Mediations

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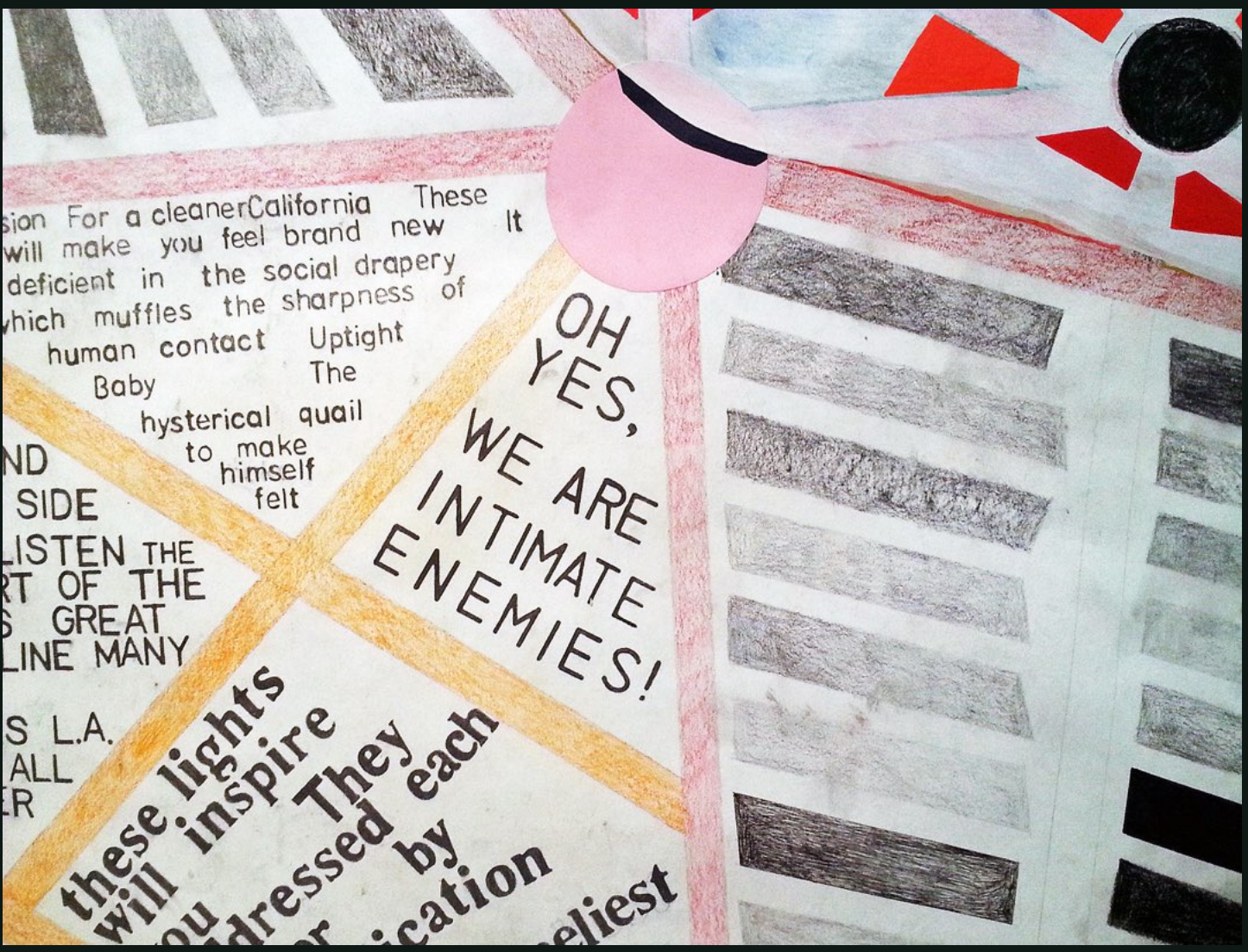

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Total Sexual Difference

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Introduction: Sex as It Really Is[1]

Amy De'Ath

What can Marxist methods tell us about sexual difference? As this dossier suggests, they can help to reveal how the colonial imposition of sex and gender was entangled with the suppression of proletarian gender variance in the capitalist core; they can tell us about the effect of shifting labor relations on the composition of queer and trans subjects; and they can explain precisely why there are zero degrees of separation between sexual liberation and class struggle. Indeed, a critique of sexual difference requires that we restore to the concept of class its richness as a category internally bonded — at the level of capital's own contradictory movement — to categories of social differentiation. The relation between capital and labor is the analytical root, for instance, when it comes to matters of unwaged and precariously waged survival, where sexed categories and their orderings can be grasped as indirect products of capital-in-motion.

In various ways, the four essays gathered here endeavor to get to the heart of the question, as Chris Nealon puts it, of *how categories come into social being in the first place*.[2] This was always Marx's question too, he points out, and in this regard, many have observed that Marx's break with the Young Hegelians was based in large part on his disagreement with them about the possibility of a reformed state:

> …The state as a state abolishes *private property* (i.e. man decrees by *political* means the *abolition* of private property) when it abolishes the *property qualification* for voters and candidates, as has been done in many of the North American States. [Thomas] Hamilton interprets this phenomenon quite correctly from a political standpoint: *The masses have gained a victory over property owners and financial wealth*. Is not private property ideally abolished when the non-owner comes to legislate for the owner of property? The *property qualification* is the last *political* form in which private property is recognized. But the political suppression of private property not only does not abolish private property; it actually

> presupposes its existence. The state abolishes, after its fashion, the distinctions established by *birth, social rank, education, occupation,* when it decrees that birth, social rank, education, occupation are *non-political* distinctions; when it proclaims, without regard to these distinctions, that every member of society is an equal partner in popular sovereignty … Far from abolishing these *effective* differences, it only exists so far as they are presupposed…[3]

As Christopher Arthur observes of this passage, "the State establishes its universality, and the citizens their communality, only by abstracting away from the *real differences and interests* that separate the members of civil society and set them against one another."[4] More than this, Arthur's commentary highlights how, as he invokes the French and American constitutions, Marx draws our attention to a contradiction inherent in the distinction between political rights and the so-called natural inalienable rights of liberty, property, and security. The problem is that the system of political rights intended to protect and defend our "natural" rights is based on non-interference, meaning that it necessarily takes the form of a *proscription* of liberty: "the limits within which each individual can act without harming others are determined by law, just as a boundary between two fields is marked by a stake."[5]

Thus, as Marx notes, commenting on the right of property, people begin to see in other people not the realization but the limitation of their own liberty.[6] The individual is set at odds with the communal. *I cannot drain this wetland for property development because it's legally protected as a conservation area. I cannot hope to get this job because it's an affirmative action hire.* The limitation of liberty is, of course, ultimately guarded by legally mandated violence: in Marx's words, "security is the supreme social concept of civil society: the concept of the police."[7] The supposedly natural rights of liberty, property, and security, as Arthur highlights, are therefore "not founded upon the relations between man and man, but rather on the separation of man from man."[8]

There are always other ways to get what you want, of course — whether that involves the allowances afforded by informal cultural codes, legal loopholes, or legally protected ways to destroy the earth — and they reveal the real differences that set people against one another: *I can buy this other piece of less beautiful, non-protected wetland and dump mortar on it. I can sexually assault my friend because I feel like it, and in this society probably get away with it*. Yet, as many besides Arthur have pointed out before me, the point is that it is not *exceptions* to the law that offer a conduit for transphobic, homophobic, and misogynist social currents, but the law itself that, in declaring us all equal, separates us as self-interested little bots, or as thoughtful compassionate beings just trying to survive. From the standpoint of capital it makes no difference which, since (with a few exceptions) we all live under the same coercions as we go about reproducing capitalist society in our collective yet uncoordinated and most uncommunal way. At what point would it be more accurate to say that it's not

the police but Grok who is the supreme social concept of civil society? The Faustian pact between liberalism and fascism inheres in this agreement on the individual as the base social unit.

As Sita Balani points out, moreover, the law makes its own exceptions concerning who gets to do what they want: the introduction of ASBOs ("anti-social behaviour orders") in the UK in 1998 prohibited certain people from doing things like wearing hoodies: "everyone is equal in the eyes of the law — except you, over there, wearing that."[9] But as Balani also intimates, this is really just law-as-usual: it is law acting as the law of separation and non-interference, as the defense of inalienable "natural" rights, and thus as the limitation of liberty. The 2025 UK Supreme Court ruling on the definition of "woman" and "sex" is a classic example. In a decision considered medically illiterate by countless doctors, five judges decided that "biological sex" — determined by a brief inspection at birth — would in turn define the terms "woman" and "sex" under the Equality Act 2010.[10] They accepted the argument of the plaintiffs, For Women Scotland (funded by billionaire JK Rowling), that sex is biological and immutable. And while the Deputy President of the Supreme Court, Lord Hodge, warned "against reading this judgement as a triumph of one or more groups in our society at the expense of another," the overriding rationale for the decision worked backward from a desired policy outcome to a fantastical medical pronouncement.[11] The court followed the monied interest of the gender critical movement to make whatever claim was necessary to reserve single-sex spaces for "biological" women, and to assert the legal rights of this imaginary constituency to go to the public toilet without fear of "harassment or discrimination."[12] It is no coincidence that the decision was also entirely consistent with the liberal capitalist principle of the limitation of liberty for some in the name of defending inalienable "natural" rights for others.

In this regard Marx's point about man as political citizen and man "as he really is" — the owner of property and Grokian agent of self-interest — is not unrelated to a markedly different kind of contradiction between sex as abstract legal category and *sex as it really is*: mutable, ambiguous, both positively and negatively social.[13] The reality of sex is what TERFs can't stand, actually. Indeed, Balani highlights the common thread between the exit fantasies of tech billionaires (tax-free enclaves, underground bunkers, space colonies), Brexiteers (impermeable borders), and transphobic feminisms (impermeable sexual categories), to note how "together, they gesture towards a world in which we can all be separately legislated: a techno-capitalist horizon of total individuation."[14] Moreover, Marx's distinction can further help to flesh out Balani's main argument, which rather gallantly returns us to the issue of toilets to point out that while "some on the left … argue that the toilets in a university or the bank might be something of a minor concern," the contrary is true because

> There remains something useful in a simultaneous contestation over the most *general* infrastructure. While horizons of universalism come

> with the taint of liberalism's failures, a left retreat from the universal comes with immediate benefits for the hard right, whose ascendency is propelled by an insistence that left politics is merely a game of self-interest played by unscrupulous minorities.[15]

Toilets are helpful sites of political struggle, then, and appropriate for this ripened contradiction: they are private and thus sort of embarrassing but essential to the well-being of bodily organs like kidneys, large intestines, urethras, uteri, and penises. And they are also helpful for the critique that might accompany such struggle because they bring us back to an analysis of the whole, especially if we take Balani's argument for the universal to mean something like a Jamesonian injunction to "always totalize!"[16]

While Balani argues that the battle for public infrastructure is a battle for a kind of class-consciousness no longer tied to wage-labor, I want to make a related point about the example of the Supreme Court ruling and the generality of public toilets, which has to do with what it teaches us about sexed categories as a product of capitalist "liberty." Capital does not care about the specific particularities of difference, only *that there is difference*, and preferably an optimal range of difference conducive to the forms of separation and individuation required for accumulation. In pitting cis women against trans women via the invented category of biological woman, then, reactionary feminists and the UK legal system are defending the boundaries installed by abstract politics (marking them with a stake, indeed). They are defending equality before the law insofar as they are defending the suppression of real differences that makes such a thing possible. In this sense, they are engaging in "pure politics," and doing so under the coercions of capital's impersonal compulsions.[17] This is not to deny that For Women Scotland are not driven by a contemptible hatred, but that transphobic and transmisogynist hatred is not gratuitous, extra-economic, or purely libidinal (even if it does shape the individual psyche), but radically connected to — we might say symptomatic of — the movements and crises of value itself.

Yet while groundbreaking scholarship has demonstrated that the law upholds abstract equality by enabling real inequalities — Amy Dru Stanley's analysis of market-driven contract law in *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (1998), and Brenna Bhandar's critique of modern property law as a "racial regime of ownership" in *The Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (2018) are standout examples here — there is relatively little work connecting the mediations of legal categories to the impersonal and automatic movements that undergird capital accumulation.[18] Nat Raha's sharp critique of transliberalism notwithstanding, this seems an especially important feminist project because it helps us to grasp why the backlash to the publicness of trans life in the last decade has been so marked in contrast to the late-twentieth-century assimilationist logics of pinkwashing and

lean-in feminism.[19] As the persecuted symbol of the real, universal, and unlimited possibilities of gender and sexual difference, transgender and transsexuality present a basic incompatibility with political-economic social categories *per se*. As such, they sit in direct antagonism with what I set out above as the liberal-fascist compact on "total individuation."

But still, there is more to this. It is not the anti-categorical implication of trans *in itself* that, by dint of being incompatible with liberal and fascist technologies of individuation, makes it the most devalued form of sexed-gendered difference today. Rather, the point is that its self-assertion threatens to topple the labor hierarchies on which capitalist accumulation depends. It is worth pausing here for a moment to recall how capital accumulation cannot take place in any single location. Rather, it requires the orchestral movement of the system as a whole because value arises as a social average (as socially necessary labor-time), meaning that it arises everywhere and nowhere. As Beverley Best puts it, "the gravitational force of value *holds* at every moment of capitalist accumulation."[20] Capitalism's forms of perfectly legal differentials and the presupposed real inequalities which are their condition of possibility are what make the *whole thing* possible! When capital's faltering productivity levels need remediating, for example, technologies of sexed, gendered, and raced difference serve up the flexible, cheap, relative surplus labor required to maintain some level of accumulation. The legal categories of private property, citizenship, the wage-contract; the geographical mobilization and fixing-in-place of laborers; global chains of commodity production: all depend on real inequalities, on misery, on violence, and on "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[21] These gradated and relative differences are the things that allow value to move.

*

Critiquing sexed categories as concepts mediated by capitalist value relations, and attending to the difficulty that sex and gender variation present both for their reactionary antagonists and for a range of liberal and anti-capitalist defenders of trans life, is therefore the project broadly shared in the essays that follow. Since as Kay Gabriel observes in the first essay of this dossier, sex change should "mean *less*"; it "should be casual, easy, and universally accessible." Making the case that the object of trans studies is not trans people, but the abstractions of sexual difference and the subjective dimensions through which sex is mediated, Gabriel's essay underscores how sexual difference is rooted in the sexual division of labor. And yet, it is not the dynamics of the capital-labor relation but the *social meaning* of sex and gender that is at issue here, as Gabriel highlights in the definition she offers of sex change as "a transformation of a series of relationships of recognition, of self to self and self to other." Gender is not about voluntarily identifying with one side of a binary, as the mish-mash of centrist realpolitik and culture war discourse would have us believe;

rather, it is a fantasy of *being identified, being sexually seen* — a fantasy shared by all of us, trans or not, and "a compromised expression of agency that ideally rests on the agency of others." Sex change aims to transform gender:

> the actual object of sex change is the durable transformation of relationships between self and other, mediated by the body, where the body here is understood to be social at every point, and thus to belong in a Lacanian sense —as Gayle Salamon and Judith Butler have argued—to the Imaginary, not the Real.

Finding a way to restore questions of subjectivity and sexuality to Marxist transfeminist study is important because "the lie of liberalism is that sex change is not sexual." To prove that, *au contraire*, recognition is an indelibly sexual fantasy mediated by a thoroughly social body, Gabriel offers an erotic parable that, beyond providing titillation (though it gives that, too), manages to figuratively demonstrate how our own imaginary relationship to our body is just that — a relationship formed through (imaginary and real) relationships with others, who we hope will regard us sexually, and in a particular way. For those who change sex, then, the hope is to be seen as "differently fuckable."

But to be regarded is not only about being sexually seen, even if such recognition is a prerequisite for a bearable life. As Gabriel points out, structure-based organizing has provided a basis for class struggles shared among seemingly disparate kinds of subjects: if people are moved to organize in part because "they feel ground down and humiliated," structure-based organizing doesn't require that they are united beyond this fact. The classic working-class demand for dignity is thus revived here as a demand that conjoins sexual liberation struggles to struggles over wages and working conditions, insofar as dignity is a demand for the ability to materially and psychically reproduce oneself "with one's head held high." As Gabriel suggests, fascists know all too well that trans struggles are class struggles, and that is why they have publicly targeted transexuals as a means of suppressing proletarian solidarities — a fact that returns us to ask: Why is sex change such a big deal; why does it instigate trans moral panic?

Emma Heaney's contribution to this dossier helps to answer that question by showing us how the drive toward sexual individuation took shape over the colonial nineteenth century, as non-cis sexual socialities were made increasingly illegible by the imposition of bourgeois sexual norms. What Foucault called sexuality, or the form of the bourgeoisie's moral self-legitimization, Heaney argues, is better grasped as the invention and regulation of cisness: a double operation in which "the creation of the gender normative gay defined by sexual object rather than gender difference, and the creation of the proper transsexual defined by a regrettable but correctable gender difference" led to the reinvention of queer and trans as a private matter and a form of "medical enclosure."

Especially important here is the connection Heaney draws between, on the one hand, the attempted eradication of sex as a collective affair in the proletarian socialities of industrializing nations, and the way the very same bourgeois authorities understood non-cisness as a racial, "population-level" trait of colonized subjects. The criminalization by the British Raj of Kinnar and Hijra through legal processes that "calcified caste identities into administrative and labor categories"; the coerced disappearance of the amrad (the young male beloved) in Iran; and the many social roles that compose the category of Two-Spirit people in the Indigenous Americas all involved the colonial application of spurious sexual knowledges as tools for population management during a period of capital's rapid expansion across colonial territories. At the same time, the development of separate nosologies for homosexuality and transness in the colonial core was, as Heaney argues, part of "a racializing narrative that reconciled the vast and various ways that vernacular sexual cultures violated cisness (albeit not the gender binary) with the demand that white bourgeois subjects be made to have their difference named, taxonomized, and filed as something other than racial or class degeneracy."

Almost as a sidenote, Heaney's argument unravels the Leftist transphobic argument that queer and trans forms of desire and recognition are themselves a product "bourgeois" identity politics, and somehow separable from "working-class" realities. Indeed, plotting their proletarian histories alongside the bourgeois technologies of medicalization, narratives of "entrapment," and the rise of nineteenth-century sexology reveals that "Leftist transphobia is indeed a class antipathy but not, as it often presents itself, an anti-capitalist one. Rather, these sentiments reflect the historical residue of the bourgeois imposition of that class's own atomized nuclear family."

Heaney's assessment of cisness as a technology of individuation is also valuable because it gives us a way to understand the invention of cisness as internally connected to capital-in-motion, and as one of the products of a global process of capitalist expansion and accumulation. In this regard, bourgeois categories of sex and gender are intimately connected to what I present in my own essay as the liberal categories of neoclassical economic thought, which remain rooted in naturalistic conceptions of the individual agent abstracted from any particular form of society. Indeed, neoclassical economic ideas about the motives of individuals somehow governing capitalist value relations grew out of what Marx critiqued as a "substantialist" concept of value in classical political economy: the notion, as Michael Heinrich puts it, that "the worker has expended a specific quantity of abstract labour and this quantity exists within the individual commodity."[22]

There's a tempting analogy to be drawn here: Marx's critique of the idea that value is congealed as a substance within the individual commodity might seem to run parallel to Judith Butler's famous argument, in *Gender Trouble*, that sex conceived as an ontological substance provides the ground for a "substantializing view of gender."[23] We might say that Butler and Marx both problematize the concept of substance by examining the concealing social forms of *money* and *gender*. However — and this

is my point — it is the specific way in which these pairings, value/money and sex/gender, are *not analogous* that is the difficult question we need to examine if we are to specify the relationship between capital and sexual difference.

In my essay, I argue that sex cannot be considered a real abstraction like value, because sex can (and does) change. Yet understanding value not as a "thing" but as the dominant social modality through which sexual difference is antagonistically arranged underscores what is so difficult to grasp about how "sex" arises in a capitalist totality, because it faces head on the problem of how to account for capital's retroactive, presuppositional, totalizing movement, where one event doesn't simply cause another. My suggestion, though, is that a value-critical inversion of Butler's argument that gender substantializes sex allows us to theorize sex as a mediating technology that has a definite and systematic relation to capital accumulation: sex and gender emerge as mediations rooted in the always-shifting boundary between waged and unwaged labor. Yet if these thin abstractions seem rather lofty, an analysis of the relationship between sexual difference and the value form offers more than the satisfaction of being theoretically correct, I suggest, because it makes way for a radical critique of the objectively existing (and in one sense, impersonal and automatic) compact between the naturalizing, empirical assumptions of liberal political economy on the one hand, and the *liberty-property-security*-speak of a substantialist "gender-critical" feminism on the other.

Our dossier ends with a longer essay by Sam Solomon; a Marxian re-reading of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* as a novel whose episodic plot tracks its protagonist Jess's movement between different labor formations. As Solomon puts it, *Stone Butch Blues* narrates "postwar, Northeastern labor history as gender history," and literary labor, especially, as a site for gender and sexual politics. While the novel is in part about the role of literary labor in the project of restoring queer and trans histories and indeed, composing living history in the very act of recording it, Solomon shows how this fight for dignity, for political education, and for solidarity is bound up in the feminization and deterioration of labor relations in general.

Thus, the landscape of deindustrializing Buffalo in the 1970s and New York City in the 1980s is not a background but a central plot device in *Stone Butch Blues*; one that undergirds Feinberg's dialectical narration of the "dynamic gendering of literary labor relations." On one level, this means that Jess's life is one in which precarious access to wage-labor means moving from job to job, being repeatedly new at work, and getting repeatedly "sized up": in Feinberg's words, "throughout the plant, there is this question: man or woman, boy or girl?" Getting clocked as trans has consequences for the kind of work one can access, and in this regard, Solomon's reading aligns with Gabriel's argument about recognition as a struggle for survival (indeed, Gabriel draws one of her own educative examples from *Stone Butch Blues*). In this vein, Solomon further demonstrates how shifting labor relations are figured in relation to the sensuous activity of wage-labor as a gendering and racializing

process itself, as "the conveyor belt held us together" but also as the successes and failures of union activism reveal both divisions and surprising solidarities between butches and cis straight men.

The status of *Stone Butch Blues* as a work of Marxist gender theory comes to the fore, then, where the novel documents managerial tactics to divide workers in order to show how apparently isolated experiences of exploitation "constitute a single struggle," as well as in Feinberg's development of a character who "develops radical political consciousness unevenly and haltingly." Most importantly, perhaps, Solomon's reading of *Stone Butch Blues* complexifies existing interpretations of the novel as an account of gender dysphoria. Showing how Feinberg narrates Jess's gender transition as a psychic necessity that is dialectically constituted by her relationship to wage-labor and her struggle as part of a collective labor history, Solomon underscores how, "in Feinberg's gender theory, class analysis accounts for historical changes to gendered relations of production." Jess's self-formation thus proceeds through a series of contradictions in which gender and labor are figured in somewhat counterintuitive relation: "going stealth" as a man after top surgery does not lead to more reliable wages in the midst of 1970s economic recession, yet when she begins presenting as visibly gender-transgressive in New York City, Jess secures casual work in phototypesetting, a new technology in the emergent feminized "third shift."

We might remark upon the fact that it's taken until 2026 for us to have a substantive Marxist reading of *Stone Butch Blues* — a novel about work and gender by a self-declared "revolutionary communist" who wanted the novel to circulate for free like a political pamphlet. In their retrospective attentions, the essays collected here also highlight the importance of remembering the queer Marxian concepts and methods we already have. To mention just a few: Rosemary Hennessy's dialecticizing of the concept of "second skin" in her 2013 book, *Fires on the Border: The Passionate Politics of Labor Organizing on the Mexican Frontera*; Kevin Floyd's demonstration, in his essay "Automatic Subjects: Gendered Labour and Abstract Life" (2016), of why a precise understanding of what value actually is matters for revolutionary theory; Gayle Salamon's concept of a "felt sense" of a body in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetoric of Materiality* (2010); Christopher Nealon's many interventions connecting questions of subjectivity and representation to a critique of capitalist totality in *Infinity for Marxists: Essays on Poetry and Capital* (2023); Gayle Rubin's 1975 account of kinship exchange as the site of production of the category women, in "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex."[24] That much of this work is the product of literary scholars working in English departments says something about the successful eradication of Marxism, since the 1980s, from economics departments in North American universities — where present variants of Chicago school and neoclassical economics now rule the day — but it also points to the relative absence of Marxist scholarship in gender and sexuality studies departments, which would take longer to explain but is symptomatically if indirectly related to the fact that

many of these departments are currently facing the existential threat known as "restructuring." Where will queer and trans Marxisms go next? We must hope that the attacks on humanities scholarship in the preserve of institutions will be accompanied by an increasing prevalence of the kinds of intellectual and revolutionary thought and study that have always been a part of liberation movements. That's where the best ruthless critique comes from, after all.

Notes

1. I would like to express my thanks to Rosemary Hennessy, Chris Nealon, Seb Franklin, and my co-conspirators for their insightful feedback and support in putting this dossier together.
2. Christopher Nealon, "Abstraction, Intuition, Poetry," *ELH*, 88: 2 (2021) 396.
3. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans and ed. T.B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 11-12.
4. Christopher Arthur, "Introduction," *The German Ideology: Part One* by Karl Marx (New York: International Publisher, 1987) 8.
5. Arthur, "Introduction" 20.
6. Arthur, "Introduction" 25.
7. Arthur, "Introduction" 25.
8. Arthur, "Introduction" 9.
9. Sita Balani, "Decomposing Public Space: 55 Tufton Street and Organised Transphobia," *Weird Economies*, 4 August 2025, https://tinyurl.com/ytvrmujb.
10. The British Medical Association condemned the Supreme Court ruling as "biologically nonsensical." See "Doctors condemn Supreme Court ruling on trans women as 'scientifically illiterate,'" *Independent*, Tuesday 29 April 2025, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/trans-gender-supreme-court-ruling-bma-doctors-b2741304.html.
11. "Supreme Court backs 'biological' definition of woman," *BBC News*, 16 April 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg7pqzk47z0.
12. "United Kingdom: Supreme Court decides sex means biological sex in Equality Act," *Baker McKenzie*, 25 April 2025, https://insightplus.bakermckenzie.com/bm/employment-compensation/united-kingdom-supreme-court-decides-sex-means-biological-sex-in-equality-act.
13. It bears noting that a critique of this logic is also present in Marx's critique of the commodity form: see Marx's analysis of how real inequality is masked by the social form of the commodity in *Capital, Volume I*, 166.
14. Balani, "Decomposing Public Space."
15. Balani, "Decomposing Public Space."
16. Philip E. Wegner, *Periodizing Jameson: Dialectics, the University, and the Desire for Narrative* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014) 15.
17. In this capitalist sense too, the personal is political in that the political must deny the personal, the real difference upon which it is based.
18. Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Brenna Bhandar, *The Colonial Lives of Property:*

Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). For work to this end, however, see Alexander Stoffel's chapter "A Marxist Theory of Sexuality and Desire," in *Eros and Empire; The Transnational Struggle for Sexual Freedom in the United States*" (Redwood, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025) 146–174, and Simon Clarke's chapter "State, Class Struggle, and the Reproduction of Capital," in *The State Debate* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991) 183–203.

