

# A Tranifesto for the Dolls

## *Toward a Trans Femme of Color Theory*

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**Abstract** In this written dialogue, the authors build on a roundtable discussion held at the 2022 annual meeting of the National Women's Studies Association to articulate what a trans femme of color theory might look like, one that positions trans femmes of color not only as objects of study but also as producers of knowledge and subjects central to the field of trans studies.

**Keywords** trans of color critique, trans femme of color theory, transfemininity, Black feminist thought, Asian American studies

**O**n November 12, 2022, a group of trans women and femme scholars of color held a roundtable session titled “For the Dolls: Toward a Trans Femme of Color Theory” at the annual meeting of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) in Minneapolis. Organized by Erique Zhang and featuring Julian Kevon Glover, Ava L. J. Kim, Tamsin Kimoto, Nathan Alexander Moore, æryka jourdain hollis o'neil, and LaVelle Ridley, the roundtable sought to intervene into the growing field of trans studies to carve out a space that centers, rather than marginalizes, trans femme of color perspectives and experiences. The panelists represent various academic traditions and disciplinary backgrounds: Black studies, Asian American studies, literary theory, performance studies, philosophy, women and gender studies, queer and trans studies, and media and communication studies.

In this written dialogue, the authors build on the initial roundtable discussion to articulate what a trans femme of color theory might look like, one that positions trans femmes of color not only as objects of study but also as producers of knowledge and subjects central to the field of trans studies. While there are numerous overlaps, the authors do not theorize in unison or reach a consensus on the topics discussed. These divergences reveal the individual and collective intellectual strengths of the contributions without rendering the differences and

distinctions to be threatening or antagonistic. Furthermore, the multiplicity of the authors' theorizations reflects their ongoing commitment to tethering theory with praxis to reflect the boundless embodied knowledge that characterizes trans of color communities.

**Julian Kevon Glover:** I must admit that, initially, I hesitated to consider what a “transfemme of color theory” might be, as my scholarly training and intellectual convictions remain deeply influential to my suspicion of any theory of identity. Said theories too often rely on notions of collective experience and, in so doing, reduce intercommunal particularities to a space of irrelevance or aberration. Simply put, I could not stand to participate in the creation of yet another theory of identity—even at the behest of my beloved trans femmes of color. I am convinced that a transfemme of color theory need not go to great lengths to delineate the interplay between identities and experiences of trans femmes of color; rather, the conjuring of such a theory might be useful if it is able to articulate how the historical and contemporary conditions of containment influence the impossibility of gender, sexual, and racial coherence and the realities with which those in the crosshairs contend daily. Such an endeavor prompts me to specifically focus on the stakes of Black transfemininity within the context of Western modernity writ large.

Regarding the aforementioned historical and contemporary conditions of containment, Frank B. Wilderson's (2017) thinking about the three constitutive elements of social death—gratuitous violence, natal alienation, and general dishonor—create the conditions through which black(ened) bodies remain interpolated and inextricably bound (Jackson 2020). This inheritance subjects Black bodies to endless physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental assaults, thus relegating Black life to a state of precarity. Perhaps it is such precarity that impelled Claudia Rankine (2015) to underscore her friend's—the mother of a Black child—casual yet profound assertion that “the condition of black life is one of mourning.” It is impossible to overstate how these conceptions of social death and mourning impact all aspects of the lives of Black people, as their pernicious influence reveals the reality that, for Black people, safety is an illusion.

So as to refrain from replicating the same theories of identity that I rebuked earlier, I must acknowledge that the attitudes and practices of many Black people refuse to accept the provocation that safety is an illusion. Further, the ongoing investment in gender—namely, through the preservation of binary conceptions—among Black people provides some of the most compelling evidence of the refusal to accept that safety is an illusion. Gender performativity remains one of the primary strategies that Black parents socialize and implore children to master, undergirded by the belief that their adherence to established gender norms will somehow continually ensure their safety. Black people's investment

in gender norms is not a problem exclusively among heterosexual folk; rather, careful attention to the ballroom scene's investment in notions of "realness" is equally as problematic, given its demand that the scene's Black LGBTQ+ membership eliminate or minimize any deviation from gender norms in order to shield themselves from encountering homophobic or transphobic violence.<sup>1</sup>

The valuation of gender normativity not only perpetually fails to protect Black communities from myriad forms of violence, it also neglects to consider how Black gender lacks any foundational "symbolic integrity" at all (Spillers 1987: 66). To this point, Hortense Spillers reminds us that white supremacist capitalist systems valued notions of labor so much that agents of these systems required that *all* Black bodies meet labor demands irrespective of gender—a far cry from the explicitly gendered divisions of labor that defined white societies. That is to say, labor demands within the context of enslavement reduce Black bodies to fungible flesh in ways that still haunt Black gender and its lack of coherence today. This is why, despite the ongoing investment in protective strategies like gender normativity and respectability, safety remains elusive for Black people.

The fungibility of Black gender highlights how the language used to define it is, at best, an approximation. This truth contextualizes the proliferation of language used to describe the experiences of Black transgender people over the past twenty years and its continual evolution. With these thoughts in mind, I want to consider how the fungibility of Black gender might enable Black trans people—specifically Black nonbinary femmes—to evade the cage of identity by practicing a relational ethic that exceeds reliance on the body as the sole or primary basis for connection and stability. I begin by referencing a truth about nonbinary femininity that historian Jules Gill-Peterson uncovered during a conversation with scholar Kadji Amin in which she articulated that there is no ontological reality to nonbinary femmeness (Gill-Peterson and Amin 2021). Gill-Peterson's provocation rightly recognizes how the terms, taken together, expose their fungibility in ways that coincide with what I also find to be so generative about fungible Black gender.

