TRANSMISOGYNY AND THE ABJECTION OF GIRLCOCK

A Thesis Submitted to

The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Women and Gender Studies

University of Regina

by

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Regina, Saskatchewan

July 2021

UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to construct a theoretical framework around transmisogyny, the intersectional violence and marginalization faced by trans women, trans fem(me)s, and non-binary people assigned male at birth. I explore the ways in which disgust, fear, and anxiety around trans women's bodies, centered around the potential existence of a trans woman's cock (which I call *girlcock*, and which can be corporeal, or imaginary, as in the case of trans women who have had genital surgery, or who otherwise do not have a penis) casts them as *abject* - dirty, placeless, and beyond the horizon of discourse. I explore this placelessness in classic feminist and lesbian literature written around sexual difference, which has too often prioritized bodily (and more specifically genital) morphology over the full embodied experiences of gender and sexuality. Next I explore how recent examples of media deploy transmisogyny through the material and metaphorical abjection of trans women on the screen, and through discourses created around the media. Finally, I turn to a documentary pornographic film that portrays a BDSM Dominant/submissive relationship as an example of media that sublimes a trans woman's body and sexuality. Importantly, and in opposition to the first two examples, this documentary creates a place for the trans sub(ject) to exist in both the foreground and the background, and blurs the lines between sexual object, and sexual subject. This thesis seeks to not only examine and challenge the structures of transmisogyny, but to push back against them, and ultimately, sublime trans women's bodies and sexualities through the words of the thesis itself.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Claire Carter, who has been gentle, caring, and supportive through this process, and who has pushed me at every stage to create something that is truly my own. Thank you also to my thesis committee members, Dr. Charity Marsh, and Dr. Darlene Juschka who helped shape my Master's program and also provided valuable insight and direction throughout my thesis writing process.

Next I would like to acknowledge the contributions made by my partner Jaye Kovach. Jaye often encountered ideas in their earliest stages, and helped me develop them into something tangible. Many of the ideas in this thesis have been co-created through intense conversations between the two of us. I would also like to acknowledge the emotional labour of everyone in my gay little family. Staring into the abyss of transmisogyny for two years has been difficult, and the support I have received from my wife, Avianna, along with my partners Jaye, Aspen, Nova, and metamour Jacq has been an important and grounding aspect of this work. I love you all so much!

Finally, I am grateful for receiving a Social Science and Humanities Research Council Graduate Student Research Award, which has allowed me to focus on my studies and live a more comfortable life. Likewise, I am indebted to the Senior Women's Academic Administrators of Canada, who awarded me the Student Award in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, and the Department of Women and Gender Studies who aided me financially through the awarding of Teaching Assistantships.

Dedication

To my schoolyard bullies

Who treated me like a woman

Long before anyone else

And who instilled in me

The strong belief

That I am too much of a pussy

To kill myself

I'm happy now

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Introduction

As I examine my thesis, I can't help but notice how it reflects and refracts my embodied experiences as a white genderqueer trans woman. This thesis is about transmisogyny and the abjection of trans women, their bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities from predominantly white feminist and lesbian spaces including theory, media, and pornography. I explore the ways in which disgust, fear, and anxiety around trans women's bodies, centered around the potential existence of a trans woman's cock (which I call *girlcock*, and which can be corporeal, or imaginary, as in the case of trans women who have had genital surgery, or who otherwise do not have a penis) casts them as *abject*—dirty, placeless, and beyond the horizon of discourse (Kristeva, 1990). To exist beyond the horizon of discourse, to be placeless is to exist *in excess* of society and of place; in many material and tangible ways, trans women's bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities are defined as being in excess, as *too-much*. Z. Nicolazzo, a transfemme tenure track professor notes that "[m]y gender is trouble, and that trouble shows up in my course evaluations as a form of excess, of being *'too much'* or extra" (Jaekel & Nicolazzo 2017, p. 176, emphasis mine). I will argue throughout this thesis that through the metaphor of girlcock, trans women are said to be too loud, too angry, and too "male" to be safely allowed into feminist and lesbian spaces. This notion of too-much extends to our bodies as well, with the potential of our girlcocks being too-much flesh for many cissexist lesbian and feminist spaces, not to mention the too-muchness of our testosterone, or even the lingering side effects of testosterone such as the often-cited bone density and structure of trans women's archeological skeletons.

The theoretical framework I construct around transmisogyny centres the abjection of girlcock as both the metaphorical and material process through which trans women are cast as dangerous intruders in feminist and lesbian spaces. This is a move I have carefully considered, and one with which I cautiously approach. In a world that obsesses over and fetishizes the genitals of trans people, and in particular trans women, it is perhaps a risk to add to that discourse with a thesis centering *girlcock*. I am not intending to reduce trans women's bodies or sexualities to their genitals, but rather, demonstrate the ways in which this is done and normalized in society, and the way in which transmisogyny is founded upon the synecdochal reduction of white masculinity (i.e. the phallus) to the cock. In the same way a certain brand of feminism reduces (white cisgender) women to their genitals and reproductive capacities, so too does it reduce (white trans) women to their cocks and the violent potential of unconsentual penetration, "the brutal spreading of these two lips by a violating penis" (Irigaray, 1993, p. 29). The belief in the rapacious nature of trans women is well documented in the many "bathroom bills" and similar trans-antagonistic pieces of legislation that have recently been or are currently attempting to be passed in the US, UK, and other countries. Yet despite this claim of potential violence, there are only "extremely rare" reports of trans women (or even men posing as women) assaulting cisgender women in bathrooms and other sex segregated spaces or facilities (Barnett et al., 2018, p. 236), and often the reverse is true, trans women are assaulted all too frequently in these spaces (e.g. Stewart, 2019; Samson, 2020). I seek to understand this discourse of trans danger and perversion, the underlying structures of transphobia and transmisogyny, for without understanding the foundation upon which

these forms of hatred are built, we will struggle to overcome them and to find the sublime in trans subjectivities and experiences.

In the first chapter, "Phallic Subjects," I explore the problem of sexual difference from a French feminist perspective, a perspective that I see being prioritized amongst trans exclusionary "radical" feminists. While I certainly do not expect this thesis to change the minds of these feminists, there is a certain power in engaging with and understanding the underlying structures of (and perhaps even subverting) this framework. I suppose I build on the tradition of loving transformative justice that Kai Cheng Thom calls for in *I Hope We Choose Love* (2019). In many ways these texts have hurt me, have invoked discursive violence against my existence and yet they remain foundational within my philosophy and my understanding of gender and sex. French feminism is not unique in this way, however, and the theorists who have engaged with gender through the lense of US-centric queer studies have also contributed to the societal structures of transmisogyny. These texts have created and fostered feminist and lesbian communites that are ultimately suspicious of my existence, a suspicion I can never ignore for fear of my own safety, a suspicion that weighs on me constantly. Despite this harm, despite this weight, I *love* these texts; they are foundational to me, and that love shows up in the labour of close and transformational readings. While many theorists invoke transmisogyny through unconscious cissexist bias (of which I include Irigaray, who is centered through much of this thesis), some, like Grosz, are directly and overtly trans-antagonistic. While there is certainly value in engaging with these latter trans-antagonistic works, if only to better understand cissexism and transmisogyny, I

chose to prioritize my own care, and do not engage too deeply with these texts within this thesis.

I seek to untangle the problem of sexual difference from the notion of "biology" and demonstrate that while these theorists have long argued for the importance of "the body," em*bodied* experiences are diminished in favour of physical morphology (i.e. whether the subject has a penis or a vulva, vagina, and womb). These morphological bodily differences are said to be ontologically irreducible and defined by their relationship to the phallic function. The phallic function represents two non-overlapping positions, "all" and "not all." Our relationships to "all" and "not all," to *completion*, determines how we enter into the symbolic or how we are represented in language and society's mass consciousness. The narrative of bodily difference has been told through the Oedipal drama (Butler, 2004, p. 152) that inaugurates our existence as individual and desiring subjects, and while this drama ultimately centres sexual reproduction, I argue that if we prioritize embodied experiences, we should understand sexuality and desire through Merleau-Ponty's embodied sexual schema (1962). The sexual schema gives history and meaning to our embodied experiences and determines what use(s) we can make of our bodies. When understood in this way, we can see that to be desired (i.e. to be the target of another's sexuality) is to, in some ways, have control over the desiring subject's body, to *complete* that body and make it "all," whole.

Ignoring the existence of trans women's embodied and affective experiences in favour of the potential existence of their morphological (and, supposedly, inherently violent) cock is the base upon which transmisogyny is founded. For when we examine

the phallic myth of subject constitution, we can see that trans women, like cisgender women, are not "all" - our bodies are deemed incomplete and wanting. However, unlike cisgender women who have an (albeit subordinate) position within the framework of sexual difference, trans women are monsterized and abjected as a whole from the phallic economy—we are neither subject nor object, inside nor outside, but something else that is *placeless* and *dangerous* to the supremacy of the phallus. This *danger*, this *placelessness*, is what casts trans women as abject, and in order to survive this abjection, I suggest that trans women need to find the sublime in their embodied existence through whatever means of bodily, embodied, and social transition necessary. Finally, I present an invitation to reimagine Irigaray's interval as the personal process of transition or material re-embodiment, a process that brings us *into place* and that I believe has the potential to sublime our bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities by defining them against our desired selves, as opposed to the other. While transition is, perhaps, most obvious amongst trans people, it is a process that everyone engages with to some extent. Ultimately, I seek to acknowledge that each body is unique, and uniquely positioned, and that something as simple as genital morphology does not, indeed cannot, ontologically bind subjects.

In the second chapter, "The Abject," I build on the theoretical abjection of *girlcock*, and demonstrate that *girlcock* is materially abject, and often absent, within media created through a non-trans lense. I look at two pieces of media created by cisgender queer artists, Bruce LaBruce's film *The Misandrists* (2017), and Peaches's music video *Rub* (2015). Like the texts I approach in the first chapter, these are pieces of media that I *love* but that invoke transmisogyny. The first time I watched *The*

Misandrists, I was taken aback by the lack of girlcock within the final orgy (a scene that centers gratuitous shots of vulvas) and uttered "show girlcock you coward" not quite as quietly as I had intended, much to the amusement of those around me. I sought out a counterexample to the abjection of girlcock I read in *The Misandrists*, and initially turned to Peaches's *Rub* as a positive example of what the representation of trans women's bodies could look like. It was a music video that had been recommended to me by friends because of how it portrayed Danni Daniels, a "cock-and-tits wielding trans girl" (O'Hara, 2015). While I was initially excited about this positive representation, a closer and deeper reading of the video left me feeling deeply fetishized. Like the texts I analyze in the first chapter, both pieces of media have, in different ways, disappointed and hurt me through their reduction of trans women to their cocks, but despite this, I invest loving time and labour into an exploration and transformation of these pieces of media in order to unearth what we can learn from them, and ultimately and importantly, move towards a sublime representation of trans women, which I explore in the third chapter.

The Misandrists and *Rub* attempt to subvert a phallic (unconsciously cisgender) gaze through a transferring of the supremacy of the phallus to another body part—in both cases, the vulva (Butler, 1993). In this way, both pieces of media attempt to critique and deconstruct the phallic (i.e. white, middleclass, cisgender, heterosexual) gaze, and while they may be successful to some degree, we can observe that despite this intent, both pieces invoke transmisogyny through the inclusion of a "trans reveal scene" and the material absence or containment of girlcock from shots that attempt to construct lesbian or queer women's sexuality—and through this sexuailty, liberation. In both *The*

Misandrists, and *Rub*, we can read a trans reveal scene in which a woman's cock is shown or discovered for the first time, followed immediately by a cisgender character's reaction. While the reactions to girlcock in *The Misandrists* (suspicion and policing) and *Rub* (joy and celebration) are vastly different—a difference that we will observe is racialized as a result of the fugitivity of Black gender (Bey, 2019)—they both act, in different ways, to contain the trans woman's body within a phallic gaze, and perhaps more importantly, a phallic affective response. We are shown and told how we should respond to these bodies rather than simply allowing our bodies and desires to respond. I argue that while the phallus can be transferred to a different body part, it does not appear as though the penis can be resignified as something other than the phallus within a phallocentric economy (even a lesbian one). Any attempt to do so results in the abjection of the phallus/penis. Until this is possible, I believe that trans women's bodies and sexualities will forever be abject, contained, and *policed* in feminist, lesbian and queer women's spaces.