19. Nat Raha, "Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (July 2017).
20. Beverley Best, *The Automatic Fetish: The Law of Value in Marx's Capital* (New York: Verso, 2024) 11.
21. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 28.
22. Michael Heinrich, *How to Read Marx's Capital: Commentary and Explanations on the Beginning Chapters*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021) 49.
23. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) 30.
24. Rosemary Hennessy, *Fires on the Border: The Passionate Politics of Labor Organizing on the Mexican Frontera* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Kevin Floyd, "Automatic Subjects: Gendered Labour and Abstract Life," *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 2 (2016): 61–86; Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Christopher Nealon, *Infinity for Marxists: Essays on Poetry and Capital* (London: Brill, 2023); Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.

Kay Gabriel. "Gender Is the Extent We Go to in Order to Be Loved." *Mediations* 37.2 (Spring 2026) 13–25.
mediationsjournal.org/articles/gender-is-the-extent

"Gender Is the Extent We Go to in Order to Be Loved"[1]

Kay Gabriel

1. Sex Change and Trans Studies

The premise that makes trans studies possible is the thesis that sex can change.

I take sex to mean the signification of sexual difference — the fact of sexual difference pressed at every point into social meaningfulness.[2] From this perspective, sex is an ideological abstraction with material force. In the debates that define trans studies, materialism and materiality are themselves fraught terms of engagement — Kathleen Stock, for instance, thinks that "material" belongs to the anti-trans camp.[3] When I say material I mean it in the Marxist sense of pertaining to the production of social reality, a reality that is lived, thought, and felt, that moves people to action or locks them in place, and that determines, though not absolutely or unchangeably, the contours of their lives. Materialism is a dialectical term that helps us to comprehend how actually existing reality already contains in motion the forces that have transformed and will transform it, down to its elements that seem, to some, untouchable constants, like sex.

People can change sex; they do it all the time. At the same time, sex, an abstraction with social force, can and does change, indeed, is changing, like history, under our feet, through a collective and constant pattern of agency and determination, of what we allow, and what we do, and what we discover, and what we suppress, and what we coerce out of each other, and what we think to be possible and make possible. In this essay, I'll argue that the object of sex change is the durable transformation of relationships between self and other, mediated by the body, and that the social meaning of sex change derives from the sexual division of labor. The transformation that sex change is supposed to effect is, in this sense, only incidentally a transformation of the flesh, though incidentals matter a lot. It is a transformation of a series of relationships of recognition, of self to self and self to other. Recognition, too, offers a framework for coalitional organizing for trans liberation across constituencies of poor and working people, most of whom are not and are not likely to become trans, but can under the

right circumstances join in a collective fight for a materially secured sense of dignity, which is also a recognition relationship. People seeing each other as those *through whom they can and must win a livable life*, and therefore *learning to see each other in the terms of one another's dignity and sense of self-worth* — these are the principles of establishing a political coalition, of people learning to think and act together as a broad political constituency.

I want to emphasize the salience of this claim, "the premise of trans studies is the thesis that sex can change," in four different ways. First, the anti-trans right fully rejects it. They take themselves to be the defenders of sex. They think that our object is "gender," which is something fake and willed, whereas theirs rests in the dignity of fact. And that fact might be dignified by the body, or by chromosomal sex — their version of determination in the last instance — or by a particular conception of God, or by their piercing, and as far as they're concerned, punishingly correct intuition about who is and is not a transsexual.[4] But whatever basis they attribute to their position, they are fast in their conviction that sex cannot change, all the while furiously attempting to coerce a social reality in which it is less and less possible for people to take the kinds of measures that assist in its changing.

Second, the social abstraction that trans studies is primarily trying to understand is not actually trans people, it's the differential category of sex. And by that I don't mean to oppose sex to, or elevate its causal primacy over, other dimensions of social difference. I mean that as part of a large and ultimately cohesive science of understanding the world in order to change it, trans studies is oriented toward comprehending the subjective dimension of the sexual division of labor over time and place as one of the motor mechanisms of a highly unequal society, of the inequalities it requires to function, and of the forces that ultimately transform it. In that sense, the sexual division of labor doesn't just include the color line; it's one of the mechanisms that gives force to, indeed is required by, the "state-sanctioned and extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death," as Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism.[5] So in concrete terms if we want to understand what makes it possible or likely for some people but not others to die in childbirth, or to die turning tricks, or to die making garments — in Manhattan in 1911, or in Bangladesh in 2013 — or to die while riding a delivery bike, or to die in prison, then the intervention that trans studies makes is to ask how everyone, absolutely everyone, decides and desires to live under the pressure of the overwhelming and constant force of the changing same of this social division. We want to know how people make sense of a wrong and bad world to themselves, how they structure their relationship to it, what makes being in relation to the world and each other bearable or not, and this will force us to take seriously the materiality and material transformations of sex. The fact that sex lives in consciousness, consciousness that gives meaning to flesh, implies that people apply their energy, activity, agency, and creativity to it constantly, even if only to its upkeep.

Consciousness that gives meaning to flesh: Rosemary Hennessy refers to this dynamic as the "second skin of social identity," by which she means the mediations that constrain everyone's expectations of the kinds of lives they and others might reasonably live, which is also to say the kind of work that they will likely do, the social protections they do or don't enjoy, and the forms of coercion to which they might legitimately be made subject.[6] I mean consciousness, then, in the sense of the developing relationship of subject and object: what people think reality is, how they arrive at a sense of themselves through the understanding that others have of them, what they believe stands in their way of a life worth living, what can be done about it, and with whom it is possible to act. Consciousness shapes and animates the inequality of any unequal society, as people en masse legislate the terms on which social life is lived. As I'll emphasize below, consciousness is therefore also the mediation through which sex change becomes meaningful, as people attempt and succeed in achieving different forms of recognition through specific, targeted interventions that affect perception of this "second skin."

Third, I want to flag in advance that my categories don't map onto the framing of sex and gender that Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton use in their essay "The Logic of Gender," initially published anonymously a decade ago and attributed to the Endnotes collective.[7] In their essay, Gonzalez and Neton lock sex and gender into an analogy with, respectively, use- and exchange-value; for the authors, gender is the abstraction of sexual difference, sex its concrete manifestation, and the "gender fetish" their name for the ideological obfuscation that makes difference appear natural. In my 2020 essay "Gender as Accumulation Strategy," I critiqued this framing for evacuating the subject — the intimate scale on which the sexual division of labor does its often deadly work.[8] Without the subject, you cannot actually talk about the fact that people change sex, and you cannot talk about why.

In my approach, which follows what I think of as Oren Gozlan's crisp rendition of the concept, gender is a *symptom* — the fingerprint that the symbolization of sexual difference leaves on the subject, one by one by one.[9] When we talk about symptoms, we can talk of loving and enjoying them, and we can talk of their perverse effects. And I think this gives us more conceptual amplitude than Gonzalez and Neton make possible in their strict definition of gender as the "anchoring of individuals into separate spheres of social activity," which more or less creates an identity between gender on the one hand and the sexual division of labor on the other, and therefore underlies their speculative orientation toward what they call gender abolition. But from my perspective, this is a category error: if gender is a symptom, then the speculative aim of even a radical science of sex and gender is not actually abolition. You don't abolish a symptom. You don't even cure it.

But fourth, trans studies, like Marxism, does in fact have a speculative aim. We are trying to change sex. More specifically: we are aiming to understand a world in order to change it, specifically, in this case, because we think that sex change is

an overall good, and that people who change sex, like all people, deserve dignified lives. People should change sex, if they want; sex change should be casual, easy, and universally accessible; it should, in fact, mean *less*, and mean something other than what it does now; sex as a punitive ordering mechanism of bourgeois society should change, probably, in its desperate entirety. So part of the right-wing slander is in fact correct, insofar as we are in fact trying, here tipping my hat to Jules Gill-Peterson, to "bring our kids up trans," in the sense that one consequence of our political success would in fact be that more people change sex in durable ways with low stakes for individuals and mass cumulative social effects.[10] Trans studies is therefore a theory of change — both in the empirical sense that organizers use to describe how social life becomes other than what it is, and in the speculative sense that makes knowledge into a force for transformation.

2. The Sex-Change Division of Labor

From this perspective, I want to excavate what I think of as both a core and a largely unthought element of sex change, one that has tremendous effects for what we think of as the trans political project. I want to approach this element of sex change by making use of an extraordinary paragraph by an author who is not a transsexual. The paragraph comes from the novel *Margery Kempe*, by Robert Glück, which is where I took the title for this essay.

Glück wrote *Margery Kempe* in the early '90s. The first edition came out in 1994 from Ira Silverberg's and Amy Scholder's High Risk Books, and NYRB Classics reissued it in 2020. It threads together a retelling of the life of Margery Kempe, a fifteenth-century failed saint from Norwich, UK, who wrote the first autobiography in the English language and believed that she was the bride of Jesus, with Glück's own failed relationship in the late '80s and early '90s with a man from the ruling class, identified only by the letter L. In this novel, Glück passes — not seamlessly — between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries. You could say he leaps between them, but lingers in the fifteenth. For instance:

> A horse was hag-ridden. Its owners filled a bottle with its urine, stopped it with a cork, and buried it: the witch could not piss and died in agony. The air hummed with flies when the travelers approached the cattle — rich odors of dung and hay. They heard an ouzel's ringing *tew tew tew*; the peasants cupped their ears. Farmers tilled their small fields to the limit. Women carded and combed, clouted and washed, and peeled rushes as in Lynn. One woman became a man when he jumped over an irrigation ditch and his cunt dropped inside out: gender is the extent we go to in order to be loved. His mittens were made of rags.[11]

Glück's medical miracle comes from a fable recorded first in Ambroise Paré's 1573 book of medicine *Des monstres et prodigies*, which relates the story of an old swineherd named Germain. At 15, Paré says, Germain, then named Marie, chased a pig into a wheat field. The pig passed over a ditch. Leaping over it, Germain "ruptured his ligaments" and his "genitalia and male rod" fell out of his body. Assembled physicians pronounced him a man, no longer a girl. The anecdote then appears in Montaigne's 1580 essay on imagination.

Glück's sentence produces an unparalleled insight of transsexual subjectivity, in which sex change orbits the impossible recognition relationship of love. In that sense, gender writes and rewrites the answer to the question "as what and who can I be fucked," which is to say that gender is a fantasy of being held durably in regard by others. Fixated on "identification," the political right and center both mistake the content of the fantasy, which is to *be identified*: less willful voluntarism, more a compromised expression of agency that ideally rests on the agency of others. While it's easiest to notice in the case of sex change, the fantasy is universal. It exerts immense pressure on people of all kinds, who twist themselves into extraordinary directions to be regarded in a way that they can bear, and who experience sometimes incapacitating humiliation if that regard bends even minimally beyond an acceptable range.

"Gender is the extent we go to in order to be loved": In Glück's pithy formulation, gender names a desire for desire. In his paragraph, even acknowledging the libidinal charge of gender loosens something in the tight knit of social constraint. The marvelous sex change that Germain experiences at the end of the paragraph inverts the witch's death at its start; the tight seal on the bottle breaks in Germain's cunt that "drops inside out." Glück's phrase cuts like a fence or a ditch through a field of other sentences, most of which are about either work or poverty. "His mittens were made of rags," "Farmers filled their small fields to the limit," "Women carded and combed, clouted and washed": the sexual division of labor sets the stage on which Germain's miraculous transformation takes place. Newly a man, Germain is poor; the peasants around him have lots no less meager. Historically speaking, soon they won't even have those. Why was he chasing a pig, and why did he have to leap a ditch into a wheat field to get it back?

In an essayistic poem about Germain that Andrea Abi-Karam and I published in *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics*, Rowan Powell records that the centuries-long process of enclosure that spilled peasants from their subsistence plots and created a proletarian class in northwestern Europe divided places through hedges, fences, ditches, stone walls, and other boundary markers.[12] The field belonged to someone else, and the ditch marked the difference. Banal divisions indicate great transformations in the death and life of private property. The libidinal release that follows the sex change in Glück's paragraph is part of the same process as the enclosure of the commons. "They hang the man and beat the woman / that steals the goose from off the common," goes a traditional English protest song of the period,

"but let the greater villain loose that steals the common from the goose." Glück sets his novel in a period of great historical transition: "Margery lived during the Hundred Years War, the collapse of feudal systems, and the plague," he writes. "At the beginning of modernity the world and the otherworld lay in shambles."[13] Transsexuals are not the harbingers of great social upheaval, whatever doctors, medical historians, or the architects of moral panics think. We're making the most of an impossible situation.

3. Recognition, Fantasy, Fulfillment

Glück's paragraph, which makes sex change meaningful from the point of view of the regard of others in context of a historically determinate sexual division of labor, shapes an insight about what it means to change sex. Consider the following thesis: the actual object of sex change is the durable transformation of relationships between self and other, mediated by the body, where the body here is understood to be social at every point, and thus to belong in a Lacanian sense — as Gayle Salamon and Judith Butler have argued — to the Imaginary, not the Real.[14] Salamon argues that the body "as it exists *for me*" is a psychic construction that brings matter into a coherent structure, understood as self rather than other; "it only comes to be once the 'literal body' assumes meaning through image, posture and touch."[15]

In other words, the point at which the body has social meaning is the point at which one is recognized or misrecognized — the point at which it assumes its "second skin" of social identity. In this sense, sex change is only incidentally a transformation of the flesh — what Salamon calls the "literal body." Because the real thing that sex change does is durably transform a series of relationships, of self to self and self to other, the actual patterns of the regard and recognition that other people have are an underthought and indispensable element of what it actually means to change sex. The desire of the Other plays an outsized role in sex change; it has to. The dominant mode of understanding sex change has been to examine what people do to themselves, all while effectively bracketing the much more chaotic, complicated, and vast though ultimately *predictable* dimension of the regard of others.

All of which fits, ultimately, with the framing that I began with: I've already argued that trans studies is oriented toward understanding labor, toward understanding the metabolic transformation that agents and the world exert on each other, and the social dimensions that in a society rigorously kept unequal divide and secure it. And on the other, I pointed attention toward the intersubjective dimension of regard of self and other that sustains a collective, divided relationship to labor. Amy De'Ath names this dynamic one of "hidden abodes and inner bonds": a dialectical process whereby the system reproduces itself through the production of subjective positions, of people who can express the logic of capital through their activities, and who, shaped into subjects, act out and sometimes try to understand their own desires as a countervailing force.[16] Which is all to say that if we want to understand where

transsexuals come from and what they (we) want, we have to confront the problem of recognition in trans politics. Recognition, in Lauren Berlant's formulation, is the misrecognition you can bear.[17] What is the role of recognition in the trans political project, and what are the stakes of placing it at or near the center of what we do?

In one sense, the stakes of recognition in trans liberation are simply coming to terms with the role of recognition in establishing life trajectories — the role of consciousness in contesting the price of one's labor, and guiding expectations for the work that someone may legitimately do and the coercion that she might legitimately experience. Legitimation here is key: if, as Michael Denning's reading of Gramsci suggests, people en masse legislate the terms of social life, then the kinds of lives that we collectively allow ourselves and others to live are at least in part the result of what people collectively experience as bearable or not.[18][19] In her interview with the NYC Trans Oral History Project, Cecilia Gentili illuminates the assigning of value that sets the terms for trans life in the Argentina of the 1980s and '90s. Referring to the woman who coached her into transition, Gentili says, "She said well, if you want to be like me, you need to know that you're going to be a whore, you're going to get high, and you're going to die young. And I said where do I sign? This is what I want."[20] As M.E. O'Brien points out in her 2021 essay, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom," fighting over the results of particular forms of recognition means that non-passing trans people most often struggle over work and its conditions, its indignities and humiliations.[21] O'Brien's essay, written before the latest terrifying round of the anti-trans panic, notes that "a majority of American employers can openly fire someone on the basis of being trans." Getting clocked — the common parlance term for being recognized as trans — pushes people out of more secure and stable sections of the labor market, and into positions where they have to fight harder to subsist.

But the stakes of recognition for trans people pierce deeper still. To show you why, let me tell you a story: A woman and a man are fucking. They've been fucking for a while. He's covered in sweat, and while he fucks her, with long, athletic strokes, sweat beads on his forehead, drops off and hits her in the mouth. They're facing each other, but they aren't looking at each other. He's holding himself up by his arms, and he's looking down at his cock sliding inside her and slipping out again. He looks at the tidy lips of her vulva, which envelop him, spit him back out and swallow him again. She's looking at him looking down at her pussy, which she hasn't always had, and she thinks about what he must be seeing and feeling: cock, lips, tissue, heat, and moisture, which, since she doesn't lubricate very much, is mostly his spit. Fixated on this image, she comes harder than normal.

The moral of this parable is that recognition is a sexual fantasy. It is indelibly sexual. Changing sex, I arrive at a place where others see me as differently fuckable, or I want to, or that is the fantasy. The desire of the Other is, of course it is, sexual, which means that transition is a sexual desire, in a way that trans culture has dealt with

more honestly than trans theory, since it seems somehow so pervy to acknowledge the fact that people change sex to fuck in a different and less unbearable way from how they might have fucked beforehand.

Some recent examples from the realm of culture: Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* — by far the most popular and highly purchased work of fiction by a trans writer — includes a vivid description of one character, experiencing awkward sex for the first time as a closeted teenager, imagining the sex she would actually like to have as a woman bottoming in a lesbian relationship, rather than the eggy, confused sex she is actually having. Gentili's memoir, *Faltas: Letters to Everyone in My Hometown Who Isn't My Rapist*, narrates a violent sexual encounter from her youth: "For many years I thought that I liked it. I have now come to understand that I didn't like it. I needed it." "He touched my nonexistent breasts as if they existed," she writes a little later, "as if they were big enough to be squeezed." Both Peters and Gentili make the experience of being understood sexually a core and inextricable part of sex change — but the sexual nature of recognition need not imply that an actual sexual encounter takes place. Each thinks about how the fantasy of being regarded in a particular way is a sexual fantasy that makes a particular subject position possible.

I'd like at this point to include a couple of caveats. One is that the point of the sex described here is not gender *affirmation,* and the purpose is not to advocate for a particular ethical position within sex. The woman in the story who climaxes thinking about her lover's line of sight, how he manifests desire in his overwhelming urge to watch himself fuck her, isn't getting off on being effortfully seen as a woman; it's more like the fact that she doesn't have to try is the *precondition* of sex being hot for her.

The second is that this form of regard is taken for granted by people who are not currently trans, who, by and large, though certainly not universally, experience the subjectifying force of sex without feeling its seams. If it's a perversion to need to be fucked, or witnessed as fuckable, to gather a sense of yourself, then that's everybody's perversion, and if trans people spend more time thinking about how we are witnessed in sex, that's only because of being more alive to the structures that define everybody else's life too.

What happens if the man in question, realizing that the vagina he's fucking was surgically rather than natally created, feels his desire suddenly invert into disgust, and confronts his lover by saying, What the fuck are you, I'm not a fucking faggot? Or — to take a horrific example from the news — consider the case of Tarjit Singh, a trans man in the UK convicted in 2021 of sexual assault for not disclosing his trans status to his lovers. These types of outburst, in which somebody senses that they've been brought, as they understand it, into contact with homosexuality and turns disgust with themself into disgust with their lover, who can be framed as the one at fault, is an example of what I mean when I say that sex is the social reality that emerges from everybody's symptom, and transsexuals just do a better job of noticing it.

What does it mean for the sexual relation to function as the beating heart of recognition? One consequence of this thesis is that it puts a bomb in the middle of the exsanguinated, hygienic, liberal rendition of trans politics, and the bomb is sex. The lie of liberalism is that sex change is not sexual. And confronting this lie honestly does actually carry some significant risk, since the moral panic led by the political right takes sex change to involve predatory sexual content, framing sex change as a result of sexual predation that leads to more sexual predation. Thanks to Christopher Rufo — who piloted the Critical Race Theory panic and then with great calculation lifted the phrase "grooming" from QAnon and turned it into a slander against teachers who support trans students — rightists spread the lie that children who are not trans are being "groomed" into sex change. They also claim that trans youth, and indeed trans adults, pose a sexual threat to other young people.

In the present environment, where the sexualities of actually existing trans people form the absent center of the political fracas, it feels fraught to be open about the sexual content of transition — the fact that the desire to rearrange the sexed signification that structures one's life not only carries implications for who and how one fucks, the capacities in which one could be understood to be a sexual subject, but also in fact itself carries a libidinal charge, like most prohibited desires do when prohibition slackens a little. Infamously, sex change is hot. Disavowing the sexual nature of transition is a political dead end to the precise degree that it is a denial of such a naked and ordinary fact.

4. Sex Change and Organizing for Dignity

So where does this leave trans politics, if repression is not an option, and failure to repress tempts a frontal fascistic attack? If sex change forms the hot core of trans politics, then in what sense is trans politics part of a liberation tradition with real stakes for the lives of people beyond an admittedly numerically small minority? In the understanding I've advanced here, *trans politics depends on sexual liberation,* on demanding and enforcing the ability of people to feel, express, and act on desires that make life worth living. So we can ask with clarity here: in what sense is sexual liberation also class politics, and how is it possible to form a coalition based around sexually informed desires that a large majority of people do not have?

To think through this problem, I want to draw on a principle from labor organizing. As Jane McAlevey and Anthony Thigpenn have emphasized, labor organizing is a form of structure-based organizing.[22] Its strength comes from uniting people already brought together into a structure — a workplace, a building, a neighborhood, an electoral district — around a shared program. That is to say: structure-based organizing doesn't begin from the principle that its constituents are already ideologically united. One key principle of this organizing practice is that people are often moved to action because they feel ground down or humiliated. They're sometimes more likely to be

moved to action if an organizer can help them identify the weight of the humiliation they're already feeling than by all of the many real material deprivations of their lives — that is, people might be more moved to action through indignation at poor treatment than because of poor wages. This is the principle behind organizing for dignity. Dignity is a structure of feeling that is a pre-condition for political solidarity. It is the firm conviction that you and the people you don't know deserve a life worth living, even if their lives are opaque to you.

There's a scene in *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg that illustrates what I mean.[23] *Stone Butch Blues* is a novel about labor organizing and butch-femme life in Buffalo, NY, before and after deindustrialization. It's focused on Jess Goldberg, like Leslie Feinberg a Jewish, working-class butch who lived in Buffalo before moving to NYC. Jess, who has the respect of other butches she works with, and is sometimes either too quick or slow to action, is being sexually harassed at the factory where she works by one particular man with a normal gender, a petty bully. The factory is union, and the union throws a social gathering in the park for the workers. The men come, and the butches come. Jess's antagonist goads her into a fight, and she responds by organizing a baseball game, cis men versus butches. Duffy, the union organizer, tries to talk her out of it, but at this point she's fixed on her goal, which is in fact a gamble: she could cause needless conflict between two working-class constituencies, raise expectations among the butches that would then be disappointed, and humiliate herself further, particularly if her team loses; alternately, she could shift the organizing terrain for the entire union such that two constituencies in the union develop a mutual regard and trust that they previously lacked. The butches win, the men show them respect they hadn't before, Jess's antagonist loses the respect of his peers and their implicit tolerance for his bullying, and then Duffy agrees with Jess's assessment: "The union did win today," he tells her.[24]

This scene shows something about what I mean — something Samuel Solomon's reading of literary labor in *Stone Butch Blues* in this dossier also demonstrates — which is that being able to claim dignity across class fractions, dignity experienced in mutual regard, clears the field for people to develop their power together. The cis men in the scene don't need to arrive at a more profound understanding of gender on the other side of the fence in order to act better towards their fellow workers; they need structures within which to recognize the butches as part of a shared project.

And I think this is a helpful way of thinking about how sexual liberation does in fact relate to everyone's problems. There is no way for people, transsexuals and non-transsexuals, to bear life in conditions of persistent misrecognition. And that is not, as the examples that have emerged in this essay suggest, an immaterial problem. It is a distinctly material problem, with dire consequences for life as it's lived, eked, and pulped apart. Dignity is a classic working-class demand, and a classic organizing principle, that also forms the point at which a trans politics of sexual liberation

touches on the lives of people who are not trans and may not ever really understand what it might mean to be trans, but can certainly understand the need to survive life with one's head held high.

And I think this also helps to clear a path away from the two other responses that I indicated above — the wrong one, and the naïve one. The response that a politics of gender and sexual liberation is not class politics at this point in time belongs to the far-right wing of the left — you could call it the right wing of Adolph Reed thought, already decisively on the right wing of the left — which sees in trans politics at best an apolitical distraction and at worst an unstrategic and/or immoral deviation from the actual terms of a class politics.[25] In a moment of lively fascistic reaction that has so publicly targeted transsexuals as a means of suppressing other forms of working class power, this line of thinking is indefensible.[26] The structure of feeling that it mobilizes, something like a confused shudder, actively isolates vulnerable people from the political coalitions they could be brought into.

