics of Poeliving: Trans Poetics and the Language of Collective Survival

As I Past, I Future[28]

Past

Adjective

1. gone by in time and no longer existing; belonging to a former time; (of a specified period of time) occurring before and leading up to the time of speaking or writing; (grammar) (of a tense) expressing an action that has happened or a state that has previously existed.

Noun

1. the time nefore the moment of speaking or writing; the history of a person or place; (informal) a part of a person's history that is considered to be shameful.

2. (grammar) a past tense or form of a verb.

Preposition

1. to or on the further side of; in front of or from one side to the other of.

2. beyond in time; later than.

3. beyond a particular point, stage, or limit; no longer capable of.

Adverb

1. so as to pass from one side of something to the other.

2. used to indicate the lapse of time.

Future

Noun

1. a period of time following the moment of speaking or writing; time regarded as still to come; events that will or are likely to happen in time to come; the likely prospects for or fate of someone or something in time to come; a prospect of success or happiness; (grammar) a tense expressing an action that has not yet happened.

2. (finance) contracts for assets (especially commodities or shares) bought at agreed prices but delivered and paid for later.

Adjective

1. at a later time; going or likely to happen or exist; (of a person) planned or destined to hold a specified position; existing after death; (grammar) (of a tense) expressing an action that has not yet happened.

[28] Here too, definitions from Oxford Languages as they appeared in Google search results have been included to provide some elusive anchor, a ghostly mooring into the layered polyphonies contained within all words.

Tourmaline, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Donna Ostrowsky, Red Durkin; Staking our Claim: Trans Women's Literature in the 21st Century
Lenni Lenape and Wappinger land (Barnard Library) – October 18th, 2012

October 18, 2012 – Lenni Lenape and Wappinger Land. It is a day of future mourning, an evening of trans haunting, ghosts speaking from the past, inside the Barnard Library. Four trans women writers, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Red Durkin, and Donna Ostrowsky, alongside trans artist, activist and scholar Tourmaline, are asked to think about their relationship to memoirs. Earlier, we stayed with Durkin and investigated her resistance towards memoirs and the normative neoliberal force they can represent. We then turned our attention to Tourmaline's and Mock's interventions and foraged in Black trans memoirs for orientations of transness that articulated something different, a vision for T4T solidarity and community-building. In order to extend this discussion of trans articulations of the self and the world, in this chapter, we now turn to a different literary genre, poetry, and to two other people on the Barnard Library panel: Ryka Aoki and Donna Ostrowsky. As mentioned in the introduction, Ostrowsky sadly passed away due to suicide six months or so after her

participation on this panel. Two years later, in 2015, Ryka Aoki publishes a collection of poems, *Why Dust Shall Never Settle Upon This Soul*, dedicated to Donna Ostrowsky and to Alexis Rivera, another of her trans friend who died in 2012 due to health complications related to HIV/AIDS. Donna was 27. Alexis was 32.

The death of our trans kin, and especially of trans women of color, is way too common. Aging and growing old are still revolutionary acts. As such, mourning and grieving are sadly part of the atmospheres around trans lives, particles in the air we breathe weighing us down in sadness, anger, fear. But mourning can also be a celebration of life, a powerful act of resistance against death and its desire to encompass all, a way to metabolize our grief into action, hope, survival. Here, Aoki's use of poetry to memorialize her friends and mourn becomes a portal through time and space, a point of entry into thinking about poetry as a tool of survival and a literary technique of struggle. First, this chapter explores the haunting echoes between two time periods that are often connected materially, affectively, and rhetorically in contemporary Western trans discourses: that of the contemporary time period in the U.S. and Europe and that of Nazi Germany. Using poetry and writing as its through-line, this exploration looks at how trans people then and now have used literary and artistic tools of self-expression as a way to process violence, resist erasure, and survive. This chapter first underlines several trans people who had to flee Nazi Germany or survived the concentration camps of the Holocaust such as Jewish-German T4T couple Charlotte Charlaque and Toni Ebel, French poet Ovida Delect, or Italian activist Lucy Salani, among many others. These trans survivors all used writing or art to live through Nazi Germany or its aftermath and to find pockets of joy and pleasure in the thick atmospheres of violence all around them. Using Delect's articulation of poetry as anti-death and development of an ethics

of poetic living as analytical lenses and time portals connecting the then and the now, this chapter then returns to the contemporary United States to highlight the trans poetics of survival employed and theorized by contemporary trans-of-color poets such as Ryka Aoki, Caleb Luna, Coyote Park, or jaye simpson. As I've said before, we're here, and we've always been here. This is a core truth of trans existence. Despite the violence circling, again and again, all around them, our trancestors were able to carve out pockets of joyous air to breathe, found pleasure and love, reasserted their freedom to be and be with, left us glimpses, foraged within the violence of the archive, of life-sustaining ways to exist. And despite the violence circling, again and again, all around us today, we'll find ways to do just the same. We'll live, we'll laugh, we'll love into the trans futures we deserve.

Context: Anti-Trans Legislations

In the year 2023, a staggering number of 510 anti-LGBTQ+ bills, most of them targeting trans adults and youth, were proposed across the United States. And on February 22, 2024, 442 anti-LGBTQ+ bills are already being proposed in the new legislative session.[29] While some of them have been or will be defeated, vetoed by their respective governor, or challenged in court, many have also passed, with increasingly negative consequences to trans youth and adults across the country. In Utah, the passing of SB16 in January 2023 effectively banned gender-affirming healthcare for minors, from surgeries to puberty blockers (ACLU of Utah 2023). In March 2023, Tennessee passed a similar ban on gender-affirming surgeries and hormonal treatments, while also passing a law banning public drag performances and

[29] ACLU's interactive map tracker can be found here for 2023: https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights and here for 2024: https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2024. Numbers change rapidly: for instance, the number went from 285 on January 18, 2024 to 367 on January 25, 2024, to 411 on February 11, 2024.

"male or female impersonation," which could lead to the criminalization of any queer or trans person believed to be impersonating another gender (Bacallao 2023). This law was deemed unconstitutional in early June 2023 by a federal judge due to its overly vague and broad language (Kruesi 2023). Oklahoma was next, when, after already passing a law on May 19, 2022 forcing public school students to use the bathroom and locker room aligned with the sex listed on their birth certificate (Smallens 2022), Governor Kevin Stitt signed SB613 into law in April 2023, thus banning gender-affirming surgeries and hormonal treatments for minors (Oklahoma Office of Governor 2023). It is also in Oklahoma that in February 2024, non-binary high-school student Nex Benedict, who is also of Chahta (Choctaw) descent, was brutally beaten alongside another trans student by older female students in the girls' bathroom, which led to Nex's death the next day (Hurley 2024). In the past couple of years, twenty-two states have passed laws effectively banning trans healthcare for minors (or even for adults, in the case of the Arkansas bill, which would have allowed private insurers to refuse covering gender care); in Arkansas, Alabama, Florida, and Indiana, however, these bills have been struck and enjoined, either permanently or preliminarily, by federal courts, which ensures continued access to care for now. Some states have also circumvented the need to propose new bills or amend old ones and have followed other routes to restrict trans people's rights and access. For instance, in 2022, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton released a formal general attorney opinion stating that under Texas law, prescribing puberty blockers to trans minors or granting them access to life-saving gender affirmation surgery is considered "child abuse" (Texas Attorney General Press Release 2022).

Across the Atlantic Ocean, on Monday, January 16, 2023, the United Kingdom's government blocked Scotland's decision to pass a new gender recognition law allowing trans people to change their legal gender without medical diagnosis (Kottasová 2023) while France banned the use of inclusive and gender-neutral language in government offices in 2017 (Timsit 2017) and in schools in 2021 (Impelli 2021). France took one more step towards a general ban in November 2023 when the French Senate voted in favor of it (Dartford 2023). And while the British government recently announced that trans people will indeed be protected by their latest conversion therapy ban (Clarke 2023), they only did so after a previous announcement that trans identities would not be protected by the ban resulted in a petition garnering almost 150.000 signatures (UK Government and Parliament Petitions 2022). In France, a similar law protecting queer and trans people from conversion therapy was recently passed too, but only after right-wing members of the Senate tried to remove "gender identity" from the new bill, while some self-defined feminists decried that the law would prevent medical practitioners from refusing to provide transition care to trans individuals (as critiqued by Le Corre 2021), going as far as stating that transition care is itself a form of conversion therapy (see Ashley 2020, 2022 for a precise debunking of this claim and a larger legal analysis of conversion therapy). Such political debates surrounding trans rights have been in the forefront of media attention elsewhere around the world too, in countries such as Germany, Argentina, the Netherlands, Chile, Brazil, and more.

Laverne Cox on the cover of the June 9th issue of the *Time* magazine

This resurgence of anti-trans bills in politics both reflects and fuels an increased visibility of trans people and trans issues in public discourse. In 2014 already, the June 9th issue of the *Time* magazine featuring Laverne Cox crystallized this overall newfound visibility and acceptance of trans folks under the moniker of "transgender tipping point" while Vogue declared 2015 the "Year of Transgender Visibility." Although this visibility is often framed within a rights-based discourse as a sign of progress, many trans folks and scholars have also critically analyzed it as a danger and a threat, especially for underprivileged racialized trans people[30]. The use of the expression "tipping point" itself already contains, within the white-supremacist and racist U.S. order, the haunting threat of

[30] In 2016, in a chapter written about Sophia Burset, the character played by Laverne Cox in *Orange Is The New Black*, Hil Malatino proposed a more complex look at the overall discourse of positive progress spurred by trans representation and visibility in shows like *Orange Is The New Black*. Malatino for instance explains that because she is framed "as a strong, black woman able to rise above the intersecting adversities she encounters," Sophia Burset represents a "transfeminine experience of the prison-industrial complex [that] has been softened, sugar-coated, and made more palatable to mainstream audiences" leading the show to "elide[], ignore[], and sidestep[] the realities of systemic, structural oppression that results in the maldistribution of life chances for trans women of color" (Malatino 2016).

racial replacement since, historically, "the term tipping point became commonplace in the 1950s as a precursor to the now familiar 'white flight'" (Weil 2023). In addition, in their introduction to *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Tourmaline, Eric Stanley and Johanna Burton write: "We know that when produced within the cosmology of racial capitalism, the promise of 'positive representation' ultimately gives little support or protection to many, if not most, trans and gender non-conforming people, particularly those who are low-income and/or of color—the very people whose lives and labor constitute the ground for the figuration of this moment of visibility" (2017: xv). Thinking about the tension between the positive potential that many think exists within representation and the intense contradiction it also contains (such as when this so-called tipping point coincides with an uptick of violence committed against trans people, and trans women of color more particularly), they highlight representation as a fundamental paradox. Along a similar line, Stephanie N. Berberick argues that there exists a "paradox of trans visibility" defined as "an apparatus that highlights some portions of existence while obscuring others and creating a hyperreal icon of transgender people that is not only near impossible to achieve but also dangerous to those who do not achieve it – through refusal or inaccessibility" (2018: 124). And, thinking through the crucial role that visibility plays for the state's surveillance practices, Toby Beauchamp also reminds us that "visibility is not a panacea but rather (…) a trap" because "one's visibility to surveillance mechanisms can allow those mechanisms to work more effectively" (2019: 16).

The visibility brought by this increased level of representation, then, also renders trans people known and identifiable by those who wish to surveil, control, contain, harm, and/or kill us, and the failure to fulfill the specific expectations set by the narrow ways in

which trans is represented becomes reason enough to justify such violence. Through and after this period of visibility, transness, or "transgenderism," as many anti-trans politicians and media call it, is now again in the forefront of discourses, as something to eliminate, to eradicate. Indeed, in early March 2023, in a speech given at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Michael Knowles, host on the conservative media company Daily Wire, which was created in 2015 by conversative media figure Ben Shapiro, stated that "transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely" (Knefel 2023). This statement was defended by other well-known conservative media hosts such as Candace Owens who endorsed Knowles' speech on her March 6th show and described it as "perfectly sensible" or Matt Walsh who, on March 7th, furthered the eliminationist rhetoric by stating "We are in a war against the most deranged ideology ever invented by the human race, plain and simple. We are fighting to eradicate the ideological equivalent of a parasitic infestation" (Tirrell 2023).

It may be easy to feel that we live in "unprecedented times" and that this level of anti-trans ideology and rhetoric is new and unique to our contemporary period. Although each situation is unique in its context and exact development, there sadly have been precedents regarding the patterns of targeting and calls for violence and elimination we are seeing today, and the rhetoric used by anti-trans politicians and media figures is hauntingly similar to that used at different times to target other groups. For instance, there has been an uptick in accusations that LGBTQIA+ folks, but especially trans people and drag queens, are "groomers" or "pedophiles." This has occurred both in daily online interactions on platforms like Twitter, with trending hashtags like #okgroomer (Selvaraj 2023), and in larger-scale smear campaigns such as those against Drag Race UK contestant Crystal, who recently won her libel suit against right-wing activist Laurence Fox (Muir 2024), or targeting Dr. Allyn

Walker, a trans sociology and criminology professor who resigned from Old Dominion University after their research on child abuse perpetration prevention sparked outrage. This rhetoric also works to present those espousing anti-trans views as "only wanting to protect children" and rhetorically repackages transphobic prejudice under a pretense of care. Research, including Dr. Walker's own content analysis of the hate mail they have received (2023), has shown that accusations of child sexual abuse echoes moral panics and homophobic campaigns such as those regularly occurring in the 1950s (Mogul et. al. 2011) or Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" in 1977.