Nonbinary femininity's lack of an ontological reality accepts that allegiance to gender normativity—and investment in further defining genders—is a fruitless endeavor, as there is no bodily compartment rife with the power to refract violence in its myriad forms. Further, nonbinary femininity finds strength in harnessing a boundless combination of embodied gender contradictions and complexities—all of which heteronormativity despises and desperately seeks to annihilate. Rather than delineate all the possible manifestations of nonbinary femininity, its practice holds that doing so will not guarantee its practitioners a sense of safety. Moreover, its practice also imbues people with a way to invest in ourselves without appealing to the cage of identity, given its purported ability to keep us safe through assimilation. It is this type of self-investment that emboldens Black nonbinary femmes to

exist on our own terms, fully aware and affirming of the embodied complexities and contradictions of other people without perceiving them as threatening to our own bodily claims. In this way, the relational ethic that nonbinary femininity yields offers a way to grapple with the condition of Black life that is mourning without wholly succumbing to the ever-present grief and despair that come to steal the possibility of boundless joy despite existing on the demonic ground on which we were never meant to survive (McKittrick 2006; Lorde 2022).

**Nathan Alexander Moore:** Julian, thank you, thank you, thank you, for offering up such a thorough and generative explication and entry into this conversation. I appreciate and agree on multiple points that you made, most importantly about how we cannot think about Black gender and impossibility without thinking with and thinking through the afterlives of slavery. As a scholar of Blackness and temporality, I would like to attempt to build on what you have already offered us, while coming to it from a slightly different register. My thoughts on trans-femmes of color and what a theory of them might do means I must center Black transfemininity and attempt to extend, deepen, and more thoroughly reshape insights made by Black feminist scholars writing on Black femaleness/femininity.

As has already been stated, Black normative gender performance is one way that Black beings have attempted to lessen the violence that began with the transatlantic slave trade. What I find most interesting is that gender, and more particularly maleness or masculinity, have been the key to thinking through one's emancipation. We need only to look to Frederick Douglass's narrative to see that the transfiguration of the slave into a man is rife with gendered connotations, as Meina Yates-Richard (2016: 484) boldly asserts "the necessity of male unfettering from female influence as prerequisite to the attainment of freedom." By succumbing to the binary logics of normative gender protocols, Black beings have implicitly proscribed maleness and masculinity as freedom, with femaleness and femininity as embodying the penultimate lack of such privileges. To return to insights offered by Spillers (1987), slavery was a process of ungendering, in which flesh marks that social space in which gender does not hold and on which any and every violation can be meted out. Yet I want to sit with Spillers's assertion that it is the female who stands most fully in the ungendered flesh, and I would like to rise to her occasion that Black men must say yes to the female within. In thinking of Black transfeminine subjects, we are the ones who were (wrongly) assigned male at birth and have chosen to embrace ourselves and come to this challenge to reckon with ungendering.

If maleness and masculinity have meant one vector through which attempts at freedom have been actualized, then perhaps it is productive that we think about how femaleness, femininity, and specifically Black transfemininity is a space that ruptures these attempts, that unsettles the linear progression from

enslaved fungible flesh to Black normatively gendered citizen. Black transfemininity both moves with the weight of history, while at the same time pointing us toward those uncharted territories for more livable futures. In this way, Black transfemmes might be conceived as walking ruptures of temporality and the supposedly stable geographies of normative gender. I want to propose Black transfemininity as a space of rupturing, an opening up and a pulling apart of the social fabric, a rending of our discursive lexicons, and the productive unsettling of our imaginaries. I have been thinking through Black transfemininity as a social and temporal rupturing for about a year now, and I rest, tentatively, on the language of *unbecoming*. It is my proposal that we can think of Black transfemmes as practicing, embodying, and navigating what I am preliminarily calling a politics and poetics of unbecoming. I conceive of unbecoming as marked by and marking Black transfemmes as the following: (1) a movement away from the normative maleness and supposed protections and freedoms it should garner; (2) as a thingness (or a relationship to things) that remembers those instantiating conditions of enslavement, a temporal rupture, a proving that the “past is not the past” for those living in the wake (Sharpe 2016); and finally, (3) unbecoming as a coming undone, an embrace of the generative possibilities of transitioning as a state of simultaneous building while tearing away and being torn apart. In my still-unfolding conception of unbecoming, I am trying to think with and think through the generative capacities of standing with/in female flesh ungendered, while also not eschewing or minimizing the violence that underpins and flows through and on this social positioning and embodied practice.