On the other hand, there's a naïve rebuttal to this position that takes trans politics and trans life to be somehow prefigurative of a utopian social configuration.[27] And while it's good to see people having a good time, and god knows we sweat for it, there's something dissatisfyingly instrumentalizing about taking the basic principles of people fighting for a life worth living in *this* world as an image of a good life for all in the next, which seems somehow to oversell the case and therefore fail to do it justice. It reminds me of the dynamic that both Viviane Namaste and Emma Heaney have separately emphasized, according to which trans women are pressed into service as allegories of something else entirely.[28] This dynamic gets worse as the more theorists saddle elements of daily life with great political significance, which also, for what it's worth, spoils people's fun. The hot doll at the party isn't even fighting for your right to dance, though she probably supports it. She's just doing an Olympic-sized line.

In other words, trans politics is class politics, although it doesn't exhaust class politics, and it's class politics now. Affirming trans liberation is one part of a large coalitional project of achieving a life worth living for everyone. When the far right makes its war on trans people, poor and working people who are not currently and will likely never be trans stand to lose. From this point of view, we will have to, absolutely have to, make this common cause our common sense.

Notes

1. I'm grateful to Amy De'Ath and Patrick DeDauw for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this essay. The present chapter adapts a talk I gave to the Sex Negativity seminar at the University of Amsterdam, June 8, 2023. Thanks to Marija Cetinić and her students for their clarifying questions. I also elaborated some of my arguments here in a more lyrical version for Bomb magazine, published under the title "Fishing and Trapping" (May 2024): https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2024/05/20/fishing-and-trapping/.
2. In the introduction to her edited volume *Feminism Against Cisness*, Emma Heaney defines sexual difference as "the social organization of the supposedly biologically derived terms of the sex binary into a hierarchy of persons and qualities." I'm using a slightly different sense: I want to lean on the abstract and various biological fact of sexual difference, the fact that it exists, it manifests in XYZ ways. The coupling of difference with social meaning and power is what I am defining as sex. In that sense, my position is to acknowledge that there is such a thing as sexual difference, without much curiosity about that so-to-speak crude materiality outside of the realm of the social. Emma Heaney, ed., *Feminism Against Cisness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024) 10.
3. See Kathleen Stock, *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (London: Fleet, 2021).
4. See, for instance, Matt Walsh's right-wing propaganda film *What Is a Woman* (2024), which insists on the ontological dignity and fixity that Walsh grants to sex, versus what Walsh and the rest of the anti-trans right call "gender ideology."
5. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography* (New York and London: Verso, 2022) 107.
6. See Rosemary Hennessy, *Fires On The Border: The Passionate Politics of Labor Organizing on the Mexican Frontera* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 125–150.
7. Endnotes, "The Logic of Gender," 2013 https://www.endnotes.org.uk/issues/issue-3/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender.
8. Kay Gabriel, "Gender as Accumulation Strategy," *Invert Journal,* Issue 1 (March 2020): 21–35. The essay was republished and is presently available as Kay Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition: Gender as Acumulation Strategy," *Feminism Against Cisness,* ed. Emma Heaney (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024) 135–157.
9. Oren Gozlan, *Transsexuality and the Art of Transitioning: A Lacanian Approach* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015) 73.
10. Jules Gill-Peterson [as Julian Gill-Peterson], *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) 195.
11. Robert Glück, *Margery Kempe* (New York: NYRB, 2020) 75.
12. Rowan Powell, "the _ _ _ jumped over the _ _ (along a leap a line a landing)," in *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics,* eds. Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel (New York: Nightboat, 2020) 357–365.
13. Glück 31.
14. See Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993)

15. Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010) 25.
16. Amy De'Ath, "Hidden Abodes and Inner Bonds: Literary Study and Marxist-Feminism," in *After Marx: Literary Theory and Value in the 20th Century*, eds. Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2022) 225–239.
17. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011) 26.
18. Michael Denning, "Everyone a Legislator," *New Left Review*, May/June 2021, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii129/articles/michael-denning-everyone-a-legislator.
19. See Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, "Restating the Obvious," *Abolition Geography* (New York and London: Verso, 2022) 266.
20. I wrote this essay in 2023, before Cecilia passed, tragically and unexpectedly, in February 2024.
21. M.E. O'Brien, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom," in *Transgender Marxism,* eds. Jules Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (London: Pluto Press, 2021) 50.
22. For an extended discussion of organizing based on this principle, see Jane McAlevey and Abby Lawlor, *Rules to Win By: Power and Participation in Union Negotiations* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2023). Particular thanks to Patrick DeDauw for thinking through the claims in this section together.
23. Thanks to Tessel Veneboer for a productive conversation about Feinberg that put me in mind of this scene.
24. Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Firebrand books, 1993; self-published, 2014) 96.
25. The furthest edge of this form of thinking, led by figures like Nina Power, grants credibility to Matt Walsh-style anti-trans fascism, on which it aligns in denouncing "gender ideology," i.e. the thesis that sex can change. See Nina Power, "Trans Barbarism," *Compact Magazine*, June 14, 2022, https://compactmag.com/article/trans-barbarism.
26. See my essay "Inventing the Crisis," *n+1*, spring 2024. https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-anti-trans-panic-and-the-crusade-against-teachers/
27. See for instance McKenzie Wark, "Femmunist Intimations," which is broadly illustrative of this type of thinking. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/159/6776809/femmunist-intimations
28. See Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Northwestern University Press, 2017).

Emma Heaney. "On the Cisness of the Bourgeoisie." *Mediations* 37.2 (Spring 2026) 27-40. mediationsjournal.org/articles/cisness-of-the-bourgeoisie

On the Cisness of the Bourgeoisie

Emma Heaney

In the final parts of *The History of Sexuality, Volume I,* Michel Foucault arrives at the claim that the bourgeoisie "must be seen … as being occupied, from the mid-eighteenth century on, with creating its own sexuality and forming a specific body based in it, a 'class' body with its health, hygiene, descent, and race."[1] The achievement of the right kind of sex "marked and maintained" the "caste distinction" of this class as it consolidated its position of cultural dominance in the nineteenth century. While aristocrats claimed a divine authority symbolized by ancestral blood, bourgeois elites legitimized their power via their supposedly superior capacity to rationally govern populations and manage global affairs. They found their complementary symbolic credential in "a specific body" — healthy, able, sane, reproductive — which they would reproduce intergenerationally via diligence regarding rooting out heritable maladies in the partners with which their children would breed; in this sense, for Foucault, "the bourgeoisie's 'blood' was its sex."[2] Bourgeois power directs eugenicist campaigns, criminalization, and vital massacres to manage or destroy bodies and populations via reinforcement of racialization, colonial difference, compulsory wage work, and production of lumpen populations excluded from the wage. These modes of "dynamic racism" and proletarianization define the epoch of bourgeois control.[3] This is the age of distinguishing the prized bourgeois body, distinguished by the correct sexuality, from the perverse, extractable, and expendable bodies that compose non-bourgeois populations. These populations, in turn, only belatedly absorbed as their own the social more that had been the pretext for their immiseration and destruction: "the working classes managed … to escape the deployment of sexuality" until the late nineteenth century.[4]

In the following pages, I propose that what Foucault calls sex or sexuality can be more accurately and capaciously thought as cisness. In a limited sense cisness is, simply enough, the ideology that posits a biological basis for dividing human beings into two mutually exclusive and compatible kinds of bodies based on sex assigned at birth. But, as I've recently clarified in conversation with Sophie Lewis, this modality

of cisness — the direct citation of organs or hormone levels — is far less central to its actual operation than the conceit that cisness is a question of medical assignment might suggest.[5] Rather, cisness — as it emerged historically and as it is inflicted on us daily — is a modality of class and racial supremacy that only resorts to the citation of viscera and bodily chemicals when confronting political challenge. Cisness is the practice of the powerful — the racial, propertied, colonial — claiming possession of a natural sex through the practice of attributing artificial, exaggerated, or perverse sex to other populations and the individuals who are made to represent these populations in the individuating instance.

Analysis of the historical emergence of cisness grows out of the diversity of nineteenth-century contexts in which bourgeois, racial, and colonial power secure their unique claims to proper sex through the criminalization and stigmatizing of lifeways that do not operate in accord with sexual dimorphism as recognized by bourgeois authorities. American law and transnationally produced racial theories treated Black people in ways that held Blackness outside of mores regarding sexual difference, the social expectations of men and women.[6] Indigenous populations did not properly honor biologized sexual dimorphism according to the policies of settler regimes in North America. This charge was also made in non-settler colonial contexts, including India, by colonial administrative bureaucracies. Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, that came under colonial cultural influence via European influence over state modernization schemes likewise found their erotic and romantic socialities remade in the image of the newly enforced norm of the biologized sexual compatibility of male and female. Proletarian and lumpen populations of urban centers from New York to San Francisco and London to Berlin had — as George Chauncey, Clare Sears, Neil McKenna, and Robert Beachy have variously demonstrated — recognized lived social sex based on presentation, often evidenced in the brutal misogynist treatment of trans women. These populations were brought under heightened forms of municipal control that attacked the widespread recognition of social sexed roles by making it a crime to masquerade in the clothes of the other sex.[7]

By the 1940s, the non-cis sexual socialities of proletarian city neighborhoods became increasingly illegible. The proliferation of the idea of homosexuality reoriented people to the sovereign importance of assigned sex for determining social (and particularly sexual) roles. This is what Foucault counts as the working class being taken up in the "deployment of sexuality."[8] An output of this transformation was the firm partitioning of trans life from its former working-class context. While gay desire and identity became an obsessive bourgeois secret, transness became fixed as a lumpen formation abjected from the socialities of working-class life. An analytic of cisness, then, reveals the bourgeois charge that various populations understood sex incorrectly as a context and correlate to this speciation of trans life.

In their introduction to *Transgender Marxism*, Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke note the contemporary effects of this history. They attribute the appeal of Marxist and revolutionary theory among trans people to the difficult structural conditions of trans life, which are "harsh enough that many are easily led to conclude that … no centre-left party … can be relied upon to truly loosen the grip of oppression."[9] Most transfeminist accounts agree that the material conditions of our society expose trans people to significant precarity because most nation-states use legal sex to manage access to public and private services including housing, healthcare, employment, and education, and identity documents. They show how trans people experience vastly disproportionate exposure to the state violence of policing and incarceration.[10] In this analysis, trans people experience these forms of marginalization to maintain their collective availability as part of a "reserve army" of labor and, in the case of trans femmes, as part of the lumpen sector that performs sex work, as I have argued elsewhere.[11]

In this essay, I'm arguing for an expansion of this materialist analysis to address the class and racial politics of cisness. This analysis provides an understanding of reactionary socialisms or hodgepodge political *claims* that borrow socialist arguments or postures on questions of gender. Such political positions have proliferated in recent years: from TERFs who pretend is the stuff of coddled undergraduates; to Elizabeth Breunig's culture war natalism, to Joe Rogan's endorsement of Bernie Sanders.[12][13] In fact, it seems that the fastest way for the rhetoric of socialism to enter mainstream publications in the US is through conservatism on matters of gender. The assertions of whiteness, cisness, and (often but not always) heterosexuality that are central to these writers' political postures prove that they are in touch with people who struggle to pay the bills, in contrast with the empty rhetorical commitment to racial, sexual, and gender justice that a Democratic Party devoid of class analysis speaks in lieu of material commitments to any constituency other than the wealthy donor class. If class — understood not in Marx's dialectical sense but in terms of the discrete social categories put forth by mainstream social science — is primary to other forms of difference, and the unmodified category of worker is supposedly the true and singular protagonist of this phase of history, then politics organized around other forms of social difference is a distraction from the consolidation of a class-based politics. Although the Breunigs and Rogans of the world aren't versed enough in class politics to articulate even this reductive position explicitly, the way such false class politics privileges their perspective leads them there anyway. In the case of trans people, the arguments that flow so easily from bourgeois media personalities have found amplification in anti-trans political organizing that attacks trans healthcare and access to public space, retaining the claim that average people just don't get trans life.[14] This essay aims to offer a Marxist analysis that moves beyond the liberal inclusion of transness on a list of identities that capital may instrumentalize, to argue that, *contra* the reactionary populist argument, it is not transness but cisness that is the historically bourgeois formation.[15]

Cisness is part of the bourgeois cultural ferment that the nineteenth century installed as a socially enforced norm both within lumpen metropolitan neighborhoods and colonized spaces, overriding many and various forms of social organization that were not organized by a binary based on assigned sex, or, in other words, by cisness.[16] Medical authorities standardized a narrative of bodily entrapment and gatekept bodily modification from all but a vanishingly small number of people who met their standards for diagnosis and treatment.[17] Bourgeois doctors thereby installed themselves as the authority that would diagnostically legitimize the tiny minority of true transsexuals.[18] They were, in fact, containing the social force of genders resistant to bourgeois social mores. This ideological containment of gender difference within the narrative frame of medicine was part of the cleaving off of bourgeois subjects — gender normative gays and lesbians and those the medical establishment deemed legitimate transsexuals — from the collectively produced forms of queer and trans life that did not (and still do not) abide by cis and straight social organization. This double operation — the creation of the gender normative gay defined by sexual object rather than gender difference, and the creation of the proper transsexual defined by a regrettable but correctable gender difference — is the process through which queer and trans were reinvented as a private matter; a historical process through which the gay or trans individual replaced the gay and trans collective as the frame for common understanding. Previous to this medical enclosure social sex was a collective affair, both in the sense that non-cis gender understandings were collectively held and (to view the same matter from the other perspective) because bourgeois and colonizing forces understood non-cisness as a population-level trait of these same subjects. The political implications of this historical reality should be clear: a misunderstanding of the cultural substance of proletarian life is at the center of a transphobia that presents itself as giving voice to regular working-class reality over rarefied queer and trans identity politics. Leftist transphobia is indeed a class antipathy but not, as it often presents itself, an anti-capitalist one. Rather, these sentiments reflect the historical residue of the bourgeois imposition of that class's own atomized nuclear family — an arrangement in which division of labor was naturalized into sexed dimorphism. This process covered over the fact that an actual division between a husband who earns and a wife who only oversees domestic management and never works for money was never a reality for most proletarians. The naturalization of a sexual division of labor via cathexis with the biological division of people has been one of the most potent forces in the enthronement of bourgeois cultural authority.

Cisness and the Nineteenth Century

In her field-defining book, *How Sex Changed*, Joanne Meyerowitz first narrated the historical emergence of transness through the chronology of twentieth-century

medical innovations. This story begins in the categories of sexual and gender difference produced by nineteenth-century European sexologists, which were then attached to surgical procedures and hormonal regimes in the early twentieth century. With the transfer of the center of this research and these services to the United States in the post-World War Two era, the story culminates with the founding of the first American sex reassignment clinics in the 1960s.[19] Along with other scholars, I then looked beyond this story to ground the historical emergence of trans in vernacular trans feminine individual accounts, mostly drawing on sexological case studies and collective histories, and on records of criminal punishment and sensational media accounts (which often appeared after assigned sex was revealed after death).[20]

But beyond the recovery of these vernacular forms of identity, both individual and collective, understanding the nineteenth century consolidation of trans femininity requires understanding how cisness emerges as a regulatory ideology. The long nineteenth century is the period in which non-cisness as an exclusively racial, colonial, and class order readjusts to incorporate the reality that same sex activity and forms of gender irreconcilable with emerging bourgeois gender norms were not only *present* in white metropolitan bourgeois elites and declining aristocratic cultures but were in fact *central* to them, from Oxbridge colleges to the last German Imperial court. Thus, homoerotic sexual relations moved from being an acceptable stage of development for otherwise normal boys to being a possible indication of a feminine disposition that defined an aberrant individual within white and bourgeois populations. This contradiction was resolved by medicalization, the association of a white man's internal androgyny with the atavistic perversions of the racialized, colonized, and proletarian; but a fundamentally individual problem in nature.

As the endpoint of this nineteenth century process, trans femininity in the US and Western Europe became two things: firstly, it continued on as a real social collectivity formed by social practices and economic structures that predated the apprehension of non-cis femininities by medical science. Scenes of mollies, *molles*, fairies, *femeniellos* organized around sex work and other precarious feminized employment continued to operate relatively unchanged. But secondly, via its incorporation into bourgeois medical science and adjacent social sciences, the social category of trans femininity also took on the status of regrettable individual malady. From this emergence of bourgeois invert as a sick individual over the proletarian fairy as representative of a blighted social order, first doctors and then municipal governments enacting anti-vice policing shored up the cisness of the bourgeoise. If a non-ethnic, white bourgeois was *that way*, he would have to go to *that part of town* to indulge himself and risk extortion or arrest. If he wished to remain in the neighborhoods and families that were the emblems of bourgeois uprightness, he would have to submit to the sexologist's intervention. This is the story of the coerced

consolidations and categorizations of a diverse array of social positionings that might have had as much to do with spiritual, kinship, or labor roles as they did with a notion of personal gender. In what follows, I select examples of the breadth of lifeways that don't operate according to an ideology of cisness. What draws together the following nineteenth-century examples of disciplinary social agents is their common contribution to the contouring of cisness as an attribute of the dominant cultural group, whether they be propertied, white or otherwise racially dominant, settler, or any combination of these.

To begin we can look to the case of the Indigenous Americas and the colonial project against Indigenous genders that contemporary Indigenous communities and thinkers refer to with the contested umbrella term, "two spirit." In *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonization and Indigenous Decolonization*, Scott Lauria Morgensen provides examples from three Indigenous nations. First he recounts the story of Och-Tisch, a Crow boté, who lived from 1854 to the late 1920s, and became a focus for the US Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs Crow Agency's program to "[target] boté for gendered and sexual reeducation."[21] The tactics of this program included "[incarcerating] the boté, [cutting] off their hair, [making] them wear men's clothing … and [forcing] manual labor."[22] Crow Historian Joe Medicine Crow recounts the community response to a US Indian Agent who targeted Crow boté in 1890, cutting their hair and forcing them to wear trousers: "the people were so upset with this that Chief Pretty Eagle came into Crow Agency, and told [the agent] to leave the reservation."[23] This communal resistance reflects the position of boté as part of Crow social life and resistance to the colonizer's gender regulation as Indigenous resistance. Morgensen periodizes the success of the substantial suppression of boté life within Crow communities as occurring by the 1920s and 1930s with the gradual transition of this regulatory violence from white agents of the American government to what he calls "Christianized" Indians who spread the idea of cisness among native communities.

Similar practices became common across North America in the early twentieth century: Morgensen also highlights the example of a Navajo woman who was taken to the Carlisle Indian School as a child in the 1930s. He cites an interview conducted with a Navajo woman by the anthropologist Walter Williams in which the woman remembers her cousin, who was a *nadle,* a Navajo two spirit identity, being taken away from school. "Since [they] dressed as a girl … school officials placed [them] in the girl's dormitory. The Navajo students protected [them] and [they] went undiscovered," but then following a lice infection "the white teachers scrubbed all the girls" and were upset by the cousin's body, so they sent them away and the family never knew what happened to them.[24] Other sources confirm similar processes and timelines across the Indigenous Americas and the Pacific Rim, as colonizers tried to suppress the socialities that were formed around social categories they viewed in relation to their own developing sense of sexual aberration.[25]

But the vast bureaucratic effort that wrested Indigenous youth from their kin and communities in order to enforce settler cultural norms in, among other areas, comportment, dress, language, and grooming habits was, of course, not limited to two-spirit people. Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* (1921) recounts the author's experience of being removed, along with other children, from her Sioux community and placed in an Indian boarding school in 1884. In "The Cutting of My Long Hair" she describes a scene of mass hair cutting; one of many experiences in which the white staff violently imposed their ideas about sex onto Indigenous children. Ša's friend Judéwin:

> had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy.... Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards. We discussed our fate for some moments, and when Judéwin said "We have to submit, because they are strong," I replied "No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!"[26]

Sa runs away but is caught and tied kicking and screaming to a chair, where the white school officials cut her hair. "Then I lost my spirit," she wrote. This vignette, which resonates so strikingly with the stories of attacks on Crow boté, points to the way that Indigenous socialities were policed via the elimination of forms of life that colonizers viewed as gender deviance. It is Indigenous lifeways that are attacked when hair is forcibly cut, regardless of whether or not this violence is done to a two-spirit person. It was the collectively and relationally produced Indigenous social orders that settlers viewed as antagonistic to the maintenance of an orderly settler society. The violent act of haircutting is just one of the emblematic, dramatic, public displays of settler attempts to destroy Sioux lifeways that Sa's writing documents.

This specific modality of enforcing cisness on Turtle Island resonates with other colonial contexts. Morgensen traces the origin of the conceptual enclosure of gender by cisness back to "[sixteenth-century] Spanish, French, and British encounters with Native cultures," which produced the category of "berdache" to collapse Indigenous genders marked for suppression and eradication. The word was imported from its original usage as a term used to "condemn Middle Eastern and Muslim men as racial enemies of Christian civilization"; "as kept boys" or "boy slaves" whose "sex was said to have been altered by immoral male desire."[27] This link between the settler-colonial apprehension of non-cis gender in the Americas on the one hand, and Orientalist understandings of the Middle East and Islamic sex-gender roles on the other, reveals the constitutive relation between racialization and cisness across colonial contexts.

In *Women with Mustaches, Men Without Beards*, Afsaneh Najmabadi studies Qajar Iran, the period that corresponds with the long nineteenth century.[28] Her book highlights the modernizing project of disappearing the categories of amrad and mukhanna — younger beloveds who were central both to classical Persian poetry and to pre-Qajar social structures of eros — from cultural view. This project, Najmabadi argues, was required to heteronormalize Iranian culture as one of the necessary components for achieving modernity. Najmabadi insists that the amrad and mukhanna were not likened to women or understood as antecedents to later trans feminine Iranian identities (the focus of her subsequent book). Rather, age and power differentials in relation to their older lovers determined their role in the sexual order as celebrated ideal objects of adoration. It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that the beloved became feminized and associated with feminized sex work rather than intra-masculine devotions. It was the amrad's feminization that precipitated the process of culturally disappearing these previously normative, indeed celebrated, social types. This process involved the re-organization of the social understanding of bodies into two mutually exclusive and compatible sex types: penetrable and penetrator, woman and man. This, in my view, marks the emergence of the bourgeois ideology of cisness.

Crucial to Najmabadi's argument is that the same modernizers who worried about and ultimately abruptly denied the existence of the amrad were also worried about Iranian women. It was the backwardness of sex segregated spheres that gave rise to same-sex practices where they existed in Iranian society. If only Iranian wives could be more like European wives, Iran could move forward both socially and politically. The twinned vices of sodomy and prostitution would disappear. These arguments represent the reevaluation of Iranian social mores in light of the importation of French and British bourgeois understandings of sexuality and kinship that had, by this point, been reformulated around the figure of the homosexual, as Foucault recounts. But they also rested on racialized and colonial disavowals that were distinct from the Euro-American regulation of sexual difference, in that they did not incorporate the abject as a medicalized, pathologized sport within the race. Rather, the Iranian context required a disappearance, not only of the amrad but of Iranian cultural ways. Modernizers connected the amrad/mukhanna to the veiled Iranian woman, both figures inadmissible to the project of modernization. But whereas the veiled woman would remain a question for constitutionalists and Islamists, modernists and feminists, and a vast array of commentators who speak without knowing anything about Iranian history, the amrad disappears.[29] Modernizers saw themselves as rescuing Iranian women from the social structure that artificially sequestered them and thus as making space for the revelation of real womanhood, exhumed from the false roles that a backwards culture had imposed. As the social roles governing sexuality resolved into cis sexes, the center of Iranian sexual culture disappeared.

Contrast this history with the apprehension of non-cis genders by the British Raj in the South Asian nineteenth century. In her study, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*, Jessica Hinchy provides an overview of the extensive efforts of the British Raj and the various local bureaucracies across the subcontinent to criminalize and often explicitly to eradicate the gender roles that have various terms in the hundreds of languages and dialects spoken across the subcontinent, but are reductively and collectively referred to in English as hijras. Hijras are characterized by feminine gender presentation, the formation of independent kinship structures organized around a guru, and the work of dancing at weddings and births and other forms of performance which is paid in the form of *badhai* or "gifts of money to which they [are] spiritually entitled."[30]

Unlike the amrad and mukhannas in the Iranian context, hijra are often defined by feminine adornment and labor roles, and have historically not been subject to the same sort of celebration in classical culture. Hijras were and are, rather, regarded as part of South Asian cultures across regions and religions. Their enduring acknowledgement as part of South Asian society is reflected in the 2014 Indian Supreme Court decision federally recognizing a third gender, and the bureaucratic recognition of a third gender across Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.[31] These actions are in contrast to the total overhaul of Iranian social mores that saw amrads go from being viewed as the ideal object of eros to being wholly erased from the cultural landscape by the end of the nineteenth century.

Like the nineteenth-century trans feminine types of Western Europe and the US — the fairies, mollies, *molles*, and *feminiellos* — hijras had a class position. They lost the caste statuses they were assigned at birth and entered a lower position on the social ladder that, at least by the nineteenth century, also became categorically associated with sex work. Unlike the trans femmes of the metropoles and provinces of empire, however, hijras were not criminalized under colonial legal codes and Indian administrative cultures via their association with sex work. Rather, as both Hinchy and Gayatri Reddy have noted, the criminalization of hijras was achieved via their inclusion in criminal castes, in a legal structure that calcified caste identities into administrative and labor categories. Navyug Gill's work further documents the use of caste by colonial bureaucracy as a nativist cover for enacting colonial population management goals, or otherwise targeting populations for incarceration, work in caste-prescribed sectors, or eradication.[32] This fact is particularly significant given that, as Durba Mitra has meticulously documented, the category of the prostitute was a central figure though which the Indian administrative state — and the social sciences that rose in tandem with it — defined their purview and purpose.[33] Unlike widows, unmarried women, religious minorities, low caste women and others, hijras were evidently not targeted by the laws and scholarly analyses that saw "the prostitute" as a catch-all socio-legal category for all women deemed incommensurable with colonial bureaucratic management of Indian populations. In other words, in the

South Asian context it seems there was not the kind of collapsing of cis and trans women in the criminalization of sex work that occurred in the metropoles of the US and Western Europe that informed my own previous argument that sex work served as the material basis for the vernacular categories of trans femininity in the US and Western Europe. Rather, the sex difference of hijras is understood as part of the fabric of South Asian lifeways that run contrary to the bureaucratic management of the colonial state.