On the other hand, Matt Walsh's reference to a 'parasitic infestation' in the excerpt above echoes the common dehumanizing rhetoric often used conjointly with fear of contamination and disease prior to genocides and large-scale killings. Some examples of this include descriptions of Black people as "monstrous beast[s]", "fiend[s]," or "ape-like" prior to, during, and after lynchings (as discussed in Livingston Smith 2021), anti-Semitic representations of Jews as rats in the 1930s and 40s (Fisk 2009), descriptions of Tutsis as roaches in Rwanda in the years leading to the 1994 genocide, or when Palestinians are described as "drugged cockroaches in a bottle" in 1983 by Rafael Eitan (as quoted in Said 1984) or as "human-animals" in 2023 by Israel Defense Minister Yoav Gallant (Livingstone Smith 2023). Importantly, in his 2021 monograph *Making Monsters*, David Livingstone Smith explains that, although dehumanization can be expressed through the use of dehumanizing terms and slurs like the one listed above, it is not just a rhetorical practice (13-14) or a metaphor (18-19), rather it encompasses "the social and psychological forces that produce and sustain certain forms of cruelty and injustice" (10). As such, people are not furthering dehumanization only when they utter dehumanizing speech, but instead, are

complicit through their acts, their inaction as bystanders who witness but do nothing, and the way they can capitalize on and benefit from dehumanization as a structuring system (through exploitation or appropriation, for instance, among other things). Because different targets of dehumanization are connected through dehumanization as an overall framework and psychosocial process, and because the world at large, and even more so the United States and Europe, has been historically and fundamentally structured through anti-Blackness, colonization and white supremacy, dehumanization always works through, and is facilitated by, racialization. This is important to keep in mind because, although anti-trans rhetoric and beliefs target all trans people, their material deployment impacts trans people of color, and especially Black trans people, at much higher rate and with much stronger intensity. When discussing transphobia and anti-trans attitudes, race must always remain front and center.

Faced with this resurgence of anti-transness and with the echoing rhetoric used, many like trans journalist Erin Reed (2024), professor and politician Robert Reich (2023), journalist Mitchell Zimmermann (2023), or singer and song-writer Cyndi Lauper (in Ring 2023) have drawn connections between current anti-trans backlash and the oppression that trans, queer, and gender non-conforming folks have experienced in 1930s-1940s Germany, at a time when the generally progressive climate of Weimar Germany, which saw vast improvements in trans care, acceptance, and visibility, was succeeded by conservative anti-trans and anti-queer crackdowns under Nazi Germany. Others, however, have called Holocaust analogies "dangerous" or a "rhetorical cudgel" that "shut[s] down productive, thoughtful discourse" (Friedberg 2018).

I am not here invested in proving how similar or different the political and social climate is for trans people living in these vastly distinct eras and geographical locations.

What I am interested in, however, is to take trans people seriously when such comparisons are heeded, in order to find ways to address our fears and anxieties and highlight survival strategies and community-sustaining practices that can help us navigate a difficult political and social landscape. For instance, if trans people are expressing that our contemporary period feels like Nazi Germany, then, I wish to locate and highlight trans ancestors and elders who lived through Nazi oppression and who managed to find love, joy, community, hope, and a life worth living, within the deep atmosphere of violence that was all around them. Doing so, I hope, will both center trans figures from the past that are too often forgotten and the "techniques of struggle" (Stanley 2021) that these trans folks employed to survive and underline the legacy and continuation of such trans techniques of struggle in our contemporary period.

Centrally, I thus here ask: what can we learn from our trans elders and ancestors and how can they help us through the hard times now and ahead? How can we explore the haunting connection between today and Nazi Germany as a way to both center the stories and lives of trans people living in Nazi Europe and those of trans people of color living under a climate of anti-trans terror in the US? More specifically for the purpose of this chapter, I highlight writing and poetry as a literary survival practice used by trans folks such as Liddy Bacroff, Lucy Salani, or Ovida Delect, to navigate Nazi Germany and survive the camps, whether for only a short time or for years. After first discussing the overall context in which trans people existed in Germany and Europe in the 1930s and 40s, I then highlight several trans figures and how they navigated anti-trans, racial, and anti-Semitic oppression and violence before and during World War II. Focusing more closely on French trans poet Ovida Delect, her conceptualization of poetry as "anti-death" and her development of an ethics of

"poévivre" (poeliving, or living poetically), I then examine the works of contemporary American trans-of-color poets such as Ryka Aoki, Caleb Luna, Arielle Twist, Coyote Park, or jaye simpson to ask: how can writing and poetry be used, by trans people under Nazi Germany or contemporary trans-of-color authors, as tools of survival, both material and imagined?

In this chapter, I thus contribute to an already existing conversation on trans poetry and poetics by highlighting the poetic work of some of our trans ancestors and bringing them into conversation with contemporary trans-of-color poets. I here intervene both in the field of trans poetry by shedding light on some of our trans ancestors, their writing practices, and their understanding of poetry and poetic writing as survival and as ethics, and in the field of Holocaust studies by bringing focus on trans deportees and survivors, who are often erased or forgotten. This erasure occurs not only because of broader dynamics regarding discussion of homosexuality and sexual oppression during the Holocaust and the representation and memorialization of trans people as cis and under their dead name and birth gender in historical and archival documents, but also as a consequence of explicitly anti-trans sentiments[31].

[31] For instance, anti-trans and trans-exclusionary radical feminist German graduate student Marie-Luise Vollbrecht argued on Twitter that describing trans people as victims of the Nazi State "mocks the true victims of the Nazi crimes" (quoted in Marhoefer 2023), which led others to use the hashtag "#MarieLeugnetNS-Verbrechen" ("Marie denies Nazi crimes") to describe her. She in turn filed a lawsuit against several accounts and NGOs who had used the hashtag. In November 2022, however, the court of Cologne ruled against her and officially recognized that trans people had indeed been victims of the Nazi State.

Trans People in Nazi Germany

Nazis burning books after raiding Hirschfeld's Institute

On May 6, 1933, a mere few months after Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, the Deutsche Studentenschaft, a merger of general student committees from all German universities mainly dominated by the National Socialist German Student's League, organize a raid of the Magnus Hirschfeld Institute of Sexology. A few days later, between 12000 and 25000 books and journals (according to Evans 2004: 375–377, 429–430 and Bartrop and Dickerman 2017: 457–458), as well as an even larger number of images from the institute's archive and libraries, are burnt by Nazis on Berlin's Opernplatz, destroying years' worth of research and countless irreplaceable resources on sexuality, gender, sexual behavior, and sexology. Violence against Magnus Hirschfeld, the founder and director of the institute, had been pervasive since 1920, when he was assaulted in Munich and left for dead. Many newspapers were calling for his death, such as the *Deutschnationale Jugendzeitung*, and others like *Der Stürmer,* published caricatures attacking his Jewish ancestry, his homosexuality, and his research. The climate was so unsafe for Hirschfeld that his public appearances had to be limited and he spent much of his time abroad. During the raid of the

institute, Hirschfeld was in Switzerland, and when the Berlin location was shut down, he tried to rebuild the institute in Paris. Failing to do so, he moved to Nice where he died in 1935. Other staff members of the institute fled Germany, were sent to labor and death camps, or died by suicide[32].

Although not entirely unproblematic as a medical space led by cis male doctors with specific views on gender, sex, and sexuality, the institute was known in Europe to be a place where trans people could access medical treatment and surgeries. Many of the first trans gender confirmation surgeries were performed there and several of the first trans people seeking care at the institute were subsequently employed or housed there. The inauguration of the Institute, in 1919, coincided with the beginning of a period of overall trans acceptance, "where a nascent, state-recognized trans identity constructed through medical, legal and cultural mediums" (Nunn 2023: 125) started to appear, accompanied by state-sanctioned forms of recognition such as legal name changes and the *Transvestitenschein* (transvestite certification), which Hirschfeld and others working at the institute lobbied for consistently. Although this period is often described as a golden age for queer and trans identities, with a proliferation of print media[33] and nightlife spaces like cabarets and clubs attracting people from all over the world to Berlin[34], and is often opposed to the following Nazi era of repression, arrest, and murder, a focus on trans folks also highlights continuities between the

[32] For instance, August Bessunger, a radiologist and urologist who started working for the institute in 1919, was arrested and interned from June to November 1943 before being sent to Auschwitz, where we lose trace of him. Karl Giese, who was Hirschfeld's life partner and a curator and archivist at the Institute, Arthur Kronfeld, a psychiatrist and university professor who helped found the institute, and Felix Abraham, sexologist and head of the sexual forensics department from 1929 to 1933, all committed suicide between 1937 and 1941. On the other hand, others like psychiatrist Berndt Götz, doctor and surgeon Ludwig Levy-Lenz, endocrinologist Bernard Schapiro, and physician Max Hodann survived by fleeing Germany.

[33] For instance, the magazine *Das 3. Geschlecht*, which ran between 1930 and 1932, is often credited as the first ever trans periodical and featured articles by trans people as well as many photographs and portraits.

[34] The club *Eldorado*, for instance, and its importance for trans and gender non-conforming people in the Weimar Republic, was highlighted in the 2023 documentary *Eldorado: Everything the Nazis Hate*

two periods as well as clear limitations regarding which ways to be trans were permissible, and which ones weren't (Nunn 2023). In addition, it is presumed that the extensive records kept by Hirschfeld at the Institute also helped Nazis identify queer and trans people to target, arrest, deport, or murder, a clear example of how visibility and recognition can quickly become weaponized with subsequent political changes and backlashes. Despite this, focusing on the Weimar Republic and the Institute does highlight that trans existence and experience are far from being only a contemporary post-1950s phenomenon and examining the subsequent Nazi period can help us remember the ways in which trans people have navigated and survived the "atmospheres of violence" (Stanley 2021) they were living in, even finding joy and love within them.

Still from Lothar Golte's 1933 film *Mysterium des Geschlechtes* featuring
Toni Ebel, Charlotte Charlaque, and Dora Richter

Although archival traces of many of these trans folks were lost during the raid of the institute, the subsequent burning of documents and books, and for some of them because of their extermination in concentration camps under birth names and genders assigned at birth, we do have historical records of some of them. Danish painter Lili Elbe (1882-1931) is probably the most well-known trans woman who received transition care at the Hirschfeld

Institute. Due to her notoriety as a painter, and her memoirs, published posthumously in 1931 in Danish and in 1933 in English under the title *Man into Woman: an Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, she is often memorialized as the earliest recipients of gender-affirming surgery. According to the online Trans Timeline published by Trans Media Watch, it is German trans woman Dora Richter (1891-unknown), however, who was the first to ever undergo gender confirmation surgery (Trans Media Watch). She was hired at the Hirschfeld institute and worked there up until the day it was raided.[35] Among her friends and colleagues were Toni Ebel (1881-1961) and Charlotte Charlaque (1892-1963), two German trans women and T4T lovers[36]. They were both also working at the institute and managed to survive by first fleeing to the Czech Republic, and then to the United States for Charlaque, who lived in New York and found some fame as an off-Broadway actress until her death[37], while Toni remained in Europe and found some success as a painter in post-war East Germany.

In a 1955 article written by Charlotte Charlaque under the pseudonym Carlotta Baroness von Curtius, two other German trans women from that time are mentioned, although there was very little else I could find about them: Hertha Haase, a "fashionable dressmaker" and Arna Engel, "one of Germany's leading portraitists" (Baroness von Curtius 1955: 27). In one of her "History Lesson" pieces for the Spring 2000 edition of *Transgender*

[35] Some have assumed that Dora Richter was killed during the raid of the Institute in 1933, but the 1939 Census records from Prague's National Archives list her living in her birthplace of Ryžovna as of May 17th of that year. There are no traces of her in the historical record after that year and it is still unclear how she lived the rest of her life.

[36] Charlaque and Ebel are an early example of the life-sustaining trans-centric relationships trans people often created with each other. Their relationship highlights the power and strength of T4T as a life orientation and commitment, especially since Ebel converted to Judaism for Charlaque who was Jewish, even with the rise of Nazism and intensified anti-semitism in 1930s Europe.

[37] Charlotte Charlaque's death was memorialized in the February 14, 1963 edition of the *Brooklyn Heights Press* under her Anglicized name of Charlotte Curtis, where she was also dubbed "Queen of the [Brooklyn Heights] Promenade."

Tapestry, Gwendolyn Ann Smith also briefly mentions someone named Lotte Engleman that Charlotte Charlaque may have met during her time at the Hirschfeld Institute, although not much else exists about this person in the existing archive (Smith 2000: 30). Magnus Hirschfeld's 1910 monograph *Die Transvestiten*, which was translated and published in English in 1991 by Michael Lombardi-Nash, lists 17 additional cases of both transfeminine and transmasculine people whom Hirschfeld met, corresponded with extensively, and/or interviewed, including famed dancer and performer Willi Pape (1893-1967). An exhaustive description of all the participants is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter.

