Beyond Survival: Finding Joy in Embodied Trans Rhetoric

By

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Acknowledgements

My dissertation is about joy, that feeling of happiness when you are celebrated and supported for being yourself. I looked around and saw the increasingly rampant demonization and criminalization of trans bodies and—although my instincts were to sit with that misery—I decided to look for the strategies trans people use to realize an existence characterized by joy. What I found was that trans bodies have the power to not only challenge the systems which marginalize them, but also to make a world where trans people can feel protected, supported, and celebrated. Writing this dissertation has been hard: it hasn't been linear, it's challenged my long-established writing process, and it's depended on my ability to self-motivate which is, to be honest, next to nonexistent. But it's done and in its writing there have been moments of joy as well; I credit that to the support and encouragement of a lot of people. So, a few thanks:

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Abstract

This dissertation is about trans joy: the feeling of happiness and comfort that comes from embodying a gender identity that is protected, supported, and celebrated by others. I situate this joy in the context of the regulatory efforts of binary gender, which is itself an effect of European colonialism. My dissertation starts from the increasingly rampant demonization and criminalization of trans bodies and turns to the strategies used by trans people to realize an existence characterized by joy. Drawing on examples of embodied rhetorical practices such as pregnancy, management of body hair, and style of dress, I demonstrate material ways trans people disrupt the marginalizing mechanism that is the gender binary—at the same time subverting colonial gender ideologies. The dissertation argues that bodies are an ideal rhetorical tool for trans worldmaking, a project that creates the conditions necessary for the protection, support, and celebration of trans identities and experiences. Each case study is presented as a model for trans worldmaking that can be taken up and reproduced, circulating the subversive potential of trans bodies. I argue that not only is binary gender a colonial effect, but also that trans rhetoric has the potential to subvert and remake gender to be a category that enables joy rather than regulation. Trans worldmaking is one project of an embodied rhetoric that is especially powerful when it plays out visibly on a wide-reaching stage: when audiences resonate with a non-conforming embodied gender, they see that their own identity is possible—that, in fact, there is a world in which their identity can (and should) be protected, supported, and celebrated.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ………………………………………………………………………… i

Abstract ………………………………………………………………………………… iii

Table of Contents ……………………………………………………………………….. iv

Chapter 1: Introduction ………………………………………………………………….. 1

Methodology ……………………………………………………………………….. 4

Frameworks ………………………………………………………………………… 5

The coloniality of the gender binary …………………………………………….. 5

Embodied trans rhetoric ………………………………………………………... 11

Trans worldmaking ……………………………………………………………….. 15

Chapter Descriptions ……………………………………………………………… 18

Chapter 2: Worldmaking Countertactics for a Trans Reproductive Justice ……………………. 22

Origins of queer dissonance ………………………………………………………… 25

Frameworks ………………………………………………………………………….. 29

Counterstories of pregnancy and birth as assemblage ………………………………… 35

Worldmaking countertactics as assemblage …………………………………………… 39

Chapter 3: Anti-colonial trans worldmaking through body hair ……………………………….. 45

A brief European hair history ………………………………………………………... 48

Hair as colonial tool ………………………………………………………………… 51

Trans hair practices for passing ……………………………………………………... 56

Trans hair practices for disruption …………………………………………………... 64

Anti-colonial body hair …………………………………………………………… 67

Chapter 4: Trans Worldmaking Through Dress ………………………………………………… 70

Dress as regulatory mechanism …………………………………………………… 72

Dress for protest ……………………………………………………………………… 79

Dress as trans worldmaking ………………………………………………………….. 83

Subversive dress ……………………………………………………………………... 84

Conclusion: Implications of Visibility ………………………………………………………… 89

Bibliography …………………………………………………………………………………. 94

Chapter 1: Introduction

In the first 3 months of 2024, the number of proposed anti-trans bills in the US increased reached 533 across 41 states; as of April, 15 of these had passed. This number does not include the 44 bills introduced at the federal level. These bills seek to “to block trans people from receiving basic healthcare, education, legal recognition, and the right to publicly exist” (Trans Legislation). This unprecedented surge in anti-trans legislation highlights the precarity of being trans in America.

This dissertation is not about trans precarity. Instead, it explores the ways trans people exist in the face of such a concerted effort toward their erasure; in fact, I ask what it means to go beyond merely surviving these circumstances to create conditions under which trans identities are celebrated. The dissertation will seek out practices of trans survival and vibrancy to think about how trans people use rhetoric to find joy. Specifically, I engage with the trans embodied rhetorics that are used to manifest trans genders in the face of dominant gender ideologies as part of a trans worldmaking project. As I will explain below, trans worldmaking is a response to the harms of the gender binary—a system which is a product of European colonialism. Drawing on examples of embodied rhetorical practices, I demonstrate material ways trans people disrupt the marginalizing mechanism that is the gender binary. The dissertation argues that trans bodies are an ideal rhetorical tool for trans worldmaking, a project that creates the conditions necessary for the protection, support, and celebration of trans identities and experiences. Each case study is presented as a model for trans worldmaking that can be taken up and reproduced, circulating the promise of trans joy.

In addition to presenting these models of trans joy, this dissertation also addresses a dearth of trans voices in trans rhetorical scholarship. Much of the existing scholarship uncritically deploys trans lives and experiences as object lessons of gender trouble, without care for the actual lives of trans people. GPat Patterson & Leland G. Spencer provide a comprehensive review of scholarship in the field that discusses transness in the contexts of popular culture; activism; rhetorical pedagogies; and methodologies (n.p). While their review calls out scholars for doing work that risks invisibilizing trans people, they also suggest that such shortcomings in fact illustrate the need for more robust trans rhetorical scholarship. For example, the authors point to Jonathan Alexander's creative writing prompt which required students to write as the "opposite" gender; he claims this activity rendered students "virtually transsexed" (qtd. in Patterson and Spencer). Using transness as a metaphor in this way not only flattens the trans experience but in fact reveals the absence of scholarship that "centers trans students' needs, explores trans students' unique literacy practices, and amplifies trans students' rhetorical contributions" (Patterson and Spencer). By centering trans voices, I allow the trans people discussed here to speak on their own terms; this is particularly evident in the pivot away from a deficit starting point of "trouble" to celebrate the joy these individuals actively make in their lives.[1] In other words, I suggest that the rhetorical power of trans is in its vibrant potentiality rather than what it demonstrates about gender as a concept.

Before continuing, I need to define two of this dissertation's foundational terms: trans and joy. GPat Patterson and Leland Spencer define "trans" as

> a disidentificatory relation to the dyadic, cissexist, and faulty assumptions of sexual dimorphism, which include: the insistence that there are only two 'true' sexes, male and female; the assertion that doctors have the authority to gender infants based upon a cursory glance at infants' genitalia; the position that gender and sex are both immutable and mutually inclusive and the insinuation that medical and governmental institutions have the ultimate authority over each person's sex/gender. (n.p.)

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[1] At the same time, I am a third-party scholar and I have determined what voices and how to foreground. To mitigate this, I have attempted to limit my analysis to trans people's own words rather than things others have said of them.

This definition centers the body and its anatomy, which is a crucial element of transness; however it does not fully capture my use of the word "trans." For that reason, I put Patterson's and Spencer's definition alongside Antonia Elle D'Orsay's definition of "transness" as

> the state of awareness or condition in society of someone who does not conform in a majority of aspects to the way their society or culture sees them as behaving and living in relation to their culture's social construction of physiological sex, usually due to a variance between their physical sex and one or both of their social sex identity and/or internal sex identity. It exists at the same level as awareness of self, and it is, itself, an awareness. (n.p)

In short, I understand trans as an identity and experience of gender that requires an awareness of one's existence *outside* of the regulatory system of binary gender.

Trans joy comes from feelings of happiness from living authentically and belonging to a community; most importantly, trans joy "position[s] trans lives as lives that are worth living" (Melo 187). Scholarship on trans people often centers trans misery: the pervasive rejection, discrimination, and violence that trans people experience in their daily lives. While focusing on this negative position plainly illustrates the harm binary gender norms can cause, it also figures trans people as victims without agency. By engaging with joy as an analytic, this dissertation highlights the regulatory nature of the binary through its subversion by trans bodies. I center joy in this dissertation for two reasons. First, starting from a joy deficit normalizes trans misery: it suggests that the trans experience is fundamentally painful. Second, I hope to offer models of worldmaking driven by a "loud and unapologetic trans-affirming politic" in the face of a system that expects—and indeed, foments—misery (LeMaster et al. 24). Within such a system, trans people "need to know trans joy exists in order to imagine [...] living in the future" (Howard).

