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Clinical Trans/Aesthetics:
the Knowledge Re/production of Transgender Womxn who Exchange Sex

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Abstract

While there is a cornucopia of writing on transgender and sex worker identities vis-à-vis gender and sexuality studies, there is lacuna of transgender worldviews and knowledge re/production beyond these political pigeonholes. When research does include direct quotes from transgender and sex worker informants, more often than not, it is either to bolster the claims of the researcher or to piece together an ethnography. In both cases, the research does not center the informant's affective and intellectual reasonings, beyond questions of gender and health. This leaves the critical thought of trans womxn sex workers out of the picture. This exclusion is unfortunate because the trans sex workers' situation gives them a unique vantage point for understanding the world(s) in which we live and beyond. Trans womxn who exchange sex re/produces knowledge that privileged epistemologies do not adequately articulate. But pairing and challenging these hegemonic modes of thinking with trans knowledge re/production, there is a synergy. This dialectic expands the delimited frameworks of hegemonic thought—a critical trans/aesthetic theory. This thesis then develops a clinical trans/aesthetics to critique interviews with trans womxn sex workers in an attempt to make legible the population's overlooked, elusive and devalued knowledge.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Critical Trans/Aesthetics

While there is a cornucopia of writing on transgender and sex worker identities *vis-à-vis* gender and sexuality studies, there is lacuna of transgender worldviews and knowledge re/production beyond these political pigeonholes. When research does include direct quotes from transgender and sex worker informants, more often than not, it is either to bolster the claims of researchers or to piece together an ethnography. In both cases, the research does not center the informant's affective and intellectual reasonings, beyond questions of gender and health. This leaves the critical thought of trans womxn¹ sex workers out of the picture. This exclusion is unfortunate because the trans sex worker's situation gives them a unique vantage point for understanding the world(s) in which we live and beyond.

In the article “Staging the Trans Sex Worker,” Nihils Rev and Fiona Maeve Geist hash together the ways in which trans sex workers are portrayed. Rev and Geist cite Viviane Namaste's comprehensive research in *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, highlighting Namaste's critique of the “epistemological weakness of the abstract and monolithic trans identity” and “the hubris of theoretical discussions that employ trans individuals in their arguments while ignoring the content of their lives.”² In doing so, Rev

¹ Author stylizes “woman” as “womxn” to connote the complexity and ambivalence of womxnhood. That is, womxnhood is not bound by Western conceptions of a gender binary and its variances. Womxnhood recognizes that cissexism defaults womanhood to a binary body, if not a cisgender one. As such, the use of “womxn” seeks to complicate foundational and reductive conceptions of womanhood that at the same time does not refuse recognition of binary womanhood nor restrict identity to such a binary. Pushing further, womxnhood is complex and ambivalent—womxnhood engages with and questions hegemonic epistemologies of “woman”.

² Nihils Rev and Fiona Maeve Geist, “Staging the Trans Sex Worker,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3711577>.

and Geist show that scholarly focus on “questions of representation and identity” is at the expense of research on the “presence and realities of [male to female] transsexual prostitutes”.³ My research question builds on and frontiers beyond Namaste’s project, and turns the findings of Rev and Geist on its head. Rather than using trans lives to build on top of already tired arguments of gender theory and exploitative questions of representation, I ask *what do trans womxn sex workers know about our shared reality that other vantage points are unable to see*. For in this knowledge, we might find novel strategies for generative matters such as disciplinary breakthroughs, as well as more immediately practical matters, such as fighting back against fascisms.

Hegemonic and normative schema of knowledge production (such as academia) privilege Western modes of reasoning. Because of their unique vantage point, I argue that trans womxn sex workers’ critical thought re/produces knowledge that (a) does not reach these production vehicles; (b) is entirely not conceivable through these privileged epistemologies; or (c) all of the above. However, in pairing and challenging these hegemonic and dominant modes of thinking with their seemingly incompatible epistemologies, I argue that we find that there is a synergy—it is through their dialectic that the limited frameworks of hegemonic thought, specifically aesthetic theory, are expanded and then can be employed to make trans/aesthetic knowledge conceivable.

The theoretic framework of critical aesthetic theory, which emerges from the Frankfurt School of critical theory, offers a theoretical toolset that can be fruitfully employed to render conceivable within hegemonic theoretical frameworks the critical thought of trans womxn sex workers that defies definition. I attempt to use critical aesthetic theory to document, explore and share the knowledge production of this thesis’s informants. At its core, critical aesthetic theory

³ Ibid., 114, citing Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 66.

can be described as a practical application of aesthetic philosophy. Aesthetic philosophy attempts to systematize the elusive qualities of works of art—from the essentialism of what constitutes a poem to the poem’s ability to evoke what Immanuel Kant calls the sublime, or “aesthetic experience” in the reader. That is, aesthetic philosophy attempts to capture such elusive knowledge within the framework of Western rationality. Expanding from that aim, critical aesthetic theory recognizes that an aesthetic mode of inquiry can elucidate our socio-political worlds more broadly. In other words, whereas aesthetic philosophy attempts to understand the mechanisms and knowledge re/production found in works of art, critical aesthetic theory applies these methods of analysis to more practical ends. But rather than focusing only on trans artmaking, I argue—as others have before me—that trans womxn, especially those who do sex work, in *being alive* re/produce knowledge. I then employ critical aesthetic theory to critique interviews with trans womxn sex workers in an attempt to make legible the population’s overlooked, elusive and devalued knowledge.

Sexual Re(op)pression

Transgender individuals exist in a liminal space—at once hyper-in/visible to both (civil) society and the state; those that engage in exchanging sex often occupy a similar place. The legal and cultural anti-sex work animus of the United States stigmatizes and criminalizes both the occupation and the workers. Yet at the same time, sex work will always be in demand. Sex workers thus mediate a space of contradiction and conceptual incongruence. Such contradictory existences are far from being conceptualized. Indeed, Julia Serano coined the term “effemimania” to describe the fascination with and disgust of trans femininity—that is, Serano employs effemimania to explain that misogyny’s subjugation of femininity to a heightened level of scrutiny holds trans womxn as a horrifying spectacle whereas trans mxn are found to be not as

interesting. Sex work is conscripted into such a framework of misogyny. While providing sex work is stigmatized, the labor is highly sought after as both a service and a site of spectacle. It is existing in this liminal space that necessitates knowledge about the unconceivable/unconceptionalizable.

My method is to analyze interviews through the framework of critical transgender aesthetic theory. Rather than rely on static criteria or the core questions that helped to set up my research in its nascence to analyze interviews and data from respondents, I take a nod from other trans/queer theorists. By not enforcing a definite structure, I let the exploration get me to questions and answers. In doing so, this thesis ambitiously builds the foundations to, employs and also suggests a new method of analytical inquiry that combines critical theory and research methodology.

Literature Review

Trans womxn make contributions across the board. It would be impossible to comprehensively address and acknowledge the contributions of all trans womxn. Rather, this thesis and literature review are provisional. Ultimately, this thesis critically engages the machinations of trans knowledge re/production in an attempt to make legible to other disciplines, fields and “worlds” in the hopes to one day lionize the inherent value of the trans sex worker’s knowledge.

The first section of the literature review doubles as a primer on a brief history of transgender identity, health and rights. The same goes for the following section on sex worker rights. To close each of these sections, I discuss explicitly the human rights issues at stake, which will hopefully already become apparent in reading through the literature review. I then discuss some of the relevant literature regarding the ethics and methodology of research projects that involve human informants. Lastly, I make a gesture towards the legacy of trans and queer

persons before me that recognize the gravitas of aesthetics. In doing so, I layout the theoretical framework of my thesis, and also lay the foundation from which I build my clinical trans/aesthetics discussed in Chapter III, and the case studies application(s) in Chapter IV.

Transgender Experience

Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl* is a comprehensive work that offers the transgender/transsexual studies experience from the perspective of a self-identified transsexual. Because of Serano's voicing, the text offers the unique trans vantage point in gender epistemologies and ontologies. The chapter "Pathological Science: Debunking Sexological and Sociological Models of Transgenderism" is a great examples of this. In this chapter, Serano maps out and then critiques the hegemonic medical epistemologies of transgenderism and transsexualism. The medicalization of human sexuality and gender owes itself to a patchwork of scientific disciplines.⁴ But when sexism pervades, "it's virtually impossible to completely separate scientific inquiry from one's own personal and political views."⁵ Serano notes that the guidelines of professional organizations, such as the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), set standards of care that until 1998 required clinical behavioral scientists to recommend gender-affirming medical treatment, such as hormone replacement therapy and surgery.⁶ This positioned HBIGD into the powerful role of regulating not only access to health care (i.e. as "gatekeepers"),⁷ but also the world of transsexuality and transgenderism, which "shaped the way our culture views and values transgender people, as well

⁴ Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Second edition (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2016), 114.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

as how transgender people come to understand themselves.”⁸ Moreover, “[HBIGDA’s] body of research, though presented as ‘scientific’ and ‘objective,’ reveals more about the researchers’ biases and assumptions than it does about the transgender population.”⁹ For example, Serano argues that the disproportionate research on transsexual women over transsexual men stems from gatekeepers’ finding “male expressions of femininity to be more disturbing and potentially threatening to society than female expressions of masculinity.”¹⁰ Serano’s assessment critically examines gatekeepers’ “good intentions” (i.e. “requiring [transsexual women] to conform to oppositional sexist ideals regarding gender”¹¹) to “protect the transsexual from the cissexual public”¹² Serano’s frame of reference brings to light the insidiousness of the gatekeepers’ sexist practices. In effect, because of gatekeepers’ worldviews, the trans person’s access to gender-affirming treatment and *to each other* was limited, “thus rendering them invisible.”¹³ This would serve to effectively silence trans persons, and isolate them from participating in worldmaking discourse. Exclusion of trans voices serves to obscure truths that could be brought to light through the making worlds from the transgender perspective. Compounding this exclusion, the sexist world of gatekeepers foists their epistemologies onto trans persons, thus leading to Serano’s conclusion that the work of gatekeepers shaped how transgender persons came to understand themselves—further burying the possibility of novel frames of reference. This all the more highlights the importance of including trans people in worldmaking.

⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁹ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰ Ibid., 127.

¹¹ Ibid., 122.

¹² Ibid., 124.

¹³ Ibid., 120.

Sex Worker Experience

In *Temporarily Yours*, Elizabeth Bernstein details her research and fieldwork on the economy of the sex trade. Sex commerce is what Bernstein calls “the exchange of sex for money in the late capitalist marketplace.”¹⁴ Bernstein recognizes that “experiences such as those of [sex worker informant] Amanda and her clients reflect and thus offer insight into broader trends at work within urban life in the contemporary West.”¹⁵ However, Bernstein’s research questions, rather than center the knowledge production of her informants, center what the labor of sex work itself says about the socio-economical and sexual morality of late capitalism, and its causal repercussions for the client base of cisgender middle-class white men.¹⁶ What is more, for “methodological” reasons, Bernstein excluded transgender individuals from her research.¹⁷ Instead, Bernstein focused on cisgender womxn and their clients.

Bernstein also contends that sex work “might sometimes (or simultaneously) constitute an attempted means of escape from even more profoundly violating social conditions.” But looking at it from another angle, the “accelerated entry” of individuals into the sex trades is a reflection of the need to escape the rampant and epidemic structural violences. This does not go far enough. Participation in the sex trades, I contend, can be understood as more than mere escape, but a subversion of those structural violences. That is, doing sex work, as an informal labor, peels and chips away at the worlds we inhabit, which are built on a framework of structural violences. Indeed, womxn sex workers challenge the governing feminist agenda through the reclamation of *inter alia* the body and sexuality of womxnhood.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*, Worlds of Desire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

In the introduction to *Revolting Prostitutes*, a comprehensive historiography of sex worker activism written by former or current sex workers, Molly Smith and Juno Mac offer a third option that does not fall into the trappings of deifying sex work and exploiting the violence sex workers face:

We do not argue that nobody experiences harms within sex work, or that these harms are minimal and should be disregarded. [. . .] Nor – as we will unpack over the course of this book – are we uncritical of what work means in a context of insatiable global capitalism and looming environmental catastrophe.¹⁸

Without fetishizing or romanticizing the labor of sex work, it at times is the production of an alterity of knowledge. To do so, it is not only ethical, but imperative to give deference to the work and words of those who exchange sex over any ethnological study. Smith and Mac explain:

The dependence on statistics in the prostitution debate is often a result of our invisibility, and our illegitimacy as commentators. Sex workers perhaps seem alien and mysterious, and the questions we raise too political; but numbers are reassuring, seemingly apolitical, and knowable.¹⁹

While such deference is perhaps obvious to some, especially in feminist research, it always calls for reiteration. To again defer to the words of Smith and Mac:

Sex workers are the original feminists. Often seen as merely subject to others' whims, in fact, sex workers have shaped and contributed to social movements across the world.

For example, started in 2004 and anthologized after its closure in 2015, the for-and-by-sex-workers magazine, \$SPREAD, is perhaps an authority on 2000s sex worker rights movement.