Photograph of Hertha Haase published in the *Berliner Morgenpost* on March 28, 1930

Although not connected to the Hirschfeld institute in any known way, we do also know of Charlotte Von Mahlsdorf (1928-2002), mainly because of her successful museum, the Gründerzeit Museum, and her role in cinematic, artistic, and queer circles in post-WWII East Berlin. Von Mahlsdorf and her 1992 memoirs *Ich bin meine eigene Frau* (translated and published in 1995 under the title *I Am My Own Woman*) are the focus of Brian James Baer's 2016 article, which highlights the complicated figure than von Malhsdorf was. A

documentary of the same name, directed by Rosa von Praunheim, was released in 1992 and a play, *I Am My Own Wife*, written by Doug Wright premiered off-Broadway in 2003, receiving the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2004 and being regularly performed around the world since then[38]. Forced by her father, a local Nazi leader, to join the Hitler Youth, she murdered him in 1944, was sentenced to four years in prison, but was subsequently released when the war ended. Her survival means both before, during, and after the War was to forage for furniture and antiques in homes left empty by Jewish people who were running from Nazi persecution or arrested and sent to concentration camps, or by German families who left East Germany after communists took over. Even after the War, she experienced harassment due to her transness, and her museum was threatened by the government and targeted by neo-Nazis in 1991, after the fall of communism in East Germany. However, police documents released in the late 90s also revealed her status as an informant and collaborator for the East German Secret Police (the Stasi). As such, von Mahlsdorf represents a complex trans ancestor, at once subjected to and complicit with state violence and persecution, whose life story through the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, Communist East Germany, and postcommunist reunified Germany became "thoroughly entangled with – and framed by – the metanarratives inspired by the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe" (Baer 2016) that the West wanted to tell about itself and its own embrace of modern sexual and gender diversity.

[38] *I Am My Own Wife* even came to Santa Barbara in early 2016 where it was performed by the Ensemble Theater Company at the New Vic for two weeks (February 6–21).

Photographs of Gerd R. taken in December 1941 at the Wittenau Heilstätter (as found in Nunn 2023)

There is also Gerd R., the trans woman who is at the center of Zavier Nunn's 2023 article, and whose complex persecution, rehabilitation, and reframing as a sexual pervert by the Nazi police after her death sheds light on how race (not just whiteness, but Germanness or "Aryanness" specifically), disability, and the ability to perform skilled work, intersected with so-called sexual or gender deviance (as the two were intertwined in Nazi understanding) to create complex nuances in how trans folks were able and allowed to live livable or unlivable lives or were sent to death. Malhoerf also shows with great precision how "Aryanness" impacted the ways queer and trans people were targeted and seen by the Nazi government (2023). As Nunn shows, even a single "Aryan" trans person, such as Gerd R. herself, could be treated differently and met with harsh repression or relative leniency at different times and for reasons that could be quite unique and situation-specific. For instance, although she was detained and interned in various prisons and concentration camps between 1937 and 1940, and although this repeated punishment did not influence the behavior that had justified such punishment in the eyes of the state (her wearing of women's clothes, her history of masochistic sexual behavior, and her tendency to be found in public trash bins

naked or almost naked), Gerd R. was met with a certain level of clemency when she was again charged with public indecency in 1941. During that trial, Gerd R. was deemed able to be cured and rehabilitated, mainly because she was "Aryan" and able to perform skilled labor, and was sent to the Berlin-Wittenau Medical Center instead. Although presented as a space for care and rehabilitation, because transness was the disease to be cured, Gerd R. was met with transphobic violence, was routinely misgendered, and was forced to cut her hair and wear men's clothes for the year and a half she stayed there. On March 12, 1943, Gerd R. was found hanging in one of the medical center's bathrooms. It is still unclear if she committed suicide, accidentally hung herself during a pleasurable act of self-asphyxiation, or if the cause of her "death lies somewhere in the grey area between accident and intention" (Nunn 2023: 154). In the end, although medical facilities act as carceral institutions of their own and hinge on repressive logics of containment and surveillance similar to those of prisons and concentration camps, they still indexed a different orientation from the state to Gerd R. as a potentially valuable enough member of society so that rehabilitation was deemed possible and preferrable to mere extermination.

Liddy Bacroff on November 20, 1931

Other trans people were not met with such an orientation from the state. Liddy Bacroff (1908-1943), for instance, was intensely criminalized starting in 1924, when she was only 16. Between that year and 1943, the year of her death, Bacroff was arrested and imprisoned many times for reasons as varied as theft, trespassing, "homosexual acts," public indecency (related to her wearing women's clothes, which was seen as cross-dressing), or commercial indecency (related to her occupation as a sex worker). While imprisoned, Bacroff wrote two longer semi-autobiographical pieces: *Freiheit! (Die Tragödy einer homosexuellen Liebe)* and *Ein Erlebnis als Transvestit. Das Abenteuer einer Nacht in der Transvestitenbar Adlon!*[39], but in all, penned "at least ten distinct but often interwoven works of creative semi-autobiography" (Ashton 2024: 92). Although she was looking to undergo "voluntary" castration as an attempt to prove herself cured in the eyes of the state, Bacroff was identified as incurable by a doctor in 1938, mainly because she desired men and practiced sex work, which sealed her fate as someone undesirable and unworthy of life. After being imprisoned at several different prisons, penitentiaries and detention centers, Bacroff was sent to the Mauthausen[40] concentration camp in late 1942, where she was exterminated on January 6, 1943 (Rosenkranz and Bollmann n.d.). Looking at Liddy Bacroff also highlights how gender and sexual repression continued after the fall of Nazi Germany. Indeed, in 1946, the Hamburg Prosecutor's Office, who had sent Bacroff to Mauthausen in 1942, apparently having lost trace of her, contacted her mother to ask if she had seen or heard

[39] Respectively, *Freedom! (The Tragedy of a Homosexual Love)* and *An Experience as a Transvestite. One Night of Adventure in the Transvestite Bar Adlon!*

[40] Although some women and children were sent to Mauthausen, this wouldn't happen until September 1944. As such, when Bacroff was sent there, it was still a concentration camp for men only. Although we don't have access to any information regarding Bacroff's time there, and although a women's extermination camp would have still resulted in her murder at the hands of the state, we can imagine the additional layer of distress Bacroff felt as a trans woman surrounded by men there.

from Bacroff. Records show that their goal was to locate Bacroff to arrest her once more and imprison her, highlighting a clear continuation in the criminalization of gender variance, homosexuality, and sex work between Nazi Germany and Post-WWII West Germany (Ashton 2024: 80).

In 1939, trans man Gerd Kubbe was also sent to a concentration camp, the women's one located in Lichtenburg, because he was wearing men's clothing, but was fortunately released several months later. As a result of a medical examination that he had to undergo there, Gerd Kubbe was granted a permission by the Gestapo to wear male clothing and to change his name, but remained under constant police surveillance (Caplan 2011)[41]. According to Marhoefer 2023, two other trans women named H. Bode and Toni Simon were also arrested, convicted, and imprisoned by Nazis for "public nuisance" and "homosexual acts." Hamburg officials sent Bode to the Buchenwald concentration camp[42], where she was exterminated in 1943, while the last document we can find in Toni Simon's file also recommended sending her to a concentration camp.

Lucy Salani at home – Still from the 2011 documentary *Essere Lucy*

[41] In this 2011 article, Caplan discusses several other cases of people assigned female at birth who were arrested, detained, or prosecuted for their wearing of male clothing, such as those of Agnes S., Gerd W., Katharina T., Louise S. or Alex S.

[42] https://www.stolpersteine-hamburg.de/en.php?&LANGUAGE=EN&MAIN_ID=7&p=31&BIO_ID=1861

As Nazi Germany created alliances or invaded and occupied other countries, more and more queer and trans people came under the violent impact of its repression. In fascist Italy, Lucy Salani (1924-2023) was drafted in the Italian Army in August 1943. According to the two books written about her life (Romano 2009, 2011), after deserting a first time and subsequently coming out of desertion, Salani was sent to be a part of the Nazi German army. There, she deserted once again, returned to Italy, and managed to hide for several months, surviving thanks to sex work. She was soon arrested during a sting operation, incarcerated, tried, and sentenced to death. She managed to convince German general Albert Kesselring to grant her a pardon and was sent to the labor camp of Bernau instead. She escaped again, but ultimately was caught and sent to the Dachau concentration camp. She managed to survive months of repeated torture and even a mass shooting on the day the camp was liberated by American troops in April 1945. She spent the rest of her life being a staunch anti-fascist and advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights, although she suffered from continued transphobic policies and attitudes from the Italian government and was even barred from residing in any retirement homes by the Italian administration, because she wouldn't be allowed to share bathrooms with women or men, her trans status placing her, in their eyes, outside of the gender binary (Baret 2018). Two books were written (Romano 2009, 2011) and three documentaries (Romano 2011, Amelio 2014, Botrugno and Coluccini 2021) made about her life. Salani was the only known Italian trans person to have survived the Nazi concentration camp.

Ovida Delect by the sea – Still from the 1986 documentary *Appelez-moi Madame*

In 1940, after a short war between France and Germany, France signs an armistice. Following it, the country is divided in two parts: a German-occupied zone in the North and the West, and a French-governed zone in the South, which collaborated extensively with Nazis. Then in high-school at the Lycee Malherbe of Caen, in the German-occupied zone, trans woman Ovida Delect (1926-1996) creates a communist youth resistance group in her school with her friends. She poses as a supporter of Nazi collaboration to infiltrate the National Popular Youth, a branch of the National Popular Rally, one of the main French collaborationist parties, in order to steal important documents and spread misinformation, leading to major disturbances and chaos within the party. Following these actions, Delect and several of her friends are arrested by the Gestapo on February 23, 1944, and sent to the Einsatzkommandos HQ at 44 rue des Jacobins. Despite being tortured for days, Delect never reveals the names of her comrades. In early April 1944, Delect is deported to the German camp of Neuengamme. This was the last convoy of deportees leaving Caen for concentration camps.

The physical, mental, and emotional violence that Delect had to endure at Neuengamme was incredibly intense, as described in her autobiographical work (Delect 1982, 1991, 1994, 1996) and in the "Constellations brisées" online archive[43]. It is only after a harrowing experience through a death march in the cold of winter that the prisoners of Neuengamme ended up being "liberated." After the war and her return to Caen, Delect becomes a literature professor and a prolific writer and poet. By the time of her death in 1996, she had published 32 poetry books, 2 collections of fairy-tales, 6 novels, 4 autobiographies, and 7 musical CDs and cassettes. In 1986, Delect, alongside her wife Huguette and her adult son, are featured in the documentary-film *Appelez-moi Madame* (Romand 1986). Although it is credited as a groundbreaking documentary by some, the visibility that it brought her was accompanied with transphobic prejudice and discrimination and made life unlivable for her in her tiny village of Saint-Pierre-Alizay. She was forced to move to Paris, where she lived alone in poverty for a few years, before moving back in with her wife in a small house in Essonne, until her death in 1996. Similarly to Salani, Ovida Delect was the only known French trans woman to have survived the Holocaust.

In addition to providing a trans-centric account of World War II and the Holocaust, highlighting the lives of these several trans people underlines the importance that creativity and self-expression held for them when surrounded by incredibly intense violence and life-threatening circumstances. Several of them turned to art (Lili Elbe, although she stopped painting after starting to live her life as a woman, Arna Engel, Toni Ebel), fashion and dress-making (Hertha Haase), dancing and performing in cabarets (Liddy Bacroff, Willi Pape), acting (Charlotte Charlaque), or to the pleasurable self-expression as gendered subjects and

[43] https://constellationsbrisees.net/portfolio/parcours-de-ovida-delect/

objects of desire that sex work granted them with (Liddy Bacroff, H. Bode, Toni Simon, Lucy Salani). Of particular interest for this chapter are the trans people who turned to writing as a creative form of self-expression and survival (Liddy Bacroff, Lucy Salani, Ovida Delect) and more specifically those like Ovida Delect who used poetry to navigate survival and find the strength, hope, and inner energy to survive deportation, incarceration, and torture in the Nazi concentration camp.

Trans Poetry and Trans Poetics

So why poetry? Why would trans people turn to this specific form of expression? What does poetry afford that other forms of writing do not? And what are some of the specific characteristics and literary strategies found in trans poetry that have given rise to an identifiable trans poetics?

Because of themes and tensions within it, experiences of gender-crossing found in trans, gender-non-conforming or intersex narratives have already been theorized and conceptualized as exceeding the bounds of traditional narrative structure. For instance, discussing Herculine Barbin's "Mes Souvenirs," the memoirs of an intersex person raised as a girl in 19th century France and reassigned as male in early adulthood, Crapanzano (1996) explains that not only can Barbin's life (and other trans lives) be seen as a *gender* issue, but it can also "be understood in terms of a loss of a *genre* – the loss of those conventionalized discursive strategies by which a man (or woman) of Barbin's provincial, bourgeois background could 'meaningfully' articulate his (her) life – or past, giving seemingly full expression to his (her) self" (Crapanzano, 1996, 107, my emphasis). While Labov's study of narrative highlights its need for "one active teller" or a "temporal and causal organization"

(Labov 2013: 7), both Crapanzo (1996) and Livia (2001) argue that trans narratives, especially when autobiographical, contain an inevitable split between narrating Is (the person narrating the story, also called *locuteur-L* in Ducrot's theorization of the polyphony of enunciation [1984: 193–94]) and narrated Is (the person created by themselves for themselves in the narrative, which Ducrot coins *locuteur-λ*). This split, this gap between narrating I and narrated I, is present in all narratives of the self, but is usually narratively acceptable because temporal differences between *locuteurs* render physical and mental changes possible; for trans, gender-non-conforming and intersex people, however, because gender isn't necessarily traditionally conceived as a mutable category, and because the gender crossing may be visibly indexed on the page or in speech through changing grammatical and linguistic gender, the narrative, in its traditional definitions and expectations, cannot hold. Although Prosser (1998) argues that the autobiographical narrative resolves a lack of coherence between present self and past self by explaining all the gradual gendered changes that happened, the first chapter of this monograph has already highlighted issues with this claim and the impossibility for traditional narratives to provide trans people with the discursive tools to tell their stories and heal.