This essay aims to provide a framework for a larger project: a more complete account of the nineteenth-century endeavor to consolidate cisness as the transcultural basis of sex through the identification and disavowal of myriad racialized and proletarian non-cis social identities. This process was already well underway, in some cases for centuries, when medical and social science turned attention to non-cis femininity in the mid nineteenth century. My understanding is that what actually arose through the sexological apprehension of trans femininity into a medical diagnostic was the opening of a possibility of bourgeois transness. The fundamental paradigm of this bourgeois emergence was psychic injury and bodily entrapment, a paradigm foreign to the myriad experiences of those occupying non-cis social roles even in the very streets of Berlin, Paris, and New York City where sexologists forged and proliferated their medical narratives during the period from 1860 to 1920.

There was a sex binary present in many of these contexts: men and women were two mutually exclusive groups. The presence of boy beloveds in Qajar Iran didn't mean that there weren't rigid rules about how men and women had to behave. What the amrad represented to the cultural colonizers from Britain and France was the reality that genitals didn't reliably place every person on one side or another of the binary of sexual subject versus sexual object, as was the bourgeois European standard. The Iranian context was understood as in relation to the reality, visible on the streets of London and Paris, that assigned sex and genital configuration did not prescribe sexual role or sexed social role. Other sex-gender systems had different rules about bodies, in fact most did. What sexology offered, as it refined and developed separate nosologies for homosexuality and transness, was a racializing narrative that reconciled the vast and various ways that vernacular sexual cultures violated cisness (albeit not the gender binary) with the demand that white bourgeois subjects be made to have their difference named, taxonomized, and filed as something other than racial or class degeneracy. Gayness and transness went from socialities to be engaged in, lived in, indulged in, collectively, to being something an individual suffered alone.

We live in the wake of this colonial and capitalist consolidation of cisness as a classed and racialized quality, as a guarded possession of the international bourgeoisie; its status as a group-forming attribute is obscured by our faith that the stuff of our body is the most personal, the most individual thing we own. The last decade has seen the leaking of trans life out of the permissible class-bifurcated narratives of mid-nineteenth-century sexology and late nineteenth-century

escalations of criminalization. No longer is trans life held as either a bourgeois individual's vanishingly rare medical anomaly or as a racialized and criminalized lifeway associated with sex work and death. Rather, transness has been revealed to a larger public as it has largely been for the last century and a half: a lifeway constrained by cis social structures, accompanied by bureaucratic and interpersonal violence, productive of an aesthetic and social genealogy. When myriad *New York Times* op-eds reinforce the idea that unprecedented numbers of young people identifying as trans is evidence of social contagion, this organ of bourgeois self-regard pathologizes the very heart of trans and queer life: these are collectively held socialities that have always been available to all, given endlessly, taken more or less graciously, never individually held, never owned.

In the United States, there has been a dramatic surge in cis men seeking injectable testosterone in the past two years. This is occurring both via existing medical standards for verified hypogonadism and in response to reported symptoms of lack of pep via the blossoming of para-medical clinics that specialize in getting you your "first dose [...] within an hour" of walking in the door and encourage patients to promote testosterone among their social circles with requests to "refer a friend for $50 off your next weekly treatment."[34] A recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* dishes on the trend of cis women using testosterone to pursue more and better sex.[35] This trend adds to the long-standing list of medical protocols that provide cis women with the hormones they need, including for birth control and IVF, to halt precocious puberty and to manage the symptoms of menopause. This multi-sectoral infrastructure that supports the increase in access, destigmatization, visibility, and variety of forms of sex modification for cis people occurs as a Trump executive order denies the existence of trans people.[36] More consequentially, American legislators write laws that forbid pediatric gender-affirming care. In Tennessee, this legislation forthrightly declares that its purpose is to satisfy the state's interest in "encouraging minors to appreciate their sex, particularly as they undergo puberty."[37] This is the landscape through which the quotidian techniques of sexed body modification are hoarded for people whose needs and desires reaffirm a cis story about what bodies should be able to do and be. In this context, trans adolescence becomes the fulcrum on which bodily autonomy tips. This essay has aimed to contextualize this contemporary reality in a long history of bourgeois states' and their cultural attachés' claims to a monopoly on understanding what bodies are and how bodies compose social units. This surety has always relied on racialized and criminalized counterexamples. What happens when the most sacrosanct achievement of the bourgeois class is challenged by its own children? Recently, we've seen just what.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 124.
2. Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 124.
3. Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 137.
4. Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 121.
5. Emma Heaney and Sophie Lewis, "On the Cisness of the Bourgeoisie," *Pinko Magazine Issue Four,* November 2025.
6. See Snorton's reading of Hortense Spillers in C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
7. Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
8. Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 21.
9. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, "Introduction," *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021) 3.
10. See Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Nat Smith and Eric Stanley, eds., *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, Second Edition (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015); Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
11. Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017) 162.
12. For Breunig's combination of social welfare advocacy and social conservatism see Elizabeth Bruenig, "It's Time to Give Socialism a Try," *Washington Post*, March 6, 2018, Accessed July 9, 2022 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-time-to-give-socialism-a-try/2018/03/06/c603a1b6-2164-11e8-86f6-54bfff693d2b_story.html and "Make Birth Free," *The Atlantic,* Accessed July 9, 2022 https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/post-roe-pro-life-parental-support/661473/.
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14. See Jules Gill-Peterson, "Caring for Trans Kids, Transnationally, or, Against 'Gender-Critical' Moms," In *Feminism Against Cisness*, edited by Emma Heaney (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024) 197–216 and Joanna Wuest, "Assuaging the Anxious Matriatch: Social Conservatives, Radical Feminisms, and Dark Money Against Trans Rights," *Feminism Against Cisness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024).
15. For another way to break through this limited Marxist analysis of trans life, see an account of trans people's experience of the role of their trans identity in labor organizing in Michelle O'Brien, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom," eds. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

16. The contrast between Sharon Marcus's *Between Women* and Jen Manion's *Female Husbands* accounts of nineteenth-century marriage forms reflects this class structure. The bourgeois and aristocratic women involved in female marriages were thought of as women, and somewhat protected from ridicule by financial security. Manion's proletarian female husbands, on the other hand, had male social identities, were subject to ridicule, and increasingly to incarceration throughout the nineteenth century. In many of the cases Manion recounts, the assigned sex of the female husband is made public either in criminal court proceedings or when their wives make claims in divorce proceedings. Cisness functions either as a bourgeois quality or through these forms of state apprehension. Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) and Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2009).
17. See Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
18. See Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*.
19. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*.
20. See: Heaney, *The New Woman*; Emily Skidmore, *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2017); Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Manion, *Female Husbands*.
21. A Crow social position that colonizers apprehended into the category of berdache and which Indigenous people have more recently incorporated under the umbrella of two spirit. Scott Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) 40.
22. Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us* 39.
23. Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us* 82.
24. Walter L. Williams, The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 180.
25. See Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (New York: Atria Books, 2014) chapter 8 and Kai Pyle, "Naming and Claiming: Recovering Ojibwe and Plains Cree Two-Spirit Language," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 574–588.
26. Zitkala-Ša, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 90–91.
27. Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us* 36.
28. Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2005).
29. See Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches* chapters 3, 7, and 8.
30. Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (New York: Verso, 2024) 30.
31. Julie McCarthy, "In India, Landmark Law Recognizes Transgender Citizens" NPR News, April 15, 2014, Accessed January 28, 2026 https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/04/15/303408581/in-india-landmark-ruling-recognizes-transgender-citizens.
32. Navyug Gill, *Labors of Division: Global Capitalism and the Emergence of the Peasant in Colonial Panjab* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

33. Durba Mitra, *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).
34. See "American Men Are Hungry for Injectable Testosterone," *The Economist*, July 8, 2025, Accessed January 28, 2026 https://www.economist.com/united-states/2025/07/08/american-men-are-hungry-for-injectable-testosterone.
35. Susan Dominus, "'I'm on Fire': Testosterone Is Giving Women Back Their Sex Drive — and Then Some," *New York Times Magazine*, October 22, 2025, Accessed January 28 2026 https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/22/magazine/testosterone-women-health-sex-libido-menopause.html.
36. Dominus 2026.
37. U.S. President Executive Order 14168 of January 20, 2025, *Federal Register* 90, no. 19 (January 30, 2025): 8615–8618.
38. Tennessee Legislature, Senate, *Prohibition on Medical Procedures Performed on Minors Related to Sexual Identity*, SB 1, 113th Gen. Assem., passed February 23, 2023, https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default?BillNumber=SB0001&ga=113.

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Two Substantialisms: On Value and Sexual Difference

Amy De'Ath

As it unfolds over the beginning chapters of *Capital, Volume I*, Marx's critique of the value-form operates at such a high level of abstraction that it can be difficult to see how it might speak to questions of sexed embodiment. Yet the post-1960s developments in critical theory provoked by his analysis — specifically, their attention to the relation between value and human social practices — can help to extend and clarify existing (rather famous) arguments that the materiality of the body is not a self-evident "reality" or substance that can be taken as a given.

Indeed, Marx's critique of value is useful in part because it helps us to challenge points of logical departure considered self-evident. In Marx's day, this included the assumption by liberal political economists, including the discipline's "best representatives," Adam Smith and David Ricardo, that value is a "nature-imposed necessity" borne by the commodity and expressed in money. But in demonstrating how the value-form possesses an objectivity that cannot be grasped by the senses, Marx's critique also challenges neoclassical economics and its basis in marginal utility theory, which understands commodity prices in relation to the motives and subjective assessments of individual commodity owners as they calculate the ratios of increased utility brought to the consumer by additional quantities of a particular good. As Simon Clarke has argued, the "marginalist revolution" of neoclassical economic and social theory based on consumption and utility may have done away with the concept of value conceived in terms of labor, but it remains rooted in naturalistic, ideological conceptions of the individual agent abstracted from any particular form of society.[1] In departing from the level of the rational individual to argue that value moves with a social objectivity that is "suprasensible," however, Marx's method offers a way to critique all manner of ideological forms in order to trace their historical roots.[2] As I want to suggest here, this includes the naturalized concept of sex defended by the neofascist, transphobic strains of conservative and liberal thought known as gender critical feminism.

On one level, Marx's critique of value as a social relationship rather than a natural substance helps to demonstrate what gender theorists have been arguing for a long

time: that sex is not transhistorical nor embodied in any essential way, but formed and brought into existence by particular social arrangements. As such, it offers a historical analytic — a "science," even — that goes some way to demonstrating *why* sociosexual mores, ideologies, and research agendas advance or recede at particular historical moments by linking these cultural shifts to value production and patterns of accumulation. But not only this: as I argue below, since the object of value critique is not only the value-form but the liberal modes of humanist, empiricist thought to which it gives rise, post-1960s Marxian value theory can help to construct a conceptual account of sex as a capitalist social form and a mediating technology, a contradictory and dynamic "form of appearance," to use Marx's term — one that's reproduced in mutually constitutive relation to gender.

This insight initially requires some reflection on the difference between the abstract logic at the heart of the capital-labor relation — "self-expanding value in motion," as Kevin Floyd puts it — and on the other hand, the world of concrete social forms. Marx explains the distinction, of course, by pointing to the fetish-character of the commodity, in which the capital-labor relation appears in its social form as value, a supposedly natural property of the commodity itself.[3] But in *Capital, Volume III*, Marx also describes three social classes — the capitalist class, the landowning class, and the working class — as social forms of appearance tied by property relations to capital, land, and labor. These latter three categories, we might recall, comprise the Trinity Formula presented by Smith as the three sources of revenue. Yet as Beverley Best has recently underlined, for Marx, capital, land, and labor are merely the "outward faces" of capital, and they serve to mystify the fact that the only source of value is unpaid surplus labor: "As appearances go, the source of profit is capital, the source of ground-rent is land, and the source of wages is labour."[4] What's more, these supposed sources of value appear disconnected from each other, which further reinforces the notion that value is to be found in their qualitative, empirical properties and not in their social relations to each other.

Marx's critique of the Trinity Formula is also a key part of his analysis of the contradictions, inversions, mystifications, and autonomizations that constitute what Best calls capital's "perceptual physics." This part of his attack on the common-sense empiricism at the heart of liberal political economy is also important because it ties capital's ostensible sources of revenue to what we might think of as the three "base" social classes — classes embodied and reproduced by actual people who are either capitalists, landowners, or proletarians. Best calls these classes *distributional categories*, and reminds us that since they're not the only social categories through which individuals make their appearances, we never encounter them in their pure forms:

> In the "actual world," the world of capitalist forms, the distributional categories are always already amalgams of other social relations / distributional categories — gender, race, sexuality, citizenship, caste,

> age, ability, merit — to form complex technologies at work in the sphere of competition for power and resources. In this sphere, for example, the category/technology of race is inherently "political economic," in the way that the social relation of modern property is inherently racialized, gendered, imperialized, with or without citizenship, franchise, and so on.[5]

It's easy to see how the "base" distributional classes are fundamentally defined by property relations, but it's also possible to imagine how a complex array of legal processes, border regimes, healthcare systems, housing arrangements, and other types of stratifications produce a range of other distributions that are also economic in character and very often appear in the form of identity categories. It's particularly difficult to point to the economic character of sexual difference, however — partly because, like race, sex is so often understood simply as a biological and physically embodied trait, but also because sex forms one pole of a gender-sex binary in which gender, not sex, is understood to be cultural and economically determined. Is sex inherently "political economic"? Is it another "distributional category"? I would insist that it is indeed, and propose that a Marxist analysis asking how so is not altogether incompatible with Judith Butler's famous critique of sex, particularly where they link assumptions about sexual difference to normative ideas of human freedom.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler famously critiques what they call the "metaphysics of substance," by which they mean the discursive appearance of sex as a substance that constitutes the ontological reality of a person; the fiction of a self-identical being that is sustained, for Butler, by "a performative twist of language."[6] Butler borrows this phrase from Michael Haar's Nietzchian critique of the supposed truth of grammatical categories which underpin the fictitious unity of the self, and they cite Haar's observation that "it was grammar (the structure of subject and predicate) that inspired Descartes' certainty that 'I' is the subject of 'think,' whereas," argues Haar, "it is rather the thoughts that come to 'me'." Butler frames the belief in "a prior ontological reality of substance and attribute" as a normative form of humanism, an "artificial philosophical means by which simplicity, order, and identity are effectively instituted." Even Monique Wittig reproduces this form of humanism in her argument for the destruction of sex:

> Where it seems that Wittig has subscribed to a radical project of lesbian emancipation and enforced a distinction between "lesbian" and "woman," she does this through the defense of the pregendered "person," characterised as freedom. This move not only confirms the [supposedly] presocial status of human freedom, but subscribes to that metaphysics of substance that is responsible for the production and naturalization of the category of sex itself.[7]

Indeed, sex provides the ground for a "substantializing view of gender," as if sex is simply something one is — just like philosophical ontologies reliant on "Being" and "Substance" can assume that one simply "is" a person, a self, an identity.[8] Yet, as Butler famously argued in *Gender Trouble*, "there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along."[9]

Critics have challenged this apparent conflation of gender and sex, but despite their distinct critical orders — one a poststructuralist dismantling of existentialism and mind-body dualisms, the other a systematic account of capital accumulation and its forms of appearance — the resemblance between Butler's critique of sex as a metaphysics of substance on the one hand and the Marxian critique of "substantialist" notions of value on the other is striking.[10] Consider the value theorist Michael Heinrich's note that:

> The "substance of value" as a figure of speech has frequently been understood in a quasi-physical, "substantialist" manner: the worker has expended a specific quantity of abstract labor and this quantity exists within the individual commodity and turns the isolated article into an object of value.[11]

The problem here, as Marx notes when he comments on how any account of capitalism must begin *post festum*, is that the political economist seeks not to understand the historical character of the forms which stamp products as commodities, "for in his eyes they are immutable," but rather, in his backward way, to account for how prices and money determine the character and magnitude of value. But of course:

> It is however precisely this finished form of the world of commodities — the money form — which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly.[12]

Given how Butler and Marx both problematize the concept of substance by reference to the concealing social forms of *money* and *gender*, it can be tempting to draw some parallels between money and value on the one hand, and gender and sex on the other: in both cases, one form of appearance substantializes the other, making sex or value appear empirical, natural, transhistorical, rather than "revealing them plainly" as social forms. It's Marx's project, in *Capital*, to show that value is not an empirical, qualitative thing to be found in sources of revenue or as a substance within the commodity, but a historical function of real abstraction, and in a not dissimilar

gesture, *Gender Trouble* seeks to show how sex depends on the false premises of normative humanisms: a grammatical formulation of subject and predicate that assumes some "prior ontological reality of substance and attribute."[13] Thus, in liberal societies, sex, like humanity, is presumed to be an inherent property of a person — even a pre-gendered person — while classical political economy, Marx notes, "makes the mistake of treating [value] as the eternal natural form of social production," and overlooking the historical specificity of the value-form. Value is perceived to be naturally "in there" in commodities while sex is supposedly "in here" in the individual.

But while liberal and normative ideas of value and sex present comparable problems, these things are obviously *not* analogous, and in one particularly important way because, of course, unlike value, sex has no objective facticity.[14] Marx shows how, as value moves through the world acquiring and shedding various forms — labor, commodities, money, for example — the value-form is not any particular thing but an expression of a *relation* between things: an abstract but objectively existing process that shapes our social world in ways that are impossible to out-think. Indeed, while Marx characterizes what he calls the "sensuous-actual" as a form of hypostasis, the "determinate form of realization" of a generalized universal, concrete forms are never simply reflections or instances of the logic of capital itself. Therefore, while we might align with the politics informing Lisa Rofel's observation that "the value-form lies not just in material objects but in bodies deemed differentially worthy of a valuable life," it is also politically salient to note that this framing, now common in contemporary theory, is misleading: the value-form is not *contained* in bodies or "life," rather, it is the dominant social modality that organizes the way bodies are sorted, categorized, recognized, and disciplined in capitalism.[15] Sex is not a real abstraction since, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel points out, real abstraction allows only for "quantitative differentiation (differentiation in abstract, non-dimensional quantity)."[16] As money, commodities, capital, and profit, for example, we apprehend the value-form through a rather limited range of expressions, in fact, even while we sense its shaping force everywhere.

But more to the point: sex is not a real abstraction like value, because sex can change. Thus, it cannot adequately be explained by analogy to commodity exchange, since, while the sex-gender binary operates categorially — through forms of social fixity that produce hierarchies, differentiation, and modes of recognition — sex and gender are also mediations ultimately rooted in (which is to say, dominated and driven by) the always-shifting boundary between waged and unwaged labor.[17] Queer and feminist Marxisms can account for this movement in increasingly precise terms today. Earlier interventions, such as Martha Giménez's Althusserian concept of the "mode of *re*production," and Gayle Rubin's argument that sex must be understood — like "food, clothing, automobiles and transistor radios" — in terms of the relations of production, insightfully suggest that sex and gender are mediated by labor formations.[18] Recent work, however, has sought to theorize them in value terms. The Endnotes Collective's

2013 essay "The Logic of Gender," and Best's erudite evaluation of this work along with other influential Marxist-feminist arguments in her essay "Wages for Housework Redux," are two signal examples: both insist on the necessity of understanding the concept of value as a social modality if we are to understand the specific ways gender is mediated directly and indirectly by the market.[19] To this end, Best returns to Ellen Meiksins Wood's oft-maligned theory of "indifferent capitalism" to argue that even as capital *empties out all particular content* in its drive to abstract the world, the dynamic threshold between waged and unwaged labor produces the sex-gender binary as a result of its own moving contradiction.[20] What is in fact capital's utopian drive to socialize all activities — and thus make them value-productive — is impeded when it meets its own limitations in the marketplace, where inter-capitalist competition and the need to minimize costs of production actually prevent unfettered growth and the full socialization of labor.[21] Again, we are reminded of the distinction between capital's internal logic and the contradictory social forms through which it cannot but take shape: "capital does not move in the world as capital, per se, but in the social form of individual, competing capitals, represented in the sphere of competition by their bearers: individual, competing capitalists."[22]

Neither "The Logic of Gender" nor Best's argument focus on the question of sexual difference, but the importance of the critical concept of mediation to their accounts of feminized social reproduction returns us to how what I have called the substantializing functions of money or gender — as they produce and naturalize the concepts of value and sex — are usefully comparable and importantly not the same. Money, as Marx demonstrates at length, is the necessary form of appearance, the universal equivalent, that allows value to circulate and exchange to take place. Yet, as money miraculously becomes more money, what it enables is capital's automatic movement — M-C-M' — self-expanding value in motion; a product of human action but not one of thought; a product of historical circumstance that sets limits, installs coercions, encourages tendencies, necessitates mediations (not least the mediation called money), but achieves all of this "behind the backs of the producers," as Marx has it.[23] Socially sanctioned forms of sexual difference have no such internal capacity for expanding themselves, however, even if they are reproduced, like exchange-relations, through repetition and social custom.[24] What gender "enables," rather, is the idealist appearance of cis-sexual difference, which might well be characterized as the ideological straitjacket of a biological reality that is infinitely variable. This contradiction is always and readily apparent, of course, because sexual difference unfolds behind our backs and in front — it is absolutely grasped by the senses!

What does this allow us to say about the relation between sex and value? The poststructuralist insight that the sex-gender binary is perpetually installed through difference and repetition — via "the stylized repetition of acts through time," acts which posit "the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" — can help us to avoid the error of thinking

that gender and sex have a causal relation to value.[25] Rather, both are moments within a social totality rooted in the self-expanding movement of value; a modality that developed over centuries through social custom, envelopes the whole world, and does so in part by producing "outsides" recognizable as social differentials and surplus populations.[26]

Indeed, grasping the distinction between these different types of substantialisms can help to explain the durability of the sex-gender binary in capitalism, as it forms part of what Sianne Ngai calls "the unity of unity and difference in capitalist social life."[27] It gets us nearer to an account of how that binary is mediated by patterns of value accumulation, and more to the point, given conditions of global economic downturn since 1973, by *crises* in value production — crises that are impossible to understand without a critical concept of value, and even more so when value appears to be generated in a multitude of locations, from financial derivatives to AI programs to animal flesh.[28]

But if, as the introduction to this dossier suggests, "sex" enters crisis when value production is in crisis, two recent arguments suggest helpful methodological coordinates for a dialectical account of that interconnection. One is about concepts: Kevin Floyd's corrective to biopolitical accounts of reproductive technologies describes how, in their work on the global surrogacy industry, Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby collapse the Marxian categories of capital and labor and "attribute value-producing agency to sheer biological substance."[29] Floyd identifies this move as part of a wider theoretical tendency which, inspired by autonomist Marxism, posits biological materiality (both embodied and technological) as a site of autonomous value production. In doing so, he argues, such theories imagine an expansion of value production in place of a reality of global conditions of secular stagnation; conditions in which the "debt-driven export of social reproduction" is one result of mass proletarianization accompanied by a shrinking pool of available wage-labor in the global South.[30] We cannot understand this tendency to devalue labor-power, to externalize surplus populations, and to draw on them as sites for the extraction of biological raw material, Floyd argues, without retaining the distinct analytic meanings of Marxian categories. The discrete concepts of constant and variable capital; capital and labor; and of course, value itself, enable us to grasp both where value comes from and how it mediates embodied forms of social difference through the capital-labor relation.[31]

In a more historical register, M.E. O'Brien's recent work on family abolition not only traces the development of sexual subcultures and gender transgression within under-employed sections of the nineteenth-century proletariat in Europe, as well as the variegated romantic codes of newly emancipated Black proletarians in the American south in the same period, but also analyses the repression of sexual deviance and variety by worker's movements which sought to consolidate the heteronormative family form. Because it considers shifts in sexual and familial

relations in the context of workforce participation, union activity, and patterns of accumulation, this framing offers a way to grasp punctual events and gradual shifts in the development of sex and gender in relation to histories of expanding and declining value production. O'Brien moves from industrial expansion and capitalist boom beginning in the nineteenth century to focus, later, on the rapidly increasing feminization of labor that took hold in advanced capitalist countries in the postwar period and which intensified in the context of declining profit margins and wage stagnation beginning in the early 1970s. Indeed, O'Brien argues that it was capitalist crisis, and not the gay liberation and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, that undid the traditional family form:

> It was not queers or feminists that ultimately brought [the] family form into crisis. The male-breadwinner family form is no longer characteristic of any sector of society, and has lost its social hegemony due to the convergence of several simultaneous trends.... Unlike the birth of the workers' movement, when worker organization played an instrumental role in creating the conditions for the ascendancy of the working-class housewife, her demise largely depended on a set of structural forces.[32]

Interventions and histories like this can also help to ground our sense of how sex may be mediated by value relations but nevertheless remains a form and product of human activity. They allow us to replace a liberal humanism with a negative and abolitionist one that attempts to think "in and through" the objective character of capitalist society, as Werner Bonefeld underlines, using a critical reason that is objective rather than subjective insofar as "it asks about the social constitution of the relations of economic objectivity" and recognizes that "the economic quantities move as if by their own volition beyond human control; and yet, their movement manifests the practices of the social individuals in the form of the economic object."[33]

Thinking carefully about the relation of capital's function of abstraction to the appearance of sex as social form — asking why sexual difference is represented by primary physical characteristics apparent at birth, to paraphrase Marx's question about *why* labor takes the form of the value of its product — is a young theoretical endeavor. But I think it could, with development, offer a Marxist clarification of Butler's discursive critique of humanism, and one that emphasizes a politics of action over ethical injunctions. This is where queer theory's negative understanding of sexuality coincides with Marx's critique of value too, as Floyd emphasizes when he suggests that re-posing the Marxist question of totality must mean "thinking what Fred Moten calls 'the general field of sociality-in-differentiation' from a point of view which is queer precisely in its refusal of the identitarian vocabularies with which sexuality has been normatively understood."[34] Queer theory's longstanding critique of identity has involved a type of disarticulating work to reveal how the "richest

junctures" in sexual and kinship relations aren't the ones where "*everything means the same thing*," as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick put it.[35] And this queer negativity also informs Emma Heaney's Marxist critique of the ideology of cisgender, which works brilliantly by way of simple description:

> We're used to thinking of cisness as an identity. One is cis if one is not trans, one has a cis body if one doesn't have a trans body. But … cisness is more accurately understood as the ideology that sorts us into these two categories. Cisness is the belief that, for almost everyone, one or another set of qualities adhere to our bodies at birth based on the appearance of our genitals (either at or before birth with imaging technology).[36]

Heaney's own refusal of the identitarian vocabulary of cisness brings us back to the idea of sex and gender as distributional categories, and sex as a mediating technology. We might say that the social classes of capitalist, landowner, and proletarian are helpful analytical concepts here because they represent what Marx might call the "thinnest" social identities: we can tie each of them, respectively, to three corresponding forms of appearance — the supposed revenue sources of capital, land, and labor. Sex and gender differentials, on the other hand, arise from a more complex array of social arrangements, laws, and customs. And I think framing them in this way in order to make the argument that, *pace* Butler, gender substantializes sanctioned forms of sexual identities, could allow us to theorize sex as a mediating technology that has a definite and systematic relation to accumulation, insofar as sex in capitalism is in fact perpetually constituted by processes that involve the taxonomizing, medicalization, and disciplining of bodies — *processes that depend on the very same political order of empiricisms or "substantialisms" that undergird both liberal political economy and "gender critical" feminism*. Sex is both a technology and a distributional category itself, but rather than collapsing sex into gender, we begin to see its specific function within the sex-gender binary — a binary considered here as a capitalist social form.