In the third chapter, "The Sublime," I turn to *The Training of Poe* (Vendetta, 2017) as an example of media that constructs a liberatory (expansive/sublime) politics of sexuality for (white) trans women. The film is described as being *co-created* by Bella Vendetta, a white cisgender woman, and Chelsea Poe, a white trans woman, and in this way, we can understand it to be created, at least in part, through a trans lense, though it should be noted that Vendetta explicitly states that it is not a "trans porn" (Kingstown, 2017). In the film, Poe acts as both a sexual object, and, through a series of reflective video diaries that are included in the film, sexual subject. Poe's body and sexuality are

provided ample room within the film, and there is a notable absence of a trans reveal scene constraining her body. Beyond this, there are shots that allow for the fullness of Poe's sexuality to exist, such as a shot of her girlcock dripping with precum - an affective (pre-conscious) response to Poe's embodied desire/sexuality. I discuss the importance of *place* and how a place is constructed for Poe throughout the film through her experience of being trained as a service sub. I note that because this coming into place occurs through the metaphor of slavery, it is a place that can most easily and uncritcally be taken up by *white* trans women. I then turn to Holloway's *SUB NOT SLAVE* (n.d.) and propose that a framework of BDSM and willful submission (versus slavery) can help us understand the process of material re-embodiment discussed in the first chapter, a process in which the body comes *into place*, in which the body (re-)shapes its own place, a process which is nothing short of what is required for trans women to sublime their bodies, to more fully inhabit and embody their gendered selves. I question, however, whether this bodily sublimation is *accessible*, or even *desirable* for many Black trans women. In Hortense Spillers' *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* (1987), Spillers describes how Black women have their subjectivity (and through their subjectivity, their body and their gender) stripped through the material impacts of the legacy of the middle passage. We can read beyond the act of ungendering to an antagonism between Blackness and (white) gender, as Nicholas Eppert does in *This Body Which is (Not) Mine* (2019). If gender is, as Eppert suggests, a (mis)recognition of white embodiment, then gendered and embodied sublimation is a sublimation of whiteness. To move beyond this whiteness, to make a place for Black trans women requires that we make a place for Blackness, that

we sublime Blackness, a project that is outside the scope of this thesis. While subliming Blackness may be outside the scope of the thesis, acknowledging the importance of this task speaks to the importance of coalition building within and across movements, as trans visual artist Micah Bazant notes on a visual media piece about Marsha P. Johnson, "No Pride for Some of Us Without Liberation for All of Us" (2013).

This thesis builds its foundation upon a tradition of primarily white, primairly cisgender feminist and queer theorists who have written about gender. Where possible, I have cited trans women scholars and authors, but the lack of academic texts written by and for trans women can be read as a material impact of the abjection of trans women from the academy and women and gender studies, a central field in the construction of the newer field, trans studies. Because of this material abjection, I frequently look for what is invisible, for what is missing, for what is left unsaid on the surface but which is still visible within or beyond the body (of the work). In this way, my methodology centers the history of trans abjection (Stryker, 1994; Namaste, 2000). Indeed, the first issue of Transgender Studies Quarterly (*TSQ*), which included eighty-six short essays revolving around keywords and concepts in transgender studies begins with an essay about abjection. While this essay is placed first because of its position in alphabetical order, it also ironically signals the importance of abjection within trans studies. An understanding of abjection will be vital in this thesis's conversations around transmisogyny. In the *TSQ* essay on abjection, Robert Phillips states:

> Abjection refers to the vague sense of horror that permeates the boundary between the self and the other. In a broader sense, the term refers to the process by which

> identificatory regimes exclude subjects that they render unintelligible or beyond classification. As such, the abjection of others serves to maintain or reinforce boundaries that are threatened. (2014, p. 19)

I primarily build upon Julia Kristeva's understanding of the abject (and the sublime) in *The Power of Horror* (1990) and extend the importance of embodied experience to my exploration of abjection, resulting in a discussion of the affective drives that lead us to the process of material abjection, by which I mean the material/affective process wherein negative *feelings*, which we seek to distance or disassociate or abject from our selves, are stuck to the bodies of others at moments and places of *tension* (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11). As Kristeva notes near the beginning of *The Power of Horror*, "When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of *affects* and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable object" (1990, p. 1, emphasis mine). This twisted braid of affects, this *tension*, a feeling the culture of whiteness teaches us to *abandon* and *avoid*, is perhaps the material affect that drives abjection. In avoiding this tension we abject what is causing the tension, regardless of if we are conscious of where that tension originates. However, as Scott notes in *Extravagant Abjection*,

> [T]o enunciate the properties of abjection from the standpoint of critical knowledge […] is to alter the object that is defined and constituted by the fact that it slips over the fictive ramparts of ego and "I" and thus, of knowing and asserting. (2010, p. 15).

The abject, then, is exactly what is unknowable, unnamable, and in naming the abject, in drawing attention to the abject, in *knowing* the abject, as I attempt to do throughout this

thesis, we transform it, we perhaps even provide the opportunity to *sublime* it. "*Sublimation*… is nothing else than the possibility of naming the prenomial, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal" (Kristeva, 1990, p. 11, emphasis original). To sublime the abject, then, is not simply to identify and name the prenomial, and pre-objectal, what exists before we recognize it, but to *trans*-form them or transform our understanding of them into the trans-nominal and trans-objectal. We can accomplish this through a loving attentiveness to affect, especially affective desire, and how it shapes our body through the repeated writing of affects to our historically lived flesh, to our sexual schema (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), to our body image, which contains within itself the possible and desired uses we can make of our body (Salamon, 2010). Such an attentiveness to affect is not only necessary to sublime our gendered and sexed bodies/embodiments, to understand when and how our bodies are being abjected by society, but is generally useful to anti-oppressive frameworks. By lovingly attending to our affective responses, by naming and subliming them, by unbraiding them, we can better understand not only when our body is abject, but when the bodies of other subjects are being materially abjected from our *self* through the tension or affects that drive discomfort and fear (or phobia). We must constantly notice these affects, name these affects, and challenge where they originate from.

Chapter 1: Phallic Subjects

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1982), Luce Irigaray opens by stating that the question of sexual difference is *the* question of our age. How are men and women, or to use the language of sex, males and females, positioned within our society? What is their *place*—a question we will return to again and again throughout this thesis. While feminist ontology has progressed significantly since Luce Irigaray first penned these words, the question of sexual difference remains poignant, especially in relation to trans discourse. This chapter seeks to explore the problem of sexual difference through psychoanalysis and the (embodied) assignment of the phallus through the Oedipal myth to bridge the French feminist concept of 'the body' with American queer theory's concept of embodiment. Through this bridging, I also seek to rewrite the Oedipal drama such that it does not correspond to physical morphology but rather a broad politics of sexual and bodily control. This shift allows us to move away from a cissexist and phallocentric regime of signification, which I suggest is a critical intervention in the tradition of French feminist thought from which I draw.

I begin my exploration with Tim Johnston's *Questioning the Threshold of Sexual Difference* (2015), in which he states that Luce Irigaray's

> description of sexual difference as "difference itself," meaning that the two sexes mark two distinct forms of being that are irreducible ontologically, is based on pervasive cissexism that necessitates critical attention […] To deny a TIGNC [Trans, Intersex, or Gender Non-Conforming] person's ontological irreducibility

> is to insist that the individual will always be the sex assigned at birth. (2015, p. 618).

This, as Johnston rightly points out, is "a form of violence akin to the disavowal of the maternal feminine that inaugurates phallocentrism" (p. 618). Thus, we can see that the need and value of moving away from Irigarayan sexual difference, that is, morphological sexual difference defined as an essential difference, as *the* essential difference. This move has benefits that extend far beyond the trans community; a move away from this framework may be a move away from white phallocentrism itself. Irigaray states that "[t]he whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else" (1995, p. 47), though we know from trans phenomenology that this is not true, that this cannot be true. In her introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet,* Eve K. Sedgwick states, "[T]o alienate conclusively, definitionally, from anyone […] the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure" (1990, p. 26), and I would extend this claim to include, in addition to sexual desire, our sexual body. To claim, then, that "human kind is composed of women and men [or males and females] and of nothing else" is a terribly consequential seizure, an act of discursive violence against trans, intersex, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people, and points to where our trans feminist intervention might begin.

Sexual difference is said to explain the differences in how men and women enter into the symbolic order, as well as their differing relationships to the other. Shanna Carlson states that for Lacan, "[S]ubjects are positioned differently with respect to one term: the phallic function. There are two sexual positions insofar as every subject is either

'all' or 'not-all' under the phallic function" (2010, p. 51). These positions, "all" and "not all," traditionally correspond to men/masculinity/the phallus and women/femininity/the lack of phallus respectively. In this way, it organizes the world such that men are deemed already complete, "all," while women are in need completion; they are "not all." Carlson continues, "[T]he masculine subject is only 'whole' or 'all' as a result of the fact that he is permitted (permits himself?) the fantasy of one who escapes the very same set that grounds his being" (p. 53). Thus the position of masculinity, of all, is (and can only exist as) a self ordained position, and one which is fundamentally grounded in a fantasy, the fantasy of the position itself.

Our relationship to "all" and "not all," whether we are a man/male (all/complete) or a woman/female (not all/incomplete), is described in psychoanalytics by the Oedipal drama that inaugurates us as desiring subjects (Butler, 1990, p. 61). Within this drama there is said to be a mother, a father, and a child or the subject (Butler 2004, p. 152). In the beginning the child is part of the mother, literally, but when the child is born they are separated from the mother and will forever desire a nostalgic return to material completeness they experienced in the womb (Braidotti, 2002, p. 44). Thus the child desires the mother (or a return to the completeness or *jouissance* of the mother's body) but discovers this is impossible—for unlike their all consuming desire for a return to the mother's body, this desire is not wholly and completely reciprocated, as the mother desires the father. The child then identifies the father as having what completes the mother and seeks to take his place. If the child identifies with having the phallus (i.e. a "boy"), they seek to kidnap the body of another and install themselves as that which

completes that body (that which is desired). If the child does not identify with the phallus (i.e. a "girl"), they are in the position of having their body kidnapped by the "boy" (Braidotti 2002, p. 45).

In *Metamorphoses* (2002), Rosi Braidotti offers a supposedly gender agnostic re-telling of the triangulation of desire with the couple and the child. Braidotti states that it is "important to inscribe at the heart of the narrative of the subject's origin *the principle of not-One*, that is, of incommensurable difference" (p. 46). Braidotti suggests that the presence of the sexual other in the mother "is not nothing" (p. 46), as evidenced by the sperm or semen required for a child to be conceived. Braidotti continues

> In the beginning, there is difference in the positive sense of "not-One," that is to say, there is flesh that is engendered as the effect of the encounter of two others, whatever their sexual morphology and gender identity may be. In the beginning there is *live flesh that longs for living*, breath that yearns for breathing. (Braidotti, 2002, p. 46, emphasis mine)

Braidotti goes on to say that we need a secular, bodily, materialistic account of this process: "the virtual possibilities which have been foreclosed by entry into the phallic regime of signification which has kidnapped the little girl's body and sexuality cannot be retrieved by mere parodic repetitions: a much deeper, more affirmative type of mimesis is needed" (p. 47). While Braidotti is suspicious of "mere parodic repetitions," an allusion to Butler's notion of performativity (1990), an examination of how we embody these "parodic repetitions" through the lens of Salamon's body image (2010) will demonstrate

that performativity may in fact be the "deeper, more affirmative type of mimesis" that Braidotti calls for.

To understand the secular and bodily materialistic account of this process that Braidotti calls for, to ensure we are talking about the full richness of the body and its embodied experiences rather than simply its morphology, it is worth exploring Sartre's three levels of bodily ontology as well as the recent turn to affect. In *Phenomenology as Methodology in Trans Studies*, Henry Rubin examines Sartre's three levels of bodily ontology: the body-for-itself, which is the body as experienced as an absolute point of view; the body-for-others, which is the morphological body that other people can touch and interact with; and the alienated body, which is when the body-for-others is perceived as the body-for-itself (1998, p. 268). The body-for-itself is the position of the embodied subject, and this position shares its material flesh with the body-for-others; these two bodies, however, are not one and the same, and either can exist in excess of the other. The differences in the morphology and embodiedness of the flesh can be accounted for through the concept of body image. In *Assuming a Body*, Gayle Salamon states,

> [B]ody image is multiple (any person always has more than one), it is flexible (its configuration changes over time), it arises from our relations with other people, and its contours are only rarely identical to the contours of the body as it is perceived from the outside. (2010, p. 29)

Body image includes the embodied knowledge of the location of one's body parts (which may or may not map to body parts that exist in the material flesh of the morphological body), the embodied perception of our senses (which may or may not map to external

material stimuli), and a sexual schema, which gives *history* and meaning to those embodied sensations and parts (Rubin, 1998, p. 270). Body image allows for the material body-for-others to be (re-)signified and (re-)embodied by the body-for-itself. We perceive and understand the world, including other subjects, through our desires and drives, experienced through affects, and inscribed in the embodied history of our sexual schema and body image. As Salamon suggests, "the usefulness of the body image for theorizing gendered embodiment is precisely not that the body image is material, *but that it allows for a resignification of materiality itself*" (2010, p. 38, emphasis mine). Understanding the process of transition through the lens of body image provides a pathway for understanding the "more affirmative type of mimesis" that Braidotti calls for. It provides a means by which we can resignify, and thus alter, our materiality.

While body image allows for the resignification of materiality, changes to the body image remain difficult; Salamon notes that

> the material body becomes something more plastic and labile than the body image […] even as it changes size, shape, behaviour, and degree of coherence, the body image persists as the only means by which we apprehend our own bodies. (p. 32).

Making changes for in-depth transformations, then, is not easy; it involves changes that must occur at an embodied and affective level. It is through an attentiveness to the material embodied experience of desire, which can manifest as both positive affects such as joy and gender euphoria, as well as negative affects such as shame and gender dysphoria, that in-depth transformations take place. While gender euphoria and gender dysphoria are two means by which embodied and affective changes can take place for

trans subjects, another path is creative transfiguration (Ashley, 2019a). For some subjects trans embodiment is, as Ashley states, "irreducibly creative," and we can understand this creativity through desire, the desire to create and embody new ways of gendered being, and through this act, transform previously alienated flesh into an art piece (Ashley, 2019a).