Within this context, literary scholars have proposed poetry to be a tailored genre for writing about transness due to its flexibility regarding narrative forms and norms. For instance, in a short keyword entry for the 2014 "Postposttranssexual" special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Rebekah Edwards explains that trans poetics "seek[s] to navigate the limits of the (im)possible" (2014: 252) and quotes several contributions by trans poets to *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderquer Poetry and Poetics*, the first-ever collection of poetry and reflections about poetics by trans and genderqueer writers, to

propose a succinct but complex definition of trans poetics. Trans poetics communicates "complex, unstable, contradictory relations between body and soul, social self and psyche" (Ladin 2013: 306), addresses the "resistance of the inarticulate, in a language that situates" (edwards 2013: 325), gives poetic form to "a body that has been historically illegible" (Shipley 2013: 197). Building from such theorizations, Andrea Abi-Karam and Kaye Gabriel develop trans poetics as "the project of imagining and making actual a totally inverted world" (2020:2), which forms itself against both "the trap of representation" and "the conception of trans literature as a self-interested discourse narrowly focused on securing the rights and recognitions of the state" (3).

Here, the contradictions and gaps that would be problematic in a traditional understanding of narratives become a core component and a constitutive element of the trans poetics expressed in trans poetry. Through the poetic, trans reality can actualize itself in a literary form that explores a less explicit relationship with narrative realism and whose literary devices allow for an expression of meaning that is less anchored in traditional narrative temporality and causality. The inverted world that Abi-Karam and Gabriel refer to may also point towards a potential for trans poetics to express truths about our trans worlds without being tethered to the cis world through narrative expectations and genres that have historically been tied to a cis audience and a struggle for receiving care and rights from a cis-dominated medical and political establishment.

Coupled with theoretical conversations about trauma as a phenomenon that disrupts memory, temporality and narrative causality (Freud 1920, Felman & Laub 1992, Caruth 1995, Caruth 1996, Luckhurst 2008), this conceptualization of trans poetics may explain why poetry seems to be a chosen tool of trans literary expression for survivors of genocidal

violence like Ovida Delect and for trans people of color in the contemporary U.S., who find themselves in thick atmospheres of violence. Looking now at Ovida Delect's poetry to examine forms of trans poetics that have helped her survive through oppressive and violent times, this chapter contributes to the above conversation on trans poetics by thinking through Delect's conceptualization of poetry as anti-death and of the ethics of poeliving. From there, I also locate constellations and echoes connecting her to contemporary American trans of color poets. By doing so, I am here developing trans poetics as a trans "technique of struggle" against the "atmospheres of violence" (Stanley 2021) surrounding trans life and trans life of color, both in the past and in our contemporary present.

Poetry as Anti-Death and the Trans Ethics of Poeliving

In her 1996 autobiography, Ovida Delect describes the context in which she came to see poetry as anti-death. Imprisoned in the German concentration camp of Neuengamme, Delect spends months being starved, beaten, humiliated. At that time already, she explains that, although she had neither paper nor pencil, writing poetry in her mind allowed her to tether herself to a feminine interior world that provided some contrast with and protection from the harsh realities of her deportation to and detainment in a men's concentration camp. Towards the end of her time at Neuengamme, she is forced with many others on a death march, an aimless march barefoot through the snow, where everyone who falls or is too slow is executed by the Nazis. While trying to focus on always keeping going and on surviving this harrowing experience, Delect composes the poem "Peine" in her mind, which she credits for her survival that day. She writes: "Au rythme d'un ahan d'obstination, d'un ahan vraiment sans joie, naquit en moi, strophe après strophe, 'PEINE'. / Finalement, ce fut comme une

drole de berceuse qui m'aidait à ne pas voir, ne pas sentir, à moins souffrir"[44] (Delect 1996: 181). It's in this context that she explains, on the next page, that: "La poésie était l'anti-mort" (182); poetry was anti-death. Although Delect does not necessarily develop this idea right there in her autobiography, examining the poem that led her to define poetry as anti-death can help us identify specific elements of this poetics of anti-death.

Peine – Original	Peine – My translation
Si trop battue Je laisse un jour Pencher sur neige L'âme violette	If too beatenf I one day leave Tilting on the snow The purple soul
Si trop battue Je laisse un jour Tourner le ciel D'acier mortel	If too beatenf I one day leave Spinning the deadly Steel sky
Si trop battue Je laisse un jour Des mains crispées Griffer la glace	If too beatenf I one day leave Tensed up hands Clawing at the ice
Si trop battue Je laisse un jour Un long corps bleu Porté à deux	If too beatenf I one day leave A long blue body Carried by two

Although our first hunch may be to see anti-death in literal opposition to death, as its negation, its denial, as a form of escapism far away from the deathly circumstances and atmospheres of violence surrounding Delect, looking closely at the poem highlights that Delect did not write this specific poem, which she identifies as an origin story for her conceptualization of poetry as anti-death, in this way. Instead, death is ever-present. It is both

[44] "To the rhythm of an obstinate panting, a truly joyless panting, was born in me, stanza after stanza, 'PEINE.' / In the end, it was like some kind of a lullaby which helped me not see, not feel, suffer less" (my translation).

the context from which her poetry is born and into which it is intervening. Instead of imagining a life away from death or life-threatening situations, Delect's "Peine" imagines death, repeating "if too beaten / I one day leave" four times at the beginning of each stanza, while never providing a "then" clause that could counter these imagined deaths. Interestingly, the verb "battre," here in the feminine past participle adjective form "battue," can both mean "to beat" as in "to beat up" or "to beat" as in "to defeat" someone; Delect thus imagines herself being fully beaten, but also fully defeated and giving up. Crucially here, however, the imagined death of the "I" is happening in the feminine, the "e" at the end of "battue" indexing the feminine in French. The material death surrounding Delect's daily life in the male space of the concentration camp she was deported to and her potential death as someone whom history will remember as a man (if there'd even be a trace of her life and death) is here opposed to her imagined death in the feminine. So how can a poem about death be a tool of anti-death?

It is specifically Delect's use of the feminine, I argue, that makes this poem about death a poem of anti-death. Indeed, imagining a feminine subject that would die presupposes the existence of a living feminine subject to begin with. As such, this imagined future feminine death actualizes and renders real a feminine life; one that Delect hasn't lived yet. Dying right there and then, while walking for miles in the snow, without having lived life as a woman, becomes impossible and fuels Delect, pushing her to keep going forward. If she hoped to one day be "battue," then she couldn't die right then. This is how death here becomes anti-death. Just as Stanley explains when discussing atmospheres of violence, "there is no escape, no outside or place to hide" (2021: 16). Similarly for Delect, the violence in the camp is so all-encompassing that escapism is not an option, and a poetics of anti-death has to

enact itself through death, locating within it the ways in which transness can intervene and provide a way forward and towards a future.

After surviving the death march and returning to France, Delect continues to build her poetics of anti-death through her prolific poetic work and her focus on lives which haven't yet or ever been lived remains. For instance, *Ces fleurs qui ont du sang*, a collection of poems she published in 1958, is not only dedicated to all who did not survive and who did not get to live the lives they were hoping to live ("to the memory of the dead, whom we must not forget" [7]), but also to an unnamed woman ("the one[f] who shares my joys and sorrows" [7]), which we could interpret as Delect herself, that is as the feminine self Delect hasn't been able to live yet, but who exists within and shares everything with the author. Later in the collection, Delect addresses that feminine self directly, stating in a now hopeful if-clause, "Later, later, who knows where we will go… / If the horizon takes on your smile…" (98). While the horizon is a spatial metaphor, it also calls into being a sense of futurity, a direction towards which one journeys, which is emphasized by the use of "later" twice and the future auxiliary "will." All of these elements are then related to the image of a smile, but not just anyone's smile, the feminine self's smile, thus actualizing the feminine self not only as existing but crucially too, as happy. Delect is longing for a feminine future.

That the tone of Delect's poetry shifts from the death of the camps to the joy of trans self-actualization is not necessarily a contradiction, but rather aims at merging life and death together within a poetics of anti-death that would highlight the complex spectrum that exists between life and death. For instance, is life in a death camp surrounded by never-ending and all-encompassing death a form of living? Is life in a gender that is not your own, forced to be someone else you're not, a form of living? What are the different forms of death that occur

on the daily and how can we think about them in new ways once our focus is turned away from seeing death solely as the negation of life?

Later, in her 1978 collection of poems titled *Ovida dans la grande fête*, Delect continues to explore how her poetics of anti-death breaks away with a vision of life and death as two binary opposites. Indeed, in another poem entirely written with feminine forms, Delect states "I am like[f] / What I have wanted[f] to be / I want to abandon myself whole[f] to the lucid madness of Love / Returning to infinity / To livedie there / To livedielive there." Instead of opposing living and dying, Delect merges them twice into single word forms: "vivremourir" and "vivremourirvivre" in the original. These two new verbs and actions become the foundation for Delect's definition of love and infinity as they both represent where Delect will livedie and livedielive. This poem represents a shift in Delect's orientation; after all, more than 30 years have passed since Delect was writing "Peine" to survive in Neuengamme. In this poem, she is still imagining death, but the circumstances around it are quite different: she isn't surrounded by violence and pain, but instead is abandoning herself to love, she is not imagining herself giving up, but rather letting go and releasing control. Death is still present, but does not represent the same outcome. The beginning of the excerpt points us towards a potential explanation: Delect is now who she always wanted to be, she has been living as her feminine self. In "Peine," life in the feminine hadn't happened, which meant that death, in the masculine, was unwelcomed and could be mentally thwarted off by imagining a feminine death. Now, in 1978, life in the feminine has been lived, thus rendering death an acceptable outcome, maybe even a welcomed one. Dying as a woman means that a life as a woman has happened, which is why dying and living merge as one, self-actualizing each other. Poetry here acts as anti-death not necessarily because it renders death non-

existent, but rather because it makes death less totalizing and terrifying by encompassing lived life within it.

It is through this poetics of anti-death that Delect then develops her vision for an ethics of 'poévivre,' that is, her invitation to "poelive" or "live poetically." Indeed, in the same collection of poems, at the beginning of it, Delect states in all-caps, in a section labeled "post-scriptum": "HOWEVER, POETIC LIFE IS NECESSARY TO ME, ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY, TO REALLY BE AMONG OTHERS, AMONG ALL OF YOU" (1978: 15). Poetic life here is what makes being even possible, it is a pre-requisite for being, and for being in community. Indeed, Delect's here situates herself twice, first among non-descript others, and then within a community of people that encompasses those of us who are reading her words. It is clear then that what she calls "poetic life" or "poeliving" is necessary for her existence as a trans woman and for the building of a community among which Delect can be herself. Later in this collection, Delect continues to discuss this concept of "poeliving" as a "grande fête," a big party, a poetic celebration of life, of love, of joy. The tone of many of her poems is bucolic, light, joyous, and highlights mundane elements of the natural environment, the birds, the flowers, the plants, that ground her in the here and the now. By getting to live as who she is, and by seeing her life through a poetic lens, Delect is fighting death and points us towards a technique of struggle we can use to navigate violence and find survival, love, community, and joy.

To poelive or live poetically is an act of self-liberation and self-affirmation and furthers the poetics of anti-death found in "Peine" into all of Delect's life and writing. In her 1996 autobiography, Delect explains: "What is true, is that the act of 'poeliving,' of being able to free myself, to affirm myself through writing, helped[f] me to bear heavy loads, to not

let myself crush under pain, to not end my days, to gnaw at the height of obstacles and overcome them" (293). We see in this quote that poeliving is here indeed a tool of survival and helped Delect combat a lot of negative emotions and experiences ("heavy loads," "pain," "obstacles") and very literally facilitated her survival by helping her to not kill herself. Although Delect did not necessarily find fame or monetary success, writing still bettered her life materially. However, it did not cancel out or provide a full escape from the violence of the transphobic world she lived in; indeed, the "obstacles" are not fully dissolved, but rather they are slowly eroded by the power of anti-death and poeliving through writing. For instance, after the realization of a movie about her life, Delect had to leave the countryside due to transphobia and move to Paris. The act of poeliving did not erase this problem, but through her affirmation of transness in writing, Delect was able to find community and connect with other trans people and feminist circles, which bettered her living situation for a little while.

Although Delect is the only known trans woman to have survived the Holocaust, and her experience is quite specific, she is far from being unique, and her use of writing and poetry as anti-death and as an affirmation of poetic living can be understood as a technique of struggle that many other trans people in other situations and circumstances can use to navigate the atmospheres of violence around them. As the opening of this chapter highlighted, there are many felt echoes for trans people, and especially trans people of color, between Nazi Europe and the contemporary U.S. Although Delect was a white French trans woman, I now use anti-death and poeliving as two trans literary lenses to think through the ways in which contemporary American trans of color writers navigate daily transphobic violence and find survival, community, and joy through the writing of poetry. This is not to

say that these writers are explicitly thinking about their writing practice in the same way as Delect did or that they tie their trans existence to hers through a genealogy of trans poets; instead, I just explore here what different lights and shadows might be cast over the poetry of trans of color poets by examining it through these specific lenses and by seriously taking into consideration the power that poetry can hold over the material realities around us. As Lorde said, "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (1985). As such, I now turn to this light, as it shines through the atmospheres of violence surrounding trans-of-color life in contemporary U.S.

Poeliving in America: Poetics of Anti-Death in Contemporary U.S. Trans of Color Poetry

Since it started collecting data in 2008, the Trans Murder Monitoring project has reported a total of 4255 murders of trans people worldwide, for an average of 284 a year, and with a peak of 375 killings in 2021.[45] Although demographic data is not available for every one of these years, the data we do have highlights that the overwhelming majority of trans people who are murdered are trans women and femmes (94% in 2023), Black, brown, and racialized (80% in 2023), that almost half of those murdered worldwide are sex workers (48%) and almost half of those in Europe are migrants (45%). Death is everywhere around us and for some of us, even more so; as Asian-American trans poet Ryka Aoki wrote in a poem in 2015:

[45] These numbers only represent murders which are reported on and victims who are reported as trans. Many more trans people die each year but are either not reported on or misgendered and deadnamed after death. In addition, suicides are not included in this data.