By thinking through Black transfemininity as rupture, we may begin to think through and actualize what I am calling a poetics and praxis of unbecoming. The Black transfeminine subject is the undoing of the social categories of normative gender in the Black community. By claiming her femininity, she moves toward the “tangle of pathology” and the inherent illegitimacy that Spillers has noted as a disavowal of enfleshment and its rupturing logics of femaleness. Unbecoming as a praxis marks the multivalent ways in which the Black transfemme is marked and unmarked by both social structures. She is unbecoming as she transitions into that “her” she has always known herself to be. She is unbecoming as she stands in, seemingly welcoming, the shame of a Black masculinity denied, deranged, and emasculated. She is unbecoming as she has no history and theory to give herself a name. She is always coming into the narrative as an irruption, as a destabilizing character in the business as usual. Black transfemmes navigate the social landscape as an insistence on that very space being undone to better serve her. Just as theories of enfleshment offer up a critique of normative humanity, unbecoming asks us all to reckon with gender as an unfinished myth. I suggest that thinking through Black transfemininity as rupture can do the work of transfiguring, as outlined by Marshall (Kai M.) Green and Treva C. Ellison (2014: 223),

as that practice which is “a form of radical political and intellectual production that takes place at the crossroads of trauma, injury, and the potential for material transformation and healing.” Working with and through rupture can allow us to begin to name the harm that Black transfeminine subjects face and attempt, however imperfectly, to begin to actualize the productive capacity of being unsettled, uncertain, and undone.

**Erique Zhang:** I’ll jump in here to say that I proposed the term *trans femme of color theory* as an admittedly imperfect way to name something I had been thinking through both in my research and in my lived experience as a nonbinary trans femme Asian American in the academy. I think it’s important that we’re interrogating what that term does, what it doesn’t do, and what it *could* do. I appreciate, Julian, your skepticism toward theories of identity. I want to be clear that I do not mean to suggest that all trans femme of color experiences are comparable, and I believe it is important to attend to the specificities of different racialized histories and how these histories have differentially produced gender within our communities. Rather, I see this theory as a tool to parse through how these processes of racialization and gendering occur. My goal here is to draw on our respective backgrounds—both academic and personal—to imagine how a trans femme of color theory (or critique, or analytic, or whatever we want to call it) might help explicate these processes.

I offer any such theory, too, as a rejection of white supremacy’s call for Asian Americans to act as “model minorities.” As my friend and colleague Rachel Kuo (2018: 51) writes in her work on networked and mediated Black-Asian solidarities, “Racialization processes are mutually constitutive, thus cannot happen in a vacuum but must occur relative to and in interaction with other racial positions and dynamics.” Indeed, white supremacy has always positioned Asian Americans in relation to Black Americans—often as in conflict with each other—and this positioning is meant to foreclose the possibility of cross-racial solidarities. In naming a trans femme of color theory, I oppose white supremacy’s dependence on division and instead seek to build bridges.

While we may find ourselves housed in women’s and gender studies departments and while we all have training in queer or feminist theory, I find it telling that we are largely approaching the question of trans femme of color theory from a decidedly non-capital *T* “trans studies” perspective. We are all drawing from genealogies of Black studies, Black feminist thought, Asian American studies, critical race theory, and so on. I would hazard a guess that many of us have felt marginalized within the broader traditions of queer and gender studies inasmuch as these interdisciplines have been dominated by white theorization. I certainly have felt discouraged from enrolling in feminist theory courses that relegate “woman of color feminisms” to one week on the syllabus. Echoing Cathy

Cohen's (1996: 440) critique of (white) queer politics as "built around a simply dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual" in ways that elide, rather than critically examine and engage with, the linkages between race, class, gender, and sexuality, I have sometimes half-joked before that my solidarity lies more with cisgender women of color than with white trans women. What I mean by this is that as a queer Asian American, my experience of gender has always been racialized, just as my experience of race has always been gendered—and so my understanding of my gender often aligns more closely with cis Asian American women's experiences than with white trans women's.

The glaring lack of trans women and femmes of color in trans studies spaces, where white trans folks and trans masculine folks abound, has often meant that I've had to turn to other fields to understand trans femme of color experience. Anecdotally speaking, I recently attempted to name all the trans women and femme scholars of color I know who are housed in women's, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS) departments and could think of only one who is tenured, plus a handful of junior faculty. Thankfully, our loose cohort of junior scholars seems to be turning the tide—Julian, Ava, Tamsin, and Nathan all hold tenure-track appointments in WGSS departments, and LaVelle will be starting her tenure-track appointment in the 2024–25 academic year. Meanwhile, other senior scholars, such as micha cárdenas, Jules Gill-Peterson, and Charlotte Tate, contribute to the field of trans studies, even if they are tenured outside WGSS. This roundtable, thus, was meant to address not just a lack in terms of theory but also a lack in terms of employment: we've necessarily had to approach trans femme of color studies from fields that are not trans studies, if such a coherent field even exists, because trans studies was not built for us.

From an Asian Americanist perspective, I think a lot about how histories of migration and immigration legislation have produced ideologies about Asian men and women in the United States. As early as 1875, US legislation banned Chinese women from entering the country under the assumption that Chinese—and by extension, all East Asian—women were "immoral" (read: prostitutes) and that Chinese labor was a threat to the US economy (read: the white labor force). This ban was extended in 1882 to prohibit the immigration of all people from East Asia, with certain exceptions. Together, these two laws produced what have been called bachelor societies. Filmmaker Richard Fung, has explored the kinds of homosocialities that came out of these histories between Chinese immigrant men, although in a Chinese Canadian context where similarly restrictive acts were passed in 1885 and 1923 (for example, in his 1996 film *Dirty Laundry*).

The history of immigration legislation and bachelor societies, along with Yellow Peril tropes of sexually deviant Asian men preying on innocent white women, have produced a kind of presumed Asian male femininity in the West. As David Henry Hwang (1986: 82–83) famously wrote in *M. Butterfly*:

As soon as a Western man comes into contact with the East—he’s already confused . . . The West thinks of itself as masculine—big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor . . . but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom—the feminine mystique.