If we understand sexuality through the sexual schema as forwarded by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), the phallus comes to represent the target of another's desires and drives, and for Merleau-Ponty, this sexuality is understood to exist pre-relationally:

> "Living" (*leben*) is a primary process from which, as a starting point, it becomes possible to "live" (*erleben*) this or that world, and we must eat and breathe before perceiving and awakening to relational living, belonging to colours and lights through sight, sounds through hearing, *to the body of another through sexuality*, before arriving at the life of human relations. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 160, emphasis mine)

This appears to be the "living flesh" that Braidotti speaks of, flesh embodied with sexuality and desire. The sexual schema is said to subtend the visible body (the body-for-others) and be "strictly individual" (p. 156). Our embodied senses, including sexuality, can be understood as the projection of surfaces: touch at the surface of our skin, hearing at the surface of our ears, sight at the surface of our eyes, and sexuality at the surface of the sexual schema, of our embodied desires and drives. The sexual schema gives "sexual value or meaning to external stimuli and outlines for each subject *the use*

[*they*] *shall make of* [*their*] *objective body*" (p. 156, emphasis mine). Thus the sexual schema, experienced and embodied in the body-for-itself, contains the affective histories of our body's desires, and importantly, constitutes how the subject's body can be used as a result of this history.

We can identify that the position of *having* the phallus as the position of being the target of another's sexuality, and beyond this, it is to position oneself as completing the desiring subject, and thus, having control over that subject (Carlson, 2010), and the possible future uses they may make of their body (Salamon, 2010). When framed in this way, the mother seeks completion in the father, while the father seeks only to complete; this relationship is not seen as reversible because the father, in this myth, is positioned as already being complete through his self-ordained claim of having the phallus (Butler, 2000, p. 61). The child's primary object of desire is a reunion with the maternal body, a metaphor for a return to material and embodied comfort and completeness. When the "boy" discovers this is impossible, however, they seek to possess the body of a "girl" through positioning themself as that which is desired by the girl, and thus completes and controls her (Braidotti, 2002, p. 45). This sexuality or desire, the state of completion that Braidotti describes, appears to be focused exclusively on reproductive sexuality, though I would argue that an embodied material sexuality should be understood within the context of Merleau-Ponty's broader sexual schema (1962). The narrative of control plays out through the drama of reproduction, but the narrative remains, ultimately, not about reproduction, but about the control of bodies, of what constitutes a desirable and complete body and existence. To construe the reproductive sexuality of the body's flesh

as its *only* instance of sexuality is to erase the historical accumulation of positive and negative affects that outlines how the subject has and can make use of their body.

When the phallus is identified and established as a privileged signifier, as that which is desired, it is an embodied identification (as I would suggest, all identifications are), and if the phallus (or rather, the penis) is not properly embodied, the phallic regime of signification deems it unacceptable and it is abject-ed. The penis, which certainly may be attached to the body of a trans woman, is not, as Braidotti so anxiously warns, "actually attached to a *desiring male's* body" (p. 46, emphasis mine). The phallic function controls and polices trans women's bodies through the abjection and containment of the improperly embodied penis/phallus; it uses the trans woman's body as a boundary in the same way it uses the cisgender woman's body as a mirror. If the phallus is the mark of sexual difference, then it is not the physical penis that denotes this sexual difference, but how societal desire is enacted and embodied. While the lack of a penis is defined as one societal boundary of man (or masculinity), another boundary is defined by trans women and the way they embody, or rather, fail to properly embody their penis as the phallus. To ignore the role that this embodied flesh plays in sexual difference, is, I believe, to discount the importance of the embodied subject that Braidotti holds dear.

The mark of sexual difference then, is not the presence or absence of a morphological penis, but how, and if we embody having the phallus, and thus, whether or not our bodies are fundamentally under the control of the phallic regime of signification. Trans women's bodies, from a societal perspective, are neither desirable, nor for that

matter, acceptable; in the 2020 documentary *Disclosure*, Laverne Cox unravels how the most common response to trans women's bodies in media is disgust, so much so that characters are often portrayed vomiting after being exposed to a trans woman's body. Trans women's bodies are forever deemed incomplete; we are nonconsensually categorized into a binary of "pre-op" (or "non-op") and "post-op," and our bodies are either deemed incomplete because we haven't had surgery, or incomplete because we have "chopped our dicks off." Trans women's bodies are not only deemed undesirable but incomplete, monstrous, non-human and ultimately abject; Susan Stryker alludes to the (power in the) monstrosity of transness in *My Words to Victor Frankenstein* (1994), and we can read the non-humanness of trans women in the use of the pejorative "brick" (Vivian, 2013), which literally casts a trans woman as a non-human object. A trans woman's non-phallic penis becomes a site of contention and anxiety (or abjection); the phallic regime, unable to incorporate trans women's bodies, abjects them as a whole and through this abjection seeks to contain them. Trans women, therefore, represent neither the position of the subject (masculine) nor the object (feminine); instead they exist in excess of this binary, as matter out of place, as the dirt of a phallic society.

Misogyny acts as a tool of the phallic regime of signification; it is used to (re-)install the supremacy of the the phallus by reinforcing the idea that people without the phallus are inferior and incomplete. Transmisogyny can be understood through a similar lense, though rather than denigrating those without the phallus, it monsterizes and abjects those who have a penis but do not properly embody the phallus. Unable to find a place for a trans woman's non-phallic penis within an economy of sexual difference

rigidly constructed around the phallic penis, and through that construction the conflation of the penis with the phallus, trans women's bodies are rejected as a whole; they are not only held up as an example of how *not* to be a man (without the phallus), but also as how *not* to be a woman (with a penis).

Transmisogyny can be understood as occurring in two parts; first there is a conflation of the trans woman's imagined penis with the embodied phallus of a "desiring male," as Briadotti puts it (Braidotti, 2002, p. 46), and second, there is the resultant abjection of the trans woman through this conflation and the resultant anxiety at the site of her imagined penis/phallus. Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) implicitly writes this abjection, transmisogyny, into feminist theory through her deployment of a cissexist framework around sexual difference. Contrasting this are feminists texts such as Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994), which intentionally and deliberately speaks this abjection into "feminist" theory. The theories presented by Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* are interesting and useful with respect to feminist theories of embodiment and gender, yet they feel tainted because of Grosz's statements around transsexuals (trans women). While Grosz seeks to construct a corporeal feminism, that is, a feminism based around the body, I find that she ignores the embodiedness of trans women's experiences. Grosz insists upon "the irreducible specificity of women's bodies, the bodies of *all* women, independent of class, race, *and history*" (1994, p. 207, emphasis mine). While *all* women are joined by this supposed irreducible specificity, "[it] in no way universalizes the particular ways in which women experience their bodies and bodily flows" (p. 207). This move, which seeks to universalize women's bodies, but not their

bodily experiences is, I think, an attempt to hold open the door to femininity. Despite this attempt, in nearly the same breath Grosz states that:

> Men [sic], contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live, as women. At best the transsexual can live out his [sic] fantasy of femininity—a fantasy that in and of itself is usually disappointed with rather crude transformations effected by surgical and chemical intervention. The transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman. (1994, p. 207)

What are we to make of this statement? Grosz, upon encountering a trans woman's body and experience, is unable to reconcile the discontinuity between sexual difference being defined through the phallus, through whose bodies are controlled, and sexual difference being defined through the imagined penis. Encountering this boundary breaking body, one which has an imagined penis, but does not embody the phallus, clearly provokes anxiety and repulsion (a form of abjection) in Grosz. Within Grosz's statement, the abjection of trans women's bodies can be read in the description of the "rather crude transformations," and the abjection of the embodied experiences of trans women can be read in the declaration that trans women "can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live, as women." The results of this societal abjection, this lack of place, are clear; murder, suicidality, self-harm, harassment, violence, self-hatred and dysphoria dominate the cisgender media and literature representations of trans experiences I find myself surrounded with. Trans subjects are positioned as a threat to gender and sex—a threat to the very fabric of a phallic society.

Kristeva states that the abject is that which "disturbs identity, systems, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1990, p. 4). We are thus cast as predatory and dangerous because of our threat to societal identities and systems because we do not respect the pre-configured borders and rules that construct an intelligible, phallic subject. This danger or threat can be seen most clearly, perhaps, in the perceived need for bathroom bills (Barnett et al., 2018, p. 236), an attempted abjection of trans women from public spaces. Within these bills lays the assumption that trans women are perpetrators of sexual violence and that this sexual violence will be enacted through their penis, which marks them as "different" from (cisgender) women and through this gendered difference, (re-)signifies the trans women as "males." Within this example we see the two necessary parts of transmisogyny; first, an imagined penis is projected onto the trans woman, and this penis is conflated with the phallus (both the mark of sexual difference and the embodiment of the possibility of rape). Next, through the anxiety that this mark provokes, the trans woman is abjected, her body is policed and controlled through the conflation of the imagined penis with the potential violence of the phallus.

Kristeva states that the abject is edged by the sublime, "the sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling" (1990, p. 12, emphasis original). This *here* and *there* might suggest that to be sublimed is to occupy both the position of subject (*here*) and object (*there*), as well as both the abject (*deject*) and the sublime (*sparkling*). This is a boundary-crossing definition that requires a movement, an elevation of sorts, that brings us from *here* to *there*, from deject to sparkling other. I argue that surviving as a trans

woman requires that we find the sublime in our bodies and embodied experiences, in whatever ways necessary, through the social and personal resignification of body parts or experiences, through hormonal and surgical alterations to the flesh, through piercings, tattoos, and other bodily modifications, or any other means that allows the subject to re-embody, to sublime their societally-abjected body and flesh. Kristeva says that "[a]s soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers […] a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly" (p. 12). If gender dysphoria can be read as one result of abjection, the anxiety and pain produced by having "matter out of place," transition (by *any* means) and gender euphoria presents opportunities for the sublime. The experience of gender euphoria, which is perhaps the experience of gender being sublimed, removes us "to a secondary universe, set off from the one where 'I' am" (p. 12), a universe that "expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling" (p. 12). This universe expands us, expands sexual difference, overstrains it, causes it to break and reshape, and allows trans women to be both *here*, in a transmisogynistic society as a gendered and sexed deject, and *there*, in the expansive universe of gender euphoria, where our bodies are not only included, but considered complete and desirable.

As Ashley (2019) notes, creative transfiguration can be a central part of the embodied trans experience. Creative transfiguration can be used to take control of one's body and bodily narrative and transform (perhaps transition) previously alienated or abjected flesh into an art piece, something that I want to suggest is elevated, sublime, and desirable. I want to explore the idea of transition being a process of material

re-embodiment that seeks to sublime previously abjected flesh. In this way, transition is a constant coming *into* the body through the embodied experience of desire (a desire for transformation). To explore this idea further, and close the chapter, I turn to Irigaray's theory of the interval and how it might be useful in thinking about transition. In fact, I want to suggest that we can perform a trans feminist intervention with the text (in the same way Irigaray performs a feminist intervention in the texts she works with) and re-interpret, or rather, trans-form Irigaray's theory of the interval to correspond to transition and embodied desire. In this way, we can move away from sexual difference, ontologically irreducible difference, being defined around the conflated penis/phallus and towards difference being defined through embodied experiences of desire (and potentially, our desire for transformation/transition).

Tim Johnston describes the interval as "the space of contact or meeting between two autonomous sexuate identities, the space that Irigaray believes has the potential to generate a more just and sustainable world" (2015, p. 619). Johnston continues, "At present, the interval is a relationship of mastery and domination. It marks the hierarchy separating an elevated masculinity from a disavowed femininity" (p. 619). That is, the interval, at present, represents a vertical phallic economy of domination and mastery but has the potential for radical transformation, "the potential to generate a more just and sustainable world," perhaps one in which trans women's bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities are sublimbed and desirable. Johnston argues that "[i]f the interval is seen as the place of irreducible relations, the gap that prevents the total appropriation of one subject by another, it becomes the place from which creativity and indeterminacy

emerge" (p. 622). The interval can be understood, as we shall see, as the *locomotion* of material re-embodiment, or transition, and this locomotion takes place through desire. Irigaray states:

> *The change of the body* and the modification of the interval represent an important issue in the economy of desire. The locomotion toward and reduction in interval are the movements of desire (even by expansion-retraction). The greater the desire, the greater the tendency to overcome the interval while at the same time retaining it. An interval that might be occupied by the *transformed body*. Overcoming the interval is the aim of desire, the cause of locomotion. (Irigaray, 1993, p. 48, emphasis original)

Irigaray indicates that *the change of the body* represents an important issue in the economy of desire. Indeed, as we saw earlier, positioning oneself as that which is desired has the potential to enact power over the desiring body, foreclosing (or opening) possible uses (changes) of the body. I theorize that the process of *material re-embodiment* is central, though certainly not unique, to the trans experience, and that we can theorize Irigaray's *change of the body* as this process of material re-embodiment. Irigaray states that the greater the desire, the greater the tendency to overcome the interval that might be occupied by the *transformed body*, while still retaining it. We can theorize transition as the locomotion of this material re-embodiment, as the interval between one's body and one's *desired* and *transformed body*, whether the body is transformed/transitioned (materially re-embodied) through social, physical, physiological, and/or other means.