A Marxian critique of sex as a constantly re-constituted social form, part of the processual movement of capital's dynamic categories, does not debar linguistic understandings of sex and its significations, but rather, as Fredric Jameson might say, subsumes them into an analysis capable of grounding them. And it also reminds us that there are many things left unexplained by Marx's critique of value. One obvious example is the question of how such a critique would be informed by Hortense Spillers's theory of the ungendering process of the middle passage, which she frames as a "hieroglyphics of the flesh," in notable propinquity to Marx's critique of the commodity as a social hieroglyph. Objectified by a comprehensive set of "externally imposed meanings and uses," Spillers argues, the captive body is a site of subjugation on a variety of (biological, sexual, linguistic, and psychological)

levels, and these differences lead Spillers to posit a fundamental distinction between *body* and *flesh* as "the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions." Flesh, Spillers notes, is "that zero degree of social conceptualization."[37] Unlike Wittig's lesbian defense of the pre-gendered person — which for Butler succumbs to the spurious "metaphysics of substance" — this proposition auspiciously brings us back around to the logic of commodity exchange and its relation to sex, this time through the radical non-identity and mutual exclusivity of commodities and gender in the history of chattel slavery.

Notes

1. Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism, and Modern Sociology* (London: Macmillan, 1982). See especially Clarke's chapter "The Marginalist Revolution: Economics and Sociology" 126–160.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 1,* trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1991 [1976]) 165.
3. Marx, *Capital, vol. 1* 164–5.
4. Beverley Best, *The Automatic Fetish: The Law of Value in Marx's* Capital (New York: Verso, 2024) 324.
5. Best, *The Automatic Fetish* 328.
6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990) 18–20.
7. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 20. For a sharp overview of the contemporary influence of Wittig's work as it inspires both trans exclusionary radical feminisms and queer transfeminisms, especially in France, see Blase A. Provitola, "TERF or Transfeminist Avant La Lettre? Monique Wittig's Complex Legacy in Trans Studies," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9:3 (August 2022) 387–406.
8. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 30–33.
9. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 12.
10. For a summary of these critiques, and an argument for the oft misunderstood yet central importance of sex and the body in Butler's early work, see Samuel Chambers, "Reconstructing Judith Butler's Theory of Sex/Gender," *Body & Society* 13:4 (2007) 47–75.
11. Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx's* Capital, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012) 49.
12. Marx, *Capital, vol. 1* 168–9. Slightly earlier in the same section, Marx pertinently notes that "the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and with the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this" (165).
13. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 20.
14. "The categories of bourgeois economics," Marx notes, "are forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of production." See Marx, *Capital Vol. I* 169.
15. Lisa Rofel, "Queer Studies, Materialism, and Crisis: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18: 1 (2012): 129.
16. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978) 53.
17. I am drawing on Best's critique of Nancy Fraser's concept of "boundary struggles" here, especially her note that, "the problem is, the real world of capitalist competition throws up obstacles to meeting this one condition for growth [the production of surplus value by labor-power], obstacles that largely reflect the state of what Fraser calls boundary struggles (i.e., class struggle). Where the boundary between waged and unwaged labor falls expresses a different contradiction, one that is internal to capital, but animated by individual capitalists in their functional antagonism to capital itself." See Beverley Best, "Wages for Housework Redux: Social Reproduction and the Utopian Dialectic of the Value-Form," *Theory & Event* 24:4 (2021): 909.
18. See Martha E. Giménez, *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist Feminist Essays*

(Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019); and Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reita (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975): 157–210.

19. Endnotes, "The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection," *Endnotes* 3 (2013): 56–91.
20. In short, the argument that capitalism opportunistically adapts and torques pre-existing social hierarchies, including gender and sexual divisions, but that these divisions are not internal to capital's logic. For an incisive summary of this argument and its place within feminist "systems debates," see Cinzia Arruzza, "Remarks on Gender," *Viewpoint Magazine*, September 2, 2014 https://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/02/remarks-on-gender/.
21. Best, "Wages for Housework Redux" 909–917 especially.
22. Best, "Wages for Housework Redux" 910.
23. Marx, *Capital, vol. 1* 135.
24. As Marx explains in his account of the emergence of the money-form: "The advance consists only in that the form of direct and universal exchangeability, in other words the universal equivalent form, has now by social custom finally become entwined with the specific natural form of the commodity gold." See Marx, *Capital, vol. 1* 162.
25. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40:4 (1988): 520. It's even more significant, then, that in their critique of substantialism, Butler's commitment to anti-foundationalist thought precludes the foundation that is not one: value.
26. For an argument detailing this process, see Endnotes, "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," *Endnotes* 2 (2010), https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/misery-and-debt.
27. Sianne Ngai, "Ambiguous Lever," *PMLA* 137:3 (2022): 530. Ngai is building on Fredric Jameson's argument in *The Political Unconscious* concerning how hard it can be to "see two things as part of the same process, different branchings of the same unity, without conflating them or assuming that one must be the 'cause' or 'result' of the other."
28. As others have done, I suggest 1973 as the year of the first global oil shock, the final collapse of the Bretton Woods Agreement, and the beginning of a protracted period of economic stagnation and contraction in the West. See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 2010); Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945-2005* (New York: Verso, 2006); Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (New York: Verso, 2019). For arguments that misrecognize flesh, computer programs, and financial transactions as sites of value-production, see for example, Melinda Cooper, *Life As Surplus: Biotechnology & Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008); Arjun Appadurai, *Banking on Words: The Failure of Language in the Age of Derivative Finance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Nicole Shukin's *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
29. Kevin Floyd, "Automatic Subjects: Gendered Labour and Abstract Life," *Historical Materialism* 24:2 (2016): 71.

30. Floyd, "Automatic Subjects" 78.
31. Floyd points to Kalindi Vora's work on biocapital and forms of biological reproduction outsourced to the global South and Lisa Adkins's post-autonomist arguments about new modes of value production in postindustrial economies as examples of these claims. Arguing that it is not value production but the production of under- and unemployed surplus populations that is expanding, Floyd contends on the contrary that, "if, in the North, social and biological reproduction performed by women increasingly takes place within the value circuit, this implies … an expanding field of labour both subject to the value-form and dissociated from the valorisation process" (79). Yet again, the problem is that the relationship between value and biological sex is figured in these accounts without a concept of mediation, nor an understanding of the unique character of value as a real abstraction that cannot be located in any one place.
32. M.E. O'Brien, "To Abolish the Family: The Working-Class Family and Gender Liberation in Capitalist Development," *Endnotes* (London): 407.
33. Werner Bonefeld, "On (Negative) Humanism and the Critique of Capital," unpublished paper, 2023.
34. Kevin Floyd, "Queer Studies, Materialism, and Crisis: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ* 18 (1) (2012): 138.
35. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994) 5.
36. Emma Heaney, "The Trans Allegory and International Studies," Talk at Queen Mary, University of London, March 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nxQAz6iJ3U.
37. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17: 2 (1987): 67.

Samuel Solomon. "Making Gender on the Shop Floor: Literary Labor in Stone Butch Blues." *Mediations* 37.2 (Spring 2026) 55–81. mediationsjournal.org/articles/gender-on-the-shop-floor

Making Gender on the Shop Floor: Literary Labor in *Stone Butch Blues*[1]

Samuel Solomon

Much published criticism on Leslie Feinberg's beloved 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues* focuses on gender and genre taxonomies: is Jess a transgender man or a butch lesbian woman, and does the book demand a queer studies or, instead, a trans studies analysis? Should we read the text as a novel or as veiled autobiography? Feinberg hirself seemed to provoke such critical engagement when ze referred to the text as an attempt to write "the kind of gender theory that we all live."[2] Feinberg was correct in regard to this text's popular reception: this well-loved novel written by a foundational advocate of transgender liberation has been an important touchstone for testing out the politics of queer and trans methodological, aesthetic, and political claims.[3] The rich development of these crucial lines of inquiry has, however, obscured the fact that the novel's plot is formed from successive episodes in which Jess struggles to find and maintain decent wage labor as it tracks her movement from Buffalo to New York City and across different forms of collective and solitary queer and trans life. In other words, *Stone Butch Blues* narrates postwar, Northeastern labor history as gender history.

To be more precise: the novel elaborates specifically *literary* labor as a site for gender and sexual politics, revealing that Jess's development is intertwined with distinct moments in the production and circulation of printed matter, including the novel itself. In this sense, *Stone Butch Blues* reflects the broader material importance of relations of literary production to left-wing feminist and queer life. Recent literary critical work has illuminated the ways that late-twentieth-century and contemporary American novelists allegorize and ironize their experiences with publishing and distribution, and scholars such as Julie Enszer, Agatha Beins, and Howard Rambsy II have shown how publishing and circulation activities were a key component of late twentieth century revolutionary social movement literatures.[4] But not a great deal of scholarship has explored more pink- and blue-collar segments of literary production (binding, shipping, electronic typesetting, clerical work), including feminized aspects of the print and book trades that were equally part of the development of what would

come to be called LGTBQ+ literature. *Stone Butch Blues*, for its part, takes precisely these social relations of literary production as the motors of its plot and character formation — literary labor is not suggested through allegory but is a basic building block of the novel's narrative. In this sense, *Stone Butch Blues* is not a "representative" example of other queer and trans narrative fiction from the period, which mostly does not take literary labor quite so directly as the engine of its plotting, but it is not entirely exceptional; much queer fiction from the period, from Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* to the "New Narrative" writings of Robert Glück, Bruce Boone, and others, was replete with reference — both literal and allegorical — to the social relations of queer textual production. I read *Stone Butch Blues* here as part of an ongoing project to explore how shifts in the labor relations of print in the late twentieth century shaped LGBTQ+ writing, specifically focusing on the feminization of print origination work and typesetting. To this end, *Stone Butch Blues* is the ur-example of a fictional text that repeatedly connects leftwing queer and feminist life to relations of literary production.

Stone Butch Blues is unique in that it directly narrates dialectical relations between gender, sexuality, and literary labor writ large, in three more or less sequential phases: addressing the physical production of printed material; social networks of writing, circulation, and reading; and finally typesetting as part of an integrated print ecology. My reading of the novel homes in on how queer and trans writing has been both conditioned by and reflective of the dynamic gendering of so-called postindustrial labor relations in the Northeastern United States. This reading also aims for a broader understanding of what queer and trans literature were, are, and might become. A crucial moment from the novel's final act helps to set out what literary labor relations entail, and their significance in this regard. Jess, who has, until this point in the novel, suffered many setbacks in her efforts to find reliable employment, finally lands relatively well-paid work as a typesetter in New York City. After one year of freelance typesetting, Jess tells Ruth, a trans woman and intimate friend,

> at work, when everyone else is at lunch, I've been typesetting all the history I've found, trying to make it look as important as it feels to me. That's what I want to leave behind, Ruth — the history of this ancient path we're walking. I want it to help us restore our dignity.[5]

There are at least two ways to interpret Jess's insistence on the *dignity* of composing histories of queer and trans life. One is that the professionally typeset and offset-printed book confers, by virtue of its format, a sort of legitimacy that is not otherwise granted to the history of gender variant people. A second implication is that the *work* of typesetting *itself*, which Jess is doing both for a wage and after hours on the sly, might help to restore the collective dignity of trans people in the present. The adjacency of this work to a capitalist form of textual or literary production is what, in part, confers the dignity

that Jess seeks here. "Typesetting all the history" is a form of literary labor that restores dignity both because an elided *history* is being restored, providing a stable ground for contemporary trans life, but also because history is being *written down for print in the book or pamphlet form* by someone who can earn a living doing this very activity. Notably, Feinberg hirself worked as a freelance typesetter for many years, including with the Worker's World Party, turning radical writing into printed matter, and Jess's accounts are likely drawing on that experience and knowledge.

This passage, toward the end of the novel, makes visible that the novel has really all along been spanning the process of literary production and consumption: Jess writes letters and imagines them in archives, works in binderies, reads feminism on the sly off flyers and in a bookstore, finds proto-queer and trans histories in libraries, and finally and most significantly works as a non-unionized typesetter. At the same time, the novel documents the prominence, decline, and partial return of access to steady work for butches and transmasculine people in deindustrializing 1970s Buffalo and in 1980s New York City.[6] Situations of literary labor tend to frame moments in the novel in which change, of *any* sort, seems possible to Jess on the basis of collective human activity from the bottom up. As I argue in what follows, these moments are especially noteworthy when they show how feminized forms of para-literary wage labor (bookbinding, secretarial work, and finally typesetting) provide fleeting but valuable opportunities for political education and solidarity. Feinberg plots LGBTQ+ literature as a site of theorization and agitation: *Stone Butch Blues* asks to what extent the feminization and deterioration of working conditions in any given sector might generate collective revolutionary activity, and to what extent the dynamic gendering of literary labor relations must be countered by something like Marxist-feminist organizing.

In what follows, I read *Stone Butch Blues* for precisely these moments in which the production, circulation, and exchange of printed texts disclose a collective labor history subject to shifting dynamics of labor, gender, and race relations. These moments amount to a gendered account of literary labor that offers both a chronology that tracks some historical tendencies and a dynamic rendering of the possibilities of literary labor to nurture revolutionary collective life.[7] By literary labor, I refer to all of the activities that are yoked together, by the novel, surrounding the production and circulation of printed matter, whether notionally "literary" or otherwise. My reading of these aspects of the novel resonates with the Marxist-feminist frame of Shahrzad Mojab and Sarah Carpenter, who propose "a way of looking at how the social world and everyday/everynight experience is organized through the everyday activity of people…"[8] Like Mojab and Carpenter, I find that Marxist analysis of labor requires an understanding of gender and race as "actual human active sensuous practices, concretized in our activity and consciousness through ongoing *acts* of racialization and gendering"; in the case of *Stone Butch Blues* this means looking closely at the manifold basic activities involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of writing and print.[9]

This is not to say that the social relations of literary labor are, in and of themselves, necessarily revolutionary: they emphatically are not. The effort to "restore dignity" through the labor of printing and publishing can provide a ground for queer and trans collectivity, but it can also elide other possible solidarities and collective possibilities, as the novel shows. As the readings below demonstrate, Feinberg uses first-person narration of one character's changing relationship to print and literary labor to make it felt that gender is part of historical time and that navigating gendered labor relations is a crucial dimension of historical change.

From Journal to Novel

Why would a *novel* allow Feinberg to approach these historiographic and political aims? Why, in particular, a novel that is susceptible to being read as veiled autobiography? One answer lies in the fact that Feinberg had published cross-genre nonfiction works addressing similar issues before; the political pamphlet *Journal of a Transsexual* (1980) was brought out by World View Publishers, and World View Forum brought out Feinberg's polemical pamphlet *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* in 1992, a year before the publication of *Stone Butch Blues*.[10] Both imprints were run by the Workers World Party, a Leninist party of which Feinberg was a member from the 1970s until the end of hir life. *Journal of a Transsexual* opens with a politically and personally direct "Foreword" that challenges a rigid sex/gender binarism, explaining that at the time of writing Feinberg identifies as a "very masculine woman" who had "lived convincingly as a man for four years on a sex-change program before leaving that program. I am a woman. I am the way I am. It is a fine way to be."[11]

Journal, like *Stone Butch Blues* after it, comprises episodes that depict, snapshot-like, moments of possibility or of danger in which systematic exclusion from and peripheral inclusion in wage labor make living a constant struggle. The journal also reflects on losing jobs as a result of bigoted bosses and co-workers, the basic difficulties of using gendered bathrooms at work, and the risk of violence in getting to work via public transportation. We learn, for example, about Feinberg's working conditions at book binderies, where she is almost entirely among cisgender women: "I am still new here. I am the topic of their conversation today. Throughout the plant, there is this question: man or woman, boy or girl?"[12] Feinberg describes the experience of being perpetually sized up, not knowing if one will be accepted as a masculine and gender non-conforming woman to work in an environment comprising mostly women workers. It's not impossible, Feinberg suggests, that some sort of acceptance might follow this sizing-up, but it's not a reliable outcome, either. Being repeatedly new at work means repeatedly facing the hypervisibility of being gender non-conforming and a vulnerability to violence from unexpected places, and in this way Feinberg's *Journal* provides quotidian illustrations of M.E. O'Brien's observation that "employment is an institution of gender violence and everyday coercion."[13]

Stone Butch Blues features many scenes that could easily find a home in the *Journal of a Transsexual*: Jess is a victim of sexual and gender violence and harassment from strangers and coworkers (above all from police and prison guards) and is hired and fired multiple times, sometimes on the basis of perceived gender nonconformity. Moreover, *Stone Butch Blues* is also narrated by an internally focalized first person, whose only self-distance comes from the future, narrating Jess's retrospection on events in her own past. Yet while the *Journal* and *Stone Butch Blues* share characteristics of episodic first-person narration by protagonists who share similar biographies, in *Stone Butch Blues* Feinberg swaps out memoir's grounding in testimony for the historical purchase of character and *Bildung*. As Juliet Jacques argues, the memoir as genre can trap the trans writer in truth claims that hinge on their constant re-exposure, and this revelation of the self can eclipse any engagement with history. Fictionality allows Feinberg to place gender at the heart of labor history as such, rather than attaching it to the supposed truth of a specific individual. For Jacques, Feinberg's "tacit aim [in writing a novel] was to offer a book more engaged with negotiation of 'straight' society, employers and trade union movements than many of its more directly autobiographical antecedents."[14] I would add that Feinberg had revolutionary communist and historical materialist ambitions, as hir political writings and deathbed words — "remember me as a revolutionary communist"— make clear.[15] It is in this spirit that *Stone Butch Blues* sees Feinberg engage with explanatory historical and political analysis by means of a first-person narrative that spans several decades and through a character who develops radical political consciousness unevenly and haltingly.

A sequence from the first half of the novel, in which Jess first finds wage work and community in the butch/femme scene of Western New York (Seneca territories), exemplifies this narration of class consciousness as something that happens across fraught moments of political possibility and of failed solidarity. Working at a small bindery, a subsector of book production that historically employed relatively large numbers of women, Jess finds herself under heightened gender scrutiny as "the only he-she in the plant" (77). The community and cross-racial solidarity with the other women workers at the plant appears at first as an initiation into the lessons of solidarity through shared work:

> About half the women on the line were from the Six Nations. Most were Mohawk or Seneca. What we shared in common was that we worked cooperatively, day in and day out. So we remembered to ask about each other's back or foot pains, family crises. We shared small bits of our culture, favorite foods, or revealed an embarrassing moment. It was just this potential for solidarity the foreman was always looking to sabotage.... But it was hard to split us up. The conveyor belt held us together. (78)

The lowest paid and worst treated workers at the bindery — Indigenous women and Jess, in this case — find opportunities at work for the elaboration and improvisation of solidarities. Jess's understanding of solidarity as "sharing cultures" flattens out local Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, bypassing a reckoning with political economic bases for labor solidarity and implicitly replacing this more difficult work with multicultural exchange, as Mark Rifkin argues, and Seneca and Mohawk women are not mentioned again in the novel.[16] At the same time, as workers they are "held together" by the conveyor belt, or by industrial capitalism's self-undermining tendency of gathering workers together in one place.

As is generically typical of the *Bildungsroman*, such episodes sequence Jess's political development so that we learn alongside her, through the medium of her first-person narration. If the scene at the first bindery seems to offer an uplifting but ultimately limited and self-serving moment of cross-racial solidarity, in a subsequent episode in another, larger bindery, Jess's incipient political consciousness comes under pressure. There Duffy, the older, straight white male local shop steward who will become her on-again-off-again mentor in political solidarity, warns her that the promotion she has been offered is not a victory for butches as Jess believes but rather a racist ploy to block the more senior man in line for promotion, a Black man named Leroy who is targeted by both management and racist coworkers. Jess manages to pass this test of solidarity by turning the promotion down, but when the bindery workers vote to strike shortly afterward, her ambitions and allegiance to butches trumps her trade union solidarity. With the other butches, she undermines the strike by leaving the bindery for a local steel plant — the pinnacle of blue-collar jobs — that announces it has been forced, presumably by legal injunction, to hire fifty women (they are then promptly dismissed from their new steel jobs). Gender and race are central to these dynamics on the shop floor, and Jess is unable to see what Feinberg shows us through this episode: a lesson that management exploits putative gains for butches to divide workers as a group without meaningfully benefiting the butches, whose relative masculinity made them hire-able in the steel plant but who are still treated "as women" first when job cuts come down the line. This harder lesson in solidarity, learned through failure, discloses how disparate episodes in the work life of butches link together in the novel, less to produce an individual consciousness whose psychological integrity is narratively paramount and more to reveal how the many seemingly isolated experiences of workers in the binderies and the steel plants constitute a single struggle. In this sense, the generic shift from the autobiographical to the fictional indexes a shift in Feinberg's political ambitions, from a piece written for those who are already comrades, a work of much-needed propaganda on behalf of trans people, to a novel written for not-only-leftists in a broadening of propagandistic scope.

Crucially, the novel's deployment of psychological interiority as a route into collective history binds "gender identity" to the conditions of labor. Jess's quest for stable work is conditioned by the combined forces of misogyny, homophobia, cissexism, de-industrialization, and post-McCarthyist union busting, as well as the more intrinsic factor of Jess's experience of bodily dysphoria. In his field-shaping work on the novel, Jay Prosser argues that Jess's explanation, as the novel's narrator, of these multiple factors "externalizes her motivation for beginning hormone treatment, suggesting that her transition is economic and political, a historical rather than a psychic necessity."[17] Prosser is right to see both impulses marking the text, but we don't have to view historical necessity as an alibi for internal truth — a psychic necessity can be historical without negating its status as psychically necessary. The novel's insistence on *extrinsic* factors, moreover, does not only come out of the mouth of Jess as an unreliable narrator. The form of the novel itself, through its sequencing and plotting, never shies away from this emphasis: disaster after incredible disaster befalls Jess and her loved ones each time stability and happiness seem within reach. The novel's episodic narration thus foregrounds the way Jess's life chances and psychic survival depend on the possibility of earning a living without being an object of derision, questioning, violence, and ostracism for her gender presentation. Feinberg may have said that one goal of the novel was to offer a work of gender theory, but in Feinberg's gender theory, class analysis accounts for historical changes to gendered relations of production. That is to say: on this novel's account, and on mine, labor relations shape how we all experience our bodies, and vice versa, in historically changing and changeable ways. On the one hand, then, *Stone Butch Blues* narrates late twentieth-century gendered labor in New York State through an individual character coming to a form of revolutionary proletarian consciousness (the novel as *Bildungsroman*), and on the other hand it provides materialist analysis by showing, across its span of decades, that both class analysis and the novelistic narration of the self require a large-scale vision of historical change that can account for relations of gender and their shifting dynamics.

These aspects of the novel's plotting facilitate its categorization as a *Bildungsroman* or novel of self-formation and cultivation, and this taxonomy is useful insofar as it is used not to fix the novel in its place but rather to clarify what we can mean when we talk about "self-formation."[18] In *Stone Butch Blues*, this does not mean a *resolution* of the trans self into a final fixity through either medical or social transition. Such transitions are indeed part of the story that the novel covers — an embodiment that feels right is vital for Jess, but it is only bearable when her own struggle can be openly accepted in collective processes of changing the world. Jess's "transition" is emphatically not the end of the story: she continues to face gender-based personal and work problems. Her expressed need for a body that feels at least tolerable is interwoven with her need for a minimal degree of social safety net, even if this is at times simply the need for a social

organization that allows her to be alone and have her basic needs met. *Stone Butch Blues* coordinates the changing relationship between these two overarching needs — psychological/internal and social/external — as, perhaps, only the novel among genres has been generically authorized to do.

In other words, Jess's self-formation as a character hinges on the cultivation, over time, of her (and our) realization of how social and historical change are possible. This is what drives Jess, by her own narratorial account, and this is what allows us as readers to imagine, for the duration of the novel, historical outcomes other than those we know the 1970s and 1980s delivered. The most important instance of this, in my view, is the novel's counterfactual approach to labor history: the failures of white-male-dominated craft union trades to take an expansive approach to the racial minoritization and feminization of various sectors does not appear, in this novel, as an inevitable outcome of material conditions. Instead, as Jess's political consciousness develops, the novel stages the conditions of possibility for more adequate revolutionary and militant leftist approaches to internationalist class struggle that might have made it otherwise. In this sense, *Stone Butch Blues* might be considered a worthy entry in the "canon of socialist bildungsroman" proposed by Benjamin Kohlmann, not least for the way that it challenges the status of the (bourgeois) individualism at which any protagonist could "arrive."[19] The privileged locus of this alternative is to be found in the novel's account of print labor and of literary production as an integrated system more broadly.

The Honda and the Harley: Print Production and the Masculinities of Deindustrialization

To examine more precisely the ways that *Stone Butch Blues* presents gender and labor neither as opposed social categories nor as forms of domination assignable to solely psychic or social domains, I return now to the novel's consistent engagement, at the level of plot, with variously gendered forms and relations of literary labor. It is in literary labor, as noted above, that Jess places hope for "restor[ing] dignity" to trans people; and in this way *Stone Butch Blues* works to explain the conditions of its own possible production. Through its elaborate plotting of queer and trans working-class engagement with texts and books, the novel shows how literary production, and the circulation of printed matter, is inextricable from gendered wage labor historically — and it also positions itself as an act of history writing that confers dignity on and perhaps instigates transformative changes to queer and trans life.