Theoretical Framework

This section lays out the theoretical groundwork of this thesis by providing a review of current theoretical landscapes. Much like aesthetic theory and transgender aesthetics, a critical theory-driven method of sociological analysis is not novel. Indeed, Namaste takes this approach in her

¹⁸ Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018).

¹⁹ Ibid.

study on trans women, published in 2000. On one hand, Namaste details the ways in which post-structuralism, its queer-theory fork, and sociology are ripe with myopias for the purposes of research of trans individuals. Whereas queer-theory prides itself in teasing out questions of gender and sexuality *vis-à-vis* trans identities, Namaste notes these queer critics rarely concerned themselves with the actual and everyday lives of their objects. Similarly, in not addressing the everyday life of trans individuals, objective sociology forecloses the possibility of accurately situating trans populations. From these analyses, Namaste concludes that the disciplines focus on the production rather than erasure of trans individuals. As such, Namaste calls for a new praxis: poststructuralist sociology. In this way, this thesis is a nod to, and forks from Namaste's project.

That said, my research does not ignore or nor minimize the brilliance of the womxn I interviewed. As mentioned, to oppose exceptionalism does not minimize trans womxn, rather it frees them from the oppressive binary that on one hand fetishizes the voices of the few in the case of exceptional art/activism, and on the other, exploits the many in homogenizing trans experience as a state of exceptional precarity.

Trans/Aesthetics

Human rights studies attempts to qualify and enumerate an elusive signifier: human rights. Due to its plurality and incongruences, human rights—especially within a western framework (theoretical and in practice)—eludes definition. As previously pointed out, critical aesthetics attempts to at the very least unpack that which eludes definition. Other human rights scholars have made similar points. Indeed, queer and trans theorists are no strangers to employing aesthetic theory for the purposes of understanding and calling out the violences and shortcomings of human rights, and to push for more inclusive and radical approaches. Far from a comprehensive list, micha cárdenas, Susan Stryker, Tourmaline Gossett and Viviane Namaste

have all contributed invaluable literature on trans/aesthetics *vis-a-vis* trans rights. Indeed, my theoretico-methodologies are grounded in the work of these scholars, artists and activists.

Barad's exploration of Stryker's text, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," provides a good transition to transgender aesthetics. As quoted in Barad, Stryker describes her "unnatural [transsexual woman] body"²⁰ and the bodies of us trans persons, "we have done the hard work of constituting ourselves in our own terms against the natural order. Though we forgo the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth."²¹

micha cárdenas, who is also a trans woman, layouts in the introduction of her collaborative text, *The Transreal*, the ways which trans aesthetics "explores the use of multiple realities as a medium in contemporary art" to "cross the boundaries of realities created by a fragmentation of reality that occurred as a result of postmodern theories and emerging technologies."²² cárdenas's transreal is, in part, a reaction to senior aide to George W. Bush Karl Rove's statement that "We're [the United States] an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality . . . We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we

²⁰ See also K. Barad, "TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2015): 392, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843239>.

²¹ Barad, "TransMaterialities," 393., quoting Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (June 1, 1994): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>. Barad clarifies in the footnote citation 17 on page 417, that Stryker's use of "blackness" to describe the "chaos" and "fecundity" of the "anarchic womb" to suggest the fullness of a void needs to be scrutinized through the lens of critical race theory; lest we fall in the trap of whiteness (re)colonizing black and brown spaces—figuratively and literally. Rather than "blackness" as void, which carries with it the signifiers of anti-blackness and colonialism, Barad suggests the alternative "nothingness" (the void).

²² micha cárdenas, Zach Blas, and Wolfgang Schirmacher, *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities*, 2011, 23.

do.”²³ To avoid confusion, it’s important to note that cárdenas’s “realities” are similar to how this thesis employs Nelson Goodman’s “worldmaking” (which is explored in deep in Chapter III). Taking nods from Jack Halberstam, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gilles Deleuze, cárdenas understands realities as a “multiplicity of times and spaces which coexist.”²⁴ Indeed, on one hand, cárdenas incorporates psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan’s “the Other as reality”. And on the other, cárdenas quotes Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s assertion of queer culture as a “world-making project”. Further, cárdenas explains, “reality is something that limits and enables actions but also takes its shape through belief”.²⁵ Considering cárdenas’s artistic and theoretical stakes in virtual and augmented realities, it’s unsurprising that cárdenas coins the term “transreal”. But on the other hand, cárdenas demarcates reality from worlds, noting that, among other things, the “transreal emerged from a response to the daily experience, with varying degrees of violence and banality of being told that as a queer femme transgender woman my gender was not real, my sexuality was not real and even my body was not real.” It’s in the theoretico-political stakes in the realness of trans/gender womxnhood that cárdenas’s realities have teeth. cárdenas demonstrates through the queer curation of contemporary artists, not least of cárdenas’s own collaborative works, the ways in which worlds both augment and reveal the real: “[t]he transreal is the embracing of an identity that is a combination of my ‘real’ body that I was born with and my personal history with another identity that I have written in flesh, in words, in pixels, in 3-dimensional models and across multiple strata of communication technologies.” In another breath, cárdenas offers another “resonance” of the transreal: “the crossing of multiple realities, a nuance for a multiplicity of worlds and the usage of reality as a medium.” While

²³ Ibid., referencing Mark Danner “Words on a Time of War: On Rhetoric Truth and Power” (2007), 22.

²⁴ Ibid., 24.

²⁵ Ibid., 28.

being fair to cárdenas’s “realities” as an integration of Halberstam’s queer spaces and times (what could be more fundamental to “reality” than space-time?), cárdenas is rather offering multiple realities as the multiplicity of modes, manners and instances in which we create the real. Looking at the transreal from this lens, we can differentiate cárdenas’s realities from worlds. For example, the way virtual reality is written into reality. And on the other hand, a more personal example to cárdenas, writing herself into reality in flesh. The transreal is “reality as a medium”²⁶—in the sense that reality is used both as vehicle, instrument and very material—however metaphysical—of the artmaking. cárdenas crosses, intersects and combines the boundaries of these written realities to forge the transreal, which are then perceivable through an auxillary world-making process. The transreal, then, can be understood as both an aspect of reality and the multiplicity of methodologies and operations to create and perceive it.²⁷

The task at hand in this thesis is rather than analyzing the ways in which artists create trans- realities and worlds, I am interested in the ways in which the mundane, everyday *living* of trans womxn—especially those who do sex work—create realities and make worlds. Not insofar that living is a mode of art—which, as will be explored, teeters on fetishizing—but how living has the same gravitas and impact of artmaking. It is not just artmakers and artworks that forge realities (a notion I do not accuse cárdenas of suggesting). But trans womxn, especially those who do sex work, have that same power in being alive. Invoking philosopher Hélèn Cixous in a selection of cárdenas’s and Elle Mehrmand’s transreal artproject, virus.circus.mem, “notes on psychoneuroendocrinology”:

Cixous said that woman must write woman’s body as an insurgent act,
can we imagine constructing and shape-shifting as a kind of writing,

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Ibid., 30. “I will focus on the operations that artists are using for allowing viewer/participants to enter into realities.”

and therefore as a kind of insurgency?
Perhaps the trans person must write with their hormones,
as a transversal act.
While I don't think I'm becoming a woman,
I'm full of joyful excitement for what I am becoming.
Everything is new.²⁸

The line, "I don't think I'm becoming a woman" suggests rather than the alterity or variance of trans/gender identity, the poem reinforces that the author *is* a woman—and always has been—and a becoming through hormones is the "insurgent" in the insurgent act of writing a woman's body. A part of the insurgency of trans/womxnhood is in in the writing, the becoming, the *living* of being a womxn.

For cárdenas, who during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan "dedicat[ed] much of [her] life, including going to jail, in order to stop the wars," the aide's (Rove) words made clear the Bush administration's political strategy.²⁹ While cárdenas does not say it by name, I infer that strategy to be imperialist war. As described above, cárdenas's reality making is more closely akin to worldmaking, which is also the task cárdenas sees many contemporary artists take on in "creat[ing] and manipul[at]ing realities". Art is a mode of worldmaking, and worldmaking is an art. Imperialist war, as Walter Benjamin first noted, the aestheticization of politics "culminate in one point" of fascism.³⁰

In the series anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*—to which cárdenas contributes a chapter—editors Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton put together a collection of texts with the aim to *inter alia* analyze visual culture

²⁸ "notes on psychoneuroendocrinology," June 28, 2008, *virus.circus.mem*, cárdenas and Elle Mehrmand, as reproduced in cárdenas, Blas, and Schirmacher, 124.

²⁹ cárdenas, Blas, and Schirmacher, 22.

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)," in *Walter Benjamin : Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Selected Writings, Walter Benjamin. Michael W. Jennings, general ed.; 4, n.d., 269.

to confront the contradictory promise of remedy and violence of trans visibility. The editors heuristically use the eponymous metonym/metaphors “door”, “trap” and the conjoining “trap door” to give definition to the contradiction of visibility.

The critiques in *Trap Door* also analyze interviews with artists, artwork, archival material and other ephemera through theory. Even though self aware, the research focused on the binary of exceptionalism—that is, the exceptional success or death of trans individuals. The research brilliantly demonstrates the artwork and trans/activism of trans individuals, even in the face of such structural violence and the unique precarities of trans existence. And at the same time, the research demonstrates these precarities and the many ways in which trans persons are not-so-paradoxically in/visible.

The problematiqués of in/visibility notwithstanding, *Trap Door*, as a vehicle of in/visibility, with one hand lifts up and becomes a platform for prominent black and brown trans persons. And with the other, it gives voice to trans persons that history would otherwise ignore. The editors, contributors and regarded artists-activists are tied by a mediating common thread: “whether visibility is a goal to be worked toward or an outcome to be avoided at all costs.”³¹ And as the editors note in the introduction, *Known Unknowns*, it is also in the everyday that incite acts of resistance. In discussing the meaningful work of the street queens of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) who built the gay rights movement from the ground up: “just by hanging out with and taking care of one another, the members of STAR were doing revolutionary work.”³²

³¹ Reina Gosset, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, “Known Unknowns: an Introduction to ‘Trap Door’” in Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), xx.

³² *Ibid.*, xvii.

It is the similar mundanity of trans experiences that this thesis attempts to analyze. But such a mundanity is still exceptionalized by hegemonic worlds. Indeed, Treva Ellison points out that “Black trans women like [Lavern] Cox, CeCe McDonald, and Janet Mock have named and resisted the exceptionalism/death binary that pervades popular culture narratives of transgender rights”.³³ The texts in *Trap Door* engage prominent trans persons who are played into that binary narrative. That is, because the persons engaged in *Trap Door* can be shoved into one or both categories, they are in/visible and worthy of subjecthood. In/visible in that their exceptionalism (whether in scholarship, art, activism, violence and/ or death) is showcased while the banality of their humanity is erased. And worthy of subjecthood insofar their narratives and visibility have enough weight to stitch together and weave into a narrative existence. But what of those trans person who do not fit into that binary narrative? The trouble of representation is a contentious one that *Trap Door* grapples with headon. Who is given a platform is often dictated by what would be considered the most compelling of personalities. That is not to say that the informants are not compelling—far from it. However, the voices of these trans womxn sex workers are the ones often overlooked. Or the compelling aspects tend to be the exceptionalization of their gender or moral “transgressions”, i.e. being a trans person who does sex work, becoming statistical data. *\$PREAD*, though admittedly lacking the voices of trans womxn, is a good example of reader-generated content. The magazine, however ambitiously, set out to be a community-making platform, through which the voices of sex workers could be disseminated and woven together. The task of this thesis ambitiously attempts a similar premise. However, what if those marginalized voices speak in a language and affect that seemingly has no rosetta stone? Are these voices sequestered in an echo chamber? And if they are to be translated into

³³ Treva Ellison, “The Labor of Werqing it: the Performance and Protest Strategies of Sir Lady Java” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, 2.

dominant modes of affect, what ought to remain intracommunity secrets and what ought to be shared?

Moreover, the necro/biopolitics of exceptionalism revolve around the industry of transness and the labor/morality of sex work. Ellison employs Kyungwon Hong's assessment of nation-states' fetishization of difference, which Hong calls "flexibility". Ellison notes that flexibility becomes a "cultural project or as a logic [. . .] that underwrites the articulation of subjectivity [. . . and] facilitates the consolidation of normativity as an epistemology of progress".³⁴ Exemplified for Hong and Ellison in the U.S. War on Poverty, the the logic of flexibility can be seen in the nation-state's "privileging professionalism . . . and rationality" as a strategy of subjectification that promotes "self-possession and self-actualization as the end goals of social movements."³⁵ In this "strategic disavowal" of an unconforming other, "sex workers, people who are regular drug users, people with mental illnesses, people with disabilities, and people in general *who cannot perform a hegemonic ideal of professional or rationality become re-thingified*."³⁶ With that in mind, Ellison took up the task of unfolding how both the rising Black middle-class of the 1960s and gay and lesbian activists disavowed prostitution and race politics for their own class-climbing ends. That is, the Black middle-class disavowed the hegemonic undesireability of sex work, and gay and lesbian activists "disavowed the centrality of race and racism in the production of sexuality-based criminalization."³⁷ Ellison then positions Black femme activist and sex worker Sir Lady Java as the hyper-in/visibility *par excellence* caused by being born at the intersection of these two erasures. Through research and interviews with Java, Ellison demonstrates how Java on one hand "flexed her hyper-visibility as a gender

³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁵ Ibid., 5.

³⁶ Ibid., 5. Emphasis added.

³⁷ Ibid., 14.

non-conforming woman as a source of livelihood” and on the other, Java’s life and praxis “offer[s] an alternative approach to thinking about Blackness and theories of Blackness and of Black ontology”.³⁸ In noticing Java’s labor, Ellison provides a definition for the labor of *werking it*. Ultimately, Java’s life and praxis in this article becomes a project of uncorking epistemologies and ontologies of gender, Blackness and Black fungibility. Indeed, as Che Gosset succinctly puts it: “Blackness troubles trans/gender; blackness is trans/gender trouble.”³⁹

Ellison’s examination of *werking it* is an example of critical engagement as a method to render the knowledge and power of in/visible (*especially Black femmes*) people to “create underworlds and undercommons . . . and its collision with [hegemonic] logics and strategies of subjectification”.⁴⁰ This thesis attempts to create and employ a similar method of critical engagement—but rather than looking at the implications of intersectional identities, it seeks to name the other epistemological projects of trans sex workers—beyond trans/gender and trans/health. In doing so, I hope to trouble the exceptionalism binary discussed earlier. Rather, this thesis is the refusal to fetishize the epistemological labor of trans womxn sex workers into pedagogical objects of gender, sexuality and health, and their theoretico-political implications.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁹ Che Gosset, “Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, 183.

⁴⁰ Ellison, “The Labor of Werqing it: the Performance and Protest Strategies of Sir Lady Java” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, 17.

Chapter II

Methodology & Ethics

Historical Framework

In the *Transgender Studies Reader*—a volume of fundamental transgender studies texts spanning the past century, edited by trans scholars Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle—contributors call into question the intentions behind the narratives that pushed for the medicalization of transsexuality. It is not surprising that cisgender persons, and other more empowered voices, felt entitled to ‘discover’, explain, name and pathologize trans phenomenology. As Stryker reminds us in the *Transgender Studies Reader*’s introduction, “(De)Subjugated Subjects”, it was Hirschfeld that coined “transvestite” as an category of identification in 1910.⁴¹ Decades later in 1949, David O. Cauldwell coined the term “transsexual(is)”.⁴² And through Cauldwell’s patient referrals, Benjamin began to popularize the term “transsexual” in the nineteen-fifties.⁴³ It was not until the nineteen-seventies or -eighties that trans persons themselves coined their own identity.⁴⁴ The identity category of “transgender” was “originally coined as a noun . . . by people who resisted categorization as either transvestites or transsexuals,”⁴⁵ but it was not long until the term was co-opted into well-meaning academic circles. In 1992 trans activist communist Leslie Feinberg first used “transgender” as an adjective and “umbrella term for an imagined

⁴¹ Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

⁴² David O. Cauldwell and Editors, “Psychopathia Transexualis,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 40-44.

⁴³ See Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies” at 4, and Meyerowitz at 364.

⁴⁴ Stephen Whittle, “Foreword,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), xi. See also: David Valentine, “Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category” (Duke University Press, 2013) at 32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

community” to foster solidarity between all oppressed gender-diverse individuals.⁴⁶ But only few years later, in 1998, the current usage of the word “trans,” that is, as a qualifying adjective, was invented by a London parliamentary group for the purposes of drafting legislation that was as inclusive as possible.⁴⁷ And today, using “transgender” as a categorizing now is considered a slur,⁴⁸ which alone could serve as a testament to the power of narrative control.

In New York City during the early aughts, anthropologist David Valentine was in the ‘right place at the right time’ to document the pluralization of transsexuation. A white cisgender gay man, Valentine used his academic platform to advocate for and promote awareness of trans persons. The result was the 2007 publication of Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender*. Valentine’s text documents and theorizes from a critical and sociological perspective, the catalysts for gender pluralism, and its importance for and impact on sexual ontology and agency. Valentine makes a quick jump from the community organizing of Feinberg’s nineteen-nineties transgender umbrella to the state-recuperation of then-buzz word neoliberalism. In doing so, Valentine’s narration of the emergence of trans identity robs trans persons of the agency that Meyerowitz “returned”.

The work of other scholars also call the above proposed narrative into question. Julia Serano takes a more critical stance on the institutionalizing and systematizing of transsexuation. And *Transgender Studies Reader* contributor Joanne Meyerowitz finds that for the most part, these doctors “lagged behind, reluctant pioneers at best”.⁴⁹ Serano labels these so-called pioneers as “gatekeepers”. That is, cis physicians stood guard at the proviable gates to access to affirming

⁴⁶ Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies”, 4.

⁴⁷ Whittle, “Foreword”, xi.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Valentine, “Imagining Transgender”, 25-26.

⁴⁹ Meyerowitz and Editors, “A ‘Fierce and Demanding’ Drive”, 363.

healthcare, such as hormones or bottom surgery.⁵⁰ For example, transwomen were subjugated to the “real-life test”—wherein hopeful candidates for treatment must first “live as” their “real gender” for a number of years—and “to conform to oppositional sexist ideals regarding gender”.⁵¹ In Meyerowitz’s findings, it was actually the trans patients themselves that persistently drove their intractable doctors to innovate better forms of care.⁵²

Not only are the intentions of sexologists subject to narrative scrutiny, the role(s) trans persons played in their own care also comes into question. On one hand, trans persons are considered to have no autonomy in their care—“merely parrot[ing] back the medical discourses”.⁵³ On the other hand, Meyerowitz demonstrates that trans persons played a significant role in the research—not just as advocates pressuring researchers, but some trans women became the doctors’ consultants. But with a third hand, Serano retorts that the research is possible *because* “trans people have often been required to subject themselves to research in order to gain access to hormones and surgery.”⁵⁴ Even still, there is merit to Meyerowitz re-empowering of trans patients. Meyerowitz returns the agency that the proverbial history books took away from trans patients.

Regardless of trans participation in the research, it is because of the authoritative power of sexologists and the medical industrial complex at large who “shaped the way our culture views and values transgender people, as well as how transgender people come to understand

⁵⁰ “Bottom surgery” and “gender-confirmation/affirmation surgery” are, as of writing, the most respectful terms for a gender-affirming vaginoplasty, the former of which is specifically genioplasty.

⁵¹ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 122.

⁵² Meyerowitz and Editors, “A ‘Fierce and Demanding’ Drive”, 363.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁵⁴ Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 116.

themselves.”⁵⁵ Academics, too, are guilty of controlling narratives. As interpreters and regulators of language, scholars have a hand at spinning narratives and forging identities.

Precarities of the Transgender Experience

Due to the intersectional disadvantages and violences transgender populations face, their voices are often excluded from contributing to disciplines outside of their own experience. This could be attributed to either harassment or outright inaccessibility to higher education. And this inaccessibility more than doubles for transgender persons who engage in sex work. While the recent emergence of trans-voices in gender and sexuality studies (e.g. the scholarly journal *Trans Studies Quarterly*, published by Duke University Press) now bubble up through over a half-century of transgender research from cisgender perspective,⁵⁶ there is an uphill battle for transgender persons in academia. A survey published by the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (now the National LGBTQ Task Force⁵⁷, the “Task Force”), found that 35% of transgender students, faculty and staff in higher education faced harassment.⁵⁸ While 47% of trans persons surveyed earned college or graduate degrees (compared to the combined total 27% of the general population), the researchers attribute this to “older students returning to school after facing job loss or other difficulties.”⁵⁹ For example survey quotes one participant who enrolled in college to avoid harassment, however inauspiciously. Another participant states:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁶ Julia Serano. 2007. *Whipping Girl: a Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 114.

⁵⁷ The National LGBTQ Task Force. October 8, 2014. “New Name, New Plan for Nation’s Oldest National LGBTQ Advocacy Organization”. <http://www.thetaskforce.org/new-name-new-plan-nations-oldest-national-lgbtq-advocacy-organization/>

⁵⁸ Jaime M. Grant, Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling. 2011. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 39.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 39.

I am in a Ph.D. program and have been censured by the faculty for coming out as a trans woman. I have been denied classes and otherwise harassed by some teachers. One male psychologist verbally attacked me in class and used transphobic and misogynist language.⁶⁰

In an article on trans experience in higher education, author Jonathan T. Pryor interviewed five trans students from a large Midwest public institution. Out of the five students interviewed, four were active members of the LGBTQ campus community studying the social sciences.⁶¹ The fifth student, a trans woman, withdrew from her Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) degree program in her third year.⁶² For Melissa the STEM program was less accommodating to trans persons than other fields, e.g. “journalism, history, women’s and gender studies, [because queer issues] are things [those fields] deal with.”⁶³

It’s important to foreground these findings from the NCTE’s and the Task Force’s report with a 2016 report published by the Williams Institute, which found that transgender adults only make up 0.6% of the U.S. population.⁶⁴

Without flattening the heterogenous experiences of trans persons, it is important to note that in the face of discrimination, many trans persons turn to sex work.⁶⁵ In another report from the NCTE, in collaboration with Best Practices Policy and Red Umbrella Project, on the lives of transgender persons who engage in sex work, “respondents achieved some college education, sex workers of color and transfeminine sex workers reported higher rates of having completed high school only or no high school,” with 27% of respondents dropping out of school due to

⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁶¹ Ibid., 39.

⁶² J. T. Pryor. 2015. “Out in the Classroom: Transgender Student Experiences at a Large Public University.” *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(5), 440-455, 446.

⁶³ Ibid., quoting Melissa, 451.

⁶⁴ A.R. Flores, J.L. Herman, G.J. Gates, & T.N.T. Brown. 2016. *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?* Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute, 2.

⁶⁵ For a more indepth account of the varied and heterogenous reasons trans individuals exchange sex, please see *Meaningful Work: Transgender Experiences in the Sex Trade*. Best Practices Policy, Red Umbrella Project and National Center for Transgender Equality, at, e.g., 4, 5, 7, 25.

harassment (compared to 10.8% of trans non-sex workers).⁶⁶ With these reports in mind, it is easy to imagine why the voices of transgender womxn sex workers are often left out of any conversation.

Methodology and Ethics

In Theory

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber notes, “[we] are particularly concerned with reducing the hierarchy between the research and the researched.”⁶⁷ To do so, the researcher needs to be critical of “one’s own lived reality and experience. Hesse-Biber calls this reflection “reflexivity”. At the same time, it’s important to not “slip” into “compulsive extroversion of interiority”—that is, it’s imperative for the “the self-absorbed Self not lose sight of the culturally different Other”.⁶⁸ For example, E. Courtney Cameron, through this reflexivity, keeps in mind the safety of the trans persons interviewed in a study about the trans community in Calgary, Canada. Cameron humbles themselves in relation to the trans informants. While Courtney identifies as trans or genderqueer, they “hesitate to use the label transgender” within the context of the their research since Cameron is also “regularly read by others as a cisgender woman, and therefore . . . retain[s] cisgender privilege.”⁶⁹ This centers the knowledge and experiences of the informants over Cameron’s—even though in many respects Comerom’s intimate knowledge rivals that of the project’s informants. In other words, the same reflexivity that Courtney undergoes is

⁶⁶ Erin Fitzgerald, Sarah Elspeth, Darby Hickey, Cherno Biko, and Harper Tobin. 2015. *Meaningful Work: Transgender Experiences in the Sex Trade*. Best Practices Policy, Red Umbrella Project and National Center for Transgender Equality, 4, 15.

⁶⁷ Hesse-Biber, 128.

⁶⁸ Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Susan Weseen and Loonmun Wong, “For whom?: Qualitative Research, Representations, and Social Responsibilities,” in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, (London: SAGE, 2008), 170, quoting Patricia Clough.

⁶⁹ E Courtney Cameron, “‘I Am Not Alone in This’: An Ethnographic Exploration of Transgender Community in Calgary, Alberta, Canada,” 2012, 25.

appropriately mediated by Courtney's recognition of their own limits and the power differentials between themselves and informants.

This resonates with my research, as I potentially fall within the identity categories of my informants. While by virtue of conducting a study, I establish a defined hierarchy (i.e., between researcher and researched), there is very little self-representation and self-study of the trans sex worker population. Indeed self-representation as "creators and interpreters of text [is a] political act".⁷⁰

On the other hand, Hesse-Biber discusses the importance of developing an interview guide for the purposes of in-depth qualitative interviews. Interview guides ought to be used as aids, and need not be "too lengthy or detailed," because "relying too heavily" on the guide can "distract the researcher from paying full attention to the respondent."⁷¹ Reese Kelly, for example, uses a qualitative, semi-structured interview method to collect data⁷² on the ways trans persons manage identity when facing uncomfortable and dangerous situations such as state-border crossings and police interactions. By semi-structured, I mean that through the questions asked, researchers have "*some control* . . . in how the interview is constructed and how [they] would like . . . respondents to respond" but are "still open to asking new questions throughout the interview".⁷³ Going further, Kelly used Pawson's theory-driven model of interviewing. This

⁷⁰ Ibid., 170, quoting C. R. Lawrence III.