Irigaray continues:

> [I]n the eroticism of the different senses or thresholds of the body, the interval remains in play as place, or *the possibility of place*, it is particularly insistent with regard to […] everything in the female sex which figures the abyss. Oscillations between the infinitely small and the infinitely large? (p. 49)

Transition, as the interval, remains in play as place, or *the possibility of place,* perhaps the possibility of *embodying place*. It represents, simultaneously, where we are, and where we desire to be. Transition is both the space and the movement between place and desired place, between what is and what is desired, our body and the possibilities it can take on. Irigaray figures the interval as being particularly insistent with regard to everything in the female sex ("woman") which figures the abyss, and while Irigaray was undoubtedly talking about the vagina/womb, we can also read the abyss as the abject, and in this way, include trans women's bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities. While gender is able to put us in our place, as we shall see, transition allows us to simultaneously exist in place and in the possibility of place embodied through our desire for material re-embodiment.

Irigaray explains:

> [T]he sexual act would turn into the act whereby the other gives new form, birth, incarnation to the self. Instead of implying the downfall of the body, it takes part in the body's renaissance. And there is no other equivalent act, in this sense. Most divine of acts. Whereby man makes woman feel her body as place. Not only her vagina and her womb but her body. *He places her within her body* and within a

> macrocosm, releasing her from her potential adherence to the cosmic through her participation in a microsociety. (p. 51, emphasis mine)

The (reproductive) sexual act, which for Irigaray represents the interval, the locomotion in traditional sexual difference, is replaced with transition, or rather, transition, defined as the locomotion of material re-embodiment, comes to stand in for the reproductive sexual relationship. For like the reproductive sexual relationship, transition gives new form, birth, re-incarnation to the self; it takes part in the body's re-naissance, literally, through the process of re-embodiment, the most divine (and perhaps most self-caring) of acts, whereby one makes oneself feel their body as place when their body has previously been abject and *out of place*. One places oneself within their own body, and within a macrocosm, releasing them from their potential adherence to the cosmic (the phallic?) through their participation in a microsociety, the possibility of place that embodied our desired self.

Irigaray asks:

> Could it be that anything that moves in a circle moves in relation to another? Where bodies embrace? Both in and not in the same place: with the one being in the other that contains. (p. 55)

If we read the interval as transition, as the locomotion of material re-embodiment, then the interval moves in relation to itself, circles itself, touches itself, embraces itself. It is the embodiment of Butler's performativity (1990), a repetition of a repetition ad infinitum. And through this infinite self-embrace (the process of material re-embodiment, the most divine of acts) the subject is "[b]oth in and not in the same place: with the one

being in the other that contains" (p. 55) Thus it is through our embodied desire for material re-embodiment that we are able to be both in place and not in place. While we exist in place as a gendered subject, our desires are able to create new possible places for our future embodiments to explore.

If transition replaces the sexual relation as the interval, we might ask how this affects the Oedipal myth. In phallic sexual difference, the male positions himself as complete, and the now-complete male then consumes the incomplete (and desiring) female who is deemed incomplete because the male has positioned himself as having that which completes and is desired, the phallus (Braidotti, 2002, p. 45). In the framework of transition, however, the desiring subject is consumed and re-created, re-embodied by the same self that desires it. This shift, I suggest, transforms the vertical logic of domination, of mastery and subjugation found in phallocentrism, into a circular (perhaps performative) logic of difference understood through the lense of transition. This move allows for the transformation of the ethics of sexual difference (an ethics of bodily control), into an ethics of material re-embodiment (still an ethics of bodily control but an ethics of bodily control applied to the self rather than the other). Beyond this, it shifts the ethics of difference from an encounter between exactly two (the self and the other), to an encounter with the self and the desired self—at the same time one and yet simultaneously one multiplied back on itself, which remains one. This provides a framework for an ethics of difference centered around the self (one), rather than an ethics constrained to the difference of two, the self and the other. This ethics recognizes that every body is unique, that every body is a vantage point that is ontologically irreducible from other bodies, and

that something as simple as similar genital morphology does not ontologically bind subjects.

Chapter 2: The Abject

In the previous chapter I examined the theoretical underpinnings of transmisogyny through a primarily psychoanalytic lense. Through an exploration of how the phallic myth of subject constitution interacts with trans women's bodies, we observed that transmisogyny occurs in two stages. First the trans woman is reduced to her morphological body (ignoring her em*bodied* experiences), and that body is then reduced to an imagined penis. Next, the penis is misattributed as the phallus, and this misattribution (and the misattributed violence of the phallus) produces an anxiety at the site of the imagined penis/phallus, ultimately leading to the abjection of trans women's bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities. In this chapter I expand upon the idea that transmisogyny is not only represented and constructed through feminist and lesbian theories of the body and womanhood but that it manifests itself in the material-discursive world through the representations of trans women's bodies and sexualities in media and pop culture. This chapter explores two works, Bruce LaBruce's film *The Misandrists* (2017) and Peaches's music video *Rub* (2015) which, each in their own way, explores the politics of trans women's bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities through a cisgender lense or gaze.

The concept of the gaze was introduced by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), and describes the way in which films can be analyzed by looking at how various gazes in the work are deployed: the gaze of the camera, of the

audience, and of the characters (p. 17). While the gaze constructed in *Visual Pleasure* is described as a male gaze, I would contend that it is in fact a phallic gaze and can be used to describe phallic/non-phallic subjects and relationships in instances where the phallus has been transferred to another body part, such as the vulva (Butler, 1993). While this phallic gaze is certainly a useful tool in analyzing gendered relations in media, it assumes that the gender of the subjects being gazed upon are legible within a strict cisgender binary framework and, thus, falls short of describing the complexities of gazing upon trans subjects and bodies. I want to (very brielfy) explore the concept of what a cisgender gaze might entail and where we might read or find its history. Since the mid- to late-1800s, transgender subjects have been scruitinized and observed through a gaze that psychopathologizes and medicalizes their identities, bodies, and subjectivities. We can read this gaze historically in Krafft Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892) and presently through the medical gatekeeping system which requires trans people to access psychiatric care or referrals before accessing medical transition technologies such as hormones and transition-related surgeries (Ashley, 2019b). While the male or phallic gaze is concerned with gendered hierarchy and the construction of an elevated masculinity over a diminished femininity, the cisgender gaze is concerned with *authorizing* gender, policing the boundaries of acceptable (trans) identity and expression, and abjecting that which does not conform.

While *Rub* and *The Misandrists* exist in different mediums with different rules (a feature-length film versus a music video), they are worth examining in tandem because of their shared deployment of a phallic cisgender gaze and the construction of women's

sexuality through orgy scenes that elevate the vulva to the sublime. I am opting not to differentiate this gaze by gender at this particular moment (though we will certainly examine the gendered effects of these gazes throughout the chapter) because we too often ignore the effects this cisgender gaze (regardless of gender) has on trans subjects. Too frequently, as we will observe through these two pieces as well as in Laverne Cox's 2020 documentary *Disclosure*, trans women are cast as abject, disgusting, and dangerous through their cocks. Both *The Misandrists* (2017), and *Rub* (2015) seek to critique transmisogynistic tropes; however, it is *critical* that in media such as this, trans women be brought back into discourse and elevated to the sublime, which, as we will see, cannot be done without a *material* connection to their sexualities and bodies.

Bruce LaBruce's 2017 film *The Misandrists* critiques and satirizes second-wave trans exclusionary lesbian feminism. In a review of the film, Teo Bugbee states that "LaBruce utilizes camp, that unifying language of queer cinema, to undermine the credos of trans-exclusionary radical feminism" (Bugbee, 2018). Despite the film's intent, there has been little engagement with the critiques of trans exclusionary radical feminism brought forward throughout the film, or more importantly, the ways in which LaBruce actually engages with trans women, their bodies, and their sexualities. LaBruce states that "I know the dynamics [of feminism] very well, enough to be critical about what I consider the bad parts of it—the censorship and anti-porn *and anti-transgender faction*" (LaBruce as cited in Gamble, 2017, emphasis mine). While LaBruce attempts to be critical of trans exclusionary feminism, his portrayals of trans women are ultimately built around the transmisogynistic tropes layed out in Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl* (2007). We

can read Isolde as an example of the deceiver (p. 37), which constructs a narrative in which trans women are positioned as being unreliable, untrustworthy, and ultimately dangerous. I argue that because the portrayals of trans women's bodies cast them as abject, and because their abject bodies are never brought back into feminist and lesbian discourse to be celebrated (and sublimed), LaBruce ultimately fails at his attempt to critique trans exclusionary feminism. To borrow the language of Isolde, LaBruce fails to reconcile his revolutionary ideas with his sexual politics and portray trans women and their bodies in a liberatory (expansive and sublime) way.

The Misandrists is set in "Ger(wo)many" in 1999 and follows the sisters of the FLA, the Female Liberation Army. The FLA are a group of revolutionary women and lesbian separatists living together and plotting to overthrow the patriarchy. At multiple moments throughout the film we hear the sisters chanting the mantra "Down Down Down, Down with the Patriarchy." The FLA's plot to overthrow the patriarchy centres around a politics of free love, reflected in one of the sisters' comments: "We have to be more than comrades; we have to be an army of lovers," as well as the FLA's overall goal of creating a liberatory pornographic film. Big Mother, the head of the FLA, states that "[p]ornography is an act of insurrection against the dominant order […] when men are taken out of the equation, nothing is more potent." Thus in this film, free love and the act of creating lesbian pornography are metaphores for female liberation. *The Misandrists* ultimately ends with the FLA shooting and then screening their feminist lesbian pornographic film, *Pornutopia: A World Without Men*, the contents of which I will come back to in a moment.

Beyond the creation of the FLA's liberatory pornographic film, the plot of *The Misandrists* follows Isolde, a sister of the FLA, who hides Volker, an injured man and fellow anti-capitalist revolutionary, in the basement of the FLA's residence. Isolde secretly takes care of Volker, and provides him with feminist literature and "medicine," which we later learn is feminizing hormones. This is an example of how trans women are cast as deceivers (Serano, 2007, p. 37), and is perhaps an ode to the media panic around trans people taking over the political left and forcing their "gender ideology" or "trans agenda" on unsuspecting comrades and children (Serano, 2017). While Volker recovers, he and Isolde develop a relationship that eventually turns sexual. Shortly before Volker and Isolde have sex for the first time, it is revealed, through another character spying on Isolde while she is in the shower, that she is trans—another supposed deception. This revelation is made through the discovery of Isolde's cock and is mirrored in the scene in which Volker and Isolde first have sex. In this scene Volker initially responds to the discovery of Isolde's cock with disgust and horror, that is, with abjection. Volker physically recoils, calls Isolde a man, states that he is not a homosexual, and says that Isolde *deceived* him, all tropes commonly associated with trans women's sexuality and the discovery of a trans woman's penis. As Serano notes, "In a tactic that emphasizes their 'true' maleness, 'deceivers' are most often used as pawns to provoke male homophobia in other characters, as well as in the audience itself" (2007, p. 37). These tropes and this abjection are part of what contributes to the increasing societal violence we are seeing enacted against trans women and people. This violence is epitomized in the example of the trans panic legal defense, which "asks a jury to find that a victim's […]

gender identity is to blame for a defendant's violent reaction, including even murder," and which is still legal in the majority of U.S. states (Joseph & Croft, 2019). Isolde, however, takes Volker's abjection in stride by saying that it is time for him to reconcile his revolutionary ideas with his sexual politics.

While Volker is, perhaps, able to make space in his (hetero)sexual politics for girlcock, Bruce LaBruce fails to construct lesbian or queer women's space that is capable of the same thing. This is a not uncommon framing of trans women's sexuality. When it *is* allowed to exist, it is as perverse heterosexual desire, as "transamoury" (Nicholson, 2020). It is worth examining the framing of Isolde's body during the trans reveal scene in the shower, as well as how Isolde's body is portrayed—or rather, not portrayed—in scenes that reflect and construct lesbian sexuality including a pillow fight, a scene in which eggs are erotically passed from girl to girl, and the orgy in *Pornutopia* which concludes the film. Prior to the shower scene there are hints that Isolde is trans, or rather, "different" than the other girls. For example, it is remarked that Isolde does not get her period with the other girls and that she is suspected of being a virgin because she will not have sex. These subtle hints are augmented by the overt deception of Isolde hiding a man in the lesbian enclave. Despite these hints, the trans reveal scene that occurs in the shower is meant to surprise the audience. The scene is shot from the perspective of Editha, who we later learn is a cop and spying on the girls. Editha stares at the back of Isolde's naked body, framed between the slightly open shower doors. We are meant to consume Isolde's body in this moment, experience her as a Black erotic object (Krell, 2017), and then as she turns and we discover she has a cock, we are meant to react. If we

react anything like the cisgender characters in the film, it is with shock and disgust, with abjection, a common, though problematic, reaction to cocks in (ciscentric) lesbian and feminist spaces. But beyond this, it is through the lense of policing, for Editha is a cop, and ultimately betrays this knowledge to Big Mother in an attempt to police the boundaries of womanhood within the household.