If it comes on to us slowly that *Stone Butch Blues* is a novel of literary labor, this is because so many of the early scenes of Jess's literary labor take place in areas of print production whose bookishness is at least apparently incidental. Jess's very first job, which "changed everything," is an after-school job "setting type by hand in a print shop" where "nobody at work cared if I wore jeans and T-shirts" (25). The textual

nature of the work itself is of little significance to Jess at this point in the novel; what matters is that her co-workers recognize her as "butch"; one co-worker with a queer brother tells her where to go in Niagara Falls to experience some kind of gender and sexual dissident community — this is what "changed everything."

Working in binderies in Buffalo, Jess does not know what is being bound between the covers, and it does not matter. What Jess can learn from the books she binds lies strictly in the interactions between workers and bosses at the scene of their production. Feinberg plots out, more or less sequentially and chronologically, three frames for gendered literary labor that correspond to a series of personal crises for Jess that are also gendered. These are, briefly: print production, such as binding, that is alienated from literariness as such and is notionally continuous with other clearly non-literary labor such as work at a cannery; print circulation and consumption, associated with the vibrant feminist print cultures of the 1970s and early 1980s; and finally for Jess an integrated literary ecology that unites production labor such as typesetting with the reading and writing of literary and political texts, inaugurating the possibility of something like a trans literature. Each mode of literary labor offers new phases of political engagement for Jess.

As we have seen, it is in binderies that Jess learns that queer solidarity without a broader practice of labor solidarity is doomed to fail. Binderies were the segment of the printing sector that had historically hired women earliest and most consistently.[20] Duffy is based in the binderies, not an industry associated with the working-class masculine family wage, and he is a reminder to Jess that patriarchal promises of white masculine dignity, when offered at the expense of solidarity with women, queer people, and people of color, are ultimately mirages. Work in binderies thus offers a grueling but practical pedagogy in solidarity across gender and racial lines, a kind of book-learning that depends on books as material objects tied to specific labor formations rather than on the contents of books themselves.

Yet if the labor of book production brings Jess into contact with a pedagogy of solidarity, it exists nonetheless within the context of the mid-century family (male) wage, and the family wages continues to be a desirable outcome for butches in the butch-femme communities that Jess finds both in the bars of Buffalo and in many of her workplaces. This is evident in Jess's rejoinder to Duffy when she chooses to leave the bindery for the steel mill:

> You don't understand what it would mean to work in the steel mill, do you?... All we got is the clothes we wear, the bikes we ride, and where we work, you know? You can ride a Honda and work in a bindery or you can ride a Harley and work at the steel plant. The other butches are gonna leave sooner or later, and I don't want to get stuck in that sweatshop with that rinky-dink union. (100)

Jess insults Duffy's efforts to democratize and integrate the bindery's "rinky dink" union precisely because she sees the other butches offered a rare chance to gain employment in a trade associated with family-wage masculinity, good pensions, job protections, and a sense of working-class self-sufficiency and dignity. The butches' decision to leave the bindery for the mill is partly about the prospect of providing for femmes, of course, in ways that resemble the heterosexual couple form at least in terms of wages and styles: jobs, bikes, and clothes are all the butches have to show for themselves, Jess insists, and you need the job to get the bike you want.[21] This plan doesn't actually work out for the butches, since the steel plants were ordered to *hire* but not *retain* women, and within a few years the steel mills close down completely and put an end to the way of life that some of the butches seek to access in the first place. This gendered hierarchy of blue-collar workplaces renders the solidarities developed in the binderies fragile and unreliable — when everyone is trying to climb a rung up the ladder as an individual, everyone gets stepped on.

The decline of family-wage masculinized workplaces is presented by the novel as a direct consequence of broader political economic transformations of the period. As the 1970s take off, Jess finds it impossible to get even temporary work, and finally, "By 1973 it seemed as though everyone we knew was laid off. Theresa lost her job at the university…/ The months of me scouring for work and money getting tighter were taking their toll on us" (141). This personal unemployment crisis coincides with a broader pattern of deindustrialization, falling profit rates, and job losses in Northeastern US cities — a shift that occasions a growth in the anti-butch and transphobic street violence to which Jess is exposed: "'You fucking he-shes. You stole our jobs,' he shouted as I hurried away. I wondered who I could blame" (142). The novel makes plain, then, that mid-century butch/femme dynamics cannot survive the crisis of capital accumulation that, by many accounts, is pegged to the year 1973. Jess decides, along with Grant, a fellow butch, that they would have a better chance of stable employment if they took testosterone and lived as men. Theresa, a lesbian feminist who has no desire to be with men (and who has already taken flak for being with a butch), breaks things off. And, as Feinberg makes clear, the economic reasons for these events are not separable from gender's psychic manifestations.

Jess's period of gender transition is marked by heightened economic precarity; a decent income is all the more necessary for hormones and top surgery, even as top surgery occasions an absence from work that leads to Jess being fired from one of her many jobs. Although her mastectomy does provide significant relief from dysphoria, living as a man does not constitute a resolution for Jess; it is another phase in the ongoing struggle for work and a livable existence. The 1970s are difficult and sad years for Jess and also, notably, constitute a period of separation from literary labor of any kind as well as from queer community. Jess's transition hardly translates to steady work in the midst of a recession that threatens the family wage conditions of secure blue-collar work for white men: "The recession was deepening. Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors had just announced massive layoffs" (158).

Going stealth is in many ways an experience of political suspension for Jess on the shop floor, and this loss proves as unbearable as the loss of queer community: indeed, they amount to the same loss. Transitioning allows Jess to feel secure enough to search for a union job, but not enough to bear the levels of scrutiny that labor organizing would entail. Working in a factory with a mold machine in unsafe conditions, Jess avoids taking on an organizing role in the union because coworkers have treated Jess as "one of the guys" on this job and the visibility of leadership in the union would put that belonging at risk (200). Duffy appears at a union organizing meeting and unwittingly refers to Jess as "she," outing her to coworkers. Jess storms out of the meeting, humiliated and furious (200). Not long after this, Jess decides to stop taking exogenous hormones and stop living as a man; ostracism from both trade union and feminist forms of political action — and from literary labor — prove unbearable.

Feminist Print Circulation, Reading, and Gendered Labor

In contrast to some mainstream images of mid-century men of letters, literary labor is always at least partially feminized in *Stone Butch Blues*; this is especially the case with respect to the kinds of literary activity introduced by Theresa before she leaves Jess. During the years chronicled in the middle section of the novel, new forms of political consciousness emerge from the tensions arising from the different jobs available to Jess as a butch and to Theresa as a femme, and from the different relations to literary labor that these positions engender. For Theresa, literary labor extends to the circulation, reading, and potential writing of texts; whereas the bindery for Jess holds (unrealized) political possibilities because it is a certain kind of workplace containing certain kinds of workers, in Theresa's feminist context the *contents* of texts, and how they are activated by circulation, matter. And Jess, through Theresa, comes to circulate with them. As we have seen already, Feinberg's plotting of *Bildung* offers not so much the construction of an ever more integral consciousness as its gradual opening up to new working-class solidarities among those unable to keep a Harley.

The middle section of the novel, covering Jess's passionate relationship with Theresa, deindustrialization in Buffalo, the collapse of the family wage, and Jess's transition, traces how new relationships to literary labor are crucial to the expansion of Jess's political consciousness, even as collective life remains out of reach for Jess. Jess and Theresa meet at a cannery, an archetypal feminized and racially minoritized workplace, shortly before Theresa is fired for resisting sexual assault by a male manager. Jess is only at the cannery briefly, but it is established straightaway as a feminized workplace that employs lesbians while differentially discriminating against them on the basis of gender presentation. Life with Theresa provides the occasion for frequent comparison of the kinds of employment available to each character after they leave the cannery, and the political possibilities opened up and closed down by these workplaces. Jess continues to cycle through temp jobs at factories,

while Theresa finds a different form of pink-collar "women's work" as a secretary at the local university, a type of job that brings very different political possibilities: Theresa returns from work with anti-war propaganda and printed materials from the Daughters of Bilitis, Black Power, and women's liberation.

Jess finds no such political education or proliferation of printed matter forthcoming from temp jobs; her retrospective narrative voice offers an ironic historical perspective on her own past political obliviousness:

> It was 1968. Revolution seemed to glimmer on the horizon. Millions took to the streets in protest. The world was exploding with change. Everywhere, that is, except in the factories where I worked. Every morning at dawn we punched in as usual. We only dreamed at night.... It was Theresa's job as a secretary at the university that opened a window, allowing me to feel the hurricane force of change. (124)

Here it is not butch factory jobs but pink-collar university work that opens up world-historical horizons. Jess and Theresa's differential access, through their work, to political literature is bifurcated along butch/femme lines that will themselves prove precarious, as we have already seen, contributing in part to Jess's decision to transition and her painful break with Theresa. Theresa's secretarial job provides her with access to the mobilizing political cultures of the post-1968 university, including the rapidly growing women's liberation and gay liberation movements and their burgeoning print cultures. With her own growing political confidence, Theresa pushes Jess to take sides on the imperial war in Vietnam and on Black power even when it means that Jess will have to disagree with some of the butches that have been her lifeline. Taking any sort of stand at work seems impossible to Jess, who works in temporary, non-union positions and who would not likely seek out or be hired to do pink-collar work.

The drastic consequences of this bifurcated access to political education become apparent when Jess fails to adequately stand with Edwin, her close friend and a Black butch/transmasculine person, against racism from other butches, a development that Theresa witnesses with dismay. Siobhan Somerville incisively reads Feinberg as part of a lineage of mostly white queer and trans writers in the US who use analogies to racialized minorities in order to denaturalize sex and gender categories: "the denaturalization of one identity category is often achieved through the naturalization of another category."[22] Somerville focuses on Edwin's ambiguous gift of DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folks* to Jess, which Jess does not even open, to argue that this unrealized/underappreciated gift signals at once an analogy between African-American double consciousness and gender transition and a rift in understanding between Ed and Jess. Indeed, Jess's failure to read not only this book but *at all* is a plot device that signals her political and personal shortcomings, and this failure coincides with Jess's separation from the worlds of feminized literary labor.[23] After her break with Theresa, Jess still

stands apart from the political consciousness of the New Left: "The Vietnam War had just officially ended. It seemed amazing.... Maybe all those rallies Theresa had attended had helped" (188). A political agency that was available to Theresa seems foreclosed to Jess as a transmasculine working class person, especially now that Jess has lost Theresa and her world of reading materials.

Jess's seeming inability to attain the political consciousness to which Theresa's job made her proximate diverges significantly from Feinberg's own positioning during the years in which these sections of the novel are set, disclosing the craftedness of Jess's *Bildung*. Feinberg, who worked for the Workers World Party's print and journalism outlets, wrote with intimate knowledge of the large scale organizing in the late 1960s through the 1970s, including highly visible labor actions undertaken by women and people of color across the US. This was the case both in trades that were already predominantly filled either by women workers, such as flight attendants (mostly white) and teachers, or by men of color (such as the Memphis Sanitation workers) *and* in previously white-male-dominated trades that were slowly being forced by antiracist and feminist social movements to admit women and non-white men. Some blue collar trades like electrical work and construction, while still predominantly white and male, were forcefully integrated by social movements and by hard won federal, state, and municipal affirmative action mandates.[24] That Jess's own receptivity to radical consciousness can only become connected to these historical realities via a reckoning with gendered relationships to literary labor shows that *Bildung* in *Stone Butch Blues* consists not only of the story of Jess's bodily autonomy and comfort but also her confidence that she can be a part a collective fight for revolutionary change. This confidence comes about through a changed relationship to literary labor and a reconciliation of masculinized production and feminized circulation and consumption: computerized typesetting is a central node in this reconciliation, as the next section explores.[25]

Literary Labor Politics

While Jess's separation from the *reading* of literature during her period of living as a man is not explicitly marked, an episode that closes that segment of the novel is punctuated by her first act of poetic composition for an old femme friend, Edna, and signals her longing for queer and femme community (235). Femme discursive power, a long-standing theme of the novel, and especially femmes' ability to "melt stone" through verbal and nonverbal communication, becomes more pointed in this crucial moment, which arrives near the end of a period of relative isolation from political organizing, feminist print culture, and queer community. "I had forgotten how much I loved femmes," Jess reflects. "Another butch would have nodded when I sighed, content that the whole story had been articulated in the rush of air. But Edna pressed for words" (231). Reconnecting with queer community through Edna, whom

Jess has admired for years, takes Jess beyond reading and starts to elicit new words — and a writing practice. Jess's brief liaison with Edna marks the regrounding in literary labor and its political opportunities that she needs for the final phase of the novel, which explores how words on the page activate the social force of working-class queer and trans lives.

Jess's decision to stop taking hormones and present in a visibly gender-transgressive manner thus entails a new relationship to the written word and yet another reorientation toward labor, as Jess faces the challenges of finding and keeping wage work for survival as a visibly gender nonconforming transmasculine person in early 1980s New York City. But this semi-anonymous and precarious life also opens up another avenue of sociality and political possibility via different forms of access to the consumption (and eventually the production) of politically meaningful print materials. While gender and labor are never separate in *Stone Butch Blues*, in this section of the narrative, episodes that Prosser argues echo moments in *Journal of a Transsexual* are glaringly interwoven with scenes depicting the radical upheavals in the print industry occasioned by the introduction of phototypesetting — a shift that opened literary labor up as a point of access to trans and queer workers' history.

The period throughout which the novel takes place was one of tremendous change in print origination work. Technological changes from "hot metal" to "cold type" or phototypesetting (i.e., from mechanical to computerized processes) were introduced by bosses in part to break the strength of closed-shop, white-male craft unions and commence increasingly casualized working conditions. New jobs in phototypesetting often went to women, people of color, and queer people — including, very often, lesbians and transmasculine people.[26] Feinberg, who worked as a typesetter, threads this history through Jess's personal and political development in a manner that directly echoes hir own account of doing freelance typesetting work: "there are reasons why I was able to get typesetting work at the time when there was a union-busting drive going on and they were hiring very queer people, women and people of color on third shift, out of sight of the normal first-shift world, corporate world."[27]

Feinberg seeds periodic references to Jess's experiences of typesetting throughout the final third of the novel, alongside and as part of Jess's engagement with feminist writing, discovery of trans history, and resurgent drive to engage in collective organizing. The discussion of typesetting begins in the final quarter of the novel with an irruption of dialogue, arriving as unexpectedly for the reader as it seemingly does for Jess (though readers with longer memories may recall that Jess's first job as a teenager involved setting type by hand at a print shop):

> "If you're an organizer for Local 6 [of the International Typographical Union (ITU)]," the owner leaned across his desk, "you can punch in, but

> you may not punch out." Ironic. He was afraid the union had sent me to organize his typesetters. I was afraid he'd find out I'd only recently learned to type. (240)

The owner of the shop is aware that there are some covert efforts taking place to unionize phototypesetting workers who were not generally part of the ITU; Jess is unaware of the changing and fraught labor relations of the trade upon which she is embarking. Through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Bertram Powers' strategy as President of Local 6 in New York City was to treat the threat that phototypesetting posed to workers' power with a rearguard craft unionist strategy: national ITU policy focused on negotiating contracts that guaranteed lifetime employment or early retirement for composition workers in exchange for allowing their existing jobs to be phased out. This approach won out, on the whole, over efforts to organize the women, queers, and people of color who were increasingly finding employment at nonunion shops. Such workers were soon to find gigs in open-shop typesetting businesses, and many of them pieced together work as freelancers.[28]

While the actual work of typesetting seems to be socially available to Jess as a gender non-conforming person, the workplace itself is not always a happy place for her. There is a lull in work for Jess over one summer — "the typesetting industry didn't pick up till early fall, but I found work catch as catch can" (247) — and during this lull Jess suffers a violent attack on a subway platform, directly echoing scenes from *Journal of a Transsexual*. Ruth, who is Jess's neighbor and new friend as well as a trans woman, takes care of Jess during a slow and painful recovery, accidentally referring to Jess as "she" on the phone with Jess's employers and losing her chance to return to a previous typesetting job. If phototypesetting is more open to gender nonconforming people than most trades, Jess nonetheless remains subject to street violence and job insecurity related to perceived gender transgressions.

The printing and typesetting workplace also remains gender-segregated: upon starting work as a typesetter at one printshop, Jess notes with longing and excitement the social ties and laughter of women working together in the proofreading room, separated from her own isolated workstation:

> I actually looked forward to being inside the proofreaders' space for a moment — women's space. The women stopped talking as I walked in. I held up the repros. "Put them over there," one of the women said. She didn't look at me as she spoke. I sighed, dropped them in the basket, and left. As I walked away, I heard their conversation resume and their voices rise in laughter once again. (264)

Jess feels this distance from "women's space" painfully; the women's hiatus in conversation contrasts conspicuously with the discursive generosity of femmes

such as Theresa and Edna — and indeed with the singing of the Seneca and Mohawk women in the bindery — that helped Jess to expand her political consciousness. The solidarity fostered in the print shop between women workers is unavailable to Jess (who goes by Jesse at work), both structurally and due to interpersonal queerphobia: at one point, Jess overhears the women, including her crush Marija, describe her as "so effeminate," "creepy," and "the kind you gotta watch out for," leading Jess to abandon that typesetting job.

Yet the world of print in 1980s New York also offers social connections: the night schedule means that Jess has time to access another repository of print, the New York Public Library, where she goes to learn more about the life of an aunt who had been an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in the early twentieth century. Jess cannot find the obituary she seeks out, but in the process of scrolling through the microfilm, she comes across a sensational article with the title "Male Butler Discovered After Death to Be a Woman":

> Now I knew there was another woman in the world who had made the same complicated decision Rocco [another transmasculine worker, an old friend] and I made.... The headline chilled me — her life reduced to eight flat words. I wondered if my life would be recorded in eight words or less. I stared at a spot high up on the wall, feeling empty and small (242).

Another personal history opens up in the library, one about Jess's working forebears, and although it painfully echoes the violence she has herself experienced and makes her feel "empty and small," it also engenders potential solidarities across time and space, even if they are figured negatively: "Time separated me from this anonymous servant. Shame separated me from Rocco."

Jess's foray into the NYPL archives supplements the reading she begins almost immediately upon discovering that there is "a bookstore on practically every corner in New York City":

> [T]he Women's Studies section tempted me. By leafing through the books I could eavesdrop on the discussions going on between women without being seen... I felt as though I was rushing into a burning building to rescue the ideas I needed in my own life. I stopped skipping over the sections in books about women controlling their own bodies. Maybe all of these things that were so important to other women would prove to have meaning for me, too. (239–240)

These engagements with print connect Jess's specific workplace struggles with those of other women and gender nonconforming people. After overhearing Marija's queerphobic comments, Jess retrains her affective energies on her friendship with

Ruth, who gives Jess a Christmas gift of *Gay American History*, presumably the real volume by Jonathan Ned Katz: "Remember I told you about what I read in a drag magazine about how people like us used to be honored? Look at this whole section about Native societies. But wait, look at this.... This whole part is about women like you who lived as men" (266).

It is at this point — in the midst of her queer and trans historical discovery through print media and her development of new print-related skills at work — that Jess makes the excited announcement to Ruth with which I earlier introduced the question of dignified work:

> I always wanted to leave something important behind. Remember the history book you gave me for Christmas?... I've been going to the library, looking up our history. There's a ton of it in anthropology books, Ruth. We haven't always been hated. Why didn't we grow up knowing that?... I grew up believing the way things are now is the way they've always been, so why even bother trying to change the world? But just finding out that it was ever different, even if it was long ago, made me feel things could change again. Whether or not I live to see it. At work, when everyone else is at lunch, I've been typesetting all the history I've found, trying to make it look as important as it feels to me. That's what I want to leave behind, Ruth — the history of this ancient path we're walking. I want it to help us restore our dignity. (271)

Print is both the medium of access to this "ancient path" (albeit by way of developmentalist and primitivist ethnography) *and* the means of "restoring" dignity and making a contemporary world in which trans people are agents rather than historical curiosities. The work of typesetting itself is isolating and causes headache and strain, but it is also rewarding and satisfying in particular ways: "At night I lived inside the coding strings, my face illuminated by the ghostly light of the terminal. The code phrases became my poetry. The curves of type against space sang to me: the melody meant everything, the words meant very little" (263). As I have argued elsewhere, phototypesetting was experienced by some women and queer people as a pleasurable skill in spite of the pain and drudgery that could accompany it, and expressions of pleasure at the mastery of a new skill "entail ... a rejection of the rhetoric of 'deskilling' that accompanies the encroachment of feminized labor" on a trade.[29] Indeed, as noted above, phototypesetting's adjacency to industrial capitalist literary production is a partial source of the dignity that Jess seeks here. In *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess acquires typesetting skills through her casualized job; like many typesetters at the time, she also acquires regular *access to the machinery*. It is through both her waged and her after-hours uses of typesetting machines that Jess begins to make sense of the engagements with printed matter, feminism, labor history, and

trans life that have been brewing across the entire novel. Typesetting can allow Jess to put into print, and perhaps even to *publish*, transgender histories about the collective capacity to change the world.

Dignity and Immediacy: Beginnings, Endings, and Afterwords

So far I have mainly discussed *Stone Butch Blues* in terms of *Bildung* to highlight how its three-phase plot structure correlates to three overlapping phases in the gendered history of print labor, which Jess experiences through her embodiment and consciousness as a gender-nonconforming worker seeking, simultaneously, identity and solidarity. With the exception of occasional ironic comments in Jess's retrospective voice, much of the narrative hews fairly closely to this diachronic unfolding. In addition to this *Bildung*, however, Feinberg also used paratexts, and the changing fates of the novel's circulation, to enact a relationship of print production to "restoring dignity" for trans people — and it is just this function of the novel that has secured its reputation. In this final section, I turn to elements of the novel that depart from its diachronic plot and situate it in its own history of print: firstly, the novel's opening "Letter to Theresa"; secondly, its "Tenth Anniversary Afterword" by Feinberg; and thirdly, the ongoing circumstances of the novel's production and circulation. In his incisive reading of these elements of the novel, Jordy Rosenberg argues that these elements of the novel repair or compensate for limitations of the diachronic narrative such as Feinberg's tendency to use nonwhite characters as object lessons for Jess rather than characters in their own right. On Rosenberg's reading, the paratextual moments that refer to but disrupt the plot open the novel up to political readings via a form of "self-apostrophe" — an address to a future trans self-formation unknowable at the moment of writing. For Rosenberg, the trans poetics of the Afterword, through its open address to a yet-to-exist, collective "you," allows for Feinberg's writing, in the "realization of apostrophe's most utopian modality," to bring into question "politics as the openness of the conjuncture towards the abolition of alienation, a horizon resolved not in the diegesis of the novel, but in the poetics of its paratext."[30]

Yet Rosenberg's persuasive appeal to poetics and lyric theory does not preclude us from affirming the political character of some of the socialist *Bildungsroman*'s most "prosaic" elements — *fabula*, *sjuzhet*, episodic structure — in a word, its plot.[31] I have been arguing throughout that the novel's "main body" does indeed open up these political questions. The novel does this precisely through its narration of struggles in sectors where labor is being feminized and casualized, opening up contradictory opportunities for gender-minoritized workers and communities in terms both of political organizing and of the social relations of textual and literary production. The "Letter to Theresa," the Tenth Anniversary Afterword, and Feinberg's posthumous legacy extend the political project of the *Bildung*, not "resolving" the "horizon" of the "abolition of alienation," as Rosenberg puts it, but maintaining it *as* a horizon that is durable and historically conditioned.

The novel's epistolary opening, a love letter to Theresa, anticipates elements of the plot by offering a condensed panorama of a deeply personal, affectively charged history that cannot be other than a labor history:

> *The plants closed. Something we never could have imagined.*
> *That's when I began passing as a man. Strange to be exiled from your own sex*
> *to borders that will never be home.* (11)

Rosenberg explains that these lines amount to a reflection on the growth of feminized and casualized service labor in a core post-industrial economy, quoting and glossing a line from the letter,

> "Are you turning tricks today? Are you waiting tables or learning Word Perfect 5.1?" The catalogue of service work periodizes the moment of the text's writing across a chasm of love lost and industrialization off-shored…"[32]

I would add to Rosenberg's illuminating observation that this catalogue of post-industrial forms of service labor includes forms of literary and textual labor — Word Perfect 5.1 signals the rise of the desktop computer and office-based moments in the process of pre-press print production. It also signals the end of "typesetting" as the profession that Jess enters by the end of the novel. However speculatively, the "Letter to Theresa" envisions shifting struggles in a still-gendered scene of textual labor.

Indeed, beyond this moment of speculation, the "Letter to Theresa" insists that literary production, the making and keeping of writing, is bound up in the struggle for memory, power, and community. Jess cannot directly mail her letter to Theresa (address unknown!); instead, she will deposit it in a place that has been the outcome of such struggles for control over the written word: "Since I can't mail you this letter, I'll send it to a place where they keep women's memories safe. Maybe someday, passing through this big city, you will stop and read it. Maybe you won't" (12). While we don't know anything in detail about this place where women's memories are kept safe, the phrase itself and its location in "this big city" evokes the existence of a number of women's archives and libraries, chiefly the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, as Ann Cvetkovich notes and as would be recognizable to many queer readers.[33] The book immediately and subtly points our attention to the institutional and counter-institutional dynamics of textual power and to how these dynamics mediate the most intimate aspects of queer lives. Jess can deposit this letter in a lesbian archive, and while Theresa probably won't read it in the fictional world of the novel, the fact of queer institutional keeping (the volunteer efforts of lesbians) will somehow actualize the communication. The novel drops this opening epistolary approach, but the production of the book itself is another way that any such "Theresa" might read Jess's letter. In

other words, the printed book is a social technology, that, like the archive, can uphold enable cross-generational and geographical intimacies and that needs to be struggled for. In this way, too, the letter — and the *Bildungsroman* that it inaugurates — becomes a way of writing back to the femme whose discursive skill is so crucial to Jess's political *Bildung*, in a dialogue that is less personal (Theresa will never read it) than historical and collective (*you* might read it). The entire textual ecology of late-twentieth-century feminist and queer life *allows* for this allegory of apostrophe to be legible and realizable.