I propose the following: that the trans body is an ideal site of disruption of colonial gender categories; and that trans embodied rhetorics demonstrate the creative capacities of trans people to make worlds where joy is central to trans existence.

Methodology

Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira defines the act of decolonization as “extricat[ing] ourselves from the logic of coloniality and its effects, and detach[ing] ourselves from the apparatus that confers prestige and meaning to Europe” (407). A decolonial queer critique “asserts the potency of other-theories, such as those of dissident and radicalized bodies” (409). This dissertation highlights the work of trans people who use their own dissident and radicalized bodies to extricate themselves from the colonial logic of the gender binary.

Pereira argues that “decolonizing implies queering” in that the act of decolonizing Euro-American systems and ideologies exposes the ways “constructions of gender and sexuality intersect and are products of colonialisms” (416). In other words, because white heteronormativity is so indebted to colonialism, to confront colonialism is to confront white heteronormativity (and vice versa). In this dissertation, I explore whether decolonizing can also imply transing—whether unraveling the presence of colonialism in the gender binary might equally unravel the binary’s regulatory power. I suggest that a trans approach to decolonial critique figures trans, non-white bodies as agents of this unraveling.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue against the use of decolonization as a metaphor to “approximat[e] other experiences of oppression” (3); they instead characterize decolonization as the action of materially “undoing” colonialism, primarily through land back efforts. Although this dissertation does analyze transness in the context of colonialism, I am drawn to the authors’ alternative framework of anti-colonial critique, which emphasizes remaking and subverting rather than *undoing* colonial constructs (19). I see the trans embodied rhetoric at play in the following case studies as in pursuit of a new, radical gender experience that emerges from a direct response to and rejection of the binary—rather than a return to pre-colonial gender systems.

The rhetorical analysis of the verbal and visual texts in this dissertation is thus driven by what I will call an anti-colonial trans critique. Heeding the call of trans theory, an anti-colonial trans critique centers embodiment and prioritizes trans voices and experiences, while addressing the colonial contexts in which the cisheteronormative binary is situated; it asks how dissident trans bodies remake or subvert the systems that make them dissident. The texts explored here come from sources characterized by their high visibility and amenability to wide circulation: podcasts, social media, and popular news media. The expansive reach of these sources makes the trans worldmaking project accessible to a global audience in a way that local actions cannot do: anyone with an internet connection can, for example, scroll through Instagram and see an array of trans bodies, perhaps finding an identity embodiment that resonates with their own self-perception. This resonance is the harbinger of trans joy.

Frameworks

This dissertation is guided by three frameworks: the coloniality of the gender binary; embodied trans rhetoric; and worldmaking. These frameworks show the interconnectedness of race and gender as well as the ways in which each is rooted in and maintained by a European colonial cosmology.

The coloniality of the gender binary

This project examines trans bodies as subject to the coloniality of Western gender. María Lugones defines coloniality as “the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for [...] classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human beings” (“Toward” 745). My understanding of this process comes from the “invention” of race and gender during the era of European colonial expansion. Colonialism, Anibal Quijano suggests, “was a product of a systematic repression [...] of the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination” (169). In other words, Europeans sought to restructure indigenous political, economic, and cultural lives in order to establish a colonial model of power. For Quijano, the “most efficient instrument of social domination” is the category of race (“Questioning” 45). As a constructed category, race has the power to mark other—i.e. non-white—cultures as “unequal, in fact inferior, by nature” (“Coloniality,” 174). This racial stratification created visible borders on indigenous bodies, instituting a disciplinary system in the service of capitalist exploitation.

Although Quijano acknowledges that gender is also a powerful axis of colonial discrimination, he sees the link between “color” and “race” as dissimilar to that between “sex” and “gender.” In effect, he sees gender as emerging from sex essentialism, where race has no such biological origin (“Questioning” 49). Lugones responds to this by arguing that conceiving of gender in this way “veil[s] the ways in which non-’white’ colonized [non-cis male peoples] were subjected and disempowered” (“Coloniality” 2). In other words, gender as an othering category unfolded along racial axes of power, and to omit that is to ignore the ways binary gender worked (and works) as a mechanism of racialized colonial control. Indigenous women (and other non-cis male individuals) were “understood as animals in the deep sense of ‘without gender,’ sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity [...] They got the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white bourgeois women” (13).

In this sense, Europeans did not impose a precolonial, Western gender system but rather one implemented to differentiate indigenous non-cismales from white women at the same time that it subjugated all indigenous bodies under a colonial model of power (Lugones, "Heterosexualism" 186). This system was implemented for the purpose of maintaining the borders between male and female, borders that rely on "nationalized and racialized tropes" of sex and gender (Aizura 289). Karma R. Chávez sees these tropes at work within an "alienizing logic," one which "insists that some are necessarily members of a community and some are recognized as not belonging, even if they physically reside there" (5). An alienizing logic produces "strangers" that obscure borders "deemed crucial to [society's] orderly and/or meaningful life and are thus charged with causing the discomfort experienced as the most painful and least bearable" (Zygmunt Bauman qtd. in Chávez 7). As Aren Z. Aizura points out, the strangers concealing the male/female border are trans and intersex bodies (289). Thus, the gender binary is a tool of colonialism used to preserve the male/female border; it is a tool that emerged "as a necessary response to the 'incoherence' of indigenous genders, as a marker of white humanity, and as a method of elimination" (binaohan 123n1).[2]

As Europeans spread their imperial reach across the globe, they imposed a system of gender that rewrote existing social paradigms and instituted colonial rule. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, in her analysis of the colonization of the Yorùbá people, argues that "the creation of 'women' as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state" (124). When Europeans arrived in Africa, they were faced with a society whose organizing categories—especially gender—were relational rather than essentialized (xiii). The social categories of the Yorùbá pre-invasion were not conducive to the Europeans' colonial project: "prior to the infusion of Western notions into Yorùbá culture," Oyěwùmí writes, "the body was not the basis of social roles, inclusions, or exclusions; it was not the foundation of social thought and identity" (x). Yorùbá society did not allow for a model of power that depended on the body to exemplify absolute supremacy of the masculine over the feminine (Ashis Nandy qtd. 121). Where that supremacy did not exist, Europeans instituted it by, for example, the implementation of binary gender categories based on sex, which then determined access to and participation in the refashioned political system. Thus, "women" became "an identifiable category, defined by their anatomy and subordinated to men in all situations" (124).

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[2] It is important to mention here that the binary is the framework by which all Western genders are defined. This includes white nonbinary or otherwise nonconforming genders. binaohan explicitly states that white nonbinary people are beneficiaries of the binary in the sense that, due to their relation to the white gender framework, "white nonbinary genders [...] are coherent in ways that [Indigenous and/or People of Color] gender never is" (binaohan 126-7).

In her analysis, Oyěwùmí gestures to two enmeshed colonial practices: "the imposition of races with the accompanying inferiorization of Africans, and the inferiorization of anafemales" (Lugones, "Coloniality" 9). In some ways, the inferiorization of anafemales (those whose anatomy appear 'female')—in contrast with precolonial Yorùbá stratifications—had a greater, more immediate effect on the Yorùbá people than did racialization: anafemales were excluded from the political system, were denied land ownership, and lost the ability to participate in the economy—all constraints helped along by Yorùbá anamales, who saw in this restructuring the potential for their own superioritization (9). Although they were always subordinate to the white colonizers, Yorùbá anamales benefited from the "invention of women" and the concomitant institution of male-gendered power (Oyěwùmí 125).

binaohan similarly emphasizes the relationality of precolonial gender systems. In some cultures, they point out, "[g]ender is not only defined by what it is but what it *does*. It is/was about the role you played in your community" (115, emphasis added). For example, in precolonial Philippines, bakla were "aids to the women who were spiritual leaders" (63). This gender category was defined by this role. When Spanish colonizers arrived, the locus of gender was shifted to the body in order to subvert existing organizational structures. binaohan explains,

> A dialectic of the trans feminine body was, since unalterable [via medical interventions] at those points, based on notifying and convincing bakla that we were really just men. And by being ‘men’ we could have greater power and status within the catholic church than under the babaylan. (63)

In other words, centering the body as the measure of social power not only destabilized indigenous social systems but also established a paradigm in which ‘men’ were naturally superior to ‘women.’