⁷¹ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, "The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing" in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* edited Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2007), quoting David Karp (2006), 122.

⁷² Reese C. Kelly, *Borders That Matter: Trans Identity Management* (State University of New York at Albany, 2012), 112, <http://search.proquest.com/openview/654fe635b4b9b664112c3fb4194c584a/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

⁷³ Hesse-Biber, 115-116.

method asks informants to critique the researcher's theory, which not only gives informants more control, but also allowed for the collection of new theory:⁷⁴

The battery of questions posed and explanatory cues offered should be understood as putting the subject in a position which allows them to think (still in silence, incidentally) – ‘yes, I understand the general theoretical tack you are exploring, this makes your concepts clear to me, and applying them to me gives the following answer’.... The subject's task is to agree, disagree and to categorize themselves in relation to the attitudinal patterns as constructed in such questions but also to refine their conceptual basis. It is at this point that mutual knowledge is really achieved.⁷⁵

Hesse-Biber points out that accurate and respectful representation of informant's “hidden knowledge” requires “acces[ing] ideas, thoughts, and memories in [the informants'] *own words*, rather than in the words of the researcher”.⁷⁶ Unstructured interviews, when researchers purposefully do not control the direction of an interview, give space for informants to tell their own stories and lived experiences through more open-ended lines of questioning.⁷⁷

In Practice

Trans/gender Research

On the sociological front, Reese Kelly's dissertation investigates the way transgender persons navigate and manage their identities in situations that require presenting identification documents or use of sex-segregated facilities.⁷⁸ These situations Kelly calls instances of “border-crossing”: “when one's identity is open to inspection, questioning, and determination either by in-group members or by a legal authority.”⁷⁹ Kelly finds that transgender individuals employ rich and complex ways of meaning-making to signify markers of belonging, which Kellys calls the “differing roles, norms, and behaviors characteristic of [a] social group [. . .] ranging from

⁷⁴ Kelly, 126-127.

⁷⁵ Ibid., quoting Pawson (1999),127.

⁷⁶ Hesse-Biber, quoting Shulamit Reinharz (1992), 118. Emphasis added.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁷⁸ Kelly, Abstract.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 99.

physical attributes to dialect to codified classifications of identity” to signify group membership.⁸⁰

Kelly goes on to show that this identity management is in response to the everyday violences and exclusions trans persons face when border-crossing.⁸¹ For example, trans masculine informant Sal grew out his hair and wore an earring while traveling through Lebanon in a fruitless attempt to evade complications that arose from the inconsistencies in his identification documents.⁸² Sal claims that “[i]n Lebanon, it’s not very normal for guys to have earrings so I would just think, there’s at least one earring, they’re going to think I’m just a girl with short hair and I’ll be fine with it.”⁸³ In another instance of identity management, rather than using gender markers of belonging, informant Besty relied on “emphasizing her English language proficiency and downplaying her tan skin tone” when interrogated by United States customs security agents when returning to the U.S.⁸⁴ These two instances of “temporary utilization of contextually specific, normative discourses of identity” Kelly calls “strategic normativity”.⁸⁵ Both informants chose to emphasize or downplay certain markers of belonging to best appear contextually ‘normal’ to border-enforcers.

At the same time, Kelly’s research provides a comprehensive cross-section of the field of transgender studies. Kelly’s introduction to “trans-situated experiences” and chapters one and two of the dissertation, for example, lay down the theory-hefty, but necessary, background on gender theory. In this introduction, Kelly elaborates from Simone de Beauvoir’s famous quote on

⁸⁰ Ibid., 96-97.

⁸¹ Ibid., 41, 71-72, 104-109, 111, 183-190.

⁸² Ibid., 138-139.

⁸³ Ibid., 139.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 140-142.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 143.

becoming a woman,⁸⁶ into detailing the history of trans theory in North America—citing academic heavy-hitters such as Dead Spade, as well as touches on autobiographies of trans women and the more recent trans reality television contestants.⁸⁷ Further, Kelly dedicates a section to defining key terms and concepts, citing Stryker and Serano, both of whom I include in this literature review.

In collating my cross-cutting of the field with Kelly's, it becomes evident that trans persons' critical thoughts on matters beyond gender and all that gendering entails are practically left out of conversation. The field of transgender theory captures the ways in which transgender persons' unique perspectives give way to new epistemologies and ontologies of gender and identity more generally. However, the field fails to capture how the unique perspectives of transgender persons could provide the right conditions to new epistemologies and ontologies in general—that is, the making of new worlds through the remaking of the world.

Exchanging Sex Research

Another researcher, France Shaver, identifies the ethical dilemmas of researching sex worker populations in “Sex Work Research: Methodological and Ethical Challenges.” The article foregrounds Shaver's attempt to overcome assumptions of homogeneity in sex worker populations.⁸⁸ To do so, Shaver compares sex worker populations to non-sex worker populations to identify which “challenges are unique to sex work (and sex workers) and which are features of more general conditions, such as gender, ethnicity, educational opportunities, health status, and poverty.”⁸⁹ At the sametime, these comparisons are reframing devices to belie common

⁸⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 3-5.

⁸⁸ Frances M. Shaver. 2005. “Sex Work Research: Methodological and Ethical Challenges.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20 (3): 296–319, 306.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 306.

misconceptions of sex work and sex workers.⁹⁰ In this way, Shaver employs comparisons as frames of reference to shed light on truths that went formerly “unseen” by the worlds of research. And while some of Shaver’s ethical conclusions leave something to be desired (e.g. Shaver permitted and then guided worried and anxious researcher family members on tours of the work sites⁹¹), the overall research rightfully understood sex work and sex workers as multidimensional and heterogeneous.⁹² Even under the limited operation of this comparative model of analysis to gender categories, Shaver still recognized that “it is essential to leave open the idea that males, transgenders [sic], and females are not necessarily homogeneous categories; there can be diversity within gender.”⁹³

The fundamental ethics and focus on heterogeneity that underpin Shaver’s methodologies are useful as I shaped my research project, and served to underpin my approach to my informant-centered research. That said, Shaver’s work, much like Kelly’s, leaves little room for informants to help remake the worlds beyond gender and sexuality studies.

At the other pole, the work of researchers Amber Horning and Amalia Paladino offers a cautionary tale of how compassion leads to research- or researcher-centered research. “Walking the Tightrope: Ethical Dilemmas of Doing Fieldwork with Youth in US Sex Markets” attempts to warn that the position of researcher requires researchers to not interfere with the lives of informants, even when not acting could be ‘immoral’.⁹⁴ In one example, Horning et al. dismiss a young ciswoman informant’s competence, waxing instead on the ‘moral dilemma’ between

⁹⁰ Ibid., 307.

⁹¹ Ibid., 302.

⁹² Ibid., 310.

⁹³ Ibid., 309.

⁹⁴ Horning A., Paladino A. 2016. “Walking the Tightrope: Ethical Dilemmas of Doing Fieldwork with Youth in US Sex Markets,” in *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking. Studies of Organized Crime*, vol 13, ed. D. Siegel and R. de Wildt. Springer, Cham, 208.

overstepping the hands-off researcher-informant relationship and saving the informant from herself. This example shows how ‘well-intentioned’ researchers foist their own moralities onto informants, effectively sequestering the informant’s voice.

Consideration for Historical and Political Framework

The signing into law April 11, 2018 of the "Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act" (SESTA) was an abuse of legislation and exploitation of feminist affect that endangers all those who exchange sex, sex workers and victims of trafficking, but also polices the activities of expats, indigenous peoples, black and brown persons, queer persons and other marginalized communities. Worst of all, as an on-background member of my community unfolds, SESTA directly assaults our "freedom of speech," mobilizing the vast amount of personal data collected through digital communications surveillance, and “chip away” at the human dignity of and profit from the criminalization of the marginalized. Further, portraying sexual work through the lens of sex trafficking not only delegitimizes the horrors of human trafficking, but it also puts the lives of swaths of womxn who do sex work at risk.

The passing of SESTA should come as no surprise. Indeed, as I mentioned above, the conflation of “sex trafficking” and “prostitution” to “anti-sex work” policy and lobbying ends started in the early 2000s.⁹⁵ As the editors of *Spread* note, since around 2010, there has been a “heavy shift toward online community blogs, . . . [,] community forums and conversations on Twitter and Facebook have become the primary places where sex workers go to find community and create their own media.”⁹⁶ All of my interviews and field notes explicitly and implicitly note the difficulty of forging community amongst trans sex workers. *Spread* magazine in part

⁹⁵ Rachel Aimee, Eliyanna Kaiser, and Audacia Ray, eds., *Spread: The Best of the Magazine That Illuminated the Sex Industry and Started a Media Revolution* (New York City: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2015), 13.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

“thought the simple act of holding a magazine . . . knowing that *sex workers made this* would encourage sex workers to feel like part of a community.”⁹⁷

To challenge anti-sex work ethos—known as whorephobia—some sex worker activists sought to align sex trades with labor movements, employing the term “sex work” and “sex worker”. To be sure, not everyone who exchange sex identify as sex workers. And this distinction will be covered in depth in the literature review section on sex work below. But the coinage of “sex worker” situated sex work and workers within identity politics, leading to “sex worker” becoming a category of political identity. That is on one hand, taking on the identity of “sex worker” semantically positions sex work within labor rights movements.⁹⁸ And on the other hand, the act of exchanging money for sex services is deeply stigmatized, the very work is conflated for the person. That is, the heightened stigma of doing sex work transforms exchanging sex from an occupation into a component of a sex worker’s identity. As one sex worker expounds, doing sex work at any point and for any period of time “stains” one’s identity, becoming an indelible component of the worker that imbues all future prospects. However, other occupations do not always leave such a “stain”—for example, as one self-identified sex worker pointed out, being a former fast-food service worker would not necessarily preclude that person from other employment opportunities.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁸ See, e.g. Rachel Aimee, Eliyanna Kaiser, and Audacia Ray, eds., *Spread: The Best of the Magazine That Illuminated the Sex Industry and Started a Media Revolution* (New York City: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2015); and Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolt: Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018).

⁹⁹ As with any form of labor, anti-blackness, racism, classism and cis/sexism pervades sex work. See, e.g. Rachel Aimee, Eliyanna Kaiser, and Audacia Ray, eds., *Spread: The Best of the Magazine That Illuminated the Sex Industry and Started a Media Revolution* (New York City: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2015); and Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolt: Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018).

Application of Methodological Theory in Practice

I developed my research project and protocol through the synthesis of methodologies. In an interactive informant-based model, the research question and ethical principles create spandrels that inform and shape every aspect of the protocol. This approach builds on top of Joseph A. Maxwell's interactive model.¹⁰⁰ Unsurprisingly, the interactive informant-based model does not substantially differ from Maxwell's. However, I include ethics as a grounding component that drives the development of a protocol. For Maxwell, the research question is the “heart, or hub, of the model.”¹⁰¹ But whereas developing the research question identifies the “what, who and how” questions of the project, in the interactive informant-centered model the ethical principles guide the researcher to those questions. Maxwell's interactive qualitative model is of particular note for my project. My initial research question (“how does critical aesthetic theory play a role in the lives of transgender womxn sex workers?”) is inherently interdisciplinary in that it seeks to examine the limen—or ‘in-between’ social spaces—of transgender sex work, which requires a scholarly “conversation” between the socio-political, philosophical and sociological. That is to say the development of protocol needs also to be an interdisciplinary venture. The interactive model, rather than treat each module of a protocol as discreet, recognizes the importance of “conversation” between the different components, and hence, is an interdisciplinary approach.

My research approach is in a way living—it adapts to the rework and refine my research question(s) with trans sex workers' needs in mind—even when that entails revising core components of my protocol. For example, if I run into ethical conundrums in the initial development. But rather than going back to the drawing board, I center the ethical concerns to

¹⁰⁰ Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, vol. 41 (Sage publications, 2012), 4, 5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

revamp my research question. For example, my research question originally started out as “how does critical aesthetic theory play a role in the lives of transgender womxn sex workers?” As I started to draft my research goals, however, it became clear that the question only superficially respected the autonomy of informants. Based on my initial question, my goal was to collect information on the impact of aesthetic theory in the lives of transgender sex workers. But that is unreasonable to ask of informants. First, critical aesthetic theory in itself is a niche branch of philosophy—that is to say, it’s not a readily accessible framework outside of academia. Second, it assumes aesthetic concepts are universal. Any data collected based on my initial question would be limited by my own conceptual biases. I aim, however, to present accurate data true to the experiences of informants, who will undoubtedly have different conceptual frameworks. And because of my conceptual biases, I could not fairly present nor analyze informants’ responses if I did not take this into account. Indeed, Hesse-Biber points out that “[f]eminist researchers are . . . concerned with issues of representation” as “research subjects are presented in how the researcher interprets and presents the research findings.”¹⁰² With this in mind, I went back to my research question and preliminary research.