"Don't know / what else I've learned, / except we know / a lot of dead people" (12). For many too, the centuries of colonial assimilation and genocide mean that entire gendered ways to feel and be with the world died alongside the ancestors. Trans people of color in contemporary U.S. exists within an atmosphere of violence whose specific elements differ from Delect's situation in the camp but whose overarching quality of ever-present death remains quite similar. Just like for Delect, death is the context from which trans of color poets write and into which their poetry intervenes. Indeed, although Aoki first expresses a desire for poetry to be an escape, to form a space where one can forget about the chaos and violence of the world, she quickly notes: "You can spend lifetimes waiting for a place like that" (xiv). The atmospheres of violence around trans of color life are inescapable, there is nowhere to go where its reach does not extend. It is not just a singular villain or a couple of obstacles to overcome, it instead turns trans of color living into an existence where "life itself becomes the enemy" (xiv), where the personal becomes subsumed under the statistical and the structural. For Aoki it is in this context that "poetry most matters, not through its ability to offer escape, but in its ability to transform one's surrounding and link even God and eternity to one's coffee-mug search for a shopping list, significance, and truth" (xvi). Poetry is anti-death here insofar as it gives the self its significance, through a symbolic reorganizing of the world's structuring order in which ungraspable scales collapse into the groundedness of everyday living, "into something manageable" (xv).

Alexis Rivera (1977-2012) and Donna Ostrowsky (1986-2013)

Intervening into the statistical orientation that the world has towards trans of color life and death, Aoki dedicates her whole collection of poems to two of her close trans friends, "Alexis and Donna," that is, Alexis Rivera, who died in 2012 from complications related to HIV/AIDS, and Donna Ostrowsky, who died by suicide in 2013. In this collection, her poetry continuously thinks through the death of her friends and so many others, through her grief and mourning, through her own relation to death as a trans woman of color, as a survivor of child abuse, as someone witnessing gun violence, and through the myriads of ways this death actualizes itself atmospherically in the mundane and the daily. Her poetic intervention, however, does not lay only in a metabolization of grief and mourning on the page so as to keeping living and surviving. Instead, Aoki also questions the mechanisms of grieving we continue to repeat, again, and again, which ultimately do little to address the reasons why we need to grieve in the first place. Our deaths are cyclical and our mourning, because of the way it has become integral to the atmosphere of violence we are in, does little to break this cycle. Where some might see our vigils, our marches in memory of her or him or them, as the tangible actions that will lead to a revolution or a drastic change into our trans existence,

Aoki describes it instead as “A blood sport.” After all, “dead queers are easier to pray to, / Because they don’t talk back / and kill the buzz” (31).

Elsewhere, Ryka Aoki critiques how Transgender Days of Remembrance (TDOR) have become institutionalized but bring about little change, sometimes even furthering violence onto specific kinds of trans people. TDOR was created in 1999 to fight off how quickly trans murder victims were forgotten and to memorialize the murders of three Black trans women in Massachusetts: Chanelle Picket, who was strangled in 1995 and whose killer was acquitted of murder, Rita Hester, who was stabbed to death in her home in 1998, and Monique Thomas who was murdered in 1998 as well. The first TDOR happened on November 20th, 1999, the anniversary of Chanelle Pickett’s murder, and is organized on that day every year since in countless cities around the world. TDOR ceremonies, at least in the American iterations that I am familiar with, consists in vigils where audience participants, regardless of their race or their gender modality (cis or trans), take turn reciting the names, and sometimes the age, country of residence, or city, of every trans person murdered around the world that past year.

Chanelle Pickett (center) and her twin sister Gabrielle (left); Rita Hester (right); sadly, no picture of Monique Thomas could be located

Many critiques have been made against Trans Day of Remembrance as a yearly memorial institution in LGBTQIA+ circles[46], due to the ways in which, among other things, it tends to collapse the death and violence experienced by those murdered only under the umbrella of transness and transphobia. Sarah Lamble, for instance, argues that, at TDOR events, "deracialized accounts of violence produce seemingly innocent White witnesses who can consume these spectacles of domination without confronting their own complicity in such acts" (2008: 25). The emphasis on trans community, or trans solidarity, and the overall fuzziness of its definition and exact borders, allows attendees to ignore the ways in which other power differentials and privileges make them complicit with the racist, white supremacist, and colonial structures that act as a foundation for transphobia and transphobic violence and leads the intensity of its impact to be focused mainly on racialized people. Through this deracialization of trans murder victims, "trans women of color act as resources – both literally and metaphorically – for the articulation and visibility of a more privileged transgender subject" (Snorton and Haritaworn 2019: 71). After consistant use of Black death by white activists and academics, the deracialized trans subject becomes worthy of protection and warrants the creation of laws and bills which often further violence against racialized folks by identifying non-white or migrant populations as likelier perpetrator of anti-trans violence, labeling non-white neighborhoods as dangerous and in need of gentrification, and funneling more people into the prison-industrial complex. In an interview with Viviane Namaste (2005), transgender and sex-worker activist and community-organizer Mirha-Soleil Ross also critiques the sex-worker erasure that often occurs in trans memorialization

[46] Of course, not all TDOR events necessarily act these ways and in some specific iterations, they may reflect decolonial, intersectional, and abolitionist commitments. This critique is directed however at the overarching normative structure of trans death, mourning, and memory that TDOR events have become.

practices, lamenting that TDOR events and website databases link to them often identify trans women of color who are sex workers as victims of anti-trans prejudice, even when their murderers clearly targeted them because they were sex workers, and not because they were trans. We also see a full co-optation starting in 2020 when Joe Biden recognizes TDOR, or when in 2021, he and Kamala Harris issue a statement naming that 46 trans people had been killed this year, but refuse to acknowledge the ways in which the U.S. government and its white supremacist and colonial order has furthered anti-trans violence and contributed to the death of many of these trans people through racist, classist, anti-sex-work, and xenophobic policies[47].

My own experience at several TDOR vigils in a small-town from the Central Coast of California highlighted to me the limits of such memorialization project and their purportedly anti-death orientation. The seemingly endless list of names may feel crushing, even dehumanizing, each one merging into the next and not revealing much about the personal human elements of that name's life. When the audience is mostly white, and mostly cis, and doesn't necessarily seem to share similar lived realities as those we are honoring, the sense of community that TDOR events are supposed to create may feel forced, the performative allyship sometimes quite evident. And although I know everyone grieves and mourns differently, I have felt personally alienated by the contrast between my outward expression of distress and heartbreak, my tears, the pain on my face, and the perceived flippancy of some attendees (especially allies), their banal conversations during the event showing their distance

[47] Similarly, United States Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken made on statement on March 31, 2021, for the occasion of Transgender Day of Visibility stating that "The LGBTQI+ community has an ally in the United States." The U.S., however, continues to kill countless queer and trans people, both within and outside its borders, criminalizing us and throwing us in prisons that don't align with our genders, enforcing border policies which endanger us and mistreat us, or funding the genocide of tens of thousands of people in Palestinian.

from our realities, their eagerness to go on stage to read names (and poorly at that) verging on self-centering and attention-seeking, their awkward or jokeful navigation of non-white-sounding names disrespecting the memory of the trans kin who has joined our ancestors.

Similarly. Ryka Aoki makes note that "With another November, / the names of trans people / change color and fall. / Mispronounced, sainted, / ceded to anonymous candles, anonymous flame" (8). Her poetry conveys the repeated nature of this memorialization, well-meaning but impersonal speeches, songs, and comments almost following a script looking past the personal elements of these people's lives, "past each favorite cousin, / each favorite movie, / each crisp new résumé… / Past each broken heel" (8). Later, she comments on the role of academia too, on how collecting surveys from trans people will only lead "some graduate student / discards the personal comments / to perform T-tests / on the numbers that remain" (29) while scholars keep doubting trans existence and questioning trans self-knowledge (30). Although presented as positive promises of progress (and as such as potential anti-death), this trans memorialization, because it has been co-opted by structures and systems that contribute to trans, and especially trans of color, death, leads to fraught grieving, to complicated mourning. Here, for Aoki, poetry is the intervention needed into this atmosphere of violence that is both structural and personal, acting as anti-death and making livable futures possible, both for herself, and for others.

This deep orientation towards others is true of many other trans of color poets. Non-binary, fat, and disabled Brown poet and scholar Caleb Luna dedicates their poetry book *Revenge Body* "for the sick & disabled / crazy femmes who are surviving, / those who chose not to, & / those who died trying" (2022), while Oji-Cree-Saulteaux trans poet jaye simpson dedicates *it was never going to be okay* to "all the queer NDN foster kids out there" (2020).

These dedications highlight the central intersectionality of their poetry, underlining that trans people are never just trans, but share commitments, communities, and oppression alongside other identity categories and experiences. Luna's also names the context in which their poetry is intervening, one where options for "sick & disabled / crazy femmes" are limited to survival, suicide, or death, the poetry here acting as anti-death because it names the overlapping structures, and their enactment in the mundane and the intimate, that target and render fat life, disabled life, racialized life, trans life, and femme life unlivable. Just like Aoki, Luna builds their own method of mourning and memorialization into their poetry, refusing to forget the ways in which capitalism, white supremacy, colonialism, sizeism, and ableism all merge together to paint transphobia and femmephobia with a specific hue. The poetics of anti-death employed here targets the ways in which death is manufactured onto Luna themselves, for instance through the Medical Industrial Complex telling them they are "already dead on the inside," through the intergenerational trauma, the "inheritances / cycles," the ways in which the systems in place teach us to destroy others and ourselves, to not want to stay, to "envy the dead" for their absence of suffering, or that "violence feels like fun." Poetic living, however, allows Luna to counter these lessons, not by simply negating them or refuting them, but by placing them back into the intimate and personal context they stem from. Violence does not disappear, but one is oriented to it differently. For instance, when Luna is harassed and verbally attacked by men, they reframe it as "MEN ARE ONLY MEAN TO ME BC IM SO BREATHTAKING" (57). Elsewhere, pain becomes a blessing with a prayer stating "may every wound / be a lesson" (54).

For many other trans of color poets, the poetics of anti-death translates itself into a redefining of death as a non-end, either because it has already happened, and life still

continued, or because it holds a futurity that extends beyond the here and the now. Early in their collection of poems *it was never going to be okay*, jaye simpson writes "haunting (a poem in six parts)." In it, they ask "have you haunted photo albums before?" and recount, through intimate childhood recollections how they were "taught to be ghost" by their foster parents. Although this metaphor stems from the fact that the only picture they can find of themselves in the family photo album is that of a "blurry phantom," the camera only having catching "the blur of their back" because they were told to leave by their foster mom who stated "this one's for family," this use of the image of a ghost, of a haunting, also brings in death, as being a ghost is one potential outcome after death. Here, simpson is thus exploring the possibility that they have always already been dead, taught from a very young age to erase themselves, and ending up haunting their own life and childhood. This death is not only enacted through how their foster parents treat them, but also through the figure of their *nookum*, their mother's mother, who's been "begging god that we'd be better off dead" and who "would rather an empty church / a graveyard full of her children / than actually know who / we were." The fact that simpson is living the life of a dead person, of a ghost, is contrasted throughout their poetry with the death of many of their family members, whether their foster father, who acted as their safe space and who understood them, or their blood mother and aunts, the regular deaths leading simpson to become "a regular at the funeral parlour on / hastings. / burying parent & child every other week." For simpson, death has happened many times, and their childhood as a ghost means that they too died, and yet life did not stop, but translated itself into poetic living on the page.

Two-spirit, Yurok/Karuk and Korean-American transgender artist Coyote Park, on the other hand, explains in *Heart of a Shapeshifter: 2Spirit Love Medicine* that they "had 8

lifetimes before this one" and that each chapter of their poetry book represents one of these vessels (2022: 13). This framing, presented in a letter addressed to the reader included at the beginning of the collection, redefines death as a non-end. If Park lived eight lives before, then it also means they died eight different times. And yet, they are not a ghost, and life still continued. Through the poetics of anti-death, their poetic intervention frames death as a lesson and is designed to provide healing, both to the author and the readers : "With this work, I wanted to provide medicine, for myself and for you" (14). Poetry is here an intervention into the suffering that each life may bring and that death does not deliver us from and an invitation to learn from the lives we lived before our deaths. Similarly, in a poem titled "In Dying, I Become," included in their poetry collection *Disintegrate/Dissociate*, Nehiyaw (Cree) multidisciplinary trans artist Arielle Twist explores how death is rebirth for trans people. Selves can be mourned without truly ever being dead; selves can be mourned without even having existed in the first place. Selves can be mourned even as they are birthed into living, as Twist explores in another poem titled "Born in Mourning." A poetics of anti-death here turns death into becoming, into process and orientation, into futurity in motion, rather than into static cessation, mere non-existence and poetry acts as the ethical tool for its expression. A poetics of anti-death here asks "what lives in death" (Vaid-Menon 2021: 2), especially as "the living dies many deaths" (28), and yet finds survival. Poeliving metabolizes the grief, the anger, the despair, the heartbreak, the loneliness to find presence, to be and be with, and to survive with death, together.