The existence and role of Sister Grete, played by trans actress Grete Gehrke presents another lense through which we can examine transmisogyny. When we compare the treatment of Isolde versus the treatment of Sister Grete, a white woman played by a trans actress, we can read a narrative of transmisogynoir—the intersection of anti-Black racism and transmisogyny (Krell, 2017). While Sister Grete is coded as one of the more/most masculine sisters in the FLA, reflected in her interest and duties "in maintaining authority and physical education" (Gehrke as cited in Gamble, 2017), she is also unquestioningly accepted. Bruce LaBruce's portrayal of Sister Grete is drawing on a trope that is exemplified in *Scary Movie*'s character Miss Mann (Wayans, 2000), a masculine coded woman in charge of physical education who we are meant to clock as trans, or rather, a man(n). This constructs a situation in which trans women, read in this instance as "men," are placed in a position of authority over vulnerable girls. This authority combined with the assumption that trans women are violent aggressors (through the misattribution of the phallus), frames the trans woman as being a threat to the young (cisgender) girls. This framing has real world consequences and should be understood as a driving factor behind both the violence enacted on trans women in women's spaces, as well as the attempt to remove trans women from these spaces out of "safety" concerns.

Beyond drawing on this transphobic trope, Bruce LaBruce links Sister Grete's name to the trans actress who portrays her, blurring the line between character and actress. This may be another way of indicating to the audience that this character should, or at the very least, could be read as trans. While there is evidence that we are perhaps meant to read Sister Grete as trans, or perhaps more precisely, we are meant to read Sister Grete's trans-*ness*, we are not meant to read Isolde as trans until the shower reveal scene. This sets Sister Grete up as a narrative decoy, a red herring meant to arouse the suspicions of the audience and to deflect suspicion away from the possibility that Isolde might be trans so that the reveal can be as effective as possible. Sister Grete, Grete Gehrke, is used as a narrative object without having any significant narrative arcs herself. When we examine Sister Grete's role (or lack thereof) in the film, especially post-reveal scene, this becomes all the more obvious. Similar to Isolde, Sister Grete is abject within the construction of lesbian sexuality and female liberation the film seeks to enact, though that abjection comes to be constructed in a different way.

While many of the instructors are portrayed having sexual relationships, Sister Grete is not. Interestingly, however, Sister Grete is not under the same level of scrutiny (or surveillance) as Isolde is in this regard (who is literally being spied upon by a cop), and we can attribute this to the heavy policing (both literal, and metaphorical) Black bodies are subjected too (Cruz, 2016). Beyond this, unlike Isolde, Sister Grete is never persuaded into having sex, either for *Pornutopia* or any other reason. We can read the difference between how these characters are treated through the lense of transmisogynoir and the over sexualization of Black women in our society. Sister Grete is white, in a

position of authority, and appears to be unquestioningly accepted by the FLA—though it should be noted that she is portrayed as largely asexual, and as a result, less of a threat. Isolde, on the other hand, is Black, in a vulnerable position (as one of the schoolgirls), and has to fight to receive even "conditional acceptance" from Big Mother (both after, and perhaps more importantly, *before* the trans reveal scene). The FLA's "Womanifesto," posted on the Kickstarter page used to fund the film might give us a clue as to why this difference exists. The Womanifesto states:

> The Female Liberation Army (a.k.a., the FLA) declares revolutionary war against the Fascist Capitalist and Largely Heterosexual Class aggregated under the Patriarchy and all its agents of murder, oppression and exploitation […] On behalf of all its constituents and affiliates and various lesbian sycophants, including *certain select sympathetic gender insurgents*, we the Female Liberation Army hereby announce [...] (LaBruce, 2016, emphasis mine)

This demonstrates that the FLA is not inclusive towards *all* trans women, but rather, "certain select sympathetic gender insurgents," and this is seen in many feminist and lesbian spaces. When trans women are granted conditional acceptance to feminist and lesbian spaces they are often expected to keep their sexuality to themselves and keep quiet about the subtle (and overt) transmisogyny they encounter; they are expected to not push back against the system. There is a politics of respectability at play here, and Isolde's Blackness certainly factors into how we read her through this lense. This reflects the reality that many Black trans women face in feminist and lesbian spaces, even when white trans women are included, and even when they are in positions of power, Black

trans women continue to be abjected through the intersectional violence leveled against them as women who are both Black and trans (Krell, 2017).

It is significant that the only time we see Isolde's cock is during the trans reveal scene, which is meant to cast her as abject. Julia Kristeva (1990) describes the abject as that which is beyond the horizon of discourse; it is neither subject nor object but that which is radically excluded. Throughout the film, there are various scenes in which lesbian eroticism is portrayed; these scenes include soft lighting, gentle caresses, and slow motion shots typical of soft core lesbian porn, ironic given the hardcore gay porn the FLA use to train themselves in the art of porn making. These shots reflect a lesbian sexuality filtered through the cisgender, heteronormative lense of lesbian porn made for consumption by men. These shots are, I hope, meant to critique that lense, but they also fail to move beyond it, and we can read this in the abjection of girlcock and trans women's bodies. Isolde is neither subject nor object in these scenes but is radically excluded. In the scene depicting a pillow fight, with feathers flying through the air in slow motion, we can see the majority of the school girls dressed in white underwear, with the exception of Isolde, whose body is still covered by her schoolgirl outfit. In another scene, the girls are erotically passing eggs from one to another; in this scene Isolde arrives late and enters a scene already dominated by cisgender lesbian sexuality. Once again, the characters are in their underwear with the exception of Isolde, whose body is covered in her school uniform. Not only is Isolde's body covered, but she is neither passed an egg, a metaphor for female (reproductive) sexuality, nor is she interacted with in the same erotic way as the other girls.

Isolde's body exists beyond the horizon of the lesbian sexuality being constructed in this film. If we look to the orgy scene that concludes *The Misandrists*, we can read an abjection of trans women's bodies through the exclusion of girlcock from shots that simultaneously elevate the vulva to the divine. After it has been revealed that Isolde has a cock, Sister Dagmar informs her that Big Mother has granted her *conditional* acceptance within the FLA. This acceptance, however, is not portrayed in the *Pornutopia* orgy. The orgy scene includes close-up shots of vulvas being fingered, licked, and traced with a strawberry. The vulva is elevated to the level of worship, which can also be heard in the FLA's prayer, "Glory be to the mother, and to the daughter, and to the holy cunt." While the cunt is holy, the cock is abject. For Volker, this abjection occurs through a gory scene depicting a forced vaginoplasty, and for Isolde, it is through the exclusion of her body, and specifically her girlcock, in the liberatory porn film the FLA creates and screens. Big Mother, upon the discovery of Editha being a cop, Isolde being trans, and the presence of Volker in the house, states "Two cocks! And a cop! In the house! This is insupportable." In this moment, Big Mother ties trans women's bodies to the patriarchal violence enacted by cops, and more generally, the state—ironic given the literal surveillance and policing enacted upon Isolde's body throughout the film.

As lesbian sexuality and female liberation are primarily constructed through the orgy scenes in *The Misandrists*, it is worthwhile to look at other contemporary media that portrays orgies including trans women and their bodies. We can find such an example in Peaches's music video *Rub* (2015). The artist Peaches is no stranger to the abject, and her 2015 album *Rub* takes up, and I argue, elevates to the sublime, the abject in female

sexuality and (primairly cisgender) women's bodies. In a review of the music video, Mary Emily O'Hara (2015) says that "*Rub* is a dirty, juicy celebration of women's hot bodies. All kinds of women are represented—from fat to thin, weathered butch to cock-and-tits wielding trans girl." While a "cock-and-tits wielding trans girl" may be included in this video, like the abject, she is strictly contained and the discourse created *around* the video further constructs trans women and girlcock as abject within lesbian sexuality and female liberation. For example, Lex Vaughn, a co-director of the music video states, "We include bodies that make the *male chromosome* shrivel" (Vaughn in O'Hara, 2015, emphasis mine). This statement is problematic in its construction of sexual difference around chromosomes (or suspected chromosomes) and is an example of how trans women's bodies and "biology" are used to construct them as abject outsiders with relation to womanhood and femaleness. How are we to reconcile this statement with the inclusion of a trans woman in *Rub*'s music video? Further, how are trans women watching this music video supposed to react? Should I shrivel, at a chromosomal level, because of the bodies I see on the screen, because of bodies like mine?

Vaughn states that "In Peaches's videos, there's women involved on both sides of the camera" (Vaughn as cited in O'Hara, 2015), and while LaBruce makes similar claims, in Peaches's videos there were *only* women involved, and this is important in the creation of a much raunchier and more honest portrayal of (primairly cisgender) lesbian sexuality than we get through Bruce LaBruce's gay male gaze, ironic and campy as it may be. Bruce LaBruce presents us with a very palatable version of soft core lesbian porn, and in an interview with *Cineaste*, LaBruce describes the film as "a love letter to the female of

the species" (LaBruce as cited in Porton, 2018). In *Rub*, however, "bodies are real, bodies are sweaty, bodies are sometimes a little scary," and "there's hair in people's teeth" (O'Hara, 2015). Bodies that are typically abject, those that are "sometimes a little scary," even within the discourse of female sexuality, are made real and given discursive space to exist within the video, but we must take a nuanced look at the space being created. Who gets to exist in the foreground *and* the background of the video, and where does our gaze focus? Who permeates the video, and who, like the abject, is contained? While girlcock is included in *Rub*, and even included in a sexual way, Danni Daniels is excluded from the majority of the video, including the orgy of rubbing that occurs under the song's refrain: "Rub, bitch, rub." Given *Rub* is the title of the video and the album, we can consider this scene an important discursive space in which women's bodies are (re-)constructed and (re-)claimed, yet it is devoid of trans women, of desiring girlcock; they are abject, beyond the horizon of discourse being constructed in the scene.

While this video certainly includes, on the surface, a positive interpretation of girlcock, a closer reading of the scene will prove that it is still constructed around transmisogyny and the abjection of trans women's bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities. The music video cuts from day time to night time with a series of shots: the full moon, a shot of a puppet boar, and then a shot of Danni Daniels, dressed as what appears to be a high priestess. Daniels is nude (shot from the waist up), tits out, with her face covered by a black veil. She walks into a space already occupied by queer women but remains separate, literally hidden from view through her black veil. Daniels is fetishized and de-humanized through cuts between her and the puppet boar. Tina Chanter, discussing

Kristeva, states that "[a]bjection concerns both the pleasurable and the fascinating, dangerous, or horrific—that which threatens […] the object of desire is desirable precisely as forbidden" (2005, p. 155). We are meant to consume Daniels as an erotic spectacle, a spectacle that is allowed to exist, even be celebrated, but that is constructed as a forbidden image—tied to the full moon, the boar, and the high priestess.

The music video goes to great lengths to ensure that we do not see Daniels's cock until we are meant to see it, when Peaches begins to sing the refrain, "Rise for me." While this scene is constructed such that it evokes much more positive emotions at the presence of a cock than the reveal scene in *The Misandrists*, it remains a reveal nonetheless, a moment of judgement that authorizes (or not) a trans character's gender. It trains us to respond to the cock through a particular cisgender lense and affective framing, in this case, one that allows for, and even celebrates, the presence of the cock, but that does not recriprocate a material connection. While Peaches sings "Can't talk right now / This chick's dick is in my mouth," Peaches seems reluctant to *actively* and *materially* engage with Daniels's cock or body beyond letting Daniels shake her dick above Peaches's face and having that cock occasionally touch her face. While Daniels certainly interacts with Peaches's body, that bodily interaction does not feel reciprocated. As Chanter notes, with the abject "[y]ou can look but you cannot touch. The gaze is authorized, but the *material* and emotional connection to sexuality is not" (2005, 168, emphasis mine). While there is certainly a positive emotional connection to Daniels's sexuality and cock, a *jouissance* of sorts, I do not read the same level of a material connection. This lack of material connection is critical and speaks to one aspect of how

transmisogyny operates in the world; while trans women may be "welcome," even "celebrated" within lesbian and feminist spaces, a willingness to engage with trans women's sexualities and bodies at a material level is often lacking.

Girlcock can be read as abject in both *Rub* and *The Misandrists*, and through this abjection, trans women's bodies and sexualities are excluded from female and lesbian spaces while vulvas and vaginas are simultaneously elevated to signify and define the boundaries of those spaces. The phallus is, according to Judith Butler (1993), transferable to other body parts and other objects, and indeed, we can see this in *The Misandrists* and *Rub* where the phallus is re-embodied and re-signified by the vulva, marking it as the privileged signifier. Butler states that "[a]lthough a number of theorists have suggested that lesbian sexuality is outside the economy of phallogocentrism, that position has been critically countered by the notion that lesbian sexuality is *as* constructed," and I would say constructed by the phallus, "as any other form of sexuality within contemporary sexual regimes" (Butler, 1993, p. 54). In *The Misandrists* and *Rub*, the phallus is re-embodied and re-signified in the vulva, which takes on the role of privileged signifier; the vulva constructs a lesbian and female sexuality in its image, while simultaneously disavowing that construction through the use of irony and camp.