In what I somewhat facetiously call the canon of Asian American masculinist writing, this emasculation is tantamount to imperialism: to be feminine is to be *dominated*, and thus portrayals of Asian men as effeminate and desexed are symbolic of broader geopolitical struggles between the West and Asia, most notably Western and especially American military intervention in Asia.

However, as Martin Manalansan (2003) and C. Winter Han (2015) argue, gender and race intersect in particular ways in queer Asian American masculine experiences. While some queer Asian American men, according to Han, might respond to these stereotypes by overcompensating for their masculinity, others instead embrace femininity, taking pride in stereotypes about effeminate Asian men. And this embracing of femininity acts as a rejection not of masculinity per se, but of the *white* masculinities that preclude the simultaneous existence of Asian masculinities.

I do not bring up these masculinist critiques to suggest that trans femininity and (queer) male femininities are equivalent. Rather, my point here is that in the West, gender and race are and must be understood as, to quote C. Riley Snorton (2017: 8), “inextricably linked yet irreconcilable and irreducible projects.” The construction of Western genders relies on the simultaneous abjection of non-Western genders (in this roundtable, we’re talking primarily about Black and Asian genders, but this also includes Latinx, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and other global gender formations). Returning to Julian’s point about labor, it is also no coincidence that the history of Asian immigration in the West has always been tied to gendered Asian labor—the Asian man’s “cheap” labor and the Asian woman’s “immoral” labor. The focus on aesthetics in my own research also draws on what Anne Anlin Cheng (2019) calls *ornamentalism*, or the ways in which the “yellow woman” is produced as decorative—ornamental—and thus not performing productive labor.

So where does this leave the Asian American trans femme? Lore/tta LeMaster and Michael Tristano (2021) take up drag queen Gia Gunn, particularly during her pre-transition stint on the television series *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, as a key but contentious figure in constructing the Asian American trans femme. I’m ambivalent about this essay. I’m not sure I buy their argument that Gia’s performance of womanhood relies on her being “almost White,” especially given that they argue that she simultaneously employs “self-Orientalization.” In other words, they suggest that her performance of race and gender both minimizes *and* maximizes her Asian racialization. Which is it?



However, I do want to tease out their articulation of trans femme of color identity as “deliberate and center[ing] relational survival against racist and phobic publics” (13). I think this definition aligns nicely with what we’ve been discussing here: the relationality among trans women and femmes of color (and between trans women of color and cis women of color), the (im)possibility of trans femme of color life in a world that is not designed for our survival. To return to Nathan’s point about tranifesting, I wonder where hope comes into the picture. Wanting to survive suggests that there is hope for something better that awaits us on the other side. How might we reframe strategies of survival as tranifesting a future utopia, one that resists pessimistic antirelationality in favor of “an understanding of queerness as collectivity” (Muñoz 2009: 11)? I’m an optimist, I’ll admit.

**LaVelle Ridley:** My articulation of what a trans femme of color theory might be, Eriq, depends on that optimism! As a Black trans cultural studies scholar, I look at the creative and critical ways in which trans women and femmes of color navigate the world. Through a concept I call *critical trans\* imagination*, Black trans women writers and artists engage in self, knowledge, and freedom making: theorizing, in other words. This imagination manifests—rather, tranifests—through the arrays of strategies writers like Janet Mock, CeCe McDonald, and Toni Newman use to imaginatively bridge their embodied and creative experiences as catalysts for epistemological and political change. For example, in her acclaimed first memoir *Redefining Realness*, Janet Mock (2014) engages in multiple forms of embodied practices of self-fashioning. She describes developing an alter ego named Keisha, speaking to boys on the phone as Keisha after school, and eventually internalizing Keisha as a critically imaginative element of her multiracial trans girlhood in Oahu. Young Mock explains, “Keisha was more real to me than I was to myself. . . . She was fully me, the me I knew myself to be in those quiet instances when all I had to do was merely be” (76). This critical imagination tranifests a more serene inner life and assuredness in her femmeness and transness. This is just one example from one memoir by one individual trans woman of color. The theories and forms of freedom thus crafted are as varied and myriad as the category “trans femme of color” allows.

I’d like to return to Nate’s emphasis on processes of unbecoming and the work of Black trans femininity as simultaneous creation and destruction. It is important to acknowledge the multiplicity of actions embedded within trans femme of color theory’s possibilities. As I have claimed, trans women and femmes of color utilize imagination as a way to craft self and freedom in their life writing, art, and public engagement. Similarly, these subjects are vital points of knowledge production, noting shifts in how we think about the complex relationships, and thus ultimate incoherence of, race, gender, sexuality, and class. Trans women and femmes of color have made significant advancements in how we

think about politics, capitalism, the prison industrial complex and its complete abolition. CeCe McDonald immediately comes to mind.

McDonald's prison writing illuminates both her personal history and the interplay between political ideologies, embodiment, and the precarity faced by nonconforming youth. Her experiences of vulnerability to harm because of her perceived nonnormativity reveals the circulation of what I call *regimes of unprotection*, which calls attention toward how structures of dominance, such as transmisogynoir and neoliberal racial capitalism, purposefully construct certain populations as legally inviolable yet persistently vulnerable to all degrees of harm. Such is the harm McDonald experienced in 2011 when she and a group of friends were attacked by a drunken group of white supremacist homophobes. McDonald's ensuing incarceration sparked a national outcry for justice.