For if there is one thing that is vital to the understanding of anti-death and poeliving I am trying to convey here, is that it is a form of poetics that is deeply oriented towards others. I here follow micha cárdenas's faith in trans of color poetics' ability "to be able to increase

the life chances of trans people of color" (2021: 42) and see both Delect and contemporary U.S. trans of color poets like Ryka Aoki, Caleb Luna, jaye simpson, Coyote Park, or Arielle Twist as reaching, through poetics of anti-death and ethics of poeliving, for a horizon of interconnected community care, especially in the face of the violence and death coming out of all the other structures of so-called care surrounding trans life (the medical system, the family, the state, romantic love, the foster care system, and more). As Jamie Berrout reminds us in her introduction to *The Collected Poems of Esdras Parra*: "Any trans woman of color who writes saves other trans women (…) and therefore saves herself" (in Parra 2015: 5).

i invite you to imagine
i invite you to imagine
i in vit eyo ut oi i m a g in e.

a future is at stake
found in the elsewhere
projections of not yet now
and soon to be
the backrooms
liminal familiar uncanny
always ours and never ours
neon lit & peopled by monsters
blinking in repetitions cycling
cycles of repeating petitions
so much of what we speculate is already here
so much of what we dystopiate is already now
atmospheres of violence
it's after the end of the world
the post-opocalypse
so much of our trans futures
are hauntings from the past
explorations from the margins of a record
refused presents medevaced
to alternate parallel
& perpendicular
tangential transversal
& coplanar worlds.
from deep vertices of
ourselves an invitation –
to imagine invagine
inchoate incubate inseminate
ourwhere into elseselves

Chapter 4 – Dreaming the Past; Remembering the Future: Apocalyptical Relationality, Oniric Transtopia and Relational Transness in Trans Fiction and Speculation

In Memory, I Dream; In My Dreams, I Remember[48]

Dream

Noun

1. A series of thoughts, images, and sensations occurring in a person's mind during sleep; a state of mind in which someone is or seems to be unaware of their immediate surroundings.

2. a cherished aspiration, ambition, or ideal; an unrealistic or self-deluding fantasy; a person or thing perceived as wonderful or perfect.

Verb

1. experience dreams during sleep; see, hear, or feel (something) in a dream.

2. indulge in daydreams or fantasies about something greatly desired.

3. contemplate the possibility of doing something or that something might be the case.

Remember

Verb

1. have in or be able to bring to one's mind an awareness of (someone or something from the past); bear (someone) in mind by making them a gift or making provision for them; pray for the well-being of; convey greetings from one person to (another); recover one's manners after a lapse

2. do something that one has undertaken to do or that is necessary or advisable; used to emphasize the importance of what is asserted.

[48] Here is our final definitional haunting, once again foraged from Oxford Language, polyphonous layers of gossamer, calmly shimmering in the warm twilit air.

20-?09??1/22? – i remember dreams from a youth spent living vicariously through futurity. alternate lives never lived and yet so known, so familiar, so felt. as i eat sushi talking about how here and now confronts what back there and then i thought would be close and soon, i am reminded that there is no way for me to differentiate what is and what isn't. theories of the lived, the dreamt, the predicted, and the fantasized collide and bounce living traces of something within each other. yet i vividly know that at seventeen in paris i adopted my cousin; even now when i close my eyes i can feel myself sleeping on the floor under the mezzanine bed, motherly waking her, microwaving her honey-flavored cereals to ward off the cold bite of the misty morning on our legs, my bejeweled hand holding her little one walking from my converted chambre de bonne to her school on a small street nearby. the smell of blood and death from the horsemeat butcher's we would walk past every morning still churns my stomach, the empty eyes of the horse head on the sign above the door a mirror of grief and containment that always made me want to pee, right there, warm stream dripping on the bare skin of my thighs.

and yet, in this here and now, no one remembers this kinship, not even her, sometimes not even i, and no one recalls this who that i was, and this how that we lived, and this horse. how do you theorize the blurs, the interstices, the time lapses and the loops and the lisps that occur between wake and sleep, (day)dreams and (night)mares, memories and premonitions? where is the word for how present the future becomes past in the felt of our skin?

Tourmaline, Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Donna Ostrowsky, Red Durkin; Staking our Claim: Trans Women's Literature in the 21st Century
Lenni Lenape and Wappinger land (Barnard Library) – October 18th, 2012

October 18, 2012 – Lenni Lenape and Wappinger Land. Returning to the vault, the archived video that sparked this work utters an invitation. It is a day of ushering, an evening of trans pivoting inside the Barnard Library. Four members of a self-defined transgender vanguard[49], Ryka Aoki, Imogen Binnie, Red Durkin and Donna Ostrowsky, alongside trans artist, activist, and scholar Tourmaline, ponder about the state and future of trans women's literature. As you readers know well by now, during the event, one of the vanguardists, Red Durkin, discussed the genres chosen by trans writers and uttered a call for all trans people to pivot away from memoirs and towards fiction. According to her, fiction, as a productive genre, as an "engine of culture" will expand trans people's horizons and through imagining

[49] The panel was convened to celebrate the publication of an anthology of trans writing named *The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* (Topside Press, 2011).

new realities on the page will ultimately create new realities in the world. Fiction, in sum, is a tool of progress.

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, while Durkin's critique acutely grasps the problems posed by some memoirs and their use of white neoliberal logics to craft a respectable subject worthy of rights and care, her solution of a wholesale rejection of memoirs only perpetuates the logics of cis-centered white supremacy she aims at critiquing. An earlier chapter already explored how different kinds of trans people hold different investments in the genre of memoir-writing, due to their positionalities, experiences, or political commitments, and orient their memoirs towards collective liberation and survival, thus proposing expansive understandings of transness. After having explored what such a "staying with the trouble"[50] of memoirs looks like, I here return to the vault of the Barnard Library archive to heed Durkin's call of pivoting towards fiction, while also specifically putting pressure on it, and on the metaphors through which the call was uttered.

While Tourmaline did discuss the role of racism, misogynoir, and transmisogynoir in the publishing industry, Durkin's statement, because it failed to consider race and scapegoated genre instead, reveals the overall white-centeredness of the panel and of the trans women's fiction that this Topside vanguard represents. By understanding the current problem of trans literature as a problem of genre, of what is written, Durkin cannot see it as a problem of authorship, of who is writing, or of positioning, of where one is writing from. In addition, the use of the military metaphor of a vanguard could be read as participating in a transphobic redefining of spatial and temporal relations to the trans people from our past who become insignificant or inexistant. Coupled with the assumption that only some kinds of

[50] Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.

writing can be productive and generative engines, the military metaphors used by Durkin colors her move towards fiction through a capitalist military-industrial framework that only transposes the problematic elements of memoirs onto the genre of fiction. While fiction writing, especially in its speculative and science-fiction genres, has indeed been a tool for abolition, survival, and liberation, the use of imagination, when left unquestioned and unchallenged, has also held colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy, and anthropocentrism close and dear. A pivot towards trans fiction writing without a hard look at the whiteness of transness only perpetuates the issues of cis-centrism, gate-keeping, neoliberalism, anti-Blackness, and ableism that have defined a large part of trans writing throughout the twentieth century. Instead of being used to critique the whiteness and white supremacist nature of trans autobiographies, this negative orientation towards memoirs turns the genre into a scapegoat and ultimately perpetuates a limited understanding of transness, trans stories, and trans imagination onto the genre of fiction towards which "we" should move.

Because of this inability or unwillingness to critically question the whiteness that is built in normative considerations about transness, the trans move to fiction unsurprisingly remained mostly white. Earlier trans anthologies of fiction or science-fiction such as *The Collection* (2012) or the *Transcendent* series (2016-2019) did not necessarily open the publishing world to a large variety of trans positionalities and life experiences, although it did provide white trans authors with additional opportunities to publish something other than an autobiography. We (or, at least I, but I invite you to ponder this as well) may ask: if these anthologies and publishing houses, by publishing trans fiction instead of memoirs, actually

showed care for trans people, as Durkin implied, which trans people did they actually care about?

While fiction and speculation writing can indeed become important spaces to think about elsewheres and otherwises, and as such can be a vital tool to imagine freedom and abolition, this discussions here highlights the tensions this genre can also contain. In its whitened deployment, science-fiction, speculation has been co-opted and used as a tool for white escapism, that is, the desire to run away from the consequences of white supremacy in our actual world towards new worlds that are blank canvases, that are, in the words of Adam Garnet Jones in "History of the New World,"[51] worlds that have "no history at all" (39). This imagined future relocation often mirrors fantasies from the colonial past when white settlers crafted the "New World" of the Americas as a space that was empty, blank, wild, devoid of history, and as such prime for their relocation. Similarly, the "new world" of fiction that Durkin crafts in her intervention on the panel is as much a fantasy as an erasure of what was always already there. Indeed, trans writers such as Alan L. Hart (1890–1962), Rachel Pollack (1945–), Les Feinberg (1949–2014), Roz Kaveney (1949–), Pat Califia (1954–), Jennifer Finney Boylan (1958–), Chiya Fujino (1962–), Charlie Jane Anders (1969–), or Z Brewer (1973–) all have published works of fiction prior to the 2012 panel while other trans authors such as Dawn Langley Simmons (1922–2000), Ovida Delect (1926–1996), Esdras Parra (1937–2004), Jackie Curtis (1947–1985), Kate Bornstein (1948–), Alec Butler (1959–), or Eli Clare (1963–) have been prolific biographers, poets and playwrights. As it were, the transgender vanguard of *The Collection*, imagined as pioneers leading the way into a new literary territory, was no vanguard at all.

[51] Published in Whitehead, Joshua (ed.). *Love After the End: an Anthology of Two-Spirit & Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2020.

In Cree and Métis Indigiqueer writer Adam Garnet Jones's "History of the New World" (Whitehead 2020), queer and trans couple Thorah and Em, and their child Asêciwan, are faced with a hard decision: remain on Earth, even as it is dying and being evacuated, or move to the "New World," a planet across space that is said to be Earth's twin, a virgin, blank, empty space with no history, perfect for relocation and colonization. While Thorah, who is white, strongly believes that leaving Earth behind is their only chance of survival, Em, who is Cree and Two-Spirit, is more hesitant; and when news that this new planet is actually inhabited by "mermaids," who send a message to the colonists ("Your circle is not round"), their doubts grow even stronger, haunting visions of Indigenous life at the hands of settler-colonial violence flashing in front of their eyes. While "the only ones not pinning their hopes on fleeing to some distant planet were NDNs," white Thorah's resolve to leave grows stronger and stronger, even if it means the loss of all relationships and kinships. Thorah's fear of death supplants any fear of becoming the colonizer that destroyed so much of Em's culture, community, and ties to the land, her whiteness convincing her that survival at all cost matters more than anything else. Although speculating about an apocalyptic future, Jones here faces us with an all-too-common settler-colonial racial dynamic in which white people become the only ones able to escape a dire situation of their own creation, while Indigenous and racialized people are left behind to deal with the aftermath of their own colonization and subjugation. White people escape; racialized and Indigenous people stay with the trouble.

I am here using Jones's speculative fiction as my own metaphor through which to understand Durkin's position. Durkin is Thorah, escaping the dying world of memoirs, even though her own whiteness is responsible for much of the damage, and leaving other trans people behind to deal with the issue. This form of literary escapism not only refuses to help

with the problem of whiteness within memoirs, but also perpetuates the very issue it critiques by bringing it into a new genre. Indeed, in such an unquestioned form, pivoting towards a new genre will not be accompanied by a pivot towards new forms of understanding, being, or relating to transness, to ourselves, and to the worlds we live in. As such, while this chapter here turns to fiction and speculative fiction, it refuses to enact such an escapist move. Instead, it remains with Em and their child Asêciwan and focus on fiction and speculative fiction, especially in trans of color writing and performance, not as a binary opposite to non-fiction and memoirs, but rather as a different site for the exploration of elsewheres and otherwises that can teach us about tools for abolition, liberation, freedom, joy, and survival in our here and now.

In order to do so, we will here focus on three specific anthologies of trans-of-color fiction and writing: *Nameless Woman: an Anthology of Fiction by Trans Women of Color* edited by Ellyn Peña, Jamie Berrout and Venus Selenite in 2018, *Love After the End: an Anthology of Two-Spirit & Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction* edited by Joshua Whitehead in 2020, and *Behind Shut Eyes: QTBIPOC Dream Anthology* edited by Coyote Park in 2021. Because the authors featured in these anthologies are not white, and because fiction and speculation have long been literary tools employed by Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous writers, queer or not, I here build upon conversations that are happening simultaneously and collaboratively between the fields of Black Studies, Latinx Studies, Indigenous Studies, Asian Studies, Queer Studies, and Trans Studies. Building from Alexis Lothian's discussion of feminist, African-American, and queer speculative fiction (2018), I see these trans of color anthologies as another site where "the future becomes as immediate as the present, the present as inaccessible as the past, the past as unpredictable as the future" (255). These trans-

of-color anthologies act as a crux that conjointly crystallizes many dynamics and concepts developed from these fields of studies. They orient to trans living through fabulation (Hartman 2008, Nyong'o 2018), utopia (Muñoz 2009, Browne 2021), fugitivity and transitivity (Snorton 2017), and Indigenous futurism and Native slipstreams (Dillon 2012). They grapple with techno-orientalism (Roh, Huang and Niu 2015), transtopia (Chiang 2021) and the figure of the cyborg found in technofeminism (Haraway 1991) and posthumanizing or dehumanizing forms of biohacking or guerilla trans existence (Preciado 2013, Malatino 2017). They articulate transness through a collective form of writing, whose horizontality and polyphony forwards the T4T relationality we've discussed elsewhere in this work, materially producing through publishing collective evidences of being; eternal bouquets of flowers against the graves the world wants to push us in. Although they are moored in the atmospheres of violence surrounding the here and the now, they are able to propose pockets of elsewhere and otherwise, halting death for a while or forever.