In *The Lesbian Phallus*, Butler goes on to state that

> if what comes to signify under the sign of the phallus are a number of body parts, discursive performatives, alternative fetishes, to name a few, then the symbolic position of "having" has been dislodged from the penis as the privileged anatomical (or non-anatomical) occasion. (Butler, 1993, p. 55)

While having the phallus can be dislodged from having a penis and be transferred to having another body part or object, such as the vulva, I am not convinced that having a penis, even a *woman's penis*, be read as having anything except the phallus within a phallogocentric regime of signification. It appears as though any non-privileged signification of the penis within a phallogocentric economy results in the abjection of the penis. Put another way, trans women's bodies are violently abjected from the phallic regime of signification; they are neither subject nor object, but something else that is dangerous to the supremacy of the phallus, regardless of whether that phallus is the penis, or re-signified in another body part such as the vulva.

In *The Misandrists*, Isolde's cock, in the only scene it is visually present, signifies the abject phallus; it constructs a mark of abject sexual difference and casts Isolde as an outsider within a phallogocentric economy in which the phallus has been re-embodied and re-signified as the vulva. This outsider status is maintained throughout the pillow fight and egg passing scenes, where Isolde is wearing more clothing than the other girls, as well as the orgy concluding the film where Isolde's cock is notably absent amongst close up shots of vulvas. These shots construct an image of what liberatory lesbian sexuality can look like, and by excluding Isolde's cock from these shots, Bruce LaBruce fails to (re-)construct a lesbian sexuality capable of materially holding the fullness of trans women's sexualities, and bodies. If we look to the rubbing orgy that occurs in Peaches's *Rub,* we can read a similar abjection. While Peaches includes a trans woman's body, even foregrounds that body and cock, we can observe a lack of material connection to Daneils's body—she is literally touched (specifically, *rub*bed) less than the other

subjects within the music video. This is notable, important, and something that can be observed across both pieces of media; even when trans women's bodies are visually included in lesbian spaces, there is often a lack of material connection to those bodies, a reluctance to actually touch them.

Transmisogyny occurs through the abjection and fetishization of girlcock, and by extension, trans women's bodies in lesbian and female sexuality. As *The Misandrists* and *Rub* demonstrate, even when trans women are granted inclusion, it is often conditional and within a space constructed specifically for the purpose of containing girlcock. Beyond the horizon of this liminal space, trans women are neither subject nor object, but simply excluded, abject. Isolde's body and sexuality, and through her body and sexuality, her female liberation, is never truly permitted or constructed. And while Daniels's body and cock are brought into discourse to be celebrated, they are celebrated in a fetishized way. What would a truly liberatory and expansive politics of trans women's sexuality look like and entail? Where can we look to find such a politics? Is it possible for trans women's bodies and sexuality to be portrayed as anything other than abject? To elevate girlcock to the sublime it must be able to exist in the background of lesbian sexuality rather than having it foregrounded as "trans inclusion in lesbian spaces." This sexuality, signified through the imagined girlcock, must be able to exist without scrutiny or suspicion, without being contained, and until we can re-signify the penis as something other than the phallus within existing feminist, lesbian and queer women's spaces, this will be impossible.

Chapter 3: The Sublime

In the previous chapters I have examined how the abjection and fetishization of girlcock positions trans women's bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities as dangerous outcasts, beyond the limits of phallocentric discourse and society. In this symbolic economy trans women's bodies and embodiments represent neither subject nor object but that which is excluded, abject. When trans women's bodies and embodiments *are* allowed to exist, they, like the abject, are contained to specific spaces and are not allowed outside that frame/framing. I argue that in order to survive, to find safety and comfort, trans women must be able to sublime their bodies and embodiments, though it is important to note that this is often not enough, for our bodies must also be sublimed by a society which is both cisheterosexist and white. Throughout this chapter I am specifically interested in exploring how kink and the BDSM practice of "training" can be used as a scaffolding for exploring and creating place, an act which has the potential to sublime bodies and subjects that have been abjected by a white phallocentric society.

This chapter explores *The Training of Poe* (Vendetta, 2017) as an example of a film directed by a cisgender queer woman that, I believe, sublimes a trans woman's body and embodiment through the framework of kink and place. While much of the film is directed and shot through a queer cisgender lense, there are moments and scenes that shatter this lense and frame/framing through the introduction of intimate autobiographical video dairies created by Chelsea Poe, the trans sub(ject). While most media fetishizes and abjects trans women's bodies, there are some exceptions, including certain examples of pornograpy, in particular porn made by or in full collaboration with trans women. Bella

Vendetta, the film's director, states that "[p]art of the beauty of [the film] actually was that NO ONE was working FOR anyone. It was truly collaborative with Chelsea and I, lots of great communication" (Kingstown, 2017, emphasis original). Because the film was "truly collaborative," it has the potential to show a more authentic version of a queer trans woman's sexuality, perhaps even the potential to sublime it. This kind of pornography, however, is rare and it should be noted that a vast majority of porn including trans women's bodies fetishizes and dehumanizes trans women through language such as "tranny" and "shemale" (Poe, 2015). *The Training of Poe* is different; it makes ample space for Poe's body to exist, not specifically as a trans woman's body, but simply as a body, a place for Vendetta's sadistic desires. When asked, "What do you think makes this release stand apart from other trans porn releases out there?" Vendetta responds,

> Well, mainly because I don't think of it as a "trans porn release" [...] The fact that Chelsea [Poe] is trans, or her gender at all, does not come in to play for any reason. I'm certainly not interested in marketing it with slurs or other tactics that might be offensive to Chelsea as a trans woman. I think if anyone has proven that adult material depicting genuine trans folks and their sexuality CAN be successful and still sell without selling out, that Chelsea has done that. (Kingstown, 2017)

Similarly, in an interview about her activism around pornography, Poe states that:

> I consider myself as much of a trans porn performer as a girl-girl performer […] it feels like trans porn performers don't even get a say in being anything other than a trans performer. I'm grouped in with all these other trans women who really don't

> have a lot in common with me, who shoot with cis men and really don't perform the same way as I do at all. (O'Donnell, 2015)

Thus it is important for both Poe and Vendetta that the film be considered more than a trans porn release, and I think for Poe it is important that this film be framed as a "girl-girl" performance. This framing works to constructs a genuine (and non-derogatory) place for Poe in lesbian sexuality, a place that she creates for herself through her activism and her porn. We can read the impact of this framing in the lack of a trans reveal scene in the film. Unlike Bruce LaBruce's *The Misandrists* (2017) and Peaches' *Rub* (2015), we are never meant to read or assume (i.e. we are never mislead) that Poe is a cisgender subject, or that her body conforms to cisgender norms. As a result, we are never given the opportunity to be surprised by Poe's trans-ness, or body; Poe's body is simply allowed to exist, and exist in full view, a rarity for trans women. The film opens with a series of credits, listing Chelsea Poe first, followed by Chelsea Poe's first video diary. The video diary is shot as a talking head, in black and white, interspersed with colour shots from future scenes in the film. The first scene shows Poe bent over slightly, being flogged by Vendetta, followed by a shot of Poe's full body, naked and tied in a rope harness, her cock dripping with precum. Unlike the other media we have examined in this thesis, the first shot of Poe's cock is neither meant to surprise, nor is it followed by a cisgender reaction that are we meant to mirror. Instead, Poe's body, cock, and embodied sexuality, read through Poe's dripping and desiring precum, are allowed to exist in full view. If we are meant to respond, it is to Poe's obvious pleasure and sexuality, not to the existence of her cock.

The Training of Poe does not exactly have a 'narrative,' instead it is produced as a documentary style pornographic film that explores BDSM, and a Dominant/submissive style relationship. The Toronto International Porn Festival states that the film

> follows […] Chelsea Poe as she travels to the mountains of western Massachusetts for an intense 3 day slave training with Mistress Bella Vendetta in Her old guard leather household. The film shows real queer BDSM subculture, from the first conversation going over protocols to Chelsea's final transformation into a trained submissive in service. (Toronto International Porn Festival 2018, 2018)

There is, I think, tremendous power in exploring and enacting Dominant/submissive style relationships, and we will explore this further. However, I believe that it is also important that we begin by being critical of the language and framing of the specific relationship in *The Training of Poe*. In the above quote, the Toronto International Porn Festival uses the language of both "trained submissive in service" and "slave," and throughout the film Poe is repeatedly referred to as "slave," or "slave poe." While Poe explicitly gives consent to be called "slave," we must be mindful of how, as white performers, Poe and Vendetta are invoking and fetishizing a history of violence and enslavement enacted against Black subjects. That is, in their pursuit of creating a sublime place for Poe, a white trans woman, they enact white supremacy through the appropriation and fetishization of historic and current Black pain and enslavement. This act of appropriation further abjects Black bodies and subjectivities, and thus, we must be critical of how it

restricts and polices permissible bodies and embodiments, an act that is fundamentally opposed to the (trans) goal of opening up these possibilities.

Mistress Vendetta asks Poe whether she is comfortable being referred to as a slave, "I don't really use the term submissive, because that's not what you are here, you are a slave here. For all intents and purposes you are now slave poe" (Vendetta, 2017). In *Transgressive and Transformative Gendered Sexual Practices and White Privileges: The Case of the Dyke/Trans BDSM Communities*, Robin Bauer states that there is a "tendency among BDSM queers to deemphasize and thus depoliticize race by deracing historically raced institutions such as slavery" (2008, p. 246). How are we to interpret two white queer women who are seemingly uncritically engaging with the discourse of Mistress and slave? Poe states that slave training "really put me into a head space that's letting me explore my identity as a slave more, and it's really amazing," so it is perhaps worth asking the question of what is gained by Poe claiming a slave identity over a submissive identity? For Vendetta, this appears to be an important distinction, one which, I believe, speaks to the intended seriousness of the situation or scene. What transpires over the weekend of filming is not meant to be an act or a performance, but rather documentation of one continuous scene or BDSM experience (Speciale & Khambatta, 2020, p. 342). In discussing safe words, which are often a component of BDSM scenes, Vendetta states that "[t]here is no magical one word that you can say to stop everything because *this is not an act*. If something becomes too intense for you, you will beg for mercy" (Vendetta, 2017). Further, to invoke the term slave within the context of BDSM is to invoke a history of violence, subjugation, and forced labour (which may be desirable elements

within the scene); however, we must remember that when we invoke these aspects through the historical institutation of slavery, we invoke a *real* and current history, that is, a history that has left and continues to leave a material mark on the world that we cannot ignore.

American slavery, as an institution, and an institution that continues to thrive in America through mass incarceration, relies on the abjection of Black bodies and subjectivies. To be subjected to slavery is to have place stripped from you, you are literally and forcibly taken from your land, your homeland, and treated as an economic good, able to be traded, bought and sold, reduced to a mere "quantity" (Spillers, 1987, p. 72). As a result of this abjection, any home, any place, is ultimately liminial and able to change at a moment's notice based on the whims of a slave trader. Beyond this, through the middle passage Black bodies are ungendered and reduced from bodies to *flesh*, they are stripped of their subject positions and become economic goods (Spillers, 1987, p. 72). In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* Spillers describes how "before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). Recall that Irigaray states that "each of us […] has a place—this place that envelops only his or her [sic] body, the first envelope of our bodies, the corporeal identity, the boundary, that which delineates us from other bodies" (1993, p. 36). For Irigaray, place and the potential of place plays a critical role in her phallocentric ethics of sexual difference, which at its core is a spatial metaphor. Within this ethics, which is represented in the phallic function, we can understand a body as either being positioned as being here (subject, male, all) or

there (object, female, not-all). However, if Black bodies are reduced to ungendered flesh, they are never even given the opportunity to enter into the phallic function, the opportunity to embody a corporeal identity, "the first envelope of our bodies." While slavery has historically reduced Black bodies to ungendered flesh and denied them entry to the phallic function, the ungendering that occurs to Poe's body as a result of her embodying the position of "slave" is not so complete. For while Poe's body can perhaps be read as becoming an ungendered receptacle for Vendetta's desires (recall that Vendetta states Poe's gender does not matter), it remains a body, and that body is simultaneously elevated to a sublime place. Poe is not only given the opportunity to come into her body, to experience her body through the intentional physicality of kink; but an opportunity to embody the position of submissive, to experience a corporeal identity that at once ungenders her, and simultaneously constructs a sublime place for Poe and her sexuality, a sexuality that, through Poe's activism, we should understand as "girl-girl." As Kristeva might describe, this sublimation "expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as [ungendered] dejects, and *there*, as [gendered] others and sparkling" (Kristeva, 1990, p. 12, emphasis original). For while Poe gives up certain aspects of her autonomy through embodying the submissive/slave, this submission is willingly given, and given in exchange for something, the opportunity to find her place, within the scene, within "girl-girl" sexuality, and within her own body (a body that is not denied to her despite the ungendering that occurs).