This relocation of gender was especially powerful on captured and enslaved Black bodies, which were “granted ‘gender’ only insofar as it meant reproduction of property” (binaohan 79n1). Hortense Spillers adds that these bodies became “a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific” (67). In these ungendered bodies, C. Riley Snorton sees a “critical genealogy of modern transness” where gender is mutable and amendable (57). Although the binary was imposed on captive Black bodies as a “cultural and political maneuver,” Black people experienced a gender beyond—and in spite of—what was imposed. For example, Snorton points to “[f]ugitive narratives featuring ‘cross-dressed’ and cross-gender modes of wander and escape” to demonstrate the ways “ungendered blackness provided the grounds for (trans) performances *for* freedom” (57-8, emphasis added). In other words, enslaved people knew how to manipulate colonial binary gender signs (such as clothing) to become “fugitive.” Snorton explains that fugitive narratives show

> how transness became capable, that is, differently conceivable as a kind of being in the world where gender—though biologized—was not fixed but fungible, which is to say, revisable within blackness, as a condition of possibility. (59)

In other words, the conditions of slavery positioned Black people to “trans” gender—that is, to use the norms of white binary genders for their own survival.

Colonial gender organization, then, was driven by the imperative to establish a male-gendered state power. This male power was always conferred on the basis of sex, which, as Lugones points out, is a construction based on the “[s]exual fears of colonizers [which] led them to imagine the indigenous people of the Americas as [...] intersexed, with large penises and breasts with flowing milk” (“Coloniality” 7). Europeans, who could not recognize indigenous gender categories, instituted binary gender categories as a way to mitigate their anxiety. The mechanisms for maintaining those categories can, in some cases, be violent, if not deadly. Other tools for correcting deviant bodies are more insidious, so embedded in the cultural consciousness that their mobilization is almost always subliminal. For example, Chapter 3 of this dissertation explores Western attitudes toward body hair, the (mis)management of which not only delineates self from other but also shores up colonial gender borders.

The entwined trajectories of gender and race demonstrate the co-constitution of organizing categories in the implementation of a colonial model of power. Binary gender as we experience it now is an effect of European colonialism, a constructed category in service to male state power. Under such a model, all bodies require discipline to become “normal” and “civilized,” regardless of whether that body belongs to the colonized or the European colonizer. Maintenance of a “good” social body is always in progress, and racial, gender, and sexual ideals are the yardsticks against which bodies are measured to determine their degree of deviance.

I am interested in this history of the construction of the gender binary because it highlights the power of cisheteronormativity. Bodies that resist such norms—refusing to concede to colonial power—are subject to correction.To protect themselves from the corrective mechanisms of colonial state power, many trans people adopt binary customs and material signifiers such that their bodies are legible as male or female. The bodies examined in this dissertation misuse these customs and signifiers in the creation and performance of their identity. The genders thus manifested are visibly disruptive, rendering nonnormative trans bodies a threat to colonial binaries. This dissertation centers these threatening bodies to think about how trans people not only challenge the constructedness of gender but also create a world in which the deconstruction of gender is an anti-colonial practice.

Embodied trans rhetoric

I want to begin this section with an important caveat: "trans" as I use it in this dissertation is predicated on white conceptualizations of gender, bodies, and what it means to identify as trans. Although the trans genders experienced in these case studies are described by the individuals as in some way nonbinary, they do emerge from a single Western, white conceptualization of gender—thus suggesting a universal, white definition of "trans." This is, of course, not the only way to experience transness. binaohan offers the following "decolonized" definition of transgender: "A hegemonic socio-political identity crafted by (mostly) white binary trans people" (29). To be very clear, I will use the general (if universalizing) "trans" when speaking in the abstract; when discussing specific individuals, I will use the terminology those individuals have self-selected. These individuals are American people of color and characterizing their conceptualization of the gender binary as Euro-American risks "simplifying the complex global flows of shared subcultural knowledges that travel far beyond the English-speaking metropolis" (Aizura 291). I will thus heed Nael Bhanji's call to be critical of the "tacit [colonial] knowledges [...] which establish the very boundaries that appear to mark out the [trans] body" (164). In other words, I am motivated to employ an anti-colonial trans methodology in order to illustrate the ways non-conforming gender identities challenge such tacit knowledges, expanding the boundaries that make a body trans.

This dissertation draws heavily on trans studies—a field that is informed by but also diverges from queer studies. Susan Stryker explains that trans studies

> considers the embodied experience of the speaking subject, who claims constative knowledge of the referent topic, to be a proper—indeed essential—component of the analysis of transgender phenomena; experiential knowledge is as legitimate as other, supposedly more 'objective' forms of knowledge, and is in fact necessary for understanding the political dynamics of the situation being analyzed. (qtd. in Hatfield 27)

Trans studies is useful to me for three reasons: 1) it emphasizes the validity of embodied knowledge; 2) it centers trans voices as they speak on their own terms; and 3) it "celebrate[s] the promise of trans joy and trans survivance" (Patterson and Spencer). These features allow me to consider the ways trans bodies create worlds that honor and care for their experiences from within dominant discourses of binary gender. Embodied rhetoric is important here because trans experiences are unquestionably centered in the body. The case studies I will explore in this dissertation are examples of different forms of trans embodiment: trans reproduction, body hair, and dress. In analyzing my materials, I consider how trans rhetoric plays out on bodies that are subject to the binary gender ideologies that support colonial models of power. I argue that trans embodied rhetorics demonstrate the creative capacities of trans people to make worlds where joy is central to trans existence.

The use and legitimacy of trans in rhetorical studies has been slow to emerge. Where rhetorical scholars have engaged with trans studies, it has not always been in ways that honor the breadth of trans experience. Patterson and Spencer, in their 2020 review of trans rhetorical scholarship, found that cisgender rhetorical scholars often struggled with: 1.) intersectional representation; 2.) reinforcing the gender binary; 3.) conflating transness with gender roles and expression, intersex experiences, and drag; 4.) invisibilizing transness under queer studies; 5.)

sensationalizing and objectifying trans bodies; and 6.) prioritizing the "comfort and intellectual growth of cisgender students and faculty" (n.p.). The authors express "feelings of exhaustion, and even anger, that the march toward trans inclusion in rhetorical studies has emerged in such a way that we face the real risk of crowding out the voices, theorizing, and activism of actual trans people" (n.p.). Thus, the presence of "actual trans people" in trans studies is crucial. Trans studies depends on the lived experiences and embodied knowledge of trans people specifically for meaning; expanding on this, Patterson explains that the usefulness of trans to rhetoric "hinges upon the simple fact that *trans people are speaking*" (n.p., original emphasis). The importance of this recognition centers around the purpose of the speaking subject: trans rhetoric works primarily as a means of survival on our own terms, as informed by embodied knowledge. Transness, then, is shaped in large part by the body and its relationship with the dominant culture(s) in which it moves; trans rhetoric thus requires the trans body and trans voice at its center. The positionality and interactions of the trans body underscore the ways dominant discourses regulate trans subjects, revealing possibilities for disruption.

In many ways, embodiment determines the experience of gender: the visible un/readability of embodied gender situates a body in relation to boundaries of the colonial gender binary. Our bodies are the first point of others' perception of our self—sites of immediate recognition of resonance or dissonance. Michael L. Butterworth calls the body a "vehicle for rhetorical performance"; this performance often conforms to the conventions of the dominant discourse, producing normative bodies. This is especially the case for sex and gender, Butterworth says, rendering the body "the means by which we understand what constitutes 'male/masculine' and 'female/feminine'" (262). Bodies that do not conform to these conventions are subject to corrective mechanisms such as denial of medical care, housing or employment discrimination, or physical violence. Thus the readability—or passability—of the trans body directly impacts the livability of a trans life.

Of course, the reading of rhetorical bodies depends on what bodies are read. Karma R. Chávez argues that, for rhetoric, the bodies that matter have historically been those of “white, cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual men” (244). Unsurprisingly, this body of rhetoric is not representative of *actual* bodies. Jay Dolmage calls these *actual* bodies “extraordinary” and argues that not only should they “be *the* body of rhetoric” but that they “can be bodies of extraordinary rhetorical power” (9, original emphasis; 21). In this dissertation I argue that trans bodies are extraordinary and their rhetorical power enables the creation of worlds in which the deconstruction of binary gender is the ideal. The trans bodies I look at enact their rhetorical power in a way that, on the one hand, visibly disrupts the gender norms that uphold colonial models of power, and on the other hand enables the potential for trans joy.

In trans rhetoric, the body is more than a source of knowledge: it is often, in fact, the surface on which theory is written. Many trans scholars use their bodies as a tool for illustrating meaning in action. For example, Ames Hawkins’ “Exhuming Transgenre Ties” presents their body—stripped and redressed over the course of the video—as an illustration of a multiply-situated subject whose donning of a tie shapes their relationship with dominant discourses. As we watch Hawkins walk barefoot across a sandy beach, they tell us, “on my transgender/genderqueer body, the tie is not simply a text; wearing it is not only performance. An always-conscious decision to mark myself with and in relationship to male dress, to professional attire, knotting a tie is a regularly repeated act of submission/domination, rejection/acceptance, exaltation, elation, revision” (00:03:37-00:03:58). The trans body cannot simply wear a tie: to do so is invariably a rhetorical act. The rhetoricity of trans embodiment is excessive, and even moreso when the trans bodies are non-white. In other words, trans bodies—and especially racialized trans bodies—carry more meaning than the intention of their composition: a person may compose their body in a way that is intended to be read as female, but because the body is trans, it has the rhetorical power to "disrupt the social, political, and embodied protocols of normative [gender] politics" (Galarte 3).