In the 2015 documentary *Free CeCe!* (dir. Jacqueline Gares), McDonald speaks with feminist abolitionist life writer Angela Y. Davis. After learning about McDonald's case and hearing her describe her life story and experiences while incarcerated in a men's prison, Davis speaks to her interlocutor's insights (modeling a nice example of how Black feminist thought is always already thinking in relationship with trans subjectivity) and offers, "We often replicate the structures of oppression and violence in our own emotions [without even realizing it]. For example, the gender policing that often takes place through the work of the authorities: there are 'men's' prisons and 'women's' prisons. And therefore trans people, they are caught in the middle of this violent binary that is supposedly based on biology." This rejection of biologically determined politics in regard to Black women echoes the seminal Combahee River Collective Black Feminist Statement of 1977. Regimes of unprotection are emotional as well as political regimes, social patterns that continue to circulate via the purposeful abandonment of women, girls, and femmes like us who trouble the supposedly firm lines between the racial, gender, sexual, and economic status quo.

**Ava L. J. Kim:** I'm interested in a trans femme of color theory that disrupts moments of becoming and orients us toward new world epistemologies. What I mean by that is how do we define new ways of being that break the valuation of some life over others? Here I'm thinking of Sylvia Wynter (2003): the overrepresentation of a "degodded" European Man as a stand-in for "humanity" reveals processes of subjectification and demands that we find new genres of being. For Wynter, these new "genres" counter what's considered human versus nonhuman, developed versus underdeveloped. Her emphasis on form points us toward a melding of the material and the aesthetic, an intersection that trans people of color are especially well equipped to untangle and define.

Nathan beautifully describes one of these forms as an unbecoming, a "state of simultaneous building while tearing away and being torn apart." How do

we balance the violence of “being torn apart” while finding a way to articulate what we’re building? In a moment of heightened scrutiny for trans people, many scholars have outlined the dangers of visibility. In the United States there is a direct correlation between the increased visibility of trans people and anti-trans violence at both legislative and interpersonal levels. Trans women of color in particular become most visible in death or in scenes of extreme violence, but they also go unseen when seeking support or working under duress. For years trans femmes of color (TFOC) have struggled to see their labor recognized in medicine, art, activism, and academia, among many others. How, then, do we grapple with the TFOC paradox of being both hypervisible and invisible at the same time?

Consider the now common practice of acknowledging trans women of color who have been murdered in a given year, shortly before a lengthy presentation on white trans life. Or the trans authors who make disclaimers in their work that their experience is not—and could never be—as difficult as that of Black and Brown trans women. This performative declaration seemingly combats the problem of invisibility but instead reifies trans of color objecthood: articulation solely through death, abjection, and unmanageability.

Scholars in Asian American studies have described this dual process as racial abstraction: racialized praise that obscures the domination being enacted. As Leslie Bow (2022: 8) writes, there is a “terrifying ambiguity effectively masked by declarations of attraction compulsively expressed over and over again in the same narrative frames or forms . . . object love announces a lack that requires compensation; it functions as a screen for what is repressed.” Though Bow focuses specifically on anti-Asian racism, her description of “racist love” is an apt description for cursory acknowledgments of violence against trans women of color. The impulse to repeat that trans women of color experience the worst forms of violence with no effort to sit with that violence or articulate trans-of-color life merely “announces a lack” of worthwhile being.

This is not a call to simply highlight “trans joy,” though that can be a differently productive discourse; instead what I hope we can orient ourselves toward is a more meaningful engagement with anti-trans violence. As Cameron Awkward-Rich (2017: 826) writes, there is more to be gained from sitting with negativity than simply disavowing it; instead we might “read from a position both committed to the idea that trans lives are ‘lived, hence livable’ while also taking feeling bad as a mundane fact.” This “requires being willing to lean into worldviews that might be hostile to . . . [trans-of-color] life” (831). Lingering with abjection then extends beyond acknowledgment. Scholars like C. Riley Snorton (2017) and Eric Stanley (2021: 79) show us the importance of deconstructing violence—Snorton on the violence and captivity that defines modern transness, Stanley on longings for the “sight of criminality”—and with this work,

witness can extend beyond recognition into other grammars of being. We gain nothing by simply reifying hierarchies of humanity. Instead I'd like to think we're building. What genres of being can we make?

A first attempt. In 2014 a trans Filipina sex worker named Jennifer Laude was murdered by US serviceman Joseph Pemberton near the US military base, Subic Bay, Philippines. The case propelled Laude into a national discourse about US imperialism, militarization, and land acquisition in Southeast Asia. The ambiguity of US jurisdiction in the Philippines grew into an extended legal battle that ended with a short sentencing and the eventual pardon of Pemberton. The Philippine president who granted him that freedom, Rodrigo Duterte, was a prominent ally of US president Donald Trump. Five years later, in March of 2021, six Asian women in Atlanta, Georgia, were killed in a shooting spree that led to a deluge of proclamations in the United States—"stop Asian hate." The sound bites about anti-Asian racism multiplied, but the event itself couldn't bear the weight of a one-hundred-year history repeatedly erased. Public discourse filtered the event through the Page Act or the Chinese Exclusion Act, an important history, but one that could not fully capture the violence that led to their deaths or their connection to transnational violence in the present.