In centering the informant, I came to: “what are the aesthetics of transgender womxn sex workers’ radical thinking?” While I only had to make minor edits in the question (i.e., I did not have to ‘go back to the drawing board’), the impact reverberated throughout the rest of my protocol. In this retooling, my goals recognize that transgender womxn sex workers are radical thinkers whose rich constructive epistemologies and ontologies are not well documented, let alone taken seriously, outside of their social constructions or worlds. Here “worlds” refers to the predicated social fabrics of trans sex worker populations. From this, the study’s goal transformed

¹⁰² Hesse-Biber, 117.

into something ethical and reasonable: to collect data that will humanize trans sex workers by highlighting their lives beyond their work, political identities and health status, and to shed light on radical thinking. The research presented in this thesis offers a novel method of data “analysis”: clinical trans/aesthetics. This methodology is further explored in Chapters III and IV.

Practicalities

Field research was approved by and conducted under auspices of the Internal Review Board of Columbia University in the City of New York.¹⁰³ Informant quotes are from my (Benjamin I. J. Mintzer) unpublished transcriptions. The date and location of interviews are redacted to protect the identity of the informants. Informants received payment for their participation.

Interviews were recorded on an encrypted mobile device and transferred to an encrypted laptop for review. Informants had the option of opting out audio recording. Names of digital interview documents were further disidentified by using a separate naming system than the names used in this thesis.

Any and all research online research into informants’ online presence (with informant’s consent) was conducted in a new session of an open source browser that routes connections through an encrypted overlay network to further obfuscate my association with informants. When possible, digital communications were conducted through open source end-to-end encryption applications.

All informants reviewed and approved this thesis prior to publication.

Limitations

While three of informants are socially and class diverse, they are all white. Only one participant is black. For all my racial justice rhetoric as a white trans womxn, I must relentlessly and ceaselessly

¹⁰³ See “Human Research Protection Office and IRBs” available online at <https://research.columbia.edu/content/human-research-protection-office-and-irbs>.

confront and defeat my own internalized racisms (to be sure: we all must). At the sametime, without placing too much blame outside of myself, finding and applying for funding, and the time to find, interview and remunerate informants, was a challenge. As someone that might figure myself within the identity frameworks of my informants, I still struggled to advertise for and find informants. In part, it was an emotional hesitation. I put a lot of weight in the ethical considerations of interviewing informants for a number of reasons, two of which stand out: (1) agency of informants; and (2) risk of participation. While it is standard in academic discourse to section off ideas before putting them in conversation, the agency of informants is so entwined and mediated by the risk of participation, that this proves difficult. “Agency” is an ambiguous term, and its employment merits critique. I cannot take up such a task here. For the purposes of my research methodology, I mean that I wanted informants to approach me rather than ask particular individuals.

Chapter III

Critical Transgender Aesthetics: a Clinical Practice

Clinical Trans/Aesthetics

This chapter expands on the theoretical framework introduced in literature review, and demonstrates how I define transgender aesthetics, which fills a gap not covered in other scholarships. That is, why, how and what trans persons, sex workers in particular, produce knowledge, beyond reality/world making. Alternatively posed—*what it is that comes through in trans reality/ world making?* This framework is the foundation and infrastructure of my methodology—it is the creation of a “new” praxis/method/mode of research analysis.

The foundations of both critical aesthetics and trans aesthetics have been detailed and layed out in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I hope to explore the ways in which I pair critical aesthetic theory with trans aesthetics to develop a critical trans aesthetics. Further, I develop my critical theory with the clinical purpose of analyzing interviews with it.

As Namaste noted about her post-structuralist approach, there are innumerable theories of rhetoric.¹⁰⁴ Namaste selected the theorists she believed were best equipped for her task.

Similarly, there are an innumerable takes on aesthetic theory. For the purpose of this thesis, I am stitching together several approaches from across disciplines to develop the theoretical framework through which I analyze the interviews. I have grouped the aesthetics disciplines into four categories: critical theory, human rights studies, trans/ queer theory and psychoanalysis.

That said, the thesis is simultaneously grounded by Nelson Goodman’s theory of worldmaking and Walter Benjamin’s political aesthetics. It is from the standpoint that trans existence is, in

¹⁰⁴ Namaste, 41.

part, a worldmaking project that initially opens up the possibility for analysis through aesthetics. As we will see, the possibilities for aesthetic analysis are further opened by the other disciplines.

Though worldmaking bridges the sociological aspect of my interviews with aesthetics, the critical lens of this thesis is most heavily influenced by the Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin, from whom I take many methodological cues. Specifically Benjamin's political aesthetics, poeology and take on translation theory. Benjamin's theory is supplemented by Merleau-Ponty's transcendentalism and Cixous's feminist aesthetics. In recognizing the virtues of [neuro] diversity in his essay, *Cezanne's Window*, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that aesthetics allows a "window" into the epistemologies and as such worlds that would otherwise be incommunicable to the typical. This particular insight permits an appreciable amount of revisionism of Merleau-Ponty. And in the revisionism, we can avoid the trappings of romanticizing both Cezanne's struggles with mental health and, as we will see, by extension the participants in this study.

Similarly, Benjamin discusses the knowledge production of the artist/artwork, but invokes the sonneteer rather than the painter. Benjamin views the sonneteer as someone through which transcendental knowledge is then instantiated in the poem. With the sonneteer having access to a different epistemological framework through which to instantiate such knowledge, Benjamin and Merleau-Ponty can be synergized to demonstrate the need for aesthetic alterities.

Critical Trans/Aesthetic Theory

As alluded in the previous chapter, I introduce my research into the disciplinary realm of critical aesthetics first by way of Nelson Goodman's concept of worldmaking. As *Trap Door* makes clear, trans existence is an act of culture production. In Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* and *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, Goodman turns to aesthetic philosophy to understand the ways in

which we come to understand our realities through predicated knowledge. This knowledge constitutes and mediates our reality through *inter alia* symbols and frames of reference.¹⁰⁵ For Goodman, works of art function both as symbols that refer to the world they depict and as worlds in their own right. That is, for example, even in a picture of the unicorn, without symbolizing anything, still is representational.¹⁰⁶ And at the same time, works of art act as pedagogical devices for understanding the different modes of symbolism and frames of reference, and yet remain consummated worlds. For example, a “Rembrandt painting remains a work of art, as it remains a painting, while functioning only as a blanket.”¹⁰⁷ In this way, “[w]orldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking.”¹⁰⁸ Our predicated understandings allow for new interpretations of reality, which then give way to new worlds.

Putting Goodman in conversation with Benjamin, new worlds engendered by politicized art can act as both refuge and arm in the war against the aestheticized violence of fascism. Lydia Goehr’s reading of Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” continues the conversation Benjamin put between modern art media (e.g. lithograph, photography, motion picture) and anti-fascist strategies.¹⁰⁹ Benjamin sees fascism as a cult of what Benjamin calls “authenticity”¹¹⁰—“the essence of all that is transmissible from [the] beginning” of an ‘authentic’ or ‘actual’ work of art, and not present its representations or mechanically exact reproductions.¹¹¹ This authenticity is an “aura” that envelops the authentic

¹⁰⁵ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 7. print (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett, 1995), 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Lydia Goehr. November 15, 2016. *History of Aesthetics: A Modern Survey*. Class lecture, Columbia University in the City of New York.

¹¹⁰ Walter Benjamin. 1936. “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, and Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968., 241-242.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

work of art: a quality of the work of art.¹¹² Benjamin recognizes that the mechanical reproducibility of art “emancipates” the work from its aura¹¹³, but that “cult value does not give way without resistance.”¹¹⁴ Indeed, this “cult of remembrance” still ritualizes photography and film,¹¹⁵ which fascism appropriates to aestheticize itself and war for the purpose of indoctrinating and controlling masses.¹¹⁶ Fascism becomes a cult of aura and authenticity in its own right, and legitimizes itself through the ‘aura-ization’ of film, which the ritual of remembrance authenticates the illusions of beauty film captures.¹¹⁷

In the “Epilogue” of *Age of Mechanical Reproducibility*, Benjamin quotes the Futurist Manifesto to capture fascism’s literal aestheticization and glorification of violence. I further excerpt Benjamin’s excerptation and reproduce it here:

War is beautiful because . . . it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machine. War is beautiful because it inaugurates the dreamed-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine-guns. War is beautiful because it combines gunfire, barrages, cease-fires, scents, and the fragrance of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architectures [. . .] Poets and artists of Futurism, . . . remember these principles of an aesthetic of war, that they may illuminate . . . your struggles for a new poetry and a new sculpture!¹¹⁸

To one end, for example, Hitler used Futurist aesthetics to “spice up” his public meetings, flaunting “uniformed strong-arm squads, the physical intimidation of enemies, . . . and dramatic arrivals by airplanes and fast, open Mercedeses”.¹¹⁹ And to the other, fascist violence is a “well-

¹¹² Ibid., 221.

¹¹³ Ibid., 224.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 225.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 224-225.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 241.

¹¹⁷ Goehr.

¹¹⁸ Benjamin citing Marinetti’s “Manifeste de Futurisme” from either, as cited by Benjamin, the Italian in *La Stampa Torino* (1909) or, as Benjaminian scholars have argued, the French in *Le Figaro* (1909), in “Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” 269-270; see also footnote 48, 282-283.

¹¹⁹ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 1. Vintage Books ed (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2004), 65–66.

calculated set of coded messages” whose “legitimation of violence against a demonized internal enemy brings us closer to the heart of fascism”¹²⁰

However, Benjamin proclaims that his theories of art are “completely useless for the purposes of Fascism.”¹²¹ Rather, Benjamin presents the essay as a counter to fascism.¹²² The politicization of art is the countering response to Fascism’s aestheticization of politics. Through such a recognition, Benjamin’s essay can be offered as the theoretical framework for emancipating art from rituals of aura, and ultimately as a means to fight against fascism. Transgender aesthetics is positioned in this thesis to be that politicized art. Goehr goes on to understand that it is the *yet-to-be-conceptualized* nature of an art form that is out of fascism’s grasp.¹²³ That is, fascism cannot appropriate what it cannot conceive, and it cannot properly conceive what has been properly conceptualized.

Thus, Benjamin asks us to remain humble in light of a third option: transcendental knowledge. Hölderlin, who inspired Walter Benjamin’s “conception of the value of the art object”, believed the “poem as both a means of producing, *and* the instantiation of knowledge”¹²⁴. The poem—and by extension the art object—attempts to “render accessible” the “noumenal or transcendental realm” that Kant believed to be “wholly inaccessible to us”¹²⁵. Such “knowledge” is transmitted—however “wholly” inaccessible—through the sublime, as a wholly *aesthetic experience*. The work of the poem itself, then, is to “span the subject-object divide” “to bring some knowledge of [the inaccessible realm]”. The poem brings to bear a knowledge that cannot be conceived explicitly, but only through an aesthetic movement. Rather than beg the

¹²⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹²¹ Benjamin, 218.

¹²² Ibid., 218.

¹²³ Goehr.

¹²⁴ Walter Benjamin et al., *Sonnets*, 2017, 4.

¹²⁵ Benjamin et al., 4.

question, Benjamin remains deferential to knowledge itself. Here, I hold Hölderlin's poetology to the task: the poem is a site of that knowledge re/production.¹²⁶ The poem becomes not just an instantiation of knowledge, but a site of knowledge re/production. That is because the poem not only contains knowledge, but is also the vehicle that transmits it. The knowledge instantiated in a poem is only potential—the kinetic work of the poem is in its re/production of that knowledge through the aesthetic experience. Critical aesthetic theory, when understood through this lens, works to not only to interpolate and then translate the knowledge produced by the poem, but to also analyze the machinations of this knowledge production. Critical aesthetic theory, then, attempts to render the intangible knowledge of the poem into explicit terms.

We can use Benjamin's poetological and translation principles and apply them to his political aesthetics. Benjamin believes that poetry, but any art for that matter, has access to a transcendental knowledge that goes beyond the poet and beyond the reader. For Benjamin, the poet acts as a conduit for a transcendental knowledge that is re/produced in the instantiation of the poem. In this way, the poem is not for the reader, but for the poem itself—to be the instantiation of such knowledge. On the other hand, the translator of any poem, has the same duty to the poem over the reader of the translation. The task of the translator is rather to re/instantiate the knowledge, by reconnecting the poem to a "pure language"—a language unfettered by the weights of contextualization and nuance. At the same time, the translator, beholden to the poem, and not to the reader, is not tasked with re-accessing the transcendental. The translator is tasked with mediating the pure language that instantiates transcendental knowledge, whereas the poet is tasked with mediating the transcendental knowledge into the poem. That is, the translator must not attempt poetry. Rather, the translator must attempt to do

¹²⁶ Borrowing the stylization of the 'stylus' employed by Queer Quantum Theorist Karen Barad.

right by the poem itself: expand the language into which the poem is being translated to fit the poem rather than fit the language into the poem. Benjamin explains this concept by quoting German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz: “[The translator] must expand and deepen [their] language by means of the foreign language.”¹²⁷

But to some degree, the poet themselves is a translator. I do not take this bold statement lightly, and it must be treated with the same sensitivity as Benjamin would allow. For indeed Benjamin would disagree that the poet “translates” transcendental knowledge. Rather, Benjamin would say the poet is the conduit that allows the poem itself to instantiate that knowledge. The poem itself does the work of “translating”, not so much the poet. As Benjamin himself asserts, “[t]he intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational.”¹²⁸ Furthermore, the poem instantiates the re/production of knowledge, rather than a translation of it. But at the same time, both the poet and the translator are beholden to the poem itself. And neither control the “knowledge” instantiated as the poem. That is, while the poet is tasked with the spontaneity of “transcendental knowledge”, the translator is in search of an ideational “pure language”. The two workers are tasked with tending to the “Blue Flower”¹²⁹, and seeing to it that the flower blooms—however, neither force the bloom, nor do they make the blossom. Rather, they set up the right conditions for the ‘flower’ blossom.