Trans rhetoric fills the gaps queer and women's studies leave behind, especially in terms of the complex subjectivities elided by the white, cis-heteronormative frameworks that shape these adjacent fields. Trans rhetoric came into existence to give voice to those subjectivities. Patterson and Spencer describe aspire to a trans rhetoric in which trans people

> [draw] from their embodied knowledge and their (emotional, spiritual, and political) disidentification with gendered formations of colonial biopower [to] craft/articulate gender cosmologies that confront kyriarchal violence, amplify the literacies of their gender expansive kin, recover the legacies of their gender expansive elders, mobilize to increase the life chances of gender expansive people, and celebrate the promise of trans joy and trans survivance. (n.p.)

By foregrounding embodied knowledge, trans rhetoric brings focus to the lived consequences of marginalization, not to engender political activism (though this is certainly a result) but to develop rhetorical tactics for survival. Survival has been—and continues to be—something trans people have to struggle for; trans joy and trans survivance have never been givens under a dominant white, cis-heteronormative culture. This project finds potential for trans joy and survivance in the embodied rhetorics of gender nonnormative people and the ways that embodiment shapes trans worldmaking.

Trans worldmaking

binaohan believes that community support is crucial for trans survival; however, they aspire to "go beyond survival to reach a place where we can be free. Of oppression, of violence, of racism, of cissexism, of transmisogyny, of transphobia, of colonialism. Just. Free" (7). I see trans worldmaking as a means of going beyond survival. Trans worldmaking, as it will be used in this dissertation, is the creation of conditions—being support, protection, and celebration—in which trans identities can be explored and experienced, especially as a deliberate response to cishet binary pressures. This understanding comes from Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's idea of queer worldmaking. Their queer world arises from a culture that "includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright" (558). This world represents the ways "people actually live" contrary to ideologies mediated by heteronormativity (559). The strength and pervasiveness of this mediation figures these actual lives as abnormal and deviant, prompting disgust and retaliation. For Berlant and Warner, "queer social practices…try to unsettle the garbled but powerful norms" that support such reactions (548). The authors explore "nonstandard intimacies" that unsettle the bent/straight binary, refusing any relation to "domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation" (558). Queer social practices thus figured highlight "the creative capacities of individuals, together and alone, to forge relations that evade the complete capture of compulsory heteronormativities" (West et al. 57).

K.J. Rawson links these creative capacities to the "generative potential and collaborative capabilities" of trans worldmaking online (46). Rawson explores online spaces as ideal sites for "creating, sharing, and preserving trans histories that would otherwise remain untold" (40). Such histories are untold because their referent lives are unrecognizable according to cishet norms. This unrecognizability stems from the binary gender ideologies of western imperialism: trans worldmaking occurs within and counter to these ideologies in a way that allows for lives to be constituted on their own terms. The trans world created online, Rawson suggests, "democratizes history by inviting anyone to participate in making history and soliciting histories that focus on everyday people" (46). Everyday (trans) people, through their own voices and embodied experiences, create a world "where trans lives count, a world where everyone makes history, and a world of shared experience" (39). Thomas K. Nakayama and Charles E. Morris III suggest that queer (and trans) worldmaking "is not a strategic plan, organized by anyone, but a bottom-up engagement with the everyday" (v). In other words, it is the everyday reality of trans lives from which emerge worlds that support and celebrate those same lives in the face of dominant ideologies of gender.

In their conceptualization of queer of color worldmaking, Gutierrez-Perez and Andrade emphasize the significance of José Esteban Muñoz's disidentification for the creation of minoritarian worlds. An "embodied process," disidentification involves "an enduring reflexivity by the individuals that wish to turn an institution against itself" (5). For Muñoz, disidentification is "descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). These survival strategies "[resist] dominant, oppressive power structures by way of distancing oneself from exclusionary or dominant practices within institutions" (Gutierrez-Perez and Andrade 5). As minoritized subjects of a binary gender ideology, trans people enact disidentificatory survival strategies to create worlds in which their lives are livable—and, indeed, joyful.

A critical element of trans worldmaking is what Lugones calls "active subjectivity," a mode of agency that involves "habit, reflection, desire, the use of daily practices, languages, ritual knowledge, a thinking-feeling way of decision making" and whose meaning comes not from institutional or social structures but from the "resistant circle" ("Gender" 34). As a form of minimal agency, active subjectivity does not require critical reflection so much as an awareness of one’s potential for disruption. An active trans subjectivity may look like a masculine-of-center pregnant body or the combination of body hair and makeup; while these, on the one hand, are simply ways of *being*, they also involve an awareness of one’s intentional challenge to binary gender expectations. Pereira calls this “living in the everyday,” emphasizing that although certain embodied practices appear passive, they in fact “[shake] up preestablished models of resistance; or rather, [they present] other possible forms of conceiving of these models” (418). In other words, trans worldmaking is not flashy and, in fact, its actors may not even call what they do ‘worldmaking.’ But the persistent embodied practices of wearing a tie and/or a dress, of sitting in an ob/gyn waiting room, of posting images of trans joy to social media—these are modes of a reinvented resistance that return agency to trans people in a world increasingly focused on erasing transness.

Among the aspirations of queer worldmaking are “changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” (Berlant and Warner 548); we can add to this list to include gender when the female/male binary is no longer the referent. Trans worldmaking follows from the practices and purposes of queer worldmaking as described by Berlant and Warner and others, with the goals of trans studies listed above. The trans worldmaking discussed in this dissertation emerges from embodied practices and knowledges that reverberate with the promise of trans joy.

Chapter descriptions

The case studies explored in the following chapters demonstrate the rhetorical power of trans bodies for “(re)inventing forms of resistance” characterized by joy (Pereira 418). Chapter Two, “Worldmaking Countertactics for Trans Reproductive Joy,” discusses Masculine Birth Ritual, a podcast created by and for masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people—individuals who are biologically capable of having a child but whose gender identities and presentations do not line up with the cultural imaginary in which a woman becomes a mother. The chapter listens to the pregnancy and birth stories shared on the podcast and hears what I call trans resonance, a reverberation of shared experiences that contributes to the project of trans worldmaking. I discuss counterstorytelling as a rhetorical tactic practiced by masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people; the telling of these trans reproductive counterstories, I argue, creates conditions in which trans pregnant and birthing people are protected, supported, and celebrated.

Chapter Three, "Anticolonial Trans Worldmaking Through Body Hair," explores the Instagram account of Alok Vaid-Menon, a nonbinary artist and model, whose feminine, hairy, and brown body is a site of visible defiance of colonial gender norms. The chapter offers a brief history of European hair practices to highlight the origin of racialized and gendered attitudes about body hair, which work to maintain colonial gender boundaries. I analyze a post from Vaid-Menon's Instagram as an explicit response to these attitudes through the extreme visibility of their non-conforming body. Ultimately, I argue that Vaid-Menon's body hair practices are an act of anticolonial trans worldmaking that not only supports trans expression and experience but also offers a model for disrupting colonial gender ideologies.

Chapter Four, "Making Trans Worlds Through Dress," explores the ways trans people use dress in order to explore and express their gender identities in pursuit of trans joy. The chapter analyzes the 2021 Emmys red carpet appearance of Carl Clemons-Hopkins, who leant into their title of "first out nonbinary nominee" by wearing a gown whose skirt resembled the nonbinary pride flag. The visual incongruity of a black masculine body in a dress inspired reactions that demonstrate colonial gender regulatory mechanisms. The easy donning and doffing of clothes allow for frequent interpretation of and experimentation with gender; additionally, trans worldmaking strategies based in dress are highly visible, meaning they are suited for wide circulation and repetition. These characteristics, I argue, make dress an ideal tool for rejecting colonial gender categories.

Chapter Five, the dissertation's concluding chapter, asks what implications these embodied disruptions of binary gender ideologies have for the politics of trans visibility. The question I explore is, "who is trans visibility for?" In the context of marginalized categories, the goal is sometimes to be visible as "normal" to the marginalizing system for the purpose of acquiring "equal" social rights; however, I suggest that the power of the visibility of the dissertation's case studies is in its potential for trans worldmaking. While the case studies discussed in the dissertation demonstrate the ways the gender binary is used as a marginalizing tool, they also highlight how trans bodies wield visibility as a means of creating conditions under which trans lives are protected, supported, and celebrated. I argue that these trans embodied rhetorics enact a politics of visibility whose goal is not to acquire equal rights as determined by colonial gender ideologies, but rather to empower trans survival and vibrancy on trans' terms.