Just under the surface, periodically rippling through the crests of waves, many questions are undergirding this exploration of trans-of-color anthologies: if critical fabulation is the combination of archival research and fictional narrative, a method to fill in the blanks left in the historical record and speculate about what was and what could have been, a way to craft "a 'recombinant narrative,' which 'loops the strands' of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future" (Hartman 2008, 12), then how do trans of color writers deploy critical fabulation to think about the future as a historical record? What would it mean to critically fabulate the future, to see the future both as its own historical archive that is yet to be, and as one that may have already been recorded, for instance through premonitions or dreams? If transtopia "refer[s] to different scales of gender transgression that

are not always recognizable through the Western notion of transgender" (Chiang 2021, 4) and is "a method of historicizing gender mutability that exceeds the transphobic denial of the past and the transgender presumption of the present" (ibid 5), then, can transtopia also help us exceed the limited projections of transness we predict and imagine for our futures? If transtopia designates "a place with transit itself as destination" (Kai-cheung 2012), what would a transtopic future look like? And how would the transtopian interact with the utopian, the dystopian, and the Foucauldian heterotopian? If queerness is "not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future" (Munoz 1), how can we similarly imagine transness, not as a being, but otherwise, in ways untethered to a present moment and a present body but oriented toward its own futurity?

All these questions here act as an invitation to open one's mind to the myriad ways in which time folds into itself and illuminates interstices of meaning that can provide relief and respite from the present atmospheres of violence (Stanley 2021) that are surrounding trans lives of color. Because current trans conditions of living influence the vantage point from which trans futurities can be imagined, I first turn to an arresting, yet all-too-common, moment of trans life: that of the trans memorial. Through this exploration of public community mourning, I use the symbol of the bouquet of flowers to imagine trans-of-color anthologies as a technique of struggle and a critical tool of T4T relationality oriented to our trans siblings, our transcestors, and our future survival. Then, I turn to the three trans-of-color anthologies listed above to identify three specific trans literary techniques of struggle deployed through the speculative: (dis)utopia, apocalyptic relationality, and oniric transtopia.

Anthology Writing: The Flowers at our Wake

December 2022 – my mom calls, as she does every day. cutting through the usual niceties, the remarks about the rarely-changing weather of where i live, she blurts out. annie died. memories of sitting at her dining table eating crepes and flan and playing sega mega drive in her spare bedroom flash in front of my eyes. despite the thousands of miles between her and i, despite the years between now and the last time i saw her, the warmth of her embrace and the sound of her voice emerge at the utterance of her name. i am brought back to the first week of my first year of high-school when i lived with annie for ten days while my mother and step-father were away. waking at six every day, the walk to the bus stop a late summer morning meditation about the anxieties of not knowing anyone, of not being known by anyone, homework in her garden with pastries and juice every day after school bringing the comfort of teenagehood to my whirlwind days away from home. i also remember gardening with her adult son and the fluttering warmth awaken in me by his every touch, a core memory i still don't know what to do with. then; a switch. and her face becomes superimposed with that of my own mother their weakening hearts connecting one's actual death with the feared death of the other the taste of orange blossom turning into vanilla-rum on my tongue the tears in my eyes choking the words in my throat the regret in my soul deadening and impossible. i hang up. skype turns into tik tok, dissociative scrolling promising a way out and through this grief. the first video welcomes me with news of the death of day rodas, her body dumped in the santa monica mountains. i feel the wind through the open windows, the emo music blasting, my ex-husband's yellow car zooming on mulholland highway probably passing by where day ended. grief is everywhere, the mourning never-ending.

this is what i am leaving on annie's grave or day's in lieu of flowers.

Memorial for the victims of the Club Q Shooting in Colorado Springs with flowers, flags, candles, etc.[52]

On the night of November 19, a shooter opened fire inside Club Q, a queer bar in Colorado Springs, injuring many and killing 5 people, 2 of whom were trans. Their names are: Daniel Davis Aston. Kelly Loving. Ashley Paugh. Derrick Rump. Raymond Green Vance. And they were more than names, they were people of flesh and blood, with relationships, dreams, communities, feelings, and probably some faults too. For those of us who did not know them, they may always just be a name, a picture, an emotion they invoke, maybe a projection of loss and death and grief into our own lives. A reminder that narratives of progress, promises of a tipping point, or delusions that it gets better, that these events are flukes or blips, are just not true.

Following this event, and ignoring its own participation in the structure that creates the foundation for such violence, the Department of Homeland Security published a National

[52] Photo taken on November 20, 2022 by Shanna Lewis for KRCC for this article: https://denverite.com/2022/11/21/club-q-shooting-denver-vigil/

Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin on November 30th, warning that "targets of potential violence include public gatherings, faith-based institutions, the LGBTQI+ community, schools, racial and religious minorities"[53] and more. But this kind of violence towards queer and trans people, especially those who are racialized, disabled, sex workers, immigrants, or undocumented, is not new. The shooting's location inside a queer bar, for instance, brings the haunting memory of Pulse, another queer club in Orlando where, during Latin night on June 12, 2016, 49 people, most of whom Latinx and Black, were murdered. Temporally as well, the Colorado shooting happened on the eve of Trans Day of Remembrance (November 20), an international day of mourning and honoring trans people who were murdered or committed suicide due to transphobic violence. As the lengthy and dehumanizing list of names uttered on many Trans Day of Remembrance events represents, trans death happens in the realm of the mundane and the everyday, something that Jamie Berrout and Ellyn Peña call a "permanent crisis" (2018, 152) and that trans scholar Eric Stanley, building from Fanon's body of work, describes as an "atmosphere of violence" (2021). Stanley tells us that:

> [A]tmospheres describe not simply the assemblages of gendered and racialized force and their contestation but the thick hang of fog that allows us to know little else. As a methodology of molecular relationality, violence holds us to the world, an atmospheric constant whose consistency must be fundamentally disturbed if we are to survive. Thinking atmospherically, then, reminds us that there is no escape, no outside or place to hide, yet through techniques of struggle collective life might still come to be. (2021, 16)

[53] https://www.dhs.gov/ntas/advisory/national-terrorism-advisory-system-bulletin-november-30-2022

I here want to heed Stanley's call to think atmospherically. Thinking through anthologies etymologically,[54] I see anthology writing as akin to a site of transgender remembrance where various flowers are brought together and combined organically to form public displays of mourning and militancy. The photograph that opens this section shows the result of the collective gathering of flowers, which, although still individually wrapped or bounded by a pot, merge visually to form a larger commemorative display. Both the trans anthology and the memorial site propose public-facing spaces in reaction to the atmospheric violence of trans life and enact specific forms of relating and being in community, of mourning together and finding ways to continue surviving communally. As both a reaction to the violence and death faced by trans people and a way to collectively gather and imagine our own futurities in the face of this violence and death, these spaces represent a crux through which "mourning becomes militancy" (Crimp 1989, 9). At our wakes, "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (Sharpe 2016, 6); the collection-of-flowers-anthology is a technique of struggle through which collective life can still come to be and with which trans writers of color disturb the consistency of violence as a trans atmospheric constant. It is specifically in the interstitial space found in the entangled knots and meandering stems of the funeral bouquet-anthology that radical understandings and deployments can be plucked, petal by petal, and thrown into the winds of trans life.

Seeing the anthology as the flowers at our wake illuminates its relation to the circumstances of trans life and expression. It may be tempting to see this form of writing as radically opposed to single-authored books such as novels or memoirs, as a kind of horizontal writing site based on care, community, and mutual support. It may also be

[54] Anthology comes from the Greek *anthos* 'flower' and *logia* 'collection,'

tempting to see anthologies as "engine[s] of culture" and progress similar to fiction because they assumedly give more opportunities for inclusion and representation to trans authors. Instead, however, thinking through anthologies as a commemorative and mournful flower display reveals its contradictions: it highlights it as both a locus of tension deeply entrenched in the atmospheres of violence surrounding trans life and as a site with radical potential for community care and trans futurity. Anthologies can also become more direct sites of memorialization. For instance, Donna Ostrowsky's memorial site[55] both lists her literary legacy (and her participation in anthologies such as *The Collection*) as a way to honor and memorialize her and proposes the Donna Ostrowsky Memorial Fund, which was created to help trans women writers, artists and filmmakers, "in lieu of flowers." Trans expression and literary or artistic production here becomes a literal replacement for flowers, highlighting the fungibility of *anthos*.

It is also important to keep in mind that neither the memorial site nor the anthology exist in a vacuum; they can both enact or contain further violence. Memorials can be defaced or destroyed. For instance, in Washington D.C. in August 2011, barely a month after her murder, the memorial for Black trans woman Lashai McLean was burnt up in a hate crime[56]. A trans memorial mural in Toronto in honor of Veronica Diaz was completely destroyed when it was painted over it, first in 2014 by city officials, and again in 2017, by an external crew of painters hired to clean up graffiti[57]. Vigils and mourning ceremonies at memorials can themselves become targets for further violence, as has happened in San Jose, CA in

[55] http://donnaostrowskymemorial.weebly.com/
[56] https://wamu.org/story/11/08/03/two_transgender_women_attacked_in_two_weeks_on_ne_block.php
[57] https://xtramagazine.com/power/toronto-trans-memorial-erased-for-the-second-time-81097

2020[58], or in Atlanta, GA[59] and Rochester, NY[60] in December 2022. As for anthologies, although a site for collective struggle and survival, editing them or participating in their writing can make life materially much more difficult, as Jamie Berrout explains in the introduction to *Nameless Woman: an Anthology of Fiction by Trans Women of Color*: "Despite the wonder and joy of being able to work closely with and connect to other trans women of color through writing, the anthology wasn't helping us survive. Materially, it only made life harder" (2018, 14). And yet, Berrout tells us, despite this material violence enacted by the process of writing, anthologies are still *something* against the "thick hang of fog" (Stanley 2021, 16) trans people are in. Discussing the very anthology readers will be reading, an anthology that was crowdfunded on Kickstarter by 405 funders, she writes: "How to wrap our minds around the totality of what we're struggling against? It feels impossible. It might be. But getting to read other trans women, writing these words, giving the anthology over to you, reader – this feels like something. Maybe a beginning. Maybe a shout that dies in the near distance. But still something" (Selenite, Peña and Berrout 2018, 15). However faint or temporary, however loud or tentative, writing the funeral-bouquet-anthology is an act of voice-gathering and world-making.

Trans Techniques of Struggle: (Dis)Utopia, Apocalyptic Relationalities & Oniric Transtopia

Turning now to each flower of the funeral-bouquet-anthology, I hope to locate trans literary techniques of struggles to cut through the foggy atmosphere of violence surrounding trans

[58] https://www.foxnews.com/us/california-murder-candlelight-vigil
[59] https://www.11alive.com/article/news/crime/17-year-old-killed-2-children-shot-at-candlelight-vigil-in-dekalb-county/85-3c6a5dc7-8dab-41db-923d-9d159a293d4e
[60] https://www.whec.com/top-news/major-police-investigation-off-upper-falls-boulevard/

life. As expressed above by Jamie Berrout, writing a trans anthology, "this feels like something." We are now turning more specifically to what this "something" could be, to what each of these stories is doing with transness and the world trans people have to live in, but also to what each of these stories is doing with writing and the work of imagining otherwise. I argue here that these anthologies of fiction and speculative fiction all complicate the utopia-dystopia binary and reorient readers towards the same complex entanglement of hopeful mourning or mournful hoping that the trans memorial site contain. While these stories do not propose any escapist solution for our problems, they also do not propose any totalizing negative projection of the future, sometimes for the simple reason that, at the very least, trans people still exist in these bleak futures, which thus highlights our future survival. Reading the stories in *Nameless Woman*, *Love After the End*, and *Behind Shut Eyes*, three trans literary techniques of struggles arose: the coining and use of (Dis)utopia by DM Rice (Whitehead 2020, 86), the deployment of new relations both to the apocalypse and to each other because of the apocalypse, something I describe as "apocalyptic relationalities," and the use of dreams as a trans of color destabilization of the boundaries between worlds, realities, and temporalities, a literary technique of struggle that I here call "oniric transtopia."