Stone Butch Blues was first published in 1993 by the Buffalo-based feminist publisher Firebrand Books, and the tenth anniversary second edition, in which the "Afterword" was published, by New York-based LGBT press Alyson Books.[34] Each of these offset print runs was enabled by the proliferation of feminist printing that took place across the 1970s and 1980s, when feminist typesetting and printing collectives abounded as businesses that tested the literary and financial autonomy of women's liberation ventures.[35] In the Afterword, Feinberg compares the writing of the novel to the cranking out of a mimeograph: "with this novel I planted a flag: Here I am — does anyone else want to discuss these important issues? I wrote it not as an expression of individual 'high' art but as a working-class organizer mimeographs a leaflet — a call to action" (304). This analogy doesn't quite track at a material level: as a novel, *Stone Butch Blues* is too long to be mimeographed at scale. Mimeos duplicate pages slowly at very low cost, unlike the offset lithography used to print pretty much any novel you held in your hands in the second half of the twentieth century and most into the twenty-first. Even more obviously, *Stone Butch Blues*, the novel, is precisely not a leaflet that can be read on the fly; the immediacy of message and the efficacy attributed to the mimeographed leaflet as a call to action is precisely not accorded by the slower unfolding, over reading time, that a book like *Stone Butch Blues* requires. Novels aren't generally read all at once on the street, although they do of course pass between hands and have historically been part of the formation of queer sociality.[36]

In contrast to Feinberg's aims for the speed in consumption and the social portability of the mimeograph, the work that Jess tells Ruth she has been privately typesetting after hours resembles professionally typeset pamphlets such as Feinberg's own *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (which indeed features "the history of this ancient path we're walking" and a historical materialist account of the development of anti-trans violence and oppression).[37] If for Jess such professionally typeset and printed pamphlets could afford "dignity" to both the typesetting worker and to the contents set in type, as well as to those who read and recognize themselves in it, then this dignity appears to sit awkwardly alongside the agitational urgency that Feinberg would later assign to *Stone Butch Blues*. The novel, which generally comes in at 300 pages, wouldn't normally be thought to have the propagandistic facility of pamphlets such as the *Journals of a Transsexual* or *Transgender Liberation*. Moreover, these pamphlets were themselves *not* reproduced by mimeograph but were typeset and printed using offset lithography through Workers World Party efforts; the copyright page of *Journal* includes a note

that reads "composed, printed, and bound entirely by voluntary labor" — labor which entailed a good deal of training and access to heavy machinery.[38]

There is then an apparent tension between Feinberg's desire for the novel to operate like a mimeographed leaflet and Jess's desire for trans history to be presented in professionally set type for the purposes of collective dignity, which is closer to how the novel was actually printed. In contrast to the mimeograph analogy, the novel describes the importance of printed matter for Jess in the process of realizing herself as a political agent inserted within a longer history and trajectory. In the world of the novel, it is Jess's typesetting shift work that enables her to move from *reading* the radical history of women and gender variance through libraries and bookstores to composing it herself. The work of typesetting itself feels dignifying (even though its social dynamics are in many cases not) precisely insofar as it is linked up to the social form of the printed book or booklet; these formats are easily (if at considerable cost) mass produced and distributed, but they are also formats that last and that have an aura of historically embedded cultural authority attached to them.

Feinberg's wish, expressed in hir Afterword, for the novel to operate with apparent immediacy of distribution and the greatest accessibility possible was perhaps more closely approached by hir actions in 2014, shortly before dying, to make the entire novel available as a pdf through hir personal website. This followed on a lengthy but ultimately successful legal battle by Feinberg and allies to regain copyright to the novel after Allyson Books, the publisher of the 2003 edition, went bankrupt. Feinberg fought for copyright precisely so the novel could be shared with everyone and not kept hidden away, a relic of queer print history. Below the link to the pdf is an explanation:

> Leslie Feinberg worked up to a few days before hir death to ready the 20th anniversary Author's Edition of Stone Butch Blues, to make it available to all, for free. This action was part of hir entire life work as a communist to "change the world" in the struggle for justice and liberation from oppression.
>
> This Author's Edition of Stone Butch Blues is dedicated to CeCe McDonald, a young Minneapolis (trans)woman of color organizer and activist sent to prison for defending herself against a white neo-Nazi attacker.[39]

This is followed by a link to a digital slideshow of solidarity actions with McDonald (Feinberg was arrested for protesting in solidarity with McDonald in 2012).[40] Feinberg's own writings on McDonald's case were regularly published in *Workers World* as well. In this sense, the most recent publication of the novel as a pdf on a personal website, interwoven with calls for and examples of antiracist queer and trans working-class solidarity, is closer to the immediacy in dissemination of a mimeographed leaflet and call to action, although the activity of reading the novel will always take a different kind of time.

These same questions about the political efficacy and cultural authority of print formats are central to the final pages of *Stone Butch Blues*. The agitational immediacy of slogans and flyers is pivotal to the novel's penultimate scenes, when Jess chances upon and is handed leaflets (not novels) at a gay and lesbian rights demonstration outside of the Christopher Street subway station, adjacent to the historic Stonewall Inn. Jess is then asked to speak spontaneously, and she gives a rousing and brilliant speech about being a lonely butch and about everybody's practical need for solidarity: "I don't know what it would take to really change the world. But couldn't we get together and try to figure it out? Couldn't the *we* be bigger? Isn't there a way we could help each other's battles so that we're not always alone?" (296). After making new connections with other demonstrators and being passed more leaflets, Jess rushes to tell Ruth about the event.

Jess's talent as a rally speaker and her newfound drive for solidarity is not presented by the novel's sequencing of events as simple spontaneity or as the immediate product of reading a flyer. Jess has gotten to this point through the combination of reading and holding books in her hands, durational experiences of workplace exploitation and abuse, a stop-and-start history of organizing collectively at work and in communal spaces, and, finally, a covert practice of stealing time from work to typeset trans history. It's all of this, along with Ruth's friendship, that enables Jess to return to organizing, which she now hopes can be more hospitably configured. Jess promptly calls Duffy on the phone, and, after begging each other's forgiveness, they catch up: Duffy reports he has been "red-baited out of the bindery where we used to work.... Then I quit drinking and got that job organizing, and I'm still working for the same union" (298). Jess, for her part, rehearses the common narrative about Bertram Powers's industrial strategy as president of ITU Local 6: "When the computers came on the scene, the owners could see first how it was going to transform the old heat-lead industry. So they hired all the people the old craft union didn't realize were important to organize. That's how they broke the back of Local 6" (298). Duffy offers Jess a job as a union organizer, with an explicit promise to have Jess's back, acknowledging that this might be necessary. Duffy explains that the world is always changing, and that Jess has always had the potential to organize: "You've got a power you've hardly used yet.... just fighting for change makes you stronger... Try imagining a world worth living in, and then ask yourself if that isn't worth fighting for" (300).

The cumulative effect of the novel's final pages is an optimism that is attached not only to the dream of a coalitional trans community, as Prosser argues, but also to the fight for a changed world and for the mutability of social relations more generally. Jess's optimism is marked as a gift from Duffy, who is neither trans nor queer but who is a fighter for change and for coalitional politics: "I remembered Duffy's challenge. *Imagine a world worth living in, a world worth fighting for*. I closed my eyes and allowed my hopes to soar" (301). This hope for change, within the logic of the novel's plot, is enabled by the promise of being an openly trans union organizer.

Jess's promised return to political organizing follows from her retrieval of trans and queer histories and origin stories and from her remaking of this readerly discovery through a finally unalienated form of labor: the stolen time of afterhours typesetting. Here, Jess engages in production directly for herself and her community. The social relations of print in the 1980s, and the labor relations of phototypesetting, that is, not only call her to action but also enable her to act. The 2003 Afterword's announcement that Feinberg wanted the novel to be a call to action like a mimeograph, and Feinberg's decision in 2014 to make *Stone Butch Blues* available for free to all to print for themselves may appear to undermine what the novel's plotting implies about the importance of skilled literary labor and the labor relations of offset lithography and typesetting. Still, these changes in Feinberg's approach are of a piece with the novel's dialectical approach to plot and character development: the novel frames Jess's needs and capacities, and the capacity of writing itself, as part of changing historical relations in which human agency exists in relational forms. If all of Feinberg's individual provocative statements about the novel's political efficacy are incomplete, this is not a failing. Whether it functions like an agitational mimeo, or as a work of gender theory, or as a free online pdf tribute to CeCe McDonald, *Stone Butch Blues* illustrates Feinberg's dialectical approach to the agency of queer and trans writing. The novel circulates through ever-changing social relations: both changing LGBTQ+ community formations and changing relationships between literary labor and organizing as activities.

Feinberg thus reinstantiates, via the dissemination of *Stone Butch Blues* itself, the vision that the novel forwards through the emplotment of Jess's complex relationship to the social relations of print. In the case of typesetting, the novel's plot indexes the contradictory and enabling interval between union busting, feminization, and extinction of a trade altogether — a historical challenge that labor organizing failed to meet. The dialectical toggling of these crucial shifts in labor formations and gender relations constitutes the novel's literary labor theory of gender. The enabling, fragile, and temporary gendered labor relations of print cultures are threaded through the novel but also beyond it, since the novel asks about its place in a chain of literary and print activities that shape these relations. *Stone Butch Blues* provides a portable frame for understanding the gendered relations of production, circulation, and consumption of LGBTQ+ literary forms and the way that these relations, in all of their variability and mutability, might be harnessed for historical change.

Notes

1. This essay has benefited tremendously from the feedback and input of a number of people: Nadya Ali, Martin Dines, Seb Franklin, Arabella Stanger and Ben Whitham helped me think through the earliest drafting stages, in 2020. Natalia Cecire prevented me from giving up by reading a way too long draft: her feedback fed into some of the essay's most important formulations. I'm grateful to Sita Balani, Emma Heaney, Ylva Karlsson, Alisa Lebow, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Ira Terán, and comrades in QTHoMo for conversations and correspondence, to two anonymous readers for their feedback, and to Amy De'Ath who heroically stewarded the essay to publication and provided final edits. Any shortcomings are entirely mine.
2. Julie Peters, "Making Connections: Gender Prac; Advanced Course: Julie Peters Interviews Leslie Feinberg," *Screaming Hyena* 7 (1996) 1, quoted in Monika I. Hogan, "'Still Me on the Inside, Trapped': Embodied Captivity and Ethical Narrative in Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*," *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture* 3, no. 2 (2004).
3. I am thinking here of insightful works of criticism including those by Jay Prosser, J. Halberstam, Monika Hogan, Siobhan Somerville, and Mark Rifkin. Early debates between Prosser and Halberstam famously hinged on whether queer feminist celebrations of destabilizing gender were adequate to describe the kinds of trans experience featured in the novel. Cael Keegan summarizes these conflicting tendencies in terms of "the divide between queer studies' emphasis on deconstruction/failure and trans* studies' focus on reconstruction/recovery (perhaps not of a 'natural' sex but an innately sensed one)." Cáel M. Keegan, "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 67, no. 3 (2020): 9. The novel has also been taken up as a privileged testing ground for "new" or innovative ontological claims in queer and feminist studies, including posthumanist queer approaches as with Roshaya Rodness, "Hard Road Ahead: Stone's Queer Agency in *Stone Butch Blues*," *Criticism* 62, no. 4 (Fall 2020).
4. For an example of the former, see Dan Sinykin, *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature*, Literature Now (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).
5. Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993) 271. Further references to *Stone Butch Blues* are noted parenthetically in the text.
6. This fact has not been foregrounded in most published readings of the novel, with one notable exception being Cat Moses's 1999 essay on "Queering Class," which argues that *Stone Butch Blues* "examines the relationship between gender and class structures and… suggests means by which such an examination might advance a praxis of resistance" Cat Moses, "Queering Class: Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*," *Studies in the Novel* 31, no. 1 (1999): 93.
7. See also Jim Holstun, "Buffalo Unsteeled: Connie Porter, Leslie Feinberg, and the Persistence of Proletarian Fiction," *The Journal of English Language and Literature* 63, no. 1 (2017): 23–42, and Graham Thompson, *The Business of America: The Cultural Production of a Post-War Nation* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).
8. Sarah Carpenter and Shahrzad Mojab, *Revolutionary Learning: Marxism, Feminism and Knowledge* (London: Pluto Press, 2017) 74.
9. Carpenter and Mojab, *Revolutionary Learning* 75.
10. *Journal of a Transsexual* (1980) was brought out by World View Publishers, and World View Forum

brought out Feinberg's polemical pamphlet *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* in 1992. Leslie Feinberg (as Diane Leslie Feinberg), *Journal of a Transsexual* (New York: World View Publishers, 1980); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (New York: World View Forum, 1992).

11. Feinberg, *Journal* 2.
12. Feinberg, *Journal* 8–9.
13. M.E. O'Brien, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom," in *Transgender Marxism*, ed. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (London: Pluto Press, 2021) 58.
14. Juliet Jacques, "Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing," *Life Writing* 14, no. 3 (July 2017): 199.
15. Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Transgender Pioneer Leslie Feinberg of *Stone Butch Blues* Has Died," *Advocate*, November 17, 2014, Accessed July 20, 2023 http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/books/2014/11/17/transgender-pioneer-leslie-feinberg-stone-butch-blues-has-died.
16. Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (Oxford University Press, 2011) 237.
17. Jay Prosser, "No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 3 (September 1995): 493.
18. Cf. e.g., Jacques, "Forms of Resistance" 361.
19. Benjamin Kohlmann, "Toward a History and Theory of the Socialist Bildungsroman," *Novel* 48, no. 2 (August 2015): 167.
20. Christina Burr, "Defending 'The Art Preservative': Class and Gender Relations in the Printing Trades Unions, 1850–1914," *Labour / Le Travail* 31 (1993): 47–73.
21. See Balay 2018 for an illuminating analysis, in the context of trucking, of the persistence and endurance of features that mark work as suitable for butch women, and of how bosses attribute these characteristics to butches, or impose them on them: "Working-class culture needs that space of endurance and sacrifice occupied by someone who harvests virility and meaning from its very perpetuation. With white straight men less willing to be that symbol, butch lesbians, indigenous people, and other marginalized bodies get pressed into service." Anne Balay, *Semi Queer: Inside the World of Gay, Trans, and Black Truck Drivers* (University of North Carolina Press, 2018) 151.
22. Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Duke University Press, 2000) 175.
23. Crucially, Jess fails to read even Edwin's inscription in DuBois's volume. Amy Olson's "Signed Copies" project with the Leslie Feinberg Library at the Sexual Minorities Archive takes up the importance of physical books for Feinberg's politics, considering precisely the ways that signed and inscribed books can "gesture … at the creation of a shared consciousness" Amy Olson, "About the Project — The Leslie Feinberg Library: Signed Copies," *The Leslie Feinberg Library*, Accessed June 1, 2023, https://sites.smith.edu/leslie-feinberg-library/about-the-project/.
24. For rich analysis of the groundbreaking affirmative action program in the Seattle electrical trades, see Ellie Belew, *High Voltage Women: Breaking Barriers at Seattle City Light* (Red Letter Press, 2019). For an account of the rise of public sector unions, see Joe Burns, *Strike Back: Using the Militant Tactics of Labor's Past to Reignite Public Sector Unionism Today* (IG Publishing, 2014), especially pp. 29–43

on "The Teacher Rebellion." For a discussion of LGBT+ inroads into a range of blue-collar trades (building and bus and truck driving, for example), see Miriam Frank, *Out in the Union: A Labor History of Queer America* (Temple University Press, 2015), especially Chapter 1, "From Construction to Couture," pp. 17–47.

25. Shortly after 1973 (so, following Jess's time at the bindery), flight attendants would undertake major membership drives and strike campaigns to challenge the gendered and gendering logic of the family wage (the very logic behind Jess and the other butches' decision to leave the binderies for the steel mill), as documented and explained in Ryan Patrick Murphy's *Deregulating Desire: Flight Attendant Activism, Family Politics, and Workplace Justice* (Temple University Press, 2016).
26. For more on this history, see especially J. Dakota Brown, Ben Koditschek, and Michael Neuchatz, *About the International Typographical Union*, ed. Chris Crawford, Ben Koditschek, and Jess Sattell (Draw Down Books, 2021); Samuel Solomon, "Offsetting Queer Literary Labor," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, nos. 2–3 (2018): 239–66; Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (Pluto Press, 1991).
27. Elizabeth Bernstein, Siobhan Brooks, Leslie Feinberg, Amber Hollibaugh, and Surina Khan, "Class, Race and Sex: The Future of Difference," *The Scholar and Feminist* XXX: *30th Anniversary: Present Challenges, Future Feminisms*, 2005 Conference Transcript, *S&F Online* 3, no. 3 and 4, no. 1 (2005) https://sfonline.barnard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/sfpanel3.pdf 52.
28. For a thorough account of this era, see Frank J. Romano and Drea Achacoso, *History of the Phototypesetting Era* (Graphic Communication Institute, 2014); for a searching overview of the labor politics of typography across the long twentieth century, see J. Dakota Brown, *Out of Sorts: Machinery, Theory, and the Revolutions in Typographical Labor* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2022).
29. Solomon, "Offsetting Queer Literary Labor" 250.
30. Jordy Rosenberg, "Afterword: One Utopia, One Dystopia," in *Transgender Marxism*, ed. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke (Pluto Press, 2021) 273.
31. I recognize the irony in the fact that I, a poet, am now arguing, against Rosenberg, a sublime novelist, that plot may be more politically salient than lyric address's tendentious status as a uniquely history-defying quality of poetic making, which I have addressed elsewhere at length. Samuel Solomon, *Lyric Pedagogy and Marxist-Feminism: Social Reproduction and the Institutions of Poetry* (Bloomsbury, 2019).
32. Rosenberg, "Afterword" 261.
33. Ann Cvetkovich, "Untouchability and Vulnerability: Stone Butchness as Emotional Style," in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally Munt and Cherry Smyth (A&C Black, 1998), 159–69. For more about the archive, see https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/. For more on how the LHA's digitization practices relate to lesbian information activism, see Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Duke University Press, 2020) 153–204.
34. Following up on these production details evidences a rich and overlapping network of designers and typesetters working across various feminist publication efforts. As a tiny example, the Firebrand Books edition notes: "Typesetting by Bets Ltd., book design by betsy bayley"; bayley also did the book design for *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*, which was co-authored by Feinberg's long-term partner Minnie Bruce Pratt and Black socialist feminist luminary

Barbara Smith. *Yours in Struggle* was typeset by Diane Lubarsky, who was also involved in typesetting Barbara Smith's foundational *Home Girls*. Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism (Firebrand Books, 1988)*.

35. For more on this, see Jess Baines, "A Darn Good Idea: Feminist Printers and the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain," in *Natural Enemies of Books: A Messy History of Women in Printing and Typography*, ed. Maryam Fanni, Matilda Flodmark, and Sara Kaaman (Occasional Papers, 2020) 79–99; Agatha Beins and Julie R. Enszer, "'We Couldn't Get Them Printed,' So We Learned to Print: *Ain't I a Woman?* and the Iowa City Women's Press," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 34, no. 2 (2013): 186–221; Solomon, "Offsetting Queer Literary Labor."
36. For more on the long history of queer literary "circulation," see Natasha Hurley, *Circulating Queerness: Before the Gay and Lesbian Novel* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
37. Feinberg, "Transgender Liberation."
38. Feinberg, *Journal of a Transsexual.*
39. "LESLIE FEINBERG," Accessed October 6, 2022, https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/.
40. See Kris Balderas-Hamel, "Court Re-Charges Transgender Author Leslie Feinberg for Action Supporting CeCe McDonald," *Workers World*, September 6, 2012, https://www.workers.org/2012/09/3812/. For further information about McDonald, visit https://supportcece.wordpress.com/

Devin William Daniels. “Still Thinking in Terms of Totality.” Mediations 37.2 (Spring 2026) 83–92.
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After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century
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Still Thinking in Terms of Totality

Devin William Daniels

What is the state of Marxist literary criticism today? What import does the historical materialist analysis of literature hold in an era where many fledging literary critics’ careers — not to mention literature departments themselves — cling to life, with decades of austerity only quickened and enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic? *After Marx*, a wide-ranging collection of Marxist cultural criticism edited by Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon, answers these questions less through evocations of the power of literature than by examining the material conditions that have given rise to the volume itself (and to the recent revival of Marxist literary criticism and Marxism generally). As Lye and Nealon state in their introduction, the fifteen essays of which it is comprised “represent a shift in Marxist literary criticism that has emerged from changes in capitalism itself, from shifts in political resistance to capitalism, and from changes in theoretical approaches to Marx’s writing” (1). This “shift,” further, consists of more than a simple “return” to Marx, or to economic themes and topics more generally, in response to events like the 2008 financial crisis. Rather, the volume, through both its self-theorization and the substance of the essays, makes specific claims for what Marxist literary criticism now *is*, or should be. To the extent this position can be pithily encapsulated, it involves a ruthless and unapologetic commitment to thinking in terms of totality and a return to the critique of political economy after the exhaustion of post-Marxism. This return to totality is not presented as the call to arms of a theoretical manifesto, however, but as a something already happening: a historically necessary response to the very conditions of capitalism and class structure that Marxism would seek to study.

The editors locate the hinge point for these shifts in capitalism from "roughly from 1965 to 1973," when, as Robert Brenner claims, capitalism entered what he calls a "long downturn," "a tendential decline in profitability for capital that has bred, over the decades, a variety of capitalist pushbacks against this decline" (2).[1] While the more common neoliberal periodization, as in the work of Wendy Brown and other Foucauldian thinkers, often emphasizes changes in policy, ideas, and outlook, for the editors of and contributors to *After Marx*, the fundamental issue is that the conditions of capitalist accumulation — the extent to which capital maintains the ability to materially expand and to generate surplus value at rates comparable to before the downturn — have changed. Whatever discursive or ideological shifts followed, such as the remaking of humanity in the image of *homo oeconomicus* or the disintegration of democracy into discreet constituent elements, were ultimately rooted in these conditions.[2]

The volume is less an adjudication of Brenner, however, than an examination and demonstration of how this state of affairs calls into question the received knowledge of Marxisms past. Anti-capitalist struggle and critique cannot return to these Marxisms and do it all over again: the same way that the heyday of earlier economic booms cannot be reproduced by contemporary capitalism, those same era's strategies are materially irreproducible (which is not to say they do not hold insights for contemporary struggle). This problem is particularly palpable within the academic study of literature, a practice that is largely tied to the career path of the tenure-line literature professor, a path that was financially reliant on an earlier form of the university — fueled by the postwar boom — and that is increasingly foreclosed for the coming generations of literary scholars. As Lye and Nealon note, the "steady decline" of literary studies "has developed a class dimension" as it has become "a shrinking pipeline of social mobility and immigrant professional assimilation" and as humanities classrooms became increasingly populated by community college transfers who could complete humanities degree requirements within two years (10). In her contribution to the volume, Sarah Brouillette further argues that this economic stagnation has reshaped the "cultivation and circulation of writers of English literature" in a way that was "globalized but not democratized," particularly as smaller publishing houses were consolidated under larger firms (119). Amidst these persisting and intensifying inequalities within the social relations of literary production, consumption, and study, students of English, the editors note, "more often find themselves in unexpected proximity to the standpoint of the wageless" (10). This phenomenon, in turn, has placed theoretical demands on Marxism's capacity to think in totalizing terms that can reckon with the material reality these students face; proponents of anti-capitalist critique and struggle have thus been compelled to rediscover and recreate their understanding of totality, something *After Marx* attempts to both theorize and implement.

Lye and Nealon's account centers on the 1960s — "the last period in which Marxism was still a defining political pole within a range of social movements" — when deindustrialization and the decline of organized labor coincided with a blossoming of social revolutions associated with the New Left, including Second Wave Feminism, environmentalism, Third Worldism, and Black Power (2–3). The challenge of the New Left was how to "conceptualize the interconnections between these forms of struggle, all understood to be global," yet, historically, this "was to remain an unfinished project" (3). The editors trace the problems this historical juncture (and its unrealized potentiality) created for two then-dominant strains of Marxist thought, represented by Louis Althusser and Theodor W. Adorno. Althusser, they claim, provided the theoretical basis for "the clearest advance in Marxism's ability to relate divergent political tendencies without subsuming them into one narrative," through his "anti-dialectical theoretical vocabulary," which emphasizes structure, relative autonomy, and overdetermination (3). Althusser was embraced by thinkers such as Stuart Hall, who conceived of the relation between race and class in terms of articulation, and by literary and cultural studies in particular, where Althusser's structuralist Marxism provided a particularly palatable method for reading texts as complex unities that, in Terry Eagleton's words, can "displace, recast and mutate" significations "according to the relatively autonomous laws of its own aesthetic modes" but always in the terms of, and never in excess of, "the general forms given to it by the structure of its significations."[3] Through this emphasis on structure, Althusserian Marxism sought to avoid what it perceived as a teleological thrust to Hegelian dialectics through "a very present-tense metaphorics of 'production'" (6).

Adorno represents, for the editors, a commitment a more Hegelian and dialectical Marxism, against Althusser's structuralism. Adorno's work, while maintaining an adherence to "a humanist language of possibility and transformation," had a macroscopic view of "the long unfolding of history" that seemed quite out of step with the anti-Hegelian French thought, "which focused… on the character of politics in the present tense" (6–7). Indeed, Adorno's personal response to the militant student uprisings of 1968 would seem to confirm that his thought was "ill-equipped to grapple with younger radicals' resistance to capitalism, imperialism, racism, and patriarchy" (7). Nonetheless, the editors maintain Adorno's utility for understanding the ultimate cause of this upsurge in radicalism: "a fully developed global capitalism that had reached into every aspect of collective and individual life" (7). In losing a sense of capitalist history through an emphasis on form, the Althusserian vein risked reifying the stultifying structure of capitalism into an inescapable fortress, whereas Adorno, for all his melancholy, maintains a focus on "the intricacies by which individual consciousness tried to wedge open space for itself to breathe" (7).