Trans bodies and lives are increasingly at risk of objectification, political regulation, and physical violence. I argue that a trans worldmaking project—which creates the conditions necessary for the protection, support, and celebration of trans identities and experiences—makes trans joy possible in the face of such violence and erasure. Trans embodied rhetorics are a means to this end. As marginalized rhetors, trans people learn and practice trans rhetorical strategies for interacting with and even confronting the binary gender ideologies that actively maintain their marginal status. These efforts not only make such marginalized trans subjectivities easier to bear but also have the potential to "demythologiz[e] and dismantl[e]" dominant discourses and “[expand] the representations of lived experience” (Glasby “Method”). Trans bodies, then, not only disrupt the colonial tool of the gender binary but also open up the possibility of a shift from a cultural default of trans misery to one of trans joy.

Chapter 2:

Worldmaking Countertactics for a Trans Reproductive Justice

Ryan had a rough pregnancy; his life postpartum was not much better. Physically, his body managed the labor of pregnancy and childbirth admirably—he describes his body as doing "everything it was supposed to do without giving [him] much trouble" (Wehman-Brown, "People" 00:24:26). It was the dissonance of being a trans-masculine pregnant person that traumatized Ryan. The culture of reproduction in the United States is centered around women, meaning that pregnancy and birth are inextricably linked with motherhood; from greeting cards to the names of health clinics, these embodied experiences are coded as feminine. This means that for masculine-of-center people like Ryan, pregnancy, birth, and life postpartum can be intensely isolating. Ryan recalls how, during the challenging first weeks of new parenthood, "people didn't know what to do with [him]." He explains that for cisheteronormative women there seems to be "sort of a cultural expectation that you get to have community," one that he could not access with his trans-masculine body (00:32:17-00:32:39).

Ryan is not alone in his experience. Masculine-of-center people, from queer women to transgender men, have always carried and given birth to children, but their stories often go unheard. Some of these stories, however, are impossible to ignore; the last two decades have seen the introduction of "the pregnant man" into the public consciousness, most notably through Thomas Beatie, who announced his first pregnancy in early 2008. Beatie's pregnant body—with his beard and a flat, masculine chest—became a visual spectacle that circulated in the media throughout 2008, culminating in the publication of his memoir in November of that year (Beatie). The national interest in Beatie's pregnancy arose from the visual dissonance of his very masculine pregnant body; when he appeared on *20/20* in November 2008, Barbara Walters emphatically told Beatie that the images of his pregnant body were “disturbing” (“Journey” 00:03:48). Walters’ reaction echoed that of people across the country—after all, pregnancy is a feminine experience and Beatie’s pregnant body did not look like it belonged to a woman. His story ran counter to the dominant narrative of reproduction, making his pregnant body illegible to onlookers.

Most masculine-of-center people do not publicize their pregnancies to this extent, of course; the pregnancies of feminine cisheteronormative women, on the other hand, are frequently made visible, whether through frequent posts on social media or high-profile photo spreads from women like Demi Moore and Beyoncé. Why are stories from people like Ryan so rarely heard? Shui-Yin Sharon Yam explains that “the birth stories of marginalized people . . . are ‘untellable’” because they challenge audiences to rethink the traditional narrative of reproduction in which a woman becomes a mother, usually with the support of a community of family, friends, and healthcare providers. She argues that this neglect of non-normative people not only “invalidates the reproductive experiences of those who do not fit into the dominant imaginary of birthing people,” but also “obscures the reproductive injustice . . . commonly experienced by non-normative birthing people” (22). In other words, because pregnant and birthing masculine-of-center people are not recognizable as women who become mothers, their stories are not typically heard as reproduction narratives. Telling the untellable stories of masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people is an act of reproductive justice, opening a “safe and dignified context for these most fundamental human experiences” (Ross and Solinger 9).

This dearth of stories precludes the conditions in which trans joy flourishes. The filling of this void has been taken up by individuals who publicly chronicle their family-building journeys as a roadmap for others to follow. These narratives have also found a home in the sixteen episodes of *Masculine Birth Ritual*, a worldmaking podcast about masculine-of-center experiences of pregnancy and birth. The podcast, created by Grover Wehman-Brown, serves as a "conduit" for these untellable stories, creating space for them to be heard and recognized ("Introduction" 00:00:18). Each episode is a conversation between Wehman-Brown and masculine-of-center parents, birth workers who care for them, community leaders, and scholars of US reproduction culture. The stories elicited on *Masculine Birth Ritual* reveal a dominant discourse of reproduction that does not hold space for masculine-of-center people, resulting in experiences of pregnancy, birth, and parenthood that are isolating at best and psychically traumatic at worst.

Ryan was a guest on the fourth episode of *Masculine Birth Ritual*; he spoke about the isolation he experienced during pregnancy and after the birth of his daughter, often struggling to find the words to share stories he had not told before. Near the beginning of the episode, Ryan stops, unsure of how much detail to provide; Wehman-Brown tells him, "I think [candor] is helpful just in terms of normalizing this experience"—an experience, Wehman-Brown adds, which prospective masculine-of-center parents typically have to "dig into the internet" to learn about ("People" 00:04:27-00:04:44). In the introductory episode, Wehman-Brown explains that the podcast is a space to "ask questions in this public sphere that tend to circulate only in the private or semi-private spheres of closed social media networks and one-on-one conversations" ("Introduction" 00:02:58-00:03:06). These stories remain insulated and precarious because they are culturally untellable—when told in the context of a feminine model of reproduction, masculine-of-center birth stories unsettle. This dissonance is the reason Yam and Wehman-Brown both want such stories told: not only do they reveal the reality of non-normative pregnant and birthing people, but the discomfort they cause prompts us to question the model that figures some bodies as non-reproductive.

This chapter engages with the untellable stories of masculine-of-center pregnant people to address what I call queer dissonance. This dissonance is emblematic of the inability to reconcile a perceived body with the norms and ideals of a dominant discourse. For masculine-of-center parents, queer dissonance functionally bars them from accessing the community and resources—e.g. prenatal yoga, birth education classes, chestfeeding support—that are open to cisheteronormative pregnant women.[3] However, alternative access points are being made in shared public spaces like podcasts and social media, as I demonstrate here. My analysis centers around two assemblages of worldmaking strategies for disrupting the queer dissonance that masculine pregnant bodies cause: first, an assemblage of pregnancy and birth counterstories; and, second, an assemblage of further worldmaking countertactics—which seek to challenge dominant practices and ideologies—for creating conditions in which masculine-of-center people can experience pregnancy and birth as joyful. I argue that these assemblages not only highlight needed changes in the discourse of reproduction in the US but also offer worldmaking practices for a trans reproductive justice that supports and celebrates non-normative pregnant and birthing people.

Origins of queer dissonance

The stock story of reproduction in the US—from conception, pregnancy, birth, to parenting—is predicated on the existence of a body that is not only recognizably female but also recognizable as a woman. In other words, reproduction is so powerfully gendered that only a female body is capable of pregnancy, and any body read as pregnant is seen as belonging to a woman; bodies that trouble this paradigm are sources of queer dissonance. Western womanhood is contingent on femininity—i.e., an absence of masculinity—and feminine pregnant bodies signal a culturally appropriate womanhood.

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[3] In addition to these more social resources, various legal and policy structures—e.g. mother/father birth certificates—underscore the precarity of trans and gender nonconforming parenthood.

In her study of masculine-of-center gestational parents, anthropologist Michelle Walks characterizes feminine pregnancy as a Western cultural fetish, "something that is valued not necessarily for its original use . . . but something with added sexual, spiritual, aesthetic, or commodity . . . value" (12). In the context of colonial nation-states, feminine pregnancy's added value comes from the reproductive labor it represents: (white) women fulfilling their designated role as reproducers of "members of national collectivities" (McClintock 355). The success of colonialism depends on the proliferation of a citizenry that obeys racial, class, and gender norms—and, importantly, a citizenry that outnumbers non-normative or deviant bodies. The cultural fetish of feminine pregnancy figures "*women* who are pregnant [as] *pregnant bodies*," publicly held objects that are constantly "under the surveillance of both strangers and people they know" (12, original emphasis). This surveillance of bodies constitutes a division between the feminine from the masculine, and the pregnant from the non-reproductive.