¹²⁷ Rudolf Pannwitz quoted in Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s ‘Tableaux Parisiens,’” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 80–81.

¹²⁸ Benjamin, 76–77.

¹²⁹ In the Harvard University Press translation of the third version of *Age of Mechanical Reproducibility*, the translators explain in footnote 30 that Benjamin’s “Blue Flower” is a reference to an unfinished novel by German Romantic writer Novalis, in which the eponymous character, *Heinrich von Ofterdigen*, searches for a blue flower that “bears the face of his unknown beloved”. See Walter Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version),” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Selected Writings, Walter Benjamin. Michael W. Jennings, general ed.; 4, n.d., 263, 278–79.

Benjaminian aesthetics attempt to render communicable the machinations of the re/produced knowledge of aestheticization— knowledge that is beyond proper conceptualization. With both transgenderism and sex work still points of consternation in the United States, it follows that their aesthetics-proper cannot yet to be appropriated into fascism. In this way, trans womxn sex workers are positioned to create anti-fascist worlds. These are some of the stakes of trans aesthetic representation. And it is in the worldmaking and living—not just the art and activism—some inherent knowledge of self in face of hegemonic epistemologies and ontologies—that is beyond appropriation and assimilation. Because of that, this thesis attempts to present the knowledge of trans sex workers that goes beyond just the exceptional. And at the same time, this thesis attempts to remain humble as to not objectify and fetishize trans sex workers as art objects. Rather, this thesis uses aesthetic theory to make legible that otherwise inconceivable knowledge—much how Benjamin notes that the task of the translator is in service of the poem, I approach the analyses of the interviews from the same standpoint. That is, much like the knowledge instantiated in the poem, the knowledge re/production of trans sex workers is also something that is more phenomenological—a knowledge that precludes the material violence of language. At the same time, language—poetry, translation, philosophy—are the tools available to make legible the machinations of this instantiation, and thus points out the potentiality of sharing such knowledge.

In *Cezanne's Doubt*, Merleau-Ponty discusses the relationship between fatalism, perspective and art in those with divergent or atypical perspectives. For Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne's depression, which perhaps stems from Cezanne's childhood hardships, did not

guarantee the painting process nor body of work Cezanne produced.¹³⁰ Merleau-Ponty's account of Cezanne's brilliance is useful when discussing the unique position of trans womxn sex workers. Like Merleau-Ponty's Cezanne, trans persons are not held prisoner by their divergent vantage point, but are affected and informed by it. While trans persons face enormous obstacles, that does not define who they are. As mentioned in the study by NCTE and the Task Force, it is "[i]n despite the mistreatment" that trans persons successfully navigate higher education.¹³¹ At the same time, queer and disability studies theorist Sunaura Taylor reminds us not to fetishize divergences and disabilities: "disability scholars and activists aspire to recognize sameness while valuing differences. Disabled individuals have fought for our equality, our sameness, while also arguing that there is value in our differences and in our limitations. . . . value lies in the very variation of embodiment, cognition, and experience that disability encompasses." Taylor's emphasis on *valuing* here reminds us the dangers of exotifying to the point of fetishizing.

Philosopher Hélène Cixous calls for radical reinvention of philosophy through more affective voicing of writing, namely from the unique vantage of womanhood.¹³² According to Cixous, Philosophy and philosophers, especially those concerning aesthetics, eschewed or outright repudiated emotive modes of writing.¹³³ And that this neglect of female affectivity impedes breakthroughs in aesthetic philosophy, the discipline as a whole, and our own humanity.¹³⁴ At the same time, *The Laugh of the Medusa* doubles as the practice of such a voicing. Here form, function and pedagogy are different framings of the same work.

¹³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. 1992. "Cezanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-sense*. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 20.

¹³¹ Grant, et al. 39.

¹³² Hélène Cixous. 1975. "The Laugh of Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*. Volume 1, Number 4. University of Chicago Press, 875.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 875.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 876.

Transgenderism works in similar modes. The affective quality of knowing who you are juxtaposed to the function of living “authentically” (e.g. taking exogenous hormones, wearing gender-affirming clothing, using pronouns, aligning one’s identification documents) becomes, for better or worse, a pedagogy—most prominently and, as Namaste and others have pointed out, exploitatively a pedagogy of gender and queering health.

Trans/Psychoanalysis

There are also attempts in psychoanalytic theory to systematize trans aesthetics. In psychoanalysis, trans persons and trans necro/biopolitics have been positioned as art objects. Psychoanalysis in collaboration with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexology is said to be the origin of western trans/ queer identity. The relationship between psychoanalysis and transsexualism is a fraught and contentious history—and the more recent work is no exception. Catherine Millot, and later informed by Millot, Patricia Gherovici, take the position that the manifestation transsexuality is what psychoanalysis calls a symptom. Both Millot and Gherovici go about this assessment through Lacan, but whereas Millot attempts to uncover an etiology of the pathological transsexual, Gherovici forks off to depathologize the trans body. However noble, Gherovici still misses the mark by making the monolithic trans individual as art *par excellence*. This thesis attempts to avoid such a horrific objectification. To reiterate, this thesis notes the usefulness of aesthetic theory to analyze trans epistemologies—it does not go as far as to objectify an imaginary trans monolith as work of art *par excellence*.

Trans/Human Rights Aesthetics

Aesthetic theory is a useful tool to investigate human rights issues. Aesthetic analysis re-situates an investigation, shedding light on facets that before went unseen. In doing so, architecture and aesthetics become an entry point to better understanding *inter alia* human rights theory, practice,

evidence and events. Eyal Weizman call this analysis-through-architecture “forensic architecture”, and analysis-through-aesthetics Weizman and Thomas Keenan call “forensic aesthetics”. Forensic architecture is a “method of research”¹³⁵ to “product[e] architectural evidence and [present it] in juridical and political forums.”¹³⁶ At the same time, Because of this presentational aspect, forensic architecture is an inherently aesthetic practice. As such, forensic aesthetics, which recognizes “the necessity for the truth to be produced and staged”,¹³⁷ must be employed in tandem with forensic architecture.

Weizman distances forensic aesthetics from the ‘artworld’ of human rights’ “good use of the affective power of the arts in helping stir public compassion,”¹³⁸ the teleology of a forensic aesthetics investigation is the same: “the mode by which things appear” in a “media environment”.¹³⁹ Not only does forensic aesthetics investigate this mode in evidence, but the very instigatory outcome itself is a “mode by which things appear.” The investigation’s presentation of “things”, much like human rights art, offers aesthetic facts meant to convince the public. Weizman (and Keenan) analyze the aestheticization of a more broad (the public) or a more calculating and rigid (scientists and the courts) subject/object¹⁴⁰, which by and larger does not account for idiosyncrasies. At the same time, because of this presentational aspect, forensic

¹³⁵ Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2017), 58.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

¹³⁸ Weizman, 94.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴⁰ See *Ibid.*, 28-29, 66: discussion of *prosopopia*—the anthropomorphizing giving of a voice to inanimate objects; and 13, 70: “blurring” or “erosion” of the “clear distinction between subjects and things[objects]”. See also Weizman, 95-95: discussion of “material aesthetics”—“the quality of relations between things”.

architecture is an inherently aesthetic practice. As such, forensic aesthetics—“the necessity for the truth to be produced and staged”¹⁴¹—must be employed in tandem with forensic architecture.

Weizman understands aesthetics as “the modes and the means by which reality is sensed and presented publicly.”¹⁴² This usage of aesthetics for Weizman, is “close to the ancient Greek meaning of the term in which to sense is to be aestheticized,” or Bruno Latour’s “the ability to perceive and to be concerned”.¹⁴³ In another sense Keenan and Weizman describe aesthetic judgement—the judgement made from one’s aestheticization:

Aesthetics, as the judgement of the senses, is what rearranges the field of options and their perceived likelihood and cuts through probability's economy of calculations.¹⁴⁴

For Keenan and Weizman, the stakes of probability refer to how scientists “measure” truth against a “scale of probability.” In other words, whether truth is “within a reasonable scientific certainty”¹⁴⁵ is weighed by the margin of error of scientific findings. Aestheticization then not only “cuts through” probability, but also cuts *down*, or lessens, the “field of options”. Trans aesthetics in this thesis also reverse engineers this process, concerning itself with the aesthetic impact on the arrangement of perceived options and likelihood. Perhaps cárdenas says it best: “*Often, trans experience begins with an affective claim to futurity that rejects the truth of the visible*”¹⁴⁶

Weizman lays out an overlooked corporeality of images in relation to forensic aesthetics and architecture. By transforming objects into images, photographs subsequently turn images

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 94-95.

¹⁴² Ibid., 94.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Keenan, Eyal Weizman, *Mengele’s Skull: the Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics*, (Berlin : Sternberg Press, 2012), 24.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁶ micha cárdenas, “Dark Shimmers: the Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media” in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, 170. Original italics.

into object.¹⁴⁷ In other words, the image can now be “studied” as an object in its own right.¹⁴⁸ that relates and is a sensor to other objects in the world, what Weizman calls “material aesthetics”.¹⁴⁹

A forensic architecture analyst pieces together and organizes available media coinciding with an event through the tools available to architects. The produced forensic analysis is a special arrangement of the evidence that reveals facts about the event that would have otherwise gone unseen. The forensic analyst, then, attempts to effect an event (or its affection) to better understand it. But, as we will see in the next chapter, one informant uses aesthetics in a way that is the reverse of forensic architecture analysis.

¹⁴⁷ Weizman, 96.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 95-96.

Chapter IV

Application of Clinical Trans/Aesthetics

Chapter IV is organized in two sections. The first section applies critical trans/aesthetics to the analytics of forensic aesthetics explored in Chapter III. I use this interdisciplinary approach to forensic aesthetics as a foundational model for this thesis's telos: a clinical trans/aesthetics. An application of clinic trans/aesthetics constitutes the concluding section of this chapter. The clinical critiques hope to demonstrate the potentiality of methodology, and double as a model for future research and researchers. As such, this demonstration is in lieu of some formalized and codified methodology. This thesis highlights the inadequacies of such codification. Explanation through examples is not a foreign concept to aesthetic theory. In fact, it is a contentious approach of the discipline to define "art" through examples. Heidegger, Danto and Adorno have all both employed and criticized this approach in their writings. But define-through-examples approach heuristically demonstrates the "both and" of that which aesthetics captures, but its formalization cannot. What remains is what I hope to be a successful application of my clinical trans/aesthetics, from which I hope future research benefits and expands.

All interviews took place between 2015 and 2019. Exact dates and locations have been redacted to protect the identities of the informants. Due to my personal ties with the community, it is important to keep details as broad as possible in order to optimally reduce risk of identification. Associations with exact dates and locations can place an informant. While I will not disclose exact dates, a general time-frame may be contextually relevant. For example, some of the interviews took place before while others after SESTA was signed into law. Pre- and Post-SESTA had a profound impact on the community.

It appears that information about gender and exchanging sex were more pertinent to a analyzing forensic aesthetic analysis. For this reason, while specifically useful for analyzing the work of trans womxn sex workers, I find that the method has more risk of exposure and exploitation than a clinical trans/aesthetic analysis. The closing chapter of this thesis concludes with recommendations for further analysis.

Forensic Trans/Aesthetics

The following interview analysis applies a clinical trans/aesthetics to the analytics of forensic aesthetics and architecture to analyze the use of virtual and physical work sites of two informants. I use the architectural and aesthetics findings of interviews I conducted with two informants in a northern, left-leaning,¹⁵⁰ United States city (“City 1”)¹⁵¹ where these informants were based at the time. There is a bevy of research on these virtual¹⁵² and physical¹⁵³ work sites. But a trans/ aesthetics approach to forensic analysis of the descriptions the informants gave about these two obvious and observable sites of work, an often overlooked site of work emerges: a psychic site of work. Design, development and experience play a significant role in the work of trans sex workers—from the development of a web advertisement to the staging of the physical work location, trans sex workers with acuity create ephemeral yet permanent, visible yet hidden,

¹⁵⁰ Drew Desilver, “Chart of the Week: The most liberal and conservative big cities,” Pew Research Center, August 8, 2014, available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/08/chart-of-the-week-the-most-liberal-and-conservative-big-cities/>.

¹⁵¹ I refer to the city in which I conducted these interviews throughout this thesis capitalized as a proper noun, i.e. City 1. The name of City 1 is not disclosed to protect the identity of these informants.