For Vendetta, place and the potential of place plays an important, even central role in her idea of slave training. During an early lesson with Poe, Vendetta instructs,

"[E]verything you do in this house, keep the intention of service in mind" (2017). Vendetta continues, stating, "[T]hat is what you're here for, to put someone else before you, and in doing that *you are going to find your place and yourself here*" (2017). Thus for Vendetta, to become a "slave" is to come into place, into yourself, while in reality, to be subjected to slavery is to have place, "that which delineates us from other bodies" (Irigaray, 1993, p. 36), stripped and stolen. Beyond this, it is important to note that Poe willingly submits herself to the position of "slave," as opposed to being violently forced into that situation against her will. To ignore these differences is to ignore the institutions of slavery and anti-Black racism, as well as disavows the whiteness that allows this privileged vantage point. As Bauer points out, "[I]t remains a white privilege not to concern oneself with one's racial status and history when playing as a slave" (2008, p. 246).

I want to return to Vendetta's statement that she does not "really use the term submissive, because that's not what [someone is] here, [they] are a slave." While we have examined some of the reasons Vendetta might prefer to use slave over submissive (or sub), the seriousness of the situation, and an enactment of certain aspects of slavery which might be desirable within the scene, it is worth exploring what I think is the radical potential of using sub(missive) over slave. Shawné Michaelain Holloway's *SUB NOT SLAVE* exhibit gives us a starting point: "The exhibition title *SUB NOT SLAVE* reinforces submission as *an active gesture that is offered in exchange for something rather than something that is owed*" (Holloway, n.d., emphasis mine). The exhibit physically positions viewers over the artist's self-shot pornography to "remind the viewer of their

role as dominant and judgement-maker on bodies or voices inside the screen," yet despite the audience taking on the embodied place of dominant, of "Master," the title of the work reminds us that the body in question has willingly and actively entered into this submissive space/place, that they are receiving something in exchange for submitting. Thus we can read submission as an act of exchange or creation, while enslavement is an act of violence and destruction.

For both Vendetta and Holloway, submission is meant to be offered in exchange for something, and is not owed, hence Vendetta's statement to Poe that she is there to put someone else before herself, and that in doing so, she will find herself and her place, in other words, in return for her submission, Poe is granted an opportunity to find herself and her place, to sublime herself and her place. This is important, for I would argue that this film is ultimately about Poe finding and subliming her place as submissive. As Poe enters Mistress Vendetta's house for the first time, Vendetta immediately puts Poe in her place, both literally and figuratively, saying, "[F]rom where you are to here, I want you to walk slowly and sexily" (Vendetta, 2017). In a video diary Poe records after her first day of training, she states "there was such a good amount of humiliation and submission, um… and just *really learning my place*, which I really loved," and in the penultimate scene of the film, in which Poe fucks herself with one of Mistress Vendetta's cocks, Poe moans, "[T]hank you for putting me in my place Mistress, thank you." Throughout the film, Poe is consistently told where and how to situate herself within the scene; she is told her place. So while Vendetta and Poe may invoke (and fetishize) the language and history of slavery, what they enter into is more akin to a Mistress/submissive relationship than a

Mistress/slave relationship because of the *willing exchange* (of power) that occurs, because in exchange for service and submission, Poe is offered the chance to find herself and her place, a sublime act of creation.

Place is not only important in terms of the training (for example Vendetta instructs Poe, "Now you're going to come back to me at *your place at my feet*") but also in terms of the setting itself. In an interview about the film, Vendetta states that "[m]y favorite scene is by far what I have dubbed the 'river scene.' I shot this scene on one of MY favorite mountains in Berkshire County [...] *It's my happy place*, and I brought Chelsea there" (Kingstown, 2017, emphasis original). Place is also important in terms of the history of Mistress Bella Vendetta's House; at one point in the film she says to Poe, "You have some big shoes to fill, because some of the best slaves in the world have come out of this House" (Vendetta, 2017). Place is important because, among other reasons, it helps to orient us; it determines what is in view and what activities are possible (Ahmed, 2006). What is in view and the possibility of activities that place and view creates can be read in numerous important ways throughout this film. Poe is instructed at the feet of the Mistress; much of Poe's training takes place in the kitchen where domestic work is often performed, and breath play (the purposeful restriction of breath) happens at the river where Poe's face can be submerged in running water. Thus, throughout the film we can read a common narrative: Mistress Vendetta provides place (her house, her kitchen, her happy place, her domination), and Poe fills that place with her body and with her submission—and in filling that place is able to find herself and her own place.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), Luce Irigaray discusses place as something which is gendered, and gendered as feminine, stating, "As for woman, she is place […] She is able to move within place as place. Within the availability of place" (p. 35). Thus, it might be more precise to say that Mistress Vendetta provides the availability of place, and Poe fills that place with her body (her place) and moves through that place as place (as embodied experience). Poe fills the place of submissive with both her body and embodied experiences, a place that we shall see she grows into, a place that expands with her training but that remains in constant contact with the contours of her body. It is hoped that through training, and the embodied places training brings her, Poe can find herself and her place. Irigaray states that "[i]f she is to be able to contain, to envelop, she must have her own envelope. Not only her clothing and ornaments of seduction, but her skin. And her skin must contain a receptacle" (1993, p. 35). The skin's receptacle that Irigaray speaks of is undoubtedly the vagina and womb, however we can read this in other ways as well. Our material bodies are receptacles for our embodied experiences, and our embodied experiences are a receptacle for our material body. We return again to Irigaray's statement that "each of us […] has a place—this place that envelops only his or her [sic] body, the first envelope of our bodies, the corporeal identity, the boundary, that which delineates us from other bodies" (p. 36). This corporeal identity, the boundary which delineates us from other bodies, is not a morphological feature such as vulva, vagina, womb, or cock, but the entirety of our embodied experiences, Sartre's concept of the body-for-itself or the body-as-experience. This place, this place of place, our

embodied experiences, the body-as-experience, envelops the body-for-others, the material body that others can touch, and vice versa.

In the first chapter, we explored a question posed by Irigaray through a trans lense that transformed the interval from the sexual relationship into the process of material re-embodiment that occurs as part of transition; Irigaray asks us,

> Could it be that anything that moves in a circle moves in relation to another? In two directions? With a place of attraction. A place of place. Where bodies embrace? Both in and not in the same place: with the one being in the other that contains. (Irigaray, 1993, p. 55)

I want to explore this concept of the circle, for it is important to Irigaray's understanding of the interval, or the sexual relationship which defines her phallocentric ethics of sexual difference, and I think it can be useful for our ethics of material re-embodiment. Irigaray states that in Plato's *Symposium*, "[M]an and woman were once joined together in such a way that they rolled around, locked in embrace. Then they were split apart, but endlessly each seeks to find the lost half and embrace once more" (1993, p. 44). Thus, we might understand Irigaray's circle as existing in two halves, one half man and the other woman, and together create a whole. While these two halves may be moving in relation to one another, may be circling one another, they are forever split by a straight line down the centre of the circle. From this we can note that every point on a circle can be understood as having an 'opposite' point which can be found by tracing this straight line from one point on the circle, through the center, until it reaches another point on the circle (bisecting the circle in two equal parts). These two points are not only positioned as being

"opposite" to one another along the circumference of the circle, but if we were to trace the circumference of the circle with our pen, if we were to explore the motion of circling, we would find that the motion of our pen at these two points is also 'opposite.' Thus while Irigaray introduces a powerful concept in the potential of a circle and circular movement, she simultaneously grounds that concept in the notion of binary opposition, and a straight bisecting line (i.e. the phallus).

What if instead of defining a circle by its two halves (always only two, and always in direct opposition to one another), we define it by its center point and circumference. When understood in this way the circle is described by a place, the center point, and the infinite possibility of place, for there are an infinite number of points along the circumference of the circle. In this metaphor we can see how the circumference of the circle envelops or contains the center point, a place, and thus can be understood as a place of place. But the center point, along with the radius, also defines (and thus contains) the circumference of the circle and the possibility of place. Building on this definition we can further understand the *radius* as a metaphor for Irigaray's interval, the distance we must overcome in order to traverse from one place, the centre point, to a different and desired point/place along the circumference of the circle, within the possibility of place. Recall that in the first chapter we defined the interval through the process of material re-embodiment, made possible with body image and desire, which at once defines our body (our place, the center point of the circle), and all possible uses of our body (our place of place, the points along the circumference of the circle). By defining and viewing

the circle in this way, we can understand difference as it is contained within or through our selves rather than being externalized through an irreconcilable bisection.

The collar that Poe wears serves as a physical and embodied reminder of Poe's place as submissive, as being owned or controlled by Vendetta (who physically puts the collar on Poe). In this way, we can perhaps understand Poe's collar as a metaphor for Irigaray's corporeal identity, the "first envelope of our body," a place of place, the circumference of the circle. Vendetta says to Poe, "[f]irst, I'm putting your collar on you, because I think it helps, and you're going to keep it on the entire time you're here" (2017). The collar serves as a reminder of Poe's place (as submissive), but it is, itself, also a place, a place that Poe fills with her neck, her body. The metaphor of the collar as the first corporeal identity, as place of place, can be extended to the rope and leather harnesses Vendetta binds Poe in. Recall that we have defined this first corporeal identity as our embodied experiences, as our body-as-experience, and thus the metaphor of the collar and the harness can extend to our embodied experiences.

The place of the collar, of the rope harness, of embodied experiences, conforms itself to the place of the body and creates the first envelope of the self. In doing so, this place (of place) tells us something important: place of place need not exceed the place(s) it contains. Place of place, the collar, the harness, our embodied experiences, remain in constant contact with the body, contain our body, and are simultaneously contained by our body. They align themselves with and to the same boundaries, and can even press into those boundaries to create change.

Irigaray speaks of woman needing to find her place, the limits of her place: “Does she have to locate herself in bigger and bigger places? But also to find, situate, in herself, the place that she is” (p. 35). Perhaps the problem that Irigaray is trying to solve, that woman needs to find her place in “bigger and bigger places” (i.e. in *woman*), is a problem she invents herself. What if woman finds her place, her body’s place, not in woman but in herself, in her own embodied experiences. What if she enveloped herself with her self, her body with her embodied experiences, and her embodied experiences with her body. She would no longer need to locate herself in bigger and bigger places, in “woman,” but rather, her place could share the same boundaries as her place of place, could remain in constant contact, and in doing so she could escape the place of “woman,” a place she can never fully embody because of the impossibly large size of that place.

Irigaray writes that

> [w]oman must be nude because she is not situated, does not situate herself in her place. Her clothes, her makeup, and her jewels are the things with which she tries to create her container(s), her envelope(s). She cannot make use of the envelope that she is, and must create artificial ones. (1993, p. 11)

Are we to understand collars and harnesses as “artificial” places, as Irigaray describes clothing, makeup and jewels, or is there room for a more radical reading? Clothing, makeup, and jewels are the trappings of femininity, of womanhood, and the statement that these places, these envelopes, are “artificial” raises the question of whether the place of “woman” is artificial as well, and if this is the case, perhaps there is no “natural” basis for place at all. That is, place itself may be artificial, an artifact of how we interpret and

categorize the world. If this is the case, woman is unable to situate herself in woman, gets lost in the infinitely large domain of "woman" because that is how we have interpreted and categorized (cisgender) women's bodies and experiences. Part of the othering that takes place for cisgender women is the collapsing of infinitely varied experiences into the simple category of "woman," a fact remarked upon by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990, p. 6). Collars and harnesses, on the other hand, are the trappings of the submissive, a place that is arguably as "real" and as embodied as "woman," but that remains in constant contact with the subject, *willingly* binds the subject, and in doing so, creates a place that grows with the subject through training. Poe's responsibilities, and more importantly, her embodiment as a service submissive grows with her and her training (directed by her and Vendetta's desires, negotiated at the beginning of the film).

Poe comes to embody the place of submissive through the sublime state of subspace, a term used by BDSM practitioners "to refer to a unique, subjectively pleasant, altered state of consciousness that is sometimes experienced by the receiver of sensation (i.e., the bottom) in a BDSM scene" (Ambler et al., 2017, p. 77) and which we see reflected in Poe's ability and desire to experience and enjoy the sensation of pain. At the beginning of the film Poe states that she is nervous but excited because she has never really been interested in receiving pain before, but by the end of the film, we have seen a transformation. Poe describes a scene involving lines of clothespins being pinned to her body and then aggressively and painfully removed as one of her favourite moments of the film/scene. In that moment Poe is simultaneously brought into her body through the experience of pain, and has her body sublimed, expanded infinitely outwards through the

experience of pleasure. Poe's body is overstrained and we hear moans escaping her in sublime ecstasy; in this moment we know that this is not a performance. Poe contains herself, and is contained, by herself and by the moment. Simultaneously Poe is in place and is place—she literally holds herself in "slave's posture" (in place) and holds within herself her embodied desires to be submissive, felt and experienced as subspace and the embodied desire to experience and find pleasure in pain.

Kristeva states that "there are lives not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*" (1990, p. 6, emphasis original). The subject desires the object, while the abject neither desires, nor is desired—the abject exists beyond the horizon(s) of desire. While trans women are often hypersexualized in the media and discourse, they are often desexualized or asexualized in physical and community spaces (Chamberland, 2015, p. 34). In this film, however, Poe is able to exist as both the object of desire and as desiring subject. Poe is the object of Vendetta's and the audience's desire, in addition to being a sexual subject in her own right with her own desires. While Poe is placed in, and comes to embody the position of submissive, she retains, even creates a place within herself as a desiring subject. This is perhaps most evident through the video diaries Poe creates as part of the documentary process. Within these diaries, Poe blurs the line between inside and outside, private and public, subject and object. In the first video diary, recorded the night before training starts, Poe says that she is really excited for the humiliation aspect of what is to come, that it is really important to who she is and *her sexuality*. Space is made in the film for Poe's desires and sexuality, they are not hidden, or toned down, but allowed to exist in their full richness.