The surveillance of pregnant bodies hinges not only on visual cues of Western, white femininity, but also on the performance of a recognizable feminine pregnancy. As KJ Surkan explains, "there is an enormous amount of effort in shoring up the cultural signification of the pregnant body as female and feminine"; this effort is evident in the regulatory "discourse produced by and about pregnant women" ("That" 59). This means that in order to remain recognizably feminine, women have to perform their pregnancy in a way that complies with the stock story of feminine reproduction. In their examination of the performance of feminine pregnancy on Instagram, Katrin Tiidenberg and Nancy K. Baym recognize that pregnancy is “simultaneously one of the most embodied . . . and one of the most discursively regulated" human experiences (2). For the authors, pregnant women “do” pregnancy, a project that requires them to “a.) learn to be pregnant by seeking information and taking advice; b.) master routines of self-care to guarantee the health of the fetus; and c.) constantly perform pregnancy to ensure that others acknowledge it” (2). This acknowledgement is key: adhering to the regulatory discourses that promote the cultural fetish of feminine pregnancy allows pregnant women to “inhabit a socially viable subjectivity” and access support and resources throughout pregnancy and after birth (10). Without this femininity, pregnant bodies cannot be socially viable.

Marika Seigel, in her rhetorical analysis of pregnancy manuals, considers the disciplinary effects of texts such as *What to Expect When You’re Expecting,* resources intended to teach women the correct way to “do” pregnancy. She figures these manuals a form of technical communication that “encourages [pregnant women] to discipline their own bodies and practices” for the good of the fetus (9). Pregnancy manuals—both the texts Seigel examines as well as less formal sources of information that circulate person-to-person and in online spaces—comprise a regulatory discourse that shores up the femininity of the ideal pregnant body. Tiidenberg and Baym point to three strands of this discourse that advance “specific, narrow, overlapping visions” of what this ideal pregnant body looks and acts like:

> The “learn it” discourse operates with an internalized sense of responsibility, intense self-education, and reliance on a lifestyle-specific set of expert knowledge (e.g. medical or new age). The “buy it” discourse is comprised of demonstrations of consumerist expertise; consumerist rituals, which construct new consumers in-utero; and legitimizes the above through the rhetoric of love. The “work it” discourse relies on women showcasing the ability to retain a sexualized female body even while pregnant, and, like the “buy it” discourse, increases its moral power by infusing what could, otherwise, be considered vanity, with maternal love. (11)

To maintain a socially viable subjectivity while pregnant, women are expected to read pregnancy manuals and trust their medical providers (whether obstetricians or midwives); buy new maternity clothes, multivitamins, and the "right" items for their new baby; and be fashionably dressed, made up, and regain their "pre-baby" body quickly. Importantly, the work required to attain this viability is not expected only of white women nor is it reflected only in white culture—though it certainly originates in white ideals of feminine beauty.[4]

In these ways, pregnancy intensifies the gender binary. Pregnancy is the pinnacle of womanhood at the same time that it requires the pregnant body to over-perform femininity. A body that was not recognizably feminine before pregnancy is not recoded as female by virtue of being pregnant (Surkan, "FTM" 3). Surkan argues that under the stock story of reproduction, masculinity and pregnancy are so incompatible that onlookers are either unable or unwilling to recognize masculine bodies as pregnant (58). Many of Wehman-Brown's guests recall how whether they were recognized as pregnant or not depended on how others read their gender: Jacoby remembers how he rarely received unsolicited pregnancy advice from strangers because his pregnant body was often read as belonging to a "chubbier guy" ("Welcoming" 00:16:06-00:16:34). These masculine-of-center pregnant bodies, then, are bodies that struggle to be recognized as such under a discourse that promotes a cultural fetish of feminine pregnancy. In moments when they are recognized as pregnant, such bodies become sites of queer dissonance that disturb onlookers.

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[4] In some ways, prominent women of color undertake the work to perform a feminine pregnancy even more visibly than their white peers in order to maintain a socially viable subjectivity. For example, *Vanity Fair* ran a feature on Serena Williams in 2017, detailing the love story that led to her pregnancy (Bissinger). Williams—who is no stranger to being masculinized by the media—posed nude for the cover, visually accentuating her Black femininity alongside her Black maternity. Although the article's striking cisheteronormative imagery did not silence critics, the piece went some way to demonstrating that Williams was "doing" pregnancy correctly.

The strategies Tiidenberg and Baym name presume a recognizably female body: bodies that are *not* are unable to “do” pregnancy in a way that promises a socially viable subjectivity. Consequently, masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people have difficulty accessing or are barred from the resources, services, and community that are available to feminine, cisheteronormative pregnant women. While telling his story in the fourth episode of *Masculine Birth Ritual*, Ryan notes that he does not have a clear picture of what pregnancy and birth are like for cisheteronormative women, but “envision[s] a type of community that [he] had no idea how to access” (Wehman-Brown, “People” 00:34:06-00:34:15). When he searched for resources and services—local and online support structures—he “never found anything that reflected who [he is] in this story” (00:40:58). Some of these support structures include competent and compassionate healthcare; birth classes; pre- and postnatal “mom groups”; and the easy camaraderie parents share with other parents in public spaces like playgrounds. Everywhere he looked, Ryan met exclusive language, imagery, and women who did not know what to do with a pregnant person who would not become a mother. Because masculine-of-center people are not recognized as capable of pregnancy and birth, their experiences are not readily supported or celebrated. Though the guests on Wehman-Brown’s podcast recount varying levels of isolation throughout their pregnancies, all describe ways they have been excluded from these elements of reproductive culture by virtue of their masculine bodies.

Frameworks

A central goal of *Masculine Birth Ritual* is to give voice to the experiences that are untellable under the discourse of reproduction in the US, facilitating trans joy. These stories shift the focus of family-building narratives to include masculine-of-center people, highlighting the exclusionary systems that figure pregnancy and birth as necessarily feminine. My analysis of the stories told on this podcast proceeds from an understanding of storytelling that arises from three theoretical frameworks: reproductive justice, critical race theory, and queer assemblage. Each of these frameworks calls for the inclusion of marginalized lived experiences as a means of challenging dominant discourse, a core principle which shapes the assemblages I explore in the rest of this chapter. I argue that these frameworks highlight the necessity of storytelling for building conditions for trans reproductive justice.

My use of reproductive justice comes from Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger. In *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*, Ross and Solinger identify telling stories as “an act of subversion and resistance”; they go on to say: “Storytelling is a core aspect of reproductive justice practice because attending to someone else’s story invites us to shift the lens—that is, to imagine the life of another person and to reexamine our own realities and reimagine our own possibilities” (59). The stories told on *Masculine Birth Ritual* are a reclamation of marginal experiences and a “[reaffirmation of] social bonds” between others whose pregnancy and birth stories are silenced and made invisible under the dominant US discourse of reproduction (Yam 22). *Masculine Birth Ritual* shifts the lens away from the familiar story of women becoming mothers to highlight feelings of dissonance and isolation that, for non-normative bodies, exist in tandem with the pursuit of the “fundamental human right” to bear, birth, and parent children (Ross and Solinger 10).

Ross and Solinger note that some stories are kept quiet as a “survival strategy” when the teller cannot “trust others with [their] truths” (59-60). Ryan, for example, withholds parts of his story, acknowledging it as he does so: “I feel like . . . I’m talking around stuff . . . I know exactly what I could be saying to you that I still have . . . I’m not in a place to say” (Wehman-Brown, “People” 00:49:15-00:49:35). He shields himself both from the scrutiny of Wehman-Brown and their listeners as well as the psychic labor of publicly processing his experiences. Ryan's discomfort sharing his experience of pregnancy and birth as a trans-masculine person emerges in part because of the dearth of similar stories. This emphasizes the value of *Masculine Birth Ritual*: as a publicly available resource, the podcast allows masculine-of-center pregnant people to "work together for strength and safety," building a coalition which recognizes that their "collective power is based on and derived from [their] power to tell [their] own stories" (Ross and Solinger 60).

The second framework informing my understanding of storytelling is critical race theory. Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso define critical race theory as an effort to

> develop a theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and pedagogical strategy that accounts for the role of race and racism [in US institutions] and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating other forms of subordination, such as gender, class, and sexual orientation. ("LatCrit" 472)

Critical race theory confronts the whiteness—especially cisheteronormative male whiteness—of institutions, which not only discount but also silence the stories of marginalized rhetors. For Solórzano and Yosso as well as for Aja Y. Martinez, a rhetorical scholar also engaging with critical race theory, marginalized rhetors include university students of color; for Yam, they are "gender non-normative people" who are pregnant or giving birth (22). In each instance, stories do the work of identifying mechanisms of subordination. Emerging from this foundation is the practice of counterstorytelling. Counterstories are those untellable stories that come from the margins, running counter to the stock or "majoritarian" stories that "generate from a legacy of [white, cisheteronormative, male, and class] privilege" (Solórzano and Yosso, "Methodology" 28). Martinez explains that a stock story "distorts and silences the experiences of people of color and others distanced from the norms such stories reproduce." In their telling, counterstories "validate, resonate, and awaken" marginalized people to the potential for collective power, strength, and safety (51)—and, I would add, joy.