The distinction between Althusser and Adorno is, in some sense, one of metaphorics: of "competing abstractions of capitalist production," the spatial mode of Althusserian structuralism and the temporal thrust of Adornian dialectics (8). In so

meticulously considering these competing theoretical strands, Lye and Nealon present a view of the Marxist field for which the long downturn would present an irresolvable historical problem. As the material shift of the downturn, already underway during the acme of Althusser's ideas, became undeniable, his line of thought faced as moment where "structure collided with history" as its emphasis on the (re)production of subjects "was confronted with the problem of a capitalism in which 'production' was itself in crisis" (6). Likewise, Adorno's linear, and at times teleological, narrative of a progressive subsumption of social relations by capital is complicated by an era in which capital's nominal expansion has been durably paired with declining profitability and a failure to repeat previous expansions of accumulation. As such, Lye and Nealon are less interested in questions of expansion and production than they are in the non-linear process by which capital has negotiated "the capitalist imperative to overcome a tendency toward diminished profits" (8). Examining capital in this way requires a vocabulary that can account for how "the incorporation of ever more people into the ranks of … 'surplus populations'" has unfolded in *dynamic* ways that frustrate models of spatial expansion or linear progression, one which allows us to conceive of the process "which has produced both the deindustrialization of the global north and the slumification of the south" (8). As evidenced by the volume's own contributions, Marxism literary criticism has begun to do just that — as the discipline itself is rendered surplus — through thinking of literary, theoretical, and cultural processes in terms of *totality*.

The nature of an edited collection might suggest an approach to totality via multiplicity, an aspirational "account of everything." Under conditions of uneven development — and in the aftermath of the proletariat's failure, in the twentieth century, to become the "subject-object of history" that Georg Lukács foresaw —I t might be tempting to fracture our sense of totality, to consider "totalities," "modernisms," "modernities," or other plurifications. As *After Marx* demonstrates, however, for critical work to fully account for these varied, uneven historical conditions it must do so in totalizing terms. The contributors understand that totality comes to bear on every moment, thus offering us constant opportunities to consider the relationship of our objects of study, superstructural as they are, to the real, material conditions of capitalist accumulation. Such a methodology does not involve the decentering of issues of difference but the full comprehension of the centrality of race, gender, and other social abstractions to the mode of production.

We see this from the opening chapters, in which Nikhil Pal Singh and Ikyo Day query how to conceive of racial abstraction within a Marxist analysis that does not merely reduce race to a byproduct of class. Singh surveys the Black radical tradition, as discussed by Cedric Robinson, seeing it as typified by "a certain oscillation between" the idea of racism as a "form of ideological and social violence" continuously produced in parallel with commodity production, and racism as an "integral component" of commodity production itself, "a practical dimension

of enforcing wage discipline and extracting surplus value" (24). While the post-Marxist disregard for class would adhere to the former, responses to post-Marxism can, alternatively, turn toward the latter to the point of class essentialism, as in Adolph Reed's claim (in Singh's paraphrase) that "the race line … is only significant insofar as it *is* a class line" (33). Singh finds more complex alternatives to these poles in the work of Stuart Hall, Angela Davis, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Citing the latter's *Golden Gulag* as the most important recent text in this tradition, he finds in it a way to think about racism "as a technical and moral infrastructure within capitalist modernity," one that "lingers in the material ordering of social space" (36). That is, when conceived in terms of the social totality, we do not need to reduce race to a superstructural effect of class but can comprehend it as a profoundly *real* abstraction having material and infrastructural effects. Similar attention to race's place in the totality undergirds Day's analysis, wherein the designation of "Indigenous lands as *non-sites* of nuclear modernity" renders them integral, not exterior, to the capitalist process (40). A return to Marx's actual writings on primitive accumulation allows Day to recover its "explicitly nonteleological, nondevelopmentalist principles," showing how by rendering Indigenous lands into "wastelands" outside capitalist development, capitalism does not violate its core logic of accumulation (46). Rather, this primitive accumulation serves as "a race-making operation and a necessary precondition for the present and future accumulation of capital" (48). Through primitive accumulation, the state creates a racial difference that is only later rendered "ontologically concrete" through the legal definition of Native status (50). So concretized, race renders Native labor exterior to the wage relation, while the wasteland remains "valuable because it is always potentially available to capitalist use and improvement" (51).

The need to think in terms of totality likewise motivates Amy De'Ath's discussion of Marxist-feminism, which pressures us to focus on reproduction, not merely production, but not in a way that is simply additive. De'Ath is unequivocal that to consider the role of reproduction from a *Marxist*-feminist perspective "requires thinking from the perspective of a totality, which post-structuralist feminisms, with their emphasis on irreducible difference and particularity, have tended to reject" (226). The concept of real abstraction proves particularly fruitful for De'Ath in her analysis of contemporary Marxist-feminist poetry, allowing for "a feminist literary criticism attuned to the highly ambivalent and dialectical ways in which capitalist subjects might 'identify,'" without confusing a given subject's identification as necessarily constituting false consciousness or naïve misrecognition (228). All of these chapters demonstrate that in order to actually understand the particular, we *must* understand its position in the totality: as Ericka Beckman argues strongly in her analysis of Latin American fiction, capitalism does not gradually progress from one location to another, it is "a single system constituted by centers and peripheries (or metropoles and satellites)" (177).

Of course, the material covered is broad: the contributors examine contemporary film, automation discourse, and the writings of Lu Xun, among other topics. These various geographical locations, historical periods, and theoretical perspectives are not, however, presented in aggregation so as to produce a sort of weak-theoretical conglomerate of approaches to anti-capitalist or leftist critical thought.[4] The embrace of self-described weakness, in the name of multiplicity, is ultimately counterrevolutionary, for, as Jameson maintains, "without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible."[5] *After Marx*, in this sense, is unapologetically "strong" in its commitment to a shared methodology of Marxist critique that emphasizes the social totality and the place of art within it. Art here does not provide metaphors for thinking about the abstract (and even sublime) properties of capitalism; it provides concrete sites of investigation.[6] Thus, in "Marxist Ecology and Shakespeare," Crystal Bartolovich rejects New Materialist work, such as Jane Bennett's, that looks to physical matter and objects as providing a site of investigation — composed of literal material — more fundamental than the critical object of historical materialism.[7] By trying to "grasp things only positively and immediately," this methodology proves incapable of accounting for the *real* historical force of social abstraction and mediation through which "relations of inequality and injustice, secured by private property, inhabit every stick and bottle cap" (73, 82). The supposed magic of Prospero's stick, in *The Tempest*, turns out not to be the vibrancy of matter, which we must admire from without, but its place in the totality of social relations, in which we are likewise embedded and which we must materially change.

Along similar perspectival lines, Michael Shane Boyle, in "In Service to Capital: Theater and Marxist Cultural Theory," examines but also rejects the long-standing theoretical debate as to the status of artistic or arts-adjacent labor — specifically performance — as productive or non-productive. Tracing this ongoing debate to misreadings of passages from the *Grundrisse* in which Marx's restatements of Adam Smith's positions have been taken for his own, Boyle maintains, with a properly recovered Marx, that the distinction between productive and unproductive labor is not one of content: "what matters is whether the pianist's performance or the piano marker's labor is 'exchanged with capital' to make a profit for the capitalist" (220). Boyle, thus, does not try to grasp the nature of performance-as-labor *in theory* but, instead, examines the actual ways in which theaters and the labor within them have been organized — some of which, it turns out, are along "productive" lines, while others are not. We thus gain a sense of capitalist subsumption not as gradual and progressive but as dynamic, shifting in accordance with the needs of accumulation in different contexts. To grasp these realities, there is no replacement for actual, material investigation; we cannot theorize ourselves to a one-size-fits-all answer. The totality does not offer itself as an object for our investigation but must be itself ascertained through the project of critique.

This focus on totality leads the collection to some uncomfortable insights regarding literary studies, which has itself been rendered, increasingly, surplus to capital's project of accumulation. In an era of economic boom and thus relative stability or even prosperity for university humanities departments, Marxist literary criticism could propose relatively satisfying answers to the question of what it "did." On the level of method, it contributed ideology critique and symptomatic reading. On the level of means, it provided the financial stability of the tenure-track career. On the level of purpose, it provided the hope that through multitudinous efforts of education and research, such work might, in the long run, contribute, in some small way, to the revolutionary eventuality (or, at least, give Marxists something to do in the meantime). After the 2008 financial crisis's decimation of the already declining job market for literature PhDs, and the decimation of the decimated enabled by the all-too-brief "budgetary crises" of the COVID-19 pandemic (during which my PhD-granting institution's endowment grew by 41.1%), these answers feel less satisfying. The methods seem stale, outmoded, or simply to no longer contribute anything new (how many times can we demonstrate that the postwar novel expresses the limits of its capacity to cognitively map global capitalism?). The individual means once offered by literary study, albeit always in uneven fashion, are less and less historically and materially available. And under conditions of climate change and budgetary squeeze, the discipline's ability to believe in the revolutionary eventuality, and its own capacity to contribute to that eventuality, is far less stable than it once was. Regardless of how critical the former generations of career-stable Marxist critics were of capitalism, their capacity to believe, with relative confidence, that Marxist literary criticism had such a purpose was itself linked to an historically exceptional period of growth and accumulation, a dependency that cannot be undone by anti-capitalist close-readings alone.

After Marx does not shy away from these ambiguities. In addition to its methodology focus on totality, labor, and material social conditions, the period of the long downturn's beginnings — during which the previous foundation of literary study began to stagnate, decay, or even collapse — is the explicit focus of several essays, most notably those of Joshua Clover, Sarah Brouillette, and Juliana Spahr. Clover maintains, perhaps more strongly than any other contributor, that we have entered a new stage, not merely the beginnings of a fresh cycle of accumulation (in Giovanni Arrighi's terms). While others continue to look for new sources of value through which to reignite the accumulation process, Clover maintains that no new hegemon is poised to replace the United States in the way that the United States replaced Great Britain. Under such conditions, the novel cannot reconcile its problematically individual protagonists with the social whole; it rather can "only narrate the impossibility of reconciliation… and then retreat" (113). Rather than continuously run new novels through this interpretative machinery, Clover claims, "we must be emancipated from the idea of the novel as privileged bearer of the problematic of our epoch" (103). Brouillette also

focuses on the novel's decline alongside the "collapse of formal investment in the production of classical liberal democracy's rational educated citizen" (117). Without the ideological enemy of the Soviet Union, and facing the limits of accumulation Clover describes, the funding of higher education, the arts, and culture are quick to the chopping block — and thus so goes the revolutionary potentiality of turning such liberal democratic education against itself. If we ask "whither literature" of this new reality, however, we must not look for familiar forms from the midcentury, hanging on in decayed and weakened guises, nor even for "literariness" as the critical field has thus far established it. Instead of devoting ourselves to the remnant of the novel, we might turn to "a literature of the nonabsorptive economy" that has "barely been studied," being produced within the algorithmic marketplace of Amazon and Google, by authors who work not with editors but "consultants who specialize in maximizing audience share" (127). Spahr likewise seeks to move on from midcentury assumptions about literature, specifically to find new models for thinking of the relationship between literature and the state "not based on the Soviet example" (132). Spahr finds that the latter, and its privileging of social realism, as well as the U.S.'s own Cold War propaganda efforts, have limited our capacity to conceive of a literary relationship to the nation-state other than as "a medium built to legitimate" it (141). She calls instead for the study of "moments when the nation-state form is briefly cracked open," such as the Paris Commune or the anti-colonial movements of the postwar decades (138). For Spahr, and for Jasper Bernes in his contribution, the novel — so tied to the historical development of capitalism itself — proves less fruitful in this regard than the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, Aimé Césaire, or Claude McKay. This trilogy of essays, placed together near the middle of the volume, all suggest quite explicitly that we must rethink our critical relationship to English departments, revolutionary literature (or its possibility), the global literary marketplace, the humanities-educated, literature-reading citizen (as a goal of education), and the novel itself as a form. As capitalism encountered the limits of accumulation, so did the social relations of literary study fracture, in ways that demand new forms and approaches in our contemporary era, in which the pre-1973, GI Bill-funded explanations of the importance of reading, writing, and analysis cannot be treated as givens.

As a whole, *After Marx* is a step towards producing new answers to these questions of object, of method, of purpose. It is also, however, a document of a relatively specific generation of Marxist literary critics, perhaps the first generation of Marxism's recent revival and perhaps the last generation to, more often than not, attain relatively stable employment within the university (though the uneven distribution of employment amongst the contributors already shows the fracturing of the professorial career path at play). As a contingently employed academic facing a post-COVID job market, the volume, for me, cannot but summon the thought of the volumes my own critical generation might one day produce but which, as the already limited number of tenure-track jobs further dwindles, will likely never appear. As, increasingly, the most

brilliant critics I know drop from the profession, their unrealized book projects haunt the discipline, ghosts that never really lived (other than as speculative sentences in cover letters and research statements). The appearance, one day, of an *After-After Marx*, seems impossible. However, if there is anything to be learned from *After Marx*, it is that the way out of this quandary is not lamentation. As a volume aware of the contingent precipice on which its own publication stands, the contributors do not ask us to keep calm and publish on. They ask us, rather, to consider not only how but *that* Marxist literary criticism — that is, the consideration of culture in historical materialist terms — *will* continue, whatever we have to say about it, as long as capitalism reigns, albeit perhaps not under the aegis of the university for much longer. If Marxist literary criticism is to truly take on the burden of thinking in terms of totality, such a step might be necessary. It is not a cause for celebration or despair but a reminder that history continues to move, and it does not wait for novels to be published about it. If Marxist literary criticism is to maintain purchase in an era of its supposed obsolescence, it must maintain its focus on the real relations that undergird its own possibility, which continuously offer the formation of solidarity as a task as possible as it is difficult.

Notes

1. See also Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (New York: Verso, 2006).
2. See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015).
3. Terry Eagleton, "Toward a Science of the Text" in *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader,* eds. Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 326.
4. See Paul Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," *Modernism/modernity*, 25, no. 3 (2018): 437–459.
5. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois Press, 1988) 355. See also Crystal Bartolovich's contribution to *After Marx,* in which this declaration is quoted (p. 82).
6. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), and much scholarship on postmodernism, including, with respect, Jameson's.
7. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010).

Jason M. Baskin. "Fictions for Another Future." *Mediations* 37.2 (Spring 2026) 93–98. mediationsjournal.org/articles/fictions-for-another-future

How to Read a Moment: The American Novel and the Crisis of the Present
Mathias Nilges
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Fictions for Another Future

Jason M. Baskin

Has the future become a thing of the past? This idea can be glimpsed in virtually any area of society and culture today—from the self-serving musings of Silicon Valley gurus and sarcastic internet memes ("Where's my hoverboard?"), to the foreboding pronouncements of historians, literary critics and contemporary novelists. Whether the tone is ironic, nostalgic, oracular, or befuddled, all voice the same refrain: the future no longer orients our temporal imaginary. Technological innovations (the "digital age"), economic transformations (the "new economy") and various social utopias (the "global 1960s") have failed, and we live in the shadow cast by their absence—the perpetual, homogenizing immediacy of an endless Now.

In a rich and bracing new study of recent American fiction, *How to Read a Moment: The American Novel and the Crisis of the Present*, Mathias Nilges reconsiders this crisis of futurity—not because the broad consensus sketched above is mistaken, exactly, but rather because it misunderstands the problem. For Nilges, Fredric Jameson offers the central, if ultimately limited, elucidation: in an age unable to think historically, we are stuck in "a present without a past or future" (33).[1] The "end of temporality" is a symptom of late capitalism's fully global expansion, its eradication of alternative spaces and synchronization of uneven temporalities into its all-encompassing system.[2] Of course, it is hard not to see this as a story of cultural exhaustion. For Jameson, late capitalism forecloses modernism's open-ended, multi-layered grappling with temporal duration. For others, such as Jonathan Arac, it marks the end of novel's significance as a literary form.

How to Read a Moment proposes an important alternative to this pervasive critical attachment to endings. Building on Jameson, Nilges reads the collapse of the future historically, as the symptom of an economy increasingly oriented around the instantaneous circulation of finance capital. This new stage of what he calls, following Mark McGurl, "real-time capitalism" (52), erodes the collective ability to think temporality as duration—that is, as anything other than a recurring series of immediate, present instants.[3] Nilges here offers a crucial intervention. He argues that the present crisis, which is a crisis *of* the present as a temporal category, is better understood in terms of historical transition to a "new temporal regime," rather than mere obsolescence. Far from a literary dead-end, or a merely reflexive, formal repetition of once-innovative modernist gestures, the contemporary novel's engagement with time is more varied—conceptually, artistically, politically—than critics have realized. Temporal crisis in fact provides the basis of the contemporary novel's vitality in the twenty-first century: "the crisis of futurity appears not as an endpoint to literature," Nilges insists, "but instead reveals itself as a common point of departure for the work of literature" (20). While everyday life today is marked by an attenuation of future imaginaries, contemporary fiction orients us in a moment of social transition by making time legible, offering readers a critical knowledge of time itself as a historical and social product.

This argument initially coalesces around a reading of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), a novel whose basic conceit—a banker caught in traffic in the middle of New York City—stages the purported end of historical temporality almost too perfectly. Nilges's study spins out from there to a wide range of contemporary novels by DeLillo, Ben Lerner, Rachel Kushner, Jennifer Egan, Gary Shteyngart, Charles Yu, Matt Johnson, Colson Whitehead, Kiese Laymon, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, William Gibson and others. The linchpin in the account of these authors' disparate engagements with narrative time is an unlikely source: the German *Zeitroman*, or time novel. Most famously associated with Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), the *Zeitroman* is a modernist out-growth of the social novel; it "traces a temporal logic of an epoch" (18). Though it may appear antiquated, Mann's particular theorization of the *Zeitroman* hinges on a distinction that Nilges believes to be crucial today: between "time itself" (a formal concept) and time as it is experienced by individuals (a phenomenological concept). The latter forms the basis of western philosophical accounts of temporality, and underpins the work of the Anglophone modernists most associated with the time novel in English: Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner. Yet Nilges argues that approaching time only as a dimension of subjective experience misses what's most valuable about narrative fiction today: time's importance as a form of critical, historically situated knowledge about the world.

Each chapter of *How to Read* unpacks a particular conceptual move in this overall argument. Nilges first turns to DeLillo's recent fiction, from *The Body Artist* (2001) to *Zero K* (2016), to show how these novels historicize today's temporal crisis. Just as the

consolidation of the novel as a literary form across the 18th and 19th centuries occurred in direct relation to capitalism's reconfiguration of time, DeLillo's novels re-engage this dialectic of narrative temporality and capitalist standardization to counter the pervasive immediacy of finance capitalism's "new temporal regime." The second chapter then hones in on the distinction between phenomenological and historical time. Novels such as *10:04* (Lerner), *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (Egan), *How to Live Safely in a Fictional Universe* (Yu) and *The Flamethrowers* (Kushner), all employ non-linear, disjunctive or asynchronous narrative strategies to stage a formal, aesthetic conceptualization of time. Dislocating subjective temporality, these texts privilege historical knowledge over immediate experience in order to generate a conception of the contemporary itself as something more than an index of mere chronological proximity—a common social and political project.

These arguments set up what I found to be the book's most important section, on the contemporary African American time novel. Here, Nilges raises a question that readers already might have found themselves asking: who is the presumptive "we" experiencing—and proclaiming—a temporal crisis? In a nation-state structured through the ongoing reproduction of racial hierarchy, this "we" obscures an uneven terrain. Whereas DeLillo or Gibson see something new in temporal crisis, African American writers have long recognized that time itself is a historical category constituted in and through social domination, and have responded to denials of futurity by cultivating what Ralph Ellison famously called "a different sense of time" opposed to the hegemonic temporality of American white supremacy, nationalism and, often, capitalism.[4] Recent works by Johnson, Laymon, and Whitehead, Nilges shows, take up this project by tracking back (and sometimes projecting forward) in time, not to recover cultural memory but to "re-temporalize the present" (160) and articulate the possibility of new, alternative futures. Frustrated with the static logic of multicultural inclusivity, these writers construct a vision of contemporaneity that recognizes the present as the site of risk, uncertainty and open possibility.

How to Read then concludes by returning to its fundamental preoccupation with periodization. In contemporary literary studies, these discussions remain oriented by Jameson's concept of postmodernism, even if recently revised into more baroque, involuted forms.[5] After a lucid reconsideration of these debates, Nilges argues for retaining postmodernism but as a more limited term, specific to the cultural products of a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s. This transitional moment saw the consolidation of the new stage of neoliberal, financial capitalism that now orders our contemporary world, and which, he argues, Jameson's concept of postmodernity still aptly names. This distinction between postmodern cultural *forms* and the historical *condition* of postmodernity itself is minor, perhaps, but useful nevertheless. It refocuses attention on historical change and critical totalization, rather than terminological debates, and privileges the complexity of transition over linear narratives of exhaustion.

Still, Nilges's choice to retain postmodernity as the contemporary's defining condition risks obscuring some of the most important insights developed in his readings. Indeed, *How to Read* compellingly articulates contemporary fiction's re-inscription of futurity. Yet in doing so the book repeatedly makes visible the limits of postmodernity's usefulness as a critical account of the present. It is striking, for instance, that Nilges's concluding argument for a more circumscribed understanding of postmodernism recalls not Jameson's field-defining thesis but David Harvey's less influential intervention into these debates. Nilges doesn't discuss Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1991), but contra Jameson's insistence that postmodernism heralded a new stage of capitalism, Harvey maintained, rather more sceptically, that it was better grasped as a symptom of the latest phase of "time-space compression" through which capitalism has historically re-organized itself on a global scale.[6] Harvey's argument develops his fundamental insight that capitalism's recurring temporal accelerations are never linear, one-dimensional processes but contradictory ones, occurring in dialectical relation to transformations in spatial organization ("spatial fixes"), vast changes in the labor process, and technological innovations.[7] For Harvey, periodic cycles of acceleration renew accumulation but also constitute limits upon which capitalism runs aground. Rather than presuming an ongoing, seamless expansion, therefore, Harvey's theory of postmodernism was also a theory of economic crisis.

I am not recalling Harvey's Marxist geography to raise perhaps inevitable (though often tedious) debates about the relative primacy of space versus time, which Nilges refreshingly bypasses. Rather, I want to highlight Harvey's point about the material dimensions and the constitutive limits of global capitalism, as it poses a valuable corrective to Jameson's vision of an all-encompassing abstraction, predicated on endless temporal acceleration and spatial extension. Nilges's discussion of temporal crisis develops directly out of Jameson's account; nevertheless, his readings repeatedly register the material limits Harvey more insistently highlights: "capitalism has to work hard," Nilges notes, "to erase competing forms of being in time" (147). Likewise, his discussion of the African American time novel brings out the ways that "temporal immobility," rather than acceleration, functions in the context of racialization to exclude certain people from full "belonging" in the present. For African Americans, as Whitehead aptly puts it in a line from *John Henry Days* (2001) that Nilges returns to several times, "[i]t's always Mississippi in the 1950s" (132). Nilges's point here is that for certain groups of people, the collapse of futurity has been a longstanding condition of American life. However, I also took away a different, perhaps even opposing, insight from Whitehead's line: temporal acceleration itself can never be an established condition of contemporary capitalism because it is not a completed process, but a site of ongoing contradiction and struggle. This is the case, furthermore, not only for particular groups of people (e.g. African Americans) but, in different and

uneven ways, for everyone. If so, then the temporal immobility Whitehead refers to here is not an aberration within real-time capitalism but one of its central, structural necessities.

This raises a slightly different set of questions than Nilges pursues. Can the temporal crisis analyzed in *How to Read* be extended to encompass both global capitalism's accelerations *and* delays? Or the "deepening divide" Ruth Wilson Gilmore identifies between "the hyper-mobile and the friction-fixed"?[8] To understand the relation between race and globalization, Gilmore argues, we need to supplement Harvey's concept of "time-space compression" with its temporal opposite, "time-space *expansion*."[9] Gilmore has in mind the vast expansion of the carceral system since the 1970s, but her concept of friction applies as well to any number of the proliferating forms of slowness, immobility and delay that characterize the global economy: the spatial enclosure of surplus populations in slums, homeless encampments and detention centers; the endless wait for public services, from transportation to medical care; the low-wage service work that underpins the apparent instantaneity of finance capital, by requiring people to take on multiple jobs for longer (more "flexible") hours. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, despite the vast profits of the financial sector, contemporary capitalism's defining feature is not accelerating accumulation, but rather stagnation: slowness and friction, in other words, at a systemic level.[10]

These examples emphasize Gilmore's point that friction is not a mere lagging indicator.[11] Rather, capitalism today functions (if that's the right word) through both compression and expansion, producing temporalities of slowness and immobility as themselves new sites and modalities of profit, exploitation and extraction.[12] Even if the organizing framework of postmodernity is ill-equipped to foreground these uneven and contradictory temporalities, Nilges's study makes the convincing case that American fiction's recent grappling with narrative time is the site of its artistic and political significance. For that, *How to Read* will be a crucial resource for anyone looking to develop more complex accounts of contemporary literary culture.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, "On the Power of the Negative," *Mediations* 28, no. 1 (2014): 71.
2. Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality" *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer 2003): 695-719.
3. Mark McGurl, "Real/Quality," in *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present,* ed. Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
4. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1952) 8.
5. See Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism,* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012).
6. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991). See also Natalie Melas, "Out of Date: David Harvey's The Condition of Postmodernity and the Postmodern Condition," *Post45* (online), 5.19.20, Accessed 27 July 2022, https://post45.org/2020/05/out-of-date-david-harveys-the-condition-of-postmodernity-and-the-postmodern-condition/.
7. For a pointed summary see David Harvey, "Globalization and the 'Spatial Fix'" *geographische revue* 2 (2001): 23–30.
8. Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Toward Liberation* (London: Verso, 2022): 117.
9. Gilmore, *Abolition Geography* 117.
10. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2004); Sarah Brouillette, Joshua Clover, and Annie McClanahan, "Introduction: Late, Autumnal, Immiserating, Terminal," *Theory and Event* 22: 2 (April 2019): 325–336.
11. Gilmore, *Abolition Geography* 114.
12. See, for instance, Neferti X. M. Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), esp. 164–169.

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