Beyond this, we can read Poe's body as existing in a similarly full space. She is present in the foreground and the background of the film, sometimes taking center stage, such as the diaries and in shots of her dripping and desiring cock, and when she fades to the background she is still visible and centered. We can read this in the river scene when Poe is adorned in a beautiful and soaking wet white dress, or when she is used as a footstool (literally *as an object*) near the end of the film. Poe embodies and is placed in the position of submissive/object, yet retains, and even creates or finds her place and herself, within herself, as a desiring sexual subject.

Place is linked to both the abject and the sublime. Recall that the abject has no place, it is beyond the horizon of discourse, while the sublime transports us to a secondary universe, *a place* that "expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling" (Kristeva, 1990, p. 12). While Irigaray and others have theorized that the body's *irreducible* place exists within a (binary) gender (man, or woman), the phallic myth of subject constitution that we examined in the first chapter demonstrates this relationship is not based on "physical sex" (or rather the morphology of our genitals), but a Master/slave relationship that determines whose body is deemed complete, and who can complete incomplete bodies, ourselves, or someone else. In this way the practice of BDSM, which makes this power dynamic explicit, has the potential to subvert, though perhaps not fully escape, the phallocentric economy (this Master/slave relationship) within a scene by empowering the submissive subject with the ability to articulate and materialize their desires, to find their place, even when, and perhaps especially when, they are being (willingly) used and consumed by the

Dominant. This framework of BDSM and willful submission (versus slavery) can help us understand the process of material re-embodiment discussed in the first chapter, a process in which the body comes *into place*, in which the body, perhaps, (re-)shapes its own place, a process which is nothing short of what is required for trans women to sublime their bodies, to (more) fully inhabit and embody their gendered selves.

Yet to do this, to sublime our gendered and embodied experiences assumes we have the possibility of taking up the position of an embodied and gendered subject in the first place. That is, in order to sublime our gendered and embodied experiences, it is necessary that we are an embodied subject with a legible body. Reading Hortense Spillers' *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book* (1987), I am left wondering whether this gendered and embodied sublimation is enough for trans women who are not white. Spillers argues that through the middle passage and the ship's slave hold, Black people have their liberties and subjectivities stripped, and their bodies reduced to flesh that can be torn apart and experimented upon. Through this reduction of the embodied subjecthood to unembodied *flesh*, the body loses its social significance, it ceases to be a body, and thus, ceases to have a gender—it is ungendered (p. 67). Nicholas Eppert argues that Black embodiment and (white) gender are fundamentally antagonistic towards one another. He asks:

> Can the Black manifest itself or make itself *appear* in and through Gender? Is the Gendered body that the Black ontologically manifests as its *own body (corps)*, its own self (*soi-même)*, or is it rather a "ruse of embodiment"? (2019, p. 111)

Eppert forwards that what the Black subject (mis)recognizes as gender is in fact whiteness disguised as gender, and thus, a form of Black Psychosis, "understood in an absolutely non-pejorative sense, but rather as imprisonment in the (White) Human Unconscious" (Eppert, 2019, p. 113). Black trans women, then, are not only abject through their transness, but through their Blackness as well, and we can read this abjection in the psychosis present in the (mis)recognition of (white) gender and human unconsciousness. To expect that Black trans women sublime their gendered experiences through this framework is, perhaps, to expect that they sublime a whiteness which is fundamentally at odds with their existence. It is to expect that they come into place with a whiteness that is out of place with their Blackness. Spillers description of ungendering forces us to acknowledge that "gender" and race cannot be separated, and thus, in order for Black trans women to sublime their bodies and subjectivities, in order for that to even be possible, society must first make a place for Blackness, for Black bodies and subjectivities, which through the current structures of racist policing and mass incarnation is, I think, impossible. This highlights the importance of coalition building within trans activism, which I explore further in the conclusion of this thesis.

Conclusion: Affective Activism

One year before I started my Master's program I was invited to sit on a panel at the Congress of Humanities to speak about my experiences with activism through the lense of affect. At the time I had a much simpler understanding of affect, and a lot of the conversation went over my head, yet I find myself returning again and again to an idea I presented during that panel—the importance of "listening to your gut," or more broadly your embodied affects as part of your activism. Listening to my gut has been an important, even central method of working through the material presented in this thesis. This practice of identifying and naming moments of tension has helped me identify transmisogyny through my own bodily responses and reactions, often a feeling of embodied anxiety, which would signal something was worth investigating further. I have a complicated relationship to this tension; it has caused me anxiety and distress at times (I frequently struggle with the question of why nobody fucking cares about trans women), but through this tension, through this often open wound, I have been able to sublime and transform many of my own experiences from something negative into something productive and generative. This thesis not only seeks to point to the abjection of trans women in various pieces of media and theory, but to write that abjection, to make it real and tangible, unignorable. Monique Wittig states that "anything that is written exists," (1975, p. x) and there is something powerful about writing the reality of transmisogyny, a reality that, from my experience, is often either ignored entirely or reduced to transphobia.

I seek to not only write the reality of transmisogyny, but through my exploration of *The Training of Poe* (Vendetta, 2017), also write the sublimation of trans women's bodies, subjectivities, and sexualities. The explicit and sexualized language I use throughout this thesis is meant as a challenge to the politics of respectability often thrust upon us as trans women, as well as acting as a critique of the de-/asexualized representation of trans women in society. Beyond this, this act of writing is meant to be an act of affirmation and sublimation of trans women's often denied bodies and sexualities. While I do not seek or claim to write or subsume "all the words of the female body" as Wittig does in *The Lesbian Body* (1975, p. x), I do seek to write at least a portion of trans women's experiences, sexualities and bodies to text, and importantly, to lesbian theory.

Abjection and sublimation, as we have seen throughout this thesis, can be understood as both theoretical frameworks as well as a material processes, and it is to the material and affective process of abjection that I now turn to. One does not simply become abject, but is actively abject*ed* at a societal and individual level through negative affects. Recall that affects, including the affects that structure abjection, circulate through the air at a societal level and are stuck to bodies at an individual level at moments and places of *tension* (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11). When we experience this tension as abject affects, as anxiety, disgust, fear, horror, we attempt to distance and dis-associate our selves from the cause of those affects, and thus, the bodies that they are stuck to. When I examine my experiences with Whiteness and privilege, I can't help but notice how they are constructed around the affect of comfort, and an uncritical abjection of bodies during

experiences of embodied discomfort, a discomfort that is (mis)read as a threat to the bodily ego that must be abjected (i.e. -phobia). I argue that an important element of trans activism, indeed any form of activism, is to sit with our bodies, critically reflect on the affects we experience, name and locate them, and challenge them when necessary. Only through this process, which like the process of transition is a process of material re-embodiment, can we come to sublime and make a place for that which has been abjected.

The abjection of trans women's embodied experiences that we explored in the first chapter of this thesis contributes to the material abjection experienced by trans women, including myself. Theories of who qualifies as a woman (or woman-enough) to access gender or sex segregated programs, services, and spaces is largely determined by discourses around the body. Yet despite the importance of the body, trans women's em*bodied* experiences of femininity and womanhood are denied, abjected, and made out to be ridiculous, disgusting, and monstrous. As Stryker notes, gender transgression, in particular what we describe as "*transition*" (specifically bodily/medical transition) has long been described in terms of monstrosity (1994). We are trained through our conscious and unconscious understanding of the symbolic to accept a strict binary gender system of elevated masculinity and diminished femininity. Occasionally we are able to move beyond this framework to include non-binary genders, but even when these genders are included, they, like the feminine, are diminished—and indeed, often still cast as feminine, as can be understood through the common grouping of "women and non-binary people." Within this system, the phallic function, there are two and only two positions (even if

there appears to be more)—all, and not all, Complete and able to Complete others, and incomplete and lacking.

Strict binary dimorphic sexual difference is a spatial difference defined around whether the body has a penis, which is always read (though sometimes misread) as the phallus, or a vulva, vagina, and womb, which are misread as lack and desire. This bodily reading, however, is not based on the material presence or absence of a penis, vulva, vagina, or womb, for this information is rarely on display, but rather an imaginary penis/phallus that is assigned to some subjects, and not others. I have experienced the reality of this imaginary phallus through the experiences of my bottom surgery, which of course, did not change people's perception of whether or not I had a cock/phallus. When this imaginary phallus is attributed to a subject who does not embody the phallus (e.g. a trans woman), transmisogyny can and often does result. This transmisogyny is due to a lack of place within the phallic function for a subject who has been (mis)attributed a phallus. This lack of place, this excessivness, is felt and experienced in the body, and is materialized socially through sex and gender segregated spaces and communities that (explicitly, or implicitly) exclude trans women.

We can read this exclusion, this lack of place, in the queer cisgender gaze through which Bruce LaBruce's film *The Misandrists* (2017) and Peaches's music video *Rub* (2015) were created. While these pieces of media are meant to be inclusive of trans women and critique the treatment of trans women in media; each in their own way contributes a transmisogynistic portrayal of trans women to the media landscape. Within both films we can read the *containment* of girlcock to a trans reveal scene that instructs

the cisgender audience how to react to a trans woman's penis. Within these scenes we learn for the first time that a woman has a penis, and this discovery is immediately followed by a cisgender character's reaction to that cock. In *The Misandrists* this reaction is repulsion; we can observe Volker physically recoiling upon the discovery. The reaction to girlcock in *Rub* is much more positive—at least on the surface. Danni Daniels shakes her cock over Peaches's face, who smiles and laughs in delight, yet this is all she does. Girlcock is something you can look at, gleefully consume with your eyes, but only your eyes, for touch is forbidden. These scenes reflect the material reality of many trans women who are either cast as repulsive horrors, asexual abjects, or untouchable fetishized objects. Media depicting trans women's bodies, and in particular media that includes a trans reveal scene, trains our embodied responses to trans womanhood and femininity. The repeated layering of these embodied and affective responses in our historically lived flesh is the material process through which we abject certain bodies and not others.

How, when, and where we make space trans women's bodies, subjectivities, and sexualities matters. Pornography has long been a place that abjects trans women through dehumanzing language such as "tranny," and "shemale," but there are some trans and queer pornographers creating films that makes space for the full richness of trans women's bodies and embodied experiences (O'Donnell, 2015). Bella Vendetta's *The Training of Poe* (2017) is an example of a pornographic film that elevates trans women's experiences to the sublime. The film notably does not have a trans reveal scene, and thus, we do not have the cisgender gaze/affective response imposed on us or Poe's body. Instead, we are encouraged to desire Poe and Poe's desires, which we learn about through

a series of reflective diary entries made by Poe. As Poe sinks further and further into submission she is able to withstand more and more pain, climaxing in a scene in which lines of clothes pins are aggressively removed from Poe's body, and she responds by moaning in ecstatic pain. Poe becomes the object of desire, but through her video diaries, is also a desiring subject. To be sublimed is, perhaps, to exist as both desiring Subject, as Poe does through her video diaries, and desired object, as Poe is framed throughout the film—at one point, literally taking on the role of an object (as she kneels and is used as a footstool).

This embodied sublimation, however, may not be available (or as available) for Black trans women, who experience further abjection due to the intersection of their Blackness and gender (Krell, 2017). Spillers argues that this abjection, though she does not use this word, occurs through the middle passage and the reduction of slaves' bodies to ungendered *flesh* without subjectivity or freedom, literally an economic good to be bought, sold, and traded (1987). Beyond this, to sublime embodied gendered experiences is to sublime a mask of whiteness that may be at odds with the subject's Blackness, for when we pull back the mask of gender, we reveal that it was a form of whiteness all along. Gender, in particular gender structured around dimorphic sexual difference that elevates Masculinity and diminishes femininity is a colonial instrument of power and control. This instrument helps define whose bodies matter, whose bodies are complete, and whose bodies are desired. Black trans lives matter and until we can make a place for them in our society and in our selves, until Black trans women can be sublimed, we will not be free. To make a place in society for Blackness, to sublime it, we must eradicate the

material historic institutions that have and continue to enslave Black people. Until we can abolish the institutional powers of police and prisons, the modern scaffolding of legalized slavery, Blackness will continue to be societally abjected, and Black trans women will lack a place.

Trans activism, then, is necessarily an intersectional activism that requires coalition building. This is not just because there are trans women who are not white, who are not able bodied, who are not skinny, but because trans activism is at least in part a bodily activism—an activism that seeks to free bodies from the control of institutional powers of *all* forms. If we constrain our activism to only benefit skinny, white, able bodied trans women (as we so often do), we are not only failing those who do not fit into that box but contributing to the power structures that oppress us. It is as part of this intersectional work that affective activism is so important. While it can be useful to notice when *we* are being abjected, it is more important to notice when we are abjecting *others*. We cannot impose the burden of creating a place, the labour of sublimation, on the subject who is abject, without place—instead, it is up to individuals and communities to take on that labour of sublimation, to make a tangible and material place for *all* abjects.

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