Laude, and the six Atlanta women—Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, and Yong Ae Yue—were read as racial objects, amenities that the killers consumed and disposed of. In both cases, white men sought sexual services immediately before killing their victims. US empire has long used sexual violence as a tool of military expansion, degrading sex workers and Asian women as nonhuman (Reyes 2019). The genre of being they reinforce is a "humanity" that justifies the endless growth of empire behind a guise of freedom and democracy. Though it's true these examples are held together by a lethal combination of sexism, racism, and imperialism, they also make visible a transnational genre of being, a laboring behind closed doors that defies US exceptionalism. Highlighting connections between these women helps us establish new types of relations, not as victims of US hate crimes—as Dean Spade (2015) and others have warned us against—but instead as connected to a global struggle against the colluding forces of fascism. Grieving these women through non-national solidarities enables us to move beyond a perpetrator/victim model into a larger war against the ruling class.

But more than that, Laude's example helps us connect individual agency to other larger contexts. Laude embodied a Filipina femininity that threatened Pemberton's sense of entitlement, whiteness, and masculinity. This is a form of resilience that's unfairly distributed, but it also demonstrates an adaptability that disrupts norms of nationhood and objectification. Laude actively connected her life to other sex workers, women of color, and trans laborers; and her transition demonstrates a new genre of being that defies a conventional hierarchy of

humanity. Trans embodiment offers us new strategies that are seemingly contradictory: choosing what might be considered abject for some but still productive relationally. Laude's life strains against objecthood and offers us a glimpse into meaningful transnational struggle: not simply a cursory mention of violence but a defiance that unsettles our conventional understandings of the world. For me a TFOC theory opens up these possibilities, revealing multiple operations of violence and demonstrating the power in finding new genres.

In my trans studies classes teaching students in the United States, I've learned that building these frames of reference is essential. Frequently, students express frustration and horror about anti-trans violence in the Americas—sometimes advising me which texts need trigger warnings—but less so with case studies in parts of the global South. Though this is oversimplified, I do take it as exemplary of a certain kind of neoliberal violence that's become somewhat ordinary. In all our texts and readings on trans people, one of the primary modes of state violence is a technique of isolation. The law reduces structural violence to individual hate crimes, documentation bars people's access to resources, and police and state agencies incarcerate and separate. We work to make these struggles interconnected so that we can build stronger solidarities and militant communities. My hope is that a TFOC theory can do the same across nation and region. Doing so gives our students new frames of reference so that we might see gender transition not just as an individual coming into being, or even just coming into relation with other trans people, but also more largely as adapting to a transnational fight for liberation.

**Tamsin Kimoto:** The provocation to think through what a trans femme of color theory might be is such a helpful starting point for a number of reasons. First and foremost, I think it puts the question of who is given leave to theorize squarely on the table. As a number of you mentioned during the NWSA roundtable, trans femmes of color are often the bad objects of trans theory, simultaneously central to and abjected from the conversation (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). Asking “What is trans femme of color theory?,” then, can feel like we're breaking the rules in some kind of way by looking through and with our own histories and frames of reference, and I think it's important to resist that feeling. Or at least to not let it shape how we can name what it is we're aiming to do. At the same time, naming it as *theory* forces us to bear in mind the risks of theorizing and of potentially taking up things that might not ultimately serve our interests or those of our communities. Roderick Ferguson (2012), for example, points us toward the histories of the “inter-disciplines” as an important reminder of how it is that we can find ourselves being reabsorbed into institutions like the university and its attendant economies of knowledge production. Naming what we do as theory places us in relation to the broader fields of theorizing to which we are each indebted and also

should make us examine that relationality: what are the potential inheritances we carry with us, and how are they showing up in what it is that we're doing? And given the demands of academic publishing—as something that structures our access to present or future employment—and the aforementioned abjected status of trans femmes of color, how do we also attend to the inheritances those fields of theorizing are not yet able or willing to name? We risk doing epistemic and conceptual violence when we theorize, and it would be a mistake to assume otherwise.

Given that, I am always curious about our suspicion of terms like *identity* and the work that suspicion is actually doing. It often reads to me like a concern we've inherited from our teachers but one that, on examination, doesn't do the work we need it to. As someone trained primarily in the history of European philosophy, the specter of which is where concerns about identity often point, I have to confess to being puzzled by the notion that there is a there there. Even if we restrict our reading of the history of theories of identity to modernity for good Foucauldian reasons, there are so many concepts of identity to choose from. Which is the one we're worried about replicating? I worry about this especially because of how concerns about identity are used to discipline the kinds of theorizing that are seen as permissible or sufficiently intellectual. This often appears in the work of (white) queer and feminist theorists as a kind of rejoinder to the work of Black feminists and other feminists of color around concepts like intersectionality. As Kristie Dotson (2018) has argued, however, such an exchange presumes that Black feminisms draw on the same conceptual registers, or that they draw on them in the same way and with the same motivations, as the people aiming to criticize them. This is, ironically enough, a problem identified by the very theorists often cited as sources for the critique, such as Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1994), or Jacques Derrida in *Margins of Philosophy* (1982), or by any number of scholars engaging their work, like Gayatri Spivak (2010), Saidiya Hartman (2008), and many others.

I'm belaboring this point because I think what all of you have offered, both here and during the roundtable itself, is an argument for thinking through trans femme of color theory in relation to identity, not as who is in or out, but as something that is messy and incomplete in its materiality. In other words, identity not as who one is in some final sense but to whom and how one sits in relation dynamically, historically, politically. Julian, I think, points us to this by asking about the relational ethics of nonbinary femininities, and Ava by evoking the murder of Jennifer Laude in conversation with the murders of the Asian women in Atlanta. In my own thinking, I am less interested in thinking through what it means to be trans femme of color or what a trans femme of color theory might do by focusing on the lack of singularity of the phrase *trans femme of color* than I am in focusing on the multiple layerings of reality embedded in that identification.