(Dis)Utopia, Apocalyptical Relationalities, Oniric Transtopias

In DM Rice's story "Apocryphal," the two main characters, on their way back home after a night out, discuss the story that the narrator was planning on writing. Playing with the binary opposition between utopia and dystopia, the narrator proposes the concept of (Dis)utopia: "I mean, in a dystopia, everything's clearly fucked but in a (dis)utopia, see where the parentheses fit? It would seem like a perfect world, but actually be this really fucked up

thing" (Selenite, Peña and Berrout 86). This idea not only disrupts the utopia-dystopia binary, but also plays with ideas of opacity and legibility. Who would think it a perfect world? And who would know more easily that the world was this really fucked up thing? Like a whisper or a head nod to those in the know, the parentheses around the "dis" part of the word hide the problem away from most people who might still believe in the utopia. In the story, the (dis)utopia refers to an imagined world with a twenty-four hour work day divided in four shifts of six hours; because everyone sleeps and works at different times, "the city never shuts down" (ibid) and everything is always available to everyone. The (dis)utopia in the narrator's mind though cannot be about "full communism" and in this world "there's still probly an elite" (ibid), showing that the (dis)utopia cannot be about full abolition and the imagination of completely otherwise systems, but the concept acts as a useful lens to put pressure on the worlds that other trans writers in the anthology are creating. For instance, in "Three Fragments," Jamie Berrout imagines a future where trans women are worthy of care, rights, and protection, after Josie Garcia, the trans daughter of the conservative Speaker of the House is murdered. The Josie Garcia Amendment grants trans women "the right to self-defense" and "an ironclad presumption in favor of trans women" (196) while also protecting them from "arrest and prosecution for [the] crimes [of sex work, theft, and the sale of drugs]" (197). Although this projected future does seem at first to provide a solution to the problems of murder, violence, and criminalization plaguing trans women in the present, the utopia quickly shows its limits, revealing the "(dis)" hiding in plain sight. For instance, despite this enshrining in law of the protection of trans women, we quickly learn that "not all trans women were protected" and that "blackness, for example, was sometimes enough to break the presumption of innocence" (197). While the work of speculation can be deployed to

understand transness as a category worthy of protection and rights, this radical imagination finds its limits at blackness. Of course, this may not come as a surprise to those of us who are suspicious of rights-based discourses or narratives aiming at using legality and state-based decisions as the basis for protection and the preservation of life. Because the state structure is not abolished in any radical way, the (dis)utopia reveals itself, calling attention and critique to these kinds of discourses as they arise in our present moment. Begging the state for more rights may very well always "actually be this really fucked up thing" (86). Similarly to Agnes in the 1950s, while white middle-class respectable transness may be able to become ingested by the state structure in a future that might be utopian for these kinds of trans people, it will always be by reinforcing and preserving the structure of anti-Blackness through which the state has come to be. In this world and its promises of safety, categories are merely reinvented or redefined, but the organizing principle remains the same; a (dis)utopian trans futurity. (Dis)utopia also becomes a lens to examine the fine granularity of trans existence and put pressure on the monolithic understanding of transness that some trans activism puts forth. The parenthetical (dis) allows for a multiplicity of realities to exist within one world, layered on top of each other however so imperfectly.

It is exactly in these gaps and warped hems, in the ill-fitting corners of the world, that possibilities for struggle and survival can burst at the seams. The push and pull between the dissonant lived experiences we share in our (dis)utopia underlines our divergent relationalities to the state and, ultimately, to transness. While for some transness might be a category used to turn oneself into a category legible to those in power for increased access to rights, care, and representation, for others, transness is an abolition practice that aims at dismantling every organizing principle our current world is built on. Thinking

atmospherically about (dis)utopia shuffles our relationality to sameness and difference, to the world we live in and those we can imagine; it complicates our understanding of dystopia and utopia and the temporal relationships we may foster with these different kinds of imagining. In a sense, the (dis) in (dis)utopia acts as its own form of apocalypse[61], of uncovering and revelation of the fucked-up-ness of the world. But aren't we always already in a state of apocalypse?

As (dis)utopian thinking already hints at, trans of color writing relies upon a redefining of relations to the world, both the one that is lived in and the one that is written of. This revelation, this uncovering of new ways to be and exist, of new forms of world-making and self-making, often appears under the metaphor of an apocalypse, to which trans folks relate to apocalyptically. Although old worlds are definitely unmade or disrupted through these revelations, the apocalypse here is not necessarily a full breakage or a total destruction; instead, it is a reshuffling of relationality, a subtle move that allows for new perspectives from slightly different angles. I here coin "apocalyptic relationalities" as a way to think through the deployment of these new relations both to the apocalypse itself, and to oneself and others because of an apocalyptic event. These apocalyptic relationalities are techniques of struggle that can destabilize the violent atmosphere around trans lives and propose different ways to relate and react to it. In the introduction to *Love After the End*, Joshua Whitehead, thinking about "the temporalities of Two-Spirited, queer, trans, and non-binary Indigenous ways of being," for instance explains that "we have already survived the apocalypse" (Whitehead 2020, 10). This orients trans Indigenous experience differently to the apocalypse, from a feared futurity to a past that one lived through. Countering white-

[61] Etymologically, the apocalypse, from the Greek *apo-* 'un-' and *kaluptein* 'cover, is a revelation.

supremacist narratives of progress and modernity, this reorientation also acts as a form of (dis)utopia that allows one to grasp the full thickness of the foggy atmosphere of violence Black, Indigenous and trans lives of color are kept in: "this, right here, right now, is a dystopian present" (ibid).

Being able to see that trans lives of color have always already survived the apocalypse and that loss and death and grief is a reality of the present, not just the product of a feared future allows one to grasp other apocalypses as opportunities: opportunities to redefine ways of being and relating to oneself and others, opportunities to lift veils and blinders to feel more clearly through the world. In Kylie Ariel Bemis's "The Sixth World," for instance, the coming of the apocalypse, "The End of the World, that tower they're building out in the Mojave" (Selenite, Peña and Berrout 2018: 95) redefines the main character Vincent/Viola's relationship to themselves and to their love interest, Delilah. It is the fear of dying as someone she is not (Vincent) and of "not get[ting] another chance" (ibid 111) that motivates Viola to disclose her transness and love to Delilah. In their relation to the apocalypse, Vincent/Viola are not even focused on survival – instead, they want to live, as who they are, and be perceived and loved, for who they are, even if only for a little. As Viola tells us in the closing lines of the story: "Maybe this world *won't* be fine. But maybe the next one will be better." As long as Viola gets to be Viola, she will be "smiling" and "laughing" no matter what. "The warmth in the palm of her hand is Delilah's" (113) and in that moment, it is all that matter. The apocalypse is not the end of all things, the destruction of everything that is; it is here the beginning of something else, of a next world, of new relations.

In Kevin Alarcon's "Apocalypse Dream," another reshuffling of relationalities is orchestrated by the apocalypse. In the story, the narrator is only able to be close to their

father in their dream of the end of the world, but not in waking life: “When I dream of apocalypse, Pa is there / I find myself scared and alone, but then I see him / A lighthouse at the end of the world / In dreams, he has no option but to love me” (Park 2021, 80). The apocalypse and the dreamworld here combine to offer new relational possibilities; although the narrator is “scared and alone” in this apocalypse dream, “the end of the world” is also the only place where the narrator can see their father as a “lighthouse.” The apocalypse is the only space in which fatherly love can occur; as such, it is not necessarily a timespace of destruction and negativity, but also an opportunity for light and love and care. The apocalypse reshuffles the relationship between the narrator and their father and can help readers reorient their own relationships to apocalypses and what they bring in our lives. Through their shift in temporality, apocalyptic relationalities enable new forms of being through which to relate to the world, real, dreamt or imagined, and with which to heal from transphobic violence. Although not necessarily stated as such, the narrator’s relationship to their father may be strained due to their queer or trans identity, and in “The Sixth World,” Vincent/Viola’s anxieties are oriented towards the possibility of transphobic violence from the world or rejection from Delilah. As a trans technique of struggle, apocalyptic relationalities do not make these forms of violence fully disappear but allow instead for a different orientation to and through them, for a slight change in atmosphere, a flicker of the barometric needle.

In both the stories explored above, and many more throughout the three anthologies, dreams play a central role in imagining and speculating about new forms of being and living. This use of dreams as a trans of color technique of struggle to destabilize the boundaries between worlds, realities, and timelines, thus allowing for the deployment of new forms of

world-making and self-making less tethered to understandings and logics from the waking world, is one that I here call "oniric transtopia." As mentioned earlier, transtopia both refers to "different scales of gender transgression" that one may not understand as belonging to the Western category of 'transgender' *and* to "a method of historicizing gender mutability" (Chiang 2021, 4-5). While Chiang explores transtopia as a new tool to relate to trans pasts and presents, I here deploy it as a technique of struggle to think about trans futures. As shown in *Behind Shut Eyes: a Dream Anthology*, an anthology investing dreams with radical and subversive power, dreams and one's relationship to dreamworld can be a powerful lens through which to think about the world and transform how we relate to our realities, our conditions, and our kin. In line with many Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal cultures and their orientation to dreams and dreamworlds, which can also be an important element of Two-Spirit understandings of transness, I here focus on dreams as a literary tool for the making of transtopian futurities. From the Greek *oneiros* 'dream,' I thus build the concept of oniric transtopia to explore the central role of dreams as trans bridges between reality and fiction, between the past, the present and the future, between the self, other selves that are us, and other selves that are not us, and between this world and others that have happened, will be happening, or are happening simultaneously.

Using dreams as a technique of struggle also poses interesting questions about agency. Indeed, as dreams happen to or through us, as we are visited in our dreams by ancestors, spirits, or by our elsewhere selves, control and agency may have to be relinquished in order to focus on receptivity and witnessing. While lucid dreams, these dreams where the dreamer is aware that they are dreaming, do exist and may bring a different light to how we relate to the worlds we are building in our sleep, the stories in these anthologies focus on how

dreams blur the boundaries between memory (the past), reality (the present), and hope or anxiety (the future). For instance, while the narrator in Catherine Kim's "Fidelity," explores their childhood, the aunt's house in South Korea that they visited as a child is as much a memory as a space belonging to the dreamworld. Kim writes: "It is the impression, or the dream, of that beach that I hold – and I can't say I know how to measure the distance between a real place and a dream" (Selenite, Peña and Berrout 204). While the gap between dream and reality is acknowledged, the narrator cannot tell how far apart they are, showing here that the scientific, and thus patriarchal and colonial, notion of measurement cannot grasp and contain trans memory and the trans world it is creating.

In Jasmine Kabale Moore's *The Girl and the Apple*," the life of the main character, Marjorie, is built under the sometimes ominous, sometimes lightbringing auspices of sleep and dream. Marjorie is both afraid of falling asleep on the train and always already asleep and "feel[ing she] can't wake up" (ibid 162). Sleep here is vulnerability, both because of what others could do to her physical sleeping body and because of what she could see and experience in the dreamworld. When she finally falls asleep, Marjorie dreams of Zola Neale Hurston and wakes up in fear and distress, concretized when the train attendant makes his presence known to her (ibid 166). Interestingly, Zora Neale Hurston herself had a very significant relationship to dreams, as her autobiography mentions premonitory dreams and visions that she had from the age of six or seven to her death at sixty-nine years old (Hurston 1996, 39). From Hurston's letters we learn: "Prometheus on his rock with his liver being continually consumed as fast as he grows another, is nothing to my dreams. I dream such wonderfully complete ones, so radiant in astral beauty. I have not the power yet to make them come true, they always die. But even as they fade, I have others" (in Kaplan 2002, 77).

While we are reminded that the ultimate death of dreams is unavoidable, their survival persists through the coming of others, always, every night. These dreams as premonitions or visions propose a different reorientation to temporality as they are both aspirational (Hurston wants them to come true), bounded as "complete ones," and repetitive and cyclical, both through the metaphor of Prometheus, forever cursed to live through the same eating of his liver, and their perpetual coming. Premonitions also redefine the future as a known temporality, not just an imagined or speculated one, and construct the future as an existing archive that one can explore and learn from, in ways similar to how one can explore and feel through archives of the past. This dissolution of boundaries between past, present, and future, or between memory, waking world, and visions or premonitions features prominently in Joss Barton's "Lord, be a femme," as the main character has visions and dreams of the past while having sex, her "asshole [having become] a glorious portal through time and space fucked back to Mayan brothels in Guatemalan jungles" (Selenite, Peña and Berrout 175). This interestingly reconfigures the asshole not as a rectum-as-grave (Bersani 1987) but as a vital tool for time travel and futurity through sex and climax, for native slipstreams from the ecstasy of one penetration to another, as an opening towards new relationships to the past, present, and future. When the narrator's past self in turn has sex with "the Emperor's warriors" (Selenite, Peña and Berrout 175), the men's eyes are filled "with visions of a world to come" (ibid 176) as they come inside her. Her sex work and the radical, spiritual, and carnal relationship that these men have with her allow them to reach a state of climax during which the spirits can reach them with premonitory apocalyptic dreams, nightmarish visions of colonization, death, and destruction: "pale demons carrying gold crosses across charred forests, cradles lined with small pox blanket, rabid dogs gnawing on the tits and intestines of

two-spirits, CIA operatives chewing coca leaves as they stand at the foot of mass graves" (ibid). Because we know these premonitions of white supremacy, colonization, Indigenous genocide, and Two-Spirit erasure have happened, the use of dreams as vessels to transport us from the present into the past and back into the future illustrate what Whitehead expressed when writing that "we [Indigenous people] have already survived the apocalypse" (Whitehead 10). Trans Indigenous pleasure and orgasmic passion becomes here the trance-like state that connects both to the ancestors and to the spirits, highlighting that survival has happened and will continue to happen. When your eyes roll in the back of your head and you see the stars in the sky fall into your pockets, when you hear the voices of hundreds of others call your name in ecstasy as they travel through the portal in your asshole, oniric transtopia becomes the dreamed place where transit is always the destination, where in-and-out motions rhythmically create a world to inhabit and explore, however so temporarily, where our trans techniques of struggle can suspend the thick clouds of fog in our atmosphere. Just like Gabe, in Serena Bahdnar's "The Root of Echoes," who losing all relationships to the people around him, even his mom, who cannot recognize him, and finding himself "ascending into a black, grey, and only occasionally green darkness" (ibid 131), can finally look up at the sky and see "an unfathomable field of bright, watery white-blue grains against the darkest black he had ever seen outside of sleep," just like him, we can gaze and see through the thick atmospheric fog and feel that all the stars in the skies aren't all dead. The stars in our pocket and through our orgasmic portals, in our dreams and through our bouquets of stories, "the stars [we] could see were all there, tantalizing, almost with reach. They were not just echoes" (ibid); they were beacons, guides, shimmering reflections of transness through time and space, connecting us to trans people from all times and timelines.

Dizzy and lost, I look up. The stars glimmer: “You are not alone. Our rage is nourishment; our laughter a revolution. Our bodies are entire worlds and ecosystems watered by your tears; our orgasms a divine connection between realities. We’ve always been, we still are, and we always will be. I love you. Always. And forever.”

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