It is important at this point to recognize that the majority of the parents that tell their stories on *Masculine Birth Ritual* self-select as white, meaning that conversations about race and the disparity of reproductive healthcare between people of color and white people do not happen (see Petersen et al.). However, counterstorytelling as conceptualized by critical race theorists remains a useful framework for examining masculine-of-center pregnancy and birth stories; using this framework also proactively opens space for the neglected pregnancy and birth stories of parents of color. Solórzano and Yosso name several key principles of critical race theory, three of which contribute to my use of counterstorytelling in this chapter: the challenge to dominant ideologies; the commitment to social justice; and the centrality of experiential knowledge ("Methodology" 26). The counterstories of pregnancy and birth told on *Masculine Birth Ritual* contest the stock story of feminine reproduction, demonstrating through lived experiences new possibilities for family-building narrative arcs. As a storytelling space, the podcast invests itself in the pursuit of reproductive justice for gender non-normative pregnant and birthing people.

Finally, I take a cue from Maria Novotny, who filters the counterstory through Jasbir Puar's framework of queer assemblage. As a methodology for addressing the war on terror, queer assemblage favors "spatial, temporal, and corporeal convergences, implosions, and rearrangements" (121). Puar further argues that "queerness as assemblage enables attention to ontology in tandem with epistemology, affect in conjunction with representational economies, within which bodies . . . interpenetrate, swirl together, and transmit affects to each other" (122). In other words, queer assemblage attends to the mess inherent in subjective embodied experiences, challenging linear, coherent, and recognizable paradigms of identity. Queering storytelling in this way allows Novotny to disrupt the stock/counterstory binary of in/fertility; "[capture] non-normative identities, positionalities, and moments of being and becoming"; and "[render] narrative even more slippery than usual . . . embracing multiple, and at times contradictory, moments of becoming" (116-117). For Novotny, a queer assemblage of stories complicates the traditional infertility counterstory—in which a woman learns she is infertile and pursues medical assistance at any cost to become pregnant—illustrating the myriad ways individuals relate to and experience the fertility clinic. The counterstories Novotny assembles feature a trans teen preserving his eggs, a gay couple working with a surrogate, and a cisheteronormative woman deciding against IVF and adoption. Through this particular assemblage, Novotny "advance[s] the ways in which [rhetoricians and healthcare providers] care for those whose stories we are simply not trained to hear" (125).

The stories told on *Masculine Birth Ritual* too represent a queer assemblage. Not all of the guests on the podcast experienced pregnancy, birth, and postpartum as solely traumatic experiences. Some of these stories depict masculine-of-center parents who navigated the exclusionary discourse of reproduction in a way that honored their gender identities; for example, Jacoby and his partner composed a "Germination Proclamation," which laid out language for how they wanted their families to talk about his pregnancy and birth (Wehman-Brown, "Welcoming" 00:17:44-00:18:00). This document honors Jacoby's lived experience as a genderqueer pregnant person at the same time that its composition signals a "limited representation of what an ideal birthing parent should look like" (Wehman-Brown, "Introduction" 00:02:23-00:02:50). The assembled stories that I examine illustrate the myriad ways masculine-of-center pregnant people relate to and experience reproduction in the US.

These counterstories are not neatly juxtaposed with the ideal arc of cisheteronormative pregnancy and birth, allowing, as Novotny argues, “for the gaps, the reorientations, the spaces between systems of power that influence identity making and knowledge making” (117).

In short, the stories I retell confront stock stories of feminine pregnancy and birth and in their telling create the conditions in which trans joy is experienced. These representations offer ways to reconsider reproductive justice beyond the centrality of anatomy; indeed, Ross and Solinger argue that “[r]eproductive oppressions stem from a determination to exercise power over vulnerable persons” regardless of gender identity or genital configuration (6). Additionally, hearing these stories according to the above frameworks reveals gaps in rhetorical scholarship around reproduction, which has largely focused on cishetero norms of pregnancy and birth. Yam suggests that a reproductive justice model (and, I propose, models informed by critical race theory and queer assemblage as well) “urges rhetoricians to be more mindful and intentional in their language use and to expand their scope of study to encompass the pregnancy and birthing experience of queer, trans, and gender nonconforming individuals to account for the intersections between reproductive and gender politics” (22). These moves not only care for the lived experiences of gender non-normative pregnant and birthing people but also broaden conceptualizations of reproductive justice. Ross and Solinger claim that a central goal of reproductive justice is to “build a united struggle for universal human rights in a way that includes everyone” (70). I contend that the following assemblages offer a guide for expanding that inclusivity.

In addition to these frames, I want to call on rhetorical listening as a valuable tool for engaging with these assemblages. Krista Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as “a trope for interpretive invention,” one that can be “employed to hear discursive intersections of any cultural categories . . . and any cultural positions . . . so as to help us to facilitate cross-cultural dialogues about any topic" (196). This practice requires that one listen *with* intent rather than *for* it (220). The storytellers featured on *Masculine Birth Ritual* should be considered not the agents of cross-cultural dialogue but the impetus. Rhetorical listening asks the audience to listen beyond the familiar, to "*choose* to listen also for the exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and our selves" (203, emphasis added); in doing so, it becomes possible to "*hear* things we cannot *see*"—things such as the reproductive injustices experienced by masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people (203, original emphasis). For Ratcliffe, such deep engagement with a text inspires "an ethical responsibility" to advocate for those persecuted by certain cultural paradigms while also questioning the ways those same paradigms enable feelings of safety for others. This responsibility opens up the "potential for personal and social justice" (203). I suggest that rhetorically listening to the experiences shared on *Masculine Birth Ritual* makes the gaps in reproductive justice apparent, indicating areas where rhetoricians; activists; healthcare providers; and friends, family, and caregivers of masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people can advocate for substantive and meaningful change—can, in other words, participate in trans worldmaking.

Counterstories of pregnancy and birth as assemblage

Similar to Novotny's queer assemblage of in/fertility stories, the counterstories shared on *Masculine Birth Ritual* capture experiences that challenge linear, coherent, and recognizable paradigms of identity. Although all of the guests on the podcast identify as masculine-of-center, not all relate negative or traumatic pregnancy and birth experiences. The queer assemblage of stories offered below demonstrates as much. As Novotny suggests, these assembled counterstories provide "a layered and more complex narrative" of masculine-of-center pregnancy and birth than they would on their own, “inventing new spaces for and pointing to the slippages of narratives that make space for agency in an always-changing identity construction” like masculine pregnancy (117). In other words, the counterstories of pregnancy and birth retold below represent a worldmaking strategy developed by masculine-of-center people to establish a reproductive justice that includes their own experiences.

As I have already shown, Ryan did not have a fraught relationship with his body during pregnancy; in fact, he explains that he “kind of thought it was cool” to see the changes in his body and feel the baby move. Nor did it affect “how gender works for [him] in the world” (Wehman-Brown, “People” 00:12:00-00:12:29). He continued on as he had been, teaching, finishing coursework for his PhD, and just “try[ing] to stay pregnant” (00:09:10-00:10:50). As he recounts his experience, however, it becomes clear that his trans-masculine body did in fact trouble the way he related to pregnancy and birth. He tells Wehman-Brown that while his friends do not see nor treat him as a woman, they did not have “a script for how to treat someone who was pregnant who wasn’t a woman.” As a result, Ryan “mostly spent the time by [himself]” (00:15:49-00:15:59). Because his pregnant body did not belong to a woman, Ryan went through pregnancy without support of friends—he does not seem to be aware, though, that this isolation was tied to the canonized stock story of feminine reproduction.

In the stories of his postpartum life, Ryan clearly recognizes the effects of this stock story. He identifies birth as the moment that “messed [his experience of gender] all up” (Wehman-Brown, “People” 00:12:28). While he acknowledges that friends did visit to hold the baby and bring Ryan and his wife food, it seemed like “the entire fact that [he] gave birth got erased about a week after [he] did it” (00:35:39). In other words, as soon as the visible fact of his pregnancy was gone, Ryan’s body reverted to its non-reproductive masculinity. Being unrecognizable as a gestational parent meant that Ryan had no way to talk about his experience—perhaps explaining his halting, reserved storytelling on *Masculine Birth Ritual.* About halfway through the episode, Ryan recalls one memory that most clearly illustrates the way the exclusive discourse of reproduction affected his life postpartum. Sometime during the early days of his daughter's life, Ryan's in-laws came to see the new baby. As they stood to go, they kissed Ryan's wife and said—in front of Ryan—"thanks so much for making us grandparents" (00:31:37-00:31:56). This seemingly unthinking erasure of the role of his body in that becoming represents a culmination of the injustices Ryan experienced under a discourse of reproduction predicated on a recognizably feminine body. He explains that he "simultaneously [doesn't] want to be made invisible as a birth parent but [he likes] the idea of someone thinking of [him] as someone who has given birth"; the counterstorytelling space of *Masculine Birth Ritual* allows Ryan to imagine such an experience (00:43:25-00:43:43).