As someone engaged in Asian American studies and abolition, this often looks very similar to the kinds of directions that Ava and Erique point to, as well as by thinking about the forces that structured the life of my great-great-grandmother and that those who've come after her continue to reckon with. I'll also admit that my worry here is not strictly academic, if there is such a thing; I worry what happens when our theorizing becomes so untethered from the material conditions of trans femme of color lives that we become superfluous to it. There have been many recent examples of scholarship occurring under the aegis of "trans studies," and not just by white scholars, in which I have to wonder whether it even matters that trans people exist. We are, after all, not immune to reproducing dynamics of erasure (Koyama 2006; Namaste 2000). All of this to say, whatever it is that trans femme of color theories turn out to be, I hope they remain deeply and messily entangled in our lives (Griffin-Gracy 2018).

**æryka jourdaine hollis o'neil:** I am so appreciative for your insistence that the function of identity continues to be essential in our consideration of any productive conception of a nascent trans femme of color theory, Tamsin—not as innate being but in and inherently *as* a relational unbecoming—which Nathan has so poignantly brought into our emerging lexicon. For me, before being an artist, and certainly before being an academic, I can only honestly approach and organize my thoughts for what a trans femme of color theory would most disruptively and provocatively become by starting *in the flesh*. As a Black, nonbinary trans femme, I am aware that each of these identifications, however politically invested I am in them to varying degrees, also entails a kind of necessary misrecognition that tries to capture the essence of a nonhuman spirit. However, this acknowledgment of misrecognition is not equal to a complete disavowal of their imbricated *feltness* or a facile equivocation that the legacies of our shared dispossession along gendered or racial lines are experienced in the same ways, either within the confines of the academy where we each locate our work, or in the various other communities we claim and call home, even and especially if they don't always claim us. I have never been comfortable in espousing "born this way" essentialisms, as the continuities of my life from Black "queer boi" to Black "transfemme" have always been clear to me as a kind of catachresis akin to Christina Sharpe's (2016: 76) notion of "anagrammatical blackness" as that which "exists as an index of violability and also potentiality." When *trans* "abuts the modifier Black" as its prefix, dominant conceptions of transness are then called into question by necessity and undergo a complete "*rearranging . . . putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning is made*" (122, 76). A trans femme of color theory might then require us to collectively move some of the dusty furniture and tropes around in (white) trans and Black (cis)<sup>2</sup> studies, turn them on their head, or just get rid of them altogether.

The ideas that animate both my scholarly and artistic practices are, in part, brought together by a long-standing personal desire to better understand the structural and intimate convergence of both intramural and extramural violence—symbolic and material—experienced by Black trans and queer femmes, which structure the terms of identification, visibility, and recognition that surround them. As part of these simultaneous projects, one part of my goal is to examine and illustrate the overwhelming cisheteropatriarchal and transnormative (and increasingly transmedicalist) conceptions of collectivity that are so often revealed in both Black protest movements and (non-Black) LGTBQ organizing. For me, I cannot approach any discussion of community, identity, representation, recognition, and more specifically in this instance, Blackness as it abuts transness and theoretical inquiries thereof, without also deeply considering what kinds of oftentimes contradictory desires, aspirations, and arrangements of power are entangled within each. In particular as of late, what concerns me is a seeming unrelenting preoccupation with recurrent models of representation in trans studies and trans cultural production more broadly. In response to the supposed dearth of “positive” depictions of trans femmes of color, the media reverberations of the infamously dubbed “trans tipping point” have in many ways been marked by the increased attempt to populate the visual field with figures of “trans excellence.” A trans femme of color theory, for me, must entail an incisive critique of this maneuver and apply pressure to the assumption of representation’s utility: for who, when, and toward what ends?

In a preliminary attempt to illustrate, I turn to an anecdote as a window into where my thinking on representation begins as of late. I want to preface this by saying it’s not intended to foreground trauma and injury in our discussion of trans femme of color representation at the outset. I share in Ava’s leeriness and exhaustion around the seeming ubiquity of “trans women of color in particular becom[ing] most visible in death or in scenes of extreme violence.” However, our position as trans femmes of color in the academy—as simultaneously “objects” and authors of inquiry—produces a different relation to our work that must be considered. Relatedly, as Snorton and Haritaworn (2013: 70) state in “Trans Necropolitics,” “Whenever the work of legibility is enacted upon transgender bodies [of color], it is always a process of translation—with risks (of appropriation) and payoffs.” Later, they explain that the deaths of “[Black] trans women . . . act as resources—both literally and metaphorically—for the articulation and visibility of a more privileged transgender subject” (71). It is paradoxically because of our vital position as an absent presence in the academy and beyond that I am interested in looking closer at some of those moments in which even the spectacles of violence against us and how they circulate can be considered as instructive for where our strivings and more radical capacities for representation



might lead. As a filmmaker and academic, and just as a Black trans femme in the world, I'm always trying to hold onto both simultaneously: the precarity and the possibility.