¹⁵² See, e.g., Caty Simon, “The Eros Raid Means None of Us Are Safe,” tits and sass, November 10, 2017, available at <http://titsandsass.com/the-eros-raid-means-none-of-us-are-safe/>: “It seems like a million [hypertext url: <https://qz.com/1065881/how-the-internet-changed-the-market-for-sex/>] thinkpieces are posted each month by oh-so-insightful journalists on how fascinating it is that the sex industry has changed with the internet.”

¹⁵³ See, e.g., A. Horning, A. Paladino, “Walking the Tightrope: Ethical Dilemmas of Doing Fieldwork with Youth in US Sex Markets,” in *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking. Studies of Organized Crime, vol 13*, ed. D. Siegel and R. de Wildt. Springer, Cham (2016); Frances M. Shaver, “Sex Work Research: Methodological and Ethical Challenges,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20 (3): 296–319 (2005), 306.

spaces that stir imaginative and affective movements in their clients—a psychic work site. To that end, I analyze the virtual work site of Joy,¹⁵⁴ an economically disadvantaged transgender woman, which demonstrates the imaginative services Joy provides. I then demonstrate affective services through analyzing the physical work site of a femme sex worker,¹⁵⁵ a transgender woman well-established in selling sex. The current body of research on affective and imaginative studies focuses on the toll or drain service jobs have on women.¹⁵⁶ My analysis, however, reveals a more empowering finding: the psychic work that sex workers provide is an intricate and powerful tool.

Virtual Work Site

Joy located to the City 1 from a southern U.S. city as of summer 2017 to spend time with friends in the community, and find work. Due to the economic precarities Joy faces, she mainly posted advertisements in the local “casual encounters” section of the classified advertisements website, craigslist.com. Both informants here were interviewed in 2017, before SESTA was enacted, with craigslist responding to the legislation by completely eliminating “casual encounters” from the site. Posting to the “casual encounters” section of craigslist.com was free. However, posts could also be taken down by site administrators if enough visitors “flag” a posting—where visitors clicked a specialized link that reports the post for violating the “terms of agreement” to administrators. Soliciting for sex violates craigslist.com terms of use¹⁵⁷, and many sex workers

¹⁵⁴ Informant’s name has been changed to protect her identity.

¹⁵⁵ Informant attributed as “femme sex worker” to protect her identity.

¹⁵⁶ See, e.g., Marcus Sibley, “Affecting the Frame: Risk, Vulnerability, and Sex Worker Subjectivities,” Marcus Sibley, “Affecting the Frame: Risk, Vulnerability, and Sex Worker Subjectivities,” (Monday, August 17, 2015). N.B. pages. 3, 16-18.

¹⁵⁷ craigslist.com, “Terms of Use,” last updated December 05, 2013, available at <https://www.craigslist.org/about/terms.of.use>.

found their postings at times quickly removed.¹⁵⁸ Joy also found that client-screening methods—which are meant to filter out “illegitimate” and “low-baller” clients¹⁵⁹—available to ads posted to craigslist.com not reliable. One method available to craigslist.com users is email relaying. Craigslist uses an email relaying system that obscures the actual email addresses of posters and respondents.¹⁶⁰ Instead, Joy will usually ask the client to send a taxi via a car service app. For Joy, this helps verify the legitimacy of the client’s identity, which for many sex workers acts as both collateral and the seriousness of the client to follow-through with a call.¹⁶¹

It is not novel to claim, no matter how faulty, that craigslist.com’s “casual encounters” section already filtered for a particular client trope: deviants and murderers.¹⁶² And while journalistic investigations of that claim find users more nuanced than that¹⁶³, its sex workers who advertised on craigslist get the proverbial short-end of that stick. The “casual encounters” section attracted users that left sex workers, more often than not, fielding through miserly clients that aim to exploit the power dynamics between service provider and client.¹⁶⁴ Joy recalls a week or so before our interview that she was self-described “kidnapped” by a client. While Joy vetted the client through the car service app method, the client withheld payment and refused to call a car

¹⁵⁸ CLNSA_throwaway, “Can we talk about CraigsList for a second? [rant],” reddit, posted April 28, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/SexWorkers/comments/2480o9/can_we_talk_about_craigslist_for_a_second_rant/.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ craigslist.com, “frequently asked questions: How can I post anonymously and still receive responses?,” last accessed December 21, 2017, available at <https://www.craigslist.org/about/help/faq#postinganonymously>.

¹⁶¹ CLNSA_throwaway.

¹⁶² See, e.g., Douglas Quenqua, “Recklessly Seeking Sex on Craigslist,” *New York Times*, Apr 19, 2009, Late Edition (East Coast), <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/docview/434069924?accountid=10226>.

¹⁶³ Quenqua.

¹⁶⁴ See, e.g., CLNSA_throwaway: “But holy fuck is it a god damn crapshoot. On a good day, my ad will generate about 100 responses within an hour, before my ad is flagged and removed. Of those responses, maybe 30 seem like legitimate inquiries. Of those 30, I end up meeting maybe 5-10 customers. On bad days, my ad is flagged before anyone can see it [sic].”

home for Joy. At the time Joy's car service app was \$20.00 past due, barring her from calling a car for herself. Though at times I have difficulty following Joy's rehash of the incident, after Joy spent an extended period of time at the client's, the client eventually called her a car. Not all of the clients that use craigslist.com are dangerous. Another client of Joy's, though dutiful with payment, tries to convince Joy in providing a gratis "girlfriend experience," i.e. the service provider treats the client as if they were in a loving, intimate relationship. Joy does not consider these pleas to pose any threat, and stands her ground.

It follows that the virtual architecture of craigslist.com postings set the stage for how Joy conducts her work. The two incidents described alone are not sufficient to make any bold claims. However, practitioners can turn to forensic architecture when the event at hand was not well or easily documented, or the site of the event inaccessible.¹⁶⁵ Then putting the virtual architecture of craigslist.com to work in tandem with Joy's advertisement provides an entry point for examining the machinations at play: the virtual work site, the fantasy Joy advertises, and the voyeurs Joy's advertisements attracts. The interplay of these machina turns Joy's use of virtual space into an imaginative device—that is, a tool for stoking the imagination. Weizman, a forensic architecture analyst himself, recognizes "how essential ... imagination is to the investigative and interpretative labor necessary to ascertain the most simple of facts".¹⁶⁶ Through this lens, imagination, in part, mediates what constitutes as fact for her clients. Joy's posting makes space for the construction of clients' imaginings even before reaching out to her—a *psychic* work site.

Joy explains that she curates her postings to signify a "girl-next door" sexual fantasy. In one selfie, Joy holds a large, beige, "realistic" dildo next to her face, and in the next, Joy sucks her thumb, sprawled out over memorabilia from a "girls'" childrens' cartoon. Joy dons the same

¹⁶⁵ Weizman, 24.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 75.

clothes in each photograph, indicating the images were taken only moments apart. *Prima facie*, the juxtaposition of images signifies the popularized “madonna-whore complex.” But the lens of forensic architecture and aesthetic bear more fruit. The temporal quality of these selfies renders the photographs as an ambiguous “before-andx-after” set (ambiguous because the images do not conspicuously include timestamps). Before-and-after photographs, Weizman argues, are “the embodiment of forensic time.”¹⁶⁷ Before-and-after photographs chronicle the “changes and variations” over time.¹⁶⁸ But without a cohesive narrative beyond the order in which Joy’s selfies are organized, it is up to the voyeur to fill in these gaps—to put the images in conversation with each other to imagine the fantasy. But that is the point: to aestheticize the voyeur into becoming a client. Weizman employs Sergei Eisenstein concept of “dialectic montage,” in which the meaning of before-and-after photographs is in the “juxtaposition” of, and “tension between” the photographs, not in the image.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, Joy is selling a fantasy through the juxtaposition of her images. Each image is intentional to fulfill the teleological purpose of Joy’s advert: to rile up the imaginations of potential clients. Before providing any in-person services for a client, Joy’s service work begins in the imaginations of her clients. Joy architects an aesthetic advertisement through imagery and wording. The voyeur’s imaginings signified by the advert set the initial parameters or perceived foundational “facts” for how the client is aestheticized by all subsequent interactions with Joy. The voyeur’s reality is at the mercy of the advertisement Joy creates.

This can put Joy, and sex workers in general, in a powerful position. Indeed, Joy is a multimedia artist, who describes her incorporation of day-to-day travailles into the works she produces. A client of Joy’s, who works with a mutual medium, even asked Joy to collaborate on

¹⁶⁷ Weizman, 98.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

works. Joy then sends back the work “completely fucked up” with her added overlays and distortions. Artwork, in a sense, is the practice of curating an aestheticization. In this sense, Joy’s craigslist postings are on one hand the practical implementation of her art skills, and on the other artworks in their own right. At the same time, however, the location and parameters of Joy’s postings restrict and attenuate any potential power. As described above, the users “casual encounters” trafficks have their own peculiarities, and the forum of craigslist.com its own restrictions and calculations. Both craigslist.com and its “casual encounters” consumers work together (flippantly or unintentionally) to manipulate power dynamics. Still, this reversal of power does not diminish the potency of Joy’s, but perhaps rather attenuate it. The aesthetic work Joy puts into her services still remains.

Physical Work Site

The femme sex worker I interviewed is well-established in the field. She has her own studio apartment for “hosting” clients. Hosting means that the service provider has housing accommodations to provide services to clients. Situated in the heart of City 1, the femme sex worker’s apartment is a “convenient location” for her and her clients. She describes her apartment as a “welcoming,” “affirming, a safe space,” which she attributes to the fact that she “really does live there.” The femme sex worker authenticates this by leaving “affectations” and storing her clothes in the apartment. This tactic is similar to Andrés Jaque’s narration of a Brazilian cis man sex worker’s account of his small London apartment:

[Bruno] needs to live in a central and prestigious part of London because this helps make his clients feel comfortable. He is turning his 28-square-metre apartment into what he calls “a pornifying stage.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Andrés Jaque, 2016, “PORNIFIED HOMES: A Meditation on Exoticism and Identity via the World of Male Escorting,” commissioned by the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2016, available at <http://www.revistaatlantica.com/en/contribution/pornified-homes/>.

But the femme sex worker's apartment does more than a "pornifying stage" that "bring[s] sexiness into [Bruno's clients'] daily lives,"¹⁷¹ it delves deeper into the psychic work site. To be sure, the femme sex worker sells sex, and accordingly evokes sexiness, explaining "I'm still seen as a young body and all those things," the latter referring to her "sexy-ass pictures." However, the femme sex worker found that it's the aura of her apartment and character (which will be explored further down) that aestheticizes her clients:

[The apartment is] not just a bed for fucking . . . It's very aesthetic. I use colors and textures. It's not [what] people think they came here for. I sort of reorient them. So it's my space.

In fact, she finds the images at best ancillary:

They'll see the image of me, and think of something, whatever it is. But when you come you see that I'm more dimensional than that.

The femme sex worker's modes are intricate; she intentionally eschews the material aesthetics of photographic images in favor of a more psychic aestheticization through affect. Like Weizman, the femme sex worker recognizes that images are susceptible to "conflicts of authenticity".¹⁷²

The femme sex worker emphasizes the importance of texture. She staged her apartment to give clients a textured experience, literally and figuratively. She emphasizes that larger-than-life better facilitates the affirmational quality of her apartment: "exaggerated fuzzy things, exaggerated lacey things." The femme sex worker is careful to note that these exaggerations are not "gaudy". "I want my soft things to be soft, my plastic to be hard, and my wood to be solid." The femme sex worker finds that the multi-texturality—or in her words, "the gender of objects in space"—can assist clients in exploring their "feminine side." Normative masculine textures for her "airquote male, airquote" clients, the femme sex worker explains, are restrictive. She notes,

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid., 100.

for example that suits only allow for subtle accents: “a dude wears a purple socks with a black suit and he thinks he’s radical. Or has a little splash of red on his tie—it’s like ‘wow, can you believe it, I’m so embarrassed!’,” to which she exclaims “fuck that!”. Instead, the femme sex worker’s antidote is to “spread all over” the exaggerated textures to “wash[] all over [her clients].” Textures like her “big fucking pink blanket that’s fuzzy as hell,” invite clients to explore the different textures within themselves, and “reveal whatever [the client] wants.” The femme sex worker recalls having a client go from “taking just a finger to taking all of me inside them.”

From another angle, the femme sex worker performs a type of forensics service, as well: “clients tell me what they want. But I don’t give them what they want, I give them what they need.” The femme sex worker intends the “mode by which things appear” in her space. This intentional presentation in some ways reverses the process of a forensic architecture analysis. But for the femme sex worker, it’s less about an observable, temporal event. The behavior, or the way the femme sex worker’s clients act and interact with her, is the site of such an temporal event. For the femme sex worker, behavior is “almost predictable to the point where it’s irrelevant somewhat” insofar that “things just really come and go as opposed to progressing through time.” In other words, an event no longer relevant to the “media environment” of the femme sex worker’s work site. Instead, the femme sex worker enacts an affective event through her aesthetic and architectural knowledge. In this way, the textural experience the femme sex worker provides amounts to a haptic aestheticization. On this level, the femme sex worker assesses her client’s psychic (affective) needs, which she evokes through a mastery of architecture and aesthetics.

* * *

Anti-Fascisms: Memes & Masculinities

Trans people as a whole are not monolithic; ok? We're all different. Trans women of color do not all think alike — we all think different. Black trans women are not all alike, as whole — we're not monolithic. We all have different life experiences, goals, interests, motivations—different everything.

What we do share is that a lot of us have learned how to survive from sex work. With that being said, is sex work difficult? Yes it is; it is very difficult. There are things that can happen during sex work that aren't nice; that aren't pleasant; that are all the horrors that one will hear. I think a lot of people have a lot of horrors in the jobs they work. [Laughs]. The thing that is exclusive to sex work, I think, that is how people view sex work is based on how we're conditioned to believe sex is; how we think of what womanhood is. And, really, the violence and the struggle of sex work has nothing to do with the sex worker. It has everything to do with the governments and the institutions that criminalize [sex workers] and the governments and institutions that pacify¹⁷³ people who commit crime against sex workers. So, really, what should be more criminal is the fact that—mostly men—[pacify violence against sex workers] . . . Let's fix those issues. Fix them. Fix the men.

— Interview with informant, 201X.

Two other informants, Zelda and Eve,¹⁷⁴ introduced compelling analyses of how to recuperate masculinities, and inoculate the toxicities. The aestheticization of masculinities is a central cultural component of fascist movements. As explored in Chapter III, fascism aestheticizes violence. This aestheticized violence is an offshoot of aestheticized masculinity. Because of this, it can be difficult to tease out one thread from the other. In his text *Male Fantasies*, for example, Klaus Theweleit uses psychoanalysis to reason how fascist masculinities come to be the gendered embodiment of aestheticized violence. Paxton, too, evokes fascism's obsession with masculinity as a core component of fascist movements. Masculinity was seen to be the gendered manifestation of physical and intellectual strength and prowess—a manifestation

¹⁷³ It is clear from the interview that the informant employed the word “pacify” to mean “handle peacefully”, or “handle with care”.

¹⁷⁴ Informants' names changed to protect their identities.

of a call to will. The aestheticization of masculinities, then sublimated into aestheticized violence. *The Futurist Manifesto* is fecund with such aestheticized violences. Much of the imagery to this day is inextricably bound to our conceptions of masculinity: automobiles, air craft, weaponry and other speedy and formidable technologies.

How does this go back to the task at hand, re: de-aestheticizing masculinities? We need to recall Benjamin's aesthetics discussed in Chapter III. Decades later, Robert O. Paxton echoes Benjamin's centering of the aestheticization of violence for understanding fascism in part and parcel. Paxton cites that Benjamin's *Reproducibility* essay "warned" that fascism's exchange of "reasoned debate" for an "immediate sensual experience transformed politics . . . into aesthetics"¹⁷⁵. And the "ultimate fascist aesthetic experience . . . was war"¹⁷⁶. Indeed, even the early fascists—who endured the "horrors" of the Great War—"considered [war] the highest human activity[:] [i]f the nation or *Volk* was mankind's highest attainment, violence in its cause was ennobling"¹⁷⁷. This aestheticization of war can be seen in Futurists' circular logic. Futurists argued that victory through violence is a demonstration of the right to victory. In other words, violence is not only one's "superior" blood, but victorious violence demonstrates the bloodline's superiority. To reemploy Paxton's recapitulation of fascism's race violence: "[i]f the nation or *Volk* was mankind's highest attainment, violence in its cause was ennobling"¹⁷⁸.

The reconciliation of this struggle plays out through the clinical application of critical trans/aesthetics to Zelda and Eve's observations about toxic masculinities.

¹⁷⁵ Paxton, 17.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 35. See also Paxton's analysis of fascist aesthetics of violence, 17, 34-35, 84-85.

Clinical Applications: De-aestheticizing Violence

Both Joy and the femme sex worker discuss how they disrupt their client's masculinities. For example, recalling Joy's disruptions of her client through "fucking with" his artwork, and through psychic play. The femme sex worker also mentions that while her clients come to "get what they want", she gives them "what they need."

But disruptions of masculinity were prominent and poignant topics that two other informants brought up. One informant, Zelda, explains that many of her sensibilities and likes are in part thanks to the remote and rural nature of her hometown. There she bonded with cis men peers over shared interest in guns, trucking and sports. Zelda has not come out completely to her family, and will comport herself as a cis man when working with her father and hanging out with high school friends. But Zelda also has friendships with other trans womxn who share her interest in normatively "masculine" interests.

Zelda does not understand these interests to be as they are normatively attributed—that is, as manifestations of masculinity. The aestheticization of these activities are recuperated when done by these trans womxn. The aura of toxic masculinities surrounding these activities oppress and alienate trans womxn. However, when a trans womxn such as Zelda participates with an intentionality, the toxic aspect is gutted, and can be reconceptualized. Such recuperation is not only useful in the disenchantment of toxic masculinities—it also repurposes the acts towards more liberatory aims. In other words, in the hands of Zelda and her community, trucking and sports de-aestheticize the ascribed violence. To be sure, there is still the potentiality of violence, but violence is a potentiality in all things. It is not that the violence is removed, but that the aestheticization of the violence is voided. The vestiges of Futurisms' aesthetic violence may not nullified, but are at least rendered benign.

Zelda being the agent does not alone inoculate the toxicity. Indeed, many cis women also part take in traditionally masculine sports and activities. But rather than nullify the toxic masculinity, cis women are seen as Colloquialisms such as being a “tomboy” or “one of the boys” show how women are masculinized rather than the activity feminized, let alone de-aestheticized by masculinities. Rather, it is with the coupling of Zelda’s intentionalities that de-aestheticizes the violence. Zelda speaks at length about her political activism and direct action. A self-proclaimed communist, anarchist and abolitionist—she was, for example, a water protector at the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests. Zelda makes it known that her work with indigenous communities informs and permeates her politics and decisions. These politics are compounded by her framing of sex work. Zelda explains that sex work is the only job she had that pays her even remotely commensurate to her time. Sex work (from this labor movement framing) for Zelda then doubles as an anti-capitalist act.¹⁷⁹ An occupation of the liminal space between subjugation to the realities of capitalism and the liberations from them. In this liminal space, Zelda is able to dethrone toxic masculinities. The dethronement is an abolitionist act—a form of pornographic profanation that Agamben might be proud of. But this play is not utter profanation—that is, to render an object or act as complete utilitarian. Rather, the pragmatics do not just divorce such play from their masculine auras, but the players (e.g. Zelda) reclaim and reorient the usefulness of these acts—as both play and liberatory act. In this way, such a reclamation is ouroboric: the reclamation of the play is liberating, but the usefulness of the play is its potential to liberate and be liberated.

¹⁷⁹ N.B. Exchanging sex is not always understood to be a political act. Recall in Chapter I that the relationship between exchanging sex and politics is fraught. Reducing exchanging sex to a labor rights movement is a form of fetishization and exceptionalization. At best, such reduction highlights unfair labor conditions under capitalism, and at worst it ignores the real violences those who exchange sex face while simultaneously deifying those who exchange sex into martyrs. For a primer on this fraught relationship, see the introduction to *Revolting Prostitutes*.

From a more straightforward perspective, Zelda has also made memes that capture this reclamation of masculinity. For about a year (with no regularity), Zelda posts these to a social media account dedicated to memes. The memes she creates comment on a range of issues that is typical for a queer leftist meme account. From tongue-in-cheek criticism of the hypocrisy of labor rights “internet activism” to trans social anxiety. To protect the identity of the informant, this thesis does not give a detailed description of Zelda’s work. The following abstract descriptions demonstrate only what is necessary for the critical purposes of this these. As representative of the memes, Zelda singled out two in particular, one of which Zelda used to elaborate on her take on masculinities. The meme recuperated a queerphobic motto of men in the rural United States. The motto spells out the core of manliness as interests and acts. This emphasizes the performativity of masculinity through behavior or acts, does so in part through the the aestheticization of speed. Zelda keeps the first half of the saying, which champions two “manly” acts”, but replaces words in the second half that are associated with queer sex acts. To be sure, the act of “queering” *inter alia* a text, activity, or space is not novel. Such a practice has been done before the verb was dreamt up in queer studies academic circles in the 1990s. Zelda’s meme could be considered the “queering” of a toxic masculinity. But this recuperation is more than a “queering”—Zelda offers an alternative epistemological framework translated through meme. The meme is a translation, not the poem. Of course, the languages of memes and trans aesthetics perhaps could be described as phylogenetically related. Such a translation would not lose as much meaning. The poem, however, is the epistemological framework, which can glimpsed through its relative banality and mundanity to Zelda.

Clinical Application: De-aestheticizing Masculinities

Another informant, Eve, also emphasizes how her positionality and experiences allowed for a different epistemological framework of (cis) men. At the beginning of our conversation about cis heterosexual-identifying men, Eve notes that “men are complicated”. Minutes later Eve appears to contradict herself, stating that on the other hand, “men are very simple”. But it’s the nature of incongruence that calls for a more deferential translation. At first, Eve explains that, contrary to popular belief, men are incredibly emotional:

Most [men] are way more emotional than we are—women and femmes. [Men] usually have all these guards up because they are so sensitive. And I learned that through prison that men live to impress each other—like how women live to impress other women, men live to impress other men. I realize that men—and we're talking about cis heterosexual men— . . . have deep personal relationships with other men, as cis heterosexual women, or trans women, or all women and femmes have deep personal relationships with each other. . . . But men don't have the same—they don't communicate in the same styles that (*typically*) women and femmes do. So [men] are... a lot of their emotions and feelings are never let out, and that's why they [men] have these outbursts. . . . This is why they [men] are emotionally disconnected, because they don't know how to [emotionally connect]. One, they are conditioned not to. And two, they just don't ever get a chance to do it.

Prior to Eve’s experiences with sex work, men were “just like some mythical thing”. But the demystification comes in coming to terms with men’s emotional complexities. The “myth of man” is akin to a Benjaminian aura—an aura that at once makes reducing interactions with men to simple, and digestible and apperceptible adages, while at the sametime obscuring “men” within a shroud of mystery. Eve offers the popularized adage of “he's not that into me.” But she explains “it's not really that. It's not that simplistic.” But the “wisdom” such an adage convey is ultimately empty.

The mythologization and mystification of men is an aestheticization. An aestheticization that offers a neat, easy-to-understand apperception. In exposing the myth for what it is, Eve recognizes the more complex machinations of toxic masculinity at work. This realization led Eve

to develop methods of engaging with men—and she discovered such methods were simple. That is, men are “very simple” not because there’s no complexity, but rather the mythologizing of men is an overdeterminism that is a product of the aestheticization of masculinities.

Conclusions

Transgender womxn, especially those who exchange sex, re/produce knowledge that cannot be distilled into hegemonic modes of knowledge production. As a discipline that attempts to systematize aesthetics, aesthetic theory proves to be a useful theoretical framework for critically engaging trans knowledge re/production. The disciplines of transgender and queer studies have long understood the importance of queer and trans contributions to knowledge. Academia and other hegemonic epistemologies are not only gatekept to admit only the privileged, these epistemologies are inherently delimited. This is unfortunate. Trans womxn who exchange sex, because of who they are and what they do, re/produce knowledge that is systematically dismissed by hegemonic epistemologies. The theoretical framework in this thesis proposes the knowledge of trans womxn as a trans/aesthetics. Trans/aesthetic theory, then, is the deference to the epistemologies of trans womxn. Aesthetic deference is important, because it does not hubristically claim to consummately conceptualize knowledge.

Aesthetics is that which is sensuous, the remainder—that which eludes its articulation. Aesthetic theory, on the other hand, with self-awareness attempts to paradoxically articulate the aesthetics. In this way, aesthetic theory struggles with aesthetics, which resists being theorized.

Worldmaking allows for categorizing testing, for making prejudgments about reality. But categories and prejudices are delimiting. And in this way, worldmaking risks becoming an aestheticizing force. Aestheticization is a condemnation. Walter Benjamin famously recognized that fascism aestheticizes violence, the apex of which is imperialist war. Aesthetics, on the other hand, is a judgment, an approach, a sensuous critique. And in defying a world's conventions, trans/aesthetics show conventions to be merely conventions. Trans/aesthetics cannot be pinned down, and move between, and thus disrupt, poles of aestheticized categories.

What does it mean to make worlds, to forge and play with realities—especially those of which we are not a part? For trans womxn who exchange sex disrupt worlds and realities. Using forensic aesthetics, we can see that trans womxn who exchange sex disrupt their clients. Sex labour is not just a service, but a disruption. However, as sex workers often note, such conclusions alone risk reducing and fetishizing sex labor. Trans/aesthetic forensics as employed in this thesis, then, only serves as a methodological modeling for a more deferential practice of trans/aesthetic theory: clinical trans/aesthetics. Clinical trans/aesthetics not only articulates the machinations of trans/aesthetics, but translates the knowledge re/produced.

Trans/aesthetics resist.

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