"Please, please! Can you just get me to the store?! I wanted to get to the store because the only thing that's really running through my mind is 'If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die on camera.' I wanna go to the camera, and if anything happens, I wanna go on camera and die. I want people to know what actually happened!" (Dior 2020). These words are an excerpt from a YouTube video, an informal testimony from Iyanna Dior, a young Minneapolis Black trans woman, describing the brutal attacks she experienced during the height of the George Floyd protests in June of 2020 that went viral soon thereafter, including reposts from prominent figures such as Janet Mock. These words have been etched into my memory and haunting me since I first heard them as I was completing research in preparation for what would become my culminating master of fine arts documentary thesis film alongside my dissertation. In making that film, I grappled with what it meant for me to be revisiting such horrific imagery to both work through my own grief and cinematically assist in figuring a "true-to-life telling of what it means to be a Black trans woman [or femme] in this reality," while also inevitably retraumatizing myself again and again (Gary and Wilderson 2020: 12).<sup>3</sup> As a partial revision of a quote from Sharpe (2017) à la Elizabeth Alexander, I had to keep asking myself, "what does it mean to be Black," trans, nonbinary, or otherwise ungendered "and look at this? Where do you stand in relation to [this image]?" Here the academic in me was at odds with the Black trans femme—the latter no longer merely an allegorical or archival curiosity for theoretical inquiry or the obligatory political prop of progressives and the Left—but instead my proximity to the image demanded a different kind of kindred spectatorial embrace and witnessing.

In producing that short film, I also considered the ethics of repurposing that imagery, even if brief and distorted, given how widely disseminated it had been on social media, a landscape that is so often pervaded with footage of Black trans people being brutalized as if for sport. I wanted to somehow intervene into the image to produce a different kind of regard, care, critique, and relationality so that I too could inhabit the world differently. I wondered, as part of an ongoing dilemma that is at once scholarly, artistic, and deeply personal: what is the relationship that Black people, and Black trans women, femmes, and gender-nonconforming folk have to surveillance and the injunction for self-disclosure and public display—to make the "truth" of themselves visible and legible—particularly as it relates to their identities, embodiments, lives, and deaths always already being so readily available for public scrutiny that exceeds their consent. Of course, for Iyanna Dior, the evidentiary function that the camera's

gaze is so often burdened with providing for those whose own testimony is consistently met with incredulity is reason enough to “wanna go to the camera and die.” But alongside this troubling reality, I wanted to explore what alternative kinds of relations to the camera, to self-documentation, representation, and intramural recognition of one’s own mortality this produces for Black trans people, whose lived experiences are so often deemed outside the terms of legibility apart from their superficial and objectifying reduction to carnal aesthetics.

How might we inhabit these terms of visibility and representation differently? In her asserted desire “to want to go to the camera and die,” Dior radically dictates the terms on which the violence against her will be made visible, circulated, and consumed. While the city of Minneapolis was still burning in the wake of unrest following George Floyd’s murder by a corrupt police force, a group of Black cis denizens went from rightfully looting and destroying state property to deputizing themselves and attempting to loot Iyanna Dior of her own Black trans body. As best she could, she attempted to harness the gaze of onlookers and surveillance cameras by trying to take control of what she felt would otherwise become her posthumous narrative. In this sense, Dior follows the legacy of Mamie Till who insisted on an open casket for her son, brutalized beyond recognition by white supremacists—with some notable revisions. In this instance, Dior’s attack was perpetrated by a mob of cisgender Black men and women. Additionally, Dior’s attack is sadly exceptional in that she survived, whereas so many other Black trans women and trans femmes of color have not. Finally, against the prevalence of countless narratives that would emplot Black cisgender and heterosexual men and boys into the public discourse as the most grievable victims of anti-Black violence, an affective archive of which Mamie Till’s son, Emmett, is of continued historical prominence, Dior casts herself as worthy of that same care. Dior’s discussion of her attack that followed and her self-proclaimed acknowledgment of the camera’s cannibalizing gaze that she attempts to upend make clear that a new theory of trans femme of color representation is urgently necessary.

When Glissantian “right to opacity for everyone” becomes in some ways structurally unavailable for Black trans femmes and other trans femmes of color, Dior and others might be said to foreground their lived experience, outlined as it is by unrelenting and quotidian violence “on both sides,” as a means for insisting on otherwise modes of representation within those overdetermined constraints (Glissant 1997). A kind of clandestine, ephemeral self-authorship even from without, to riff on Frantz Fanon’s famous assertion,<sup>4</sup> and “actually *claiming* the monstrosity of a female with the potential to ‘name’ [*herself*],” to follow Spillers (2003: 229). As Wilderson (2010: 66) states, “Only when real violence is coupled

with *representational 'monstrosity,'* can Blacks move from the status of things to the status of . . . of what, we'll just have to wait and see." This is a project which Black trans femmes and other trans femmes of color have variously taken up with their own flesh. If the specter and spectacularization of our bodies, identities, aesthetics, and knowledge production are inevitable on both sides of mortality, *let's give them something to talk about.*

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## Notes

1. The ballroom scene is a cultural formation comprising (mostly) urban Black and Brown lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people who join "houses" and compete against members of other houses in myriad competitive categories—including runway, fashion, realness, face, and performance—for prizes ranging from trophies to \$100,000.
2. As I have written elsewhere, the use of cisgender identity in relationship to Black people represents somewhat of a misnomer. However, in this instance, suffice it to say cis Black people and "Black (cis) studies" might otherwise be understood as those who *believe* themselves to be and cling to cisgender identity, seduced by its ruses of stability, coherence, and ascendancy. See hollis o'neil 2018.
3. Partially inspired by the notable absence thereof in Ja'Tovia Gary's powerful experimental feature *The Giverny Document*.

4. "I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (Fanon 1967: 116).

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