While Ryan's story underscores the harm caused by the gap in reproductive justice, other episodes highlight the complexity of non-normative family-building narratives. The eighth episode of *Masculine Birth Ritual* features J Carroll, a trans-nonbinary single parent by choice. As J tells Wehman-Brown, they had always had a desire to be a parent, regardless of their gender identity (Wehman-Brown, "He" 00:01:15-00:02:00). They see pregnancy as just something their body is able to do—"I'm not feminine," they say, "so it can't be only a feminine thing" (00:32:16-00:32:30). This perspective made their pregnancy and birth less traumatic than it was for Ryan. However, that does not mean that J experienced their family-building journey with the structural support that a cisheteronormative woman might.

As J sought out resources and services to prepare them for birth and parenthood, nothing felt "at home" (Wehman-Brown, "He" 00:14:48)—everything seemed to highlight the fact that reproduction culture in the US excludes gender identities and experiences like J's. From the books they read—such as *What to Expect When You're Expecting*—to apps used to track the growth of their baby, nothing available resonated with J's life. J remembers going to prenatal yoga classes, which, while generally not contributing to the feminization of pregnancy, occasionally excluded J through language use—calling participants "ladies" or "mommas" for example. Such an atmosphere made J feel slightly awkward, but they found the classes useful and so resolved to "just do the yoga and try not to listen to anything" (00:08:01-00:08:38). J had to make do, revealing a tactic of selective engagement that many pregnant and birthing masculine-of-center people have to use. Not everything is going to be perfect, J tells Wehman-Brown—"you have to take the good things and leave the rest" (00:08:45-00:08:51).

The final piece of this queer assemblage relates yet another experience that does not conform to a single reproduction counterstory arc. As a high school biology teacher, Vanya—who describes herself as a genderqueer butch—is fascinated by the reproductive process and, like J, had always wanted to be pregnant (Wehman-Brown, "Grow" 00:01:02-00:04:00). She recognizes, though, that pregnancy is characterized in our culture as the "ultimate thing you can do as a woman"—this meant that, for Vanya, getting pregnant as someone who is not a woman was "a mindtrip" (00:07:15-00:07:32). Although she has never tried to pass as such, Vanya is often read as a cisgender male owing to her preference for masculine clothing and the beard she puberty caused her to grow. As her body became more visibly pregnant, onlookers struggled to place her, and she was subjected to the sir-ma'am-sir address typical among cisheteronormative people confronted with a body that defies gender norms. In general, though, Vanya did not dwell on how pregnancy related to her gender—she was just Vanya, "growing a human" (00:08:45-00:09:00). Vanya maintained her preference for masculine clothing, though as her body grew she struggled to find things to wear that were not feminine. She recalls standing in a fitting room and "crying because . . . things fit but they just didn't look right, they looked too feminine. Everything had little frills and it was just terrible for someone who doesn't identify in a feminine way." Instead, Vanya made do with leggings, unbuttoned jeans, and too-big t-shirts (00:11:00-00:11:58). Although the experience of moving in the world with a masculine pregnant body did not leave her feeling traumatized by moments of queer dissonance, the fact that Vanya could not just be a pregnant *person* highlights the exclusive mechanisms of reproduction culture in the US.

As a queer assemblage, the counterstories told on *Masculine Birth Ritual* highlight the impossibility of a single masculine-of-center reproduction narrative. Exclusion from the stock story on its own does not guarantee a negative family-building experience. Indeed, as this assemblage of stories shows—and as Wehman-Brown tells Ryan—"being pregnant and being trans doesn't mean that . . . pregnancy is going to be terrible" ("People" 00:49:01). Trans-masculine pregnancy and birth are figured as unnatural and disruptive according to the exclusionary discourse of feminine reproduction; Ryan's isolation, J's need to make do, and Vanya's struggle to maintain her gender presentation all point to the harm inflicted by such exclusion. However, there are worldmaking countertactics for confronting such harm, "skills" which are familiar to queer and trans people (00:49:05). Producing a podcast to communally hold the experiential knowledge of masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people is one such countertactic. Sharing and listening to these stories is an act of reproductive justice: this queer assemblage shifts the paradigm of reproduction to create conditions for masculine-of-center pregnancy and birthing people to experience joy.

Worldmaking countertactics as assemblage

This second assemblage of worldmaking countertactics developed by masculine-of-center parents represent a skill integral to queer and trans people's survival: the ability to collectively build spaces of power, strength, and safety within the confines of an exclusionary discourse. Masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people have enacted worldmaking practices of inclusion that take advantage of shared online spaces, language and framing, and material practices and epistemologies to hold space for their non-normative experiential knowledge. Because the podcast makes this knowledge publicly accessible, these countertactics not only provide masculine-of-center people with the tools to navigate pregnancy and birth within a discursive context that privileges femininity, but also offer rhetoricians, activists, and healthcare providers suggestions for implementing a trans reproductive justice practices.

At the end of each episode of *Masculine Birth Ritual*, Wehman-Brown invites their guests to imagine that they are thirty years in the future, seated beside a masculine-of-center pregnant person: what changes or support would they like to see for this person? Some guests share dreams of better-trained medical professionals or more research on masculine reproduction; tellingly, most guests wish for a world in which knowledge and stories of masculine-of-center pregnancy and birth are collectively held. The power of storytelling, after all, is in the collaborative building of knowledges "with full awareness that while ours may not be the dominant narrative, we may nonetheless highlight the importance of our respective backgrounds, experiences, and material realities" (Cedillo and Bratta 235).

Masculine-of-center people are doing this worldmaking work on their own, making do with the space available to them. For example, several guests mention a popular Facebook group dedicated to trans*, nonbinary, and masculine-of-center parents; this is a space to ask questions, share advice, and recommend resources to others. J explains that they used the group to gather “anecdotal evidence” to answer questions that their midwife could not (Wehman-Brown, “He” 00:14:56-00:15:45). This group assembles experiential knowledge to offer models for navigating pregnancy and birth as masculine-of-center people. Without guides and manuals that reflect their lived experiences or healthcare providers competent in gender neutral reproductive care, masculine-of-center people have to “dig into the internet” to find what they can.

Masculine-of-center parents are also creating linguistic space to help friends and family engage with the reality of their pregnancy and birth. Jacoby’s “Germination Proclamation,” for example, establishes language preferences with family and friends, disrupting the dominant reproduction discourse; sharing the “Germination Proclamation” on the podcast and online allows other masculine-of-center pregnant people to take up that subversion. Ross and Solinger and Yam all advocate for a shift toward inclusive language and more expansive conceptualizations of reproduction, in scholarship as much as healthcare. Limiting conversations around reproduction to women, motherhood, and the female body overlooks the lived experiences of gender non-normative pregnant and birthing people. This omission reifies the cisheteronormativity that is “prevalent in existing pregnancy and birth discourse” (Yam 22). Reproductive justice and critical race theory frameworks urge us to honor the voices from the margins and listen for the gaps between the stories and dominant ideologies—these gaps signal places for rhetorical inquiry that “encompass[es] intersecting identities, positionalities, and experiences that spill over binary categories” (Yam 32).

In addition to confronting the limitations of language, some masculine-of-center people have made the decision to enter birth work to effect change through healthcare. Mac is a queer transman who became a doula in part to meet the needs of LGBTQ people. His goal is to provide competent and compassionate care through education and empowerment; gender neutral childbirth classes; providing competency workshops to healthcare professionals; and, most importantly, listening to and holding space for his clients (Wehman-Brown, “Possibility” 00:00:49-10:00:00). In addition to providing resources and care that feel comfortable to masculine-of-center pregnant people, Mac’s work as a doula and educator begins to revise the stock story of feminine reproduction; not only does this revision expand networks of compassionate and competent care, but also creates material spaces in which masculine-of-center parents feel safe to birth their babies. These knowledges and practices become collectively held through their telling on the podcast, an offering to a community that is typically excluded from the narrative of reproduction.

The above worldmaking countertactics are examples of a kind of self-directed advocacy, creating tools for survival outside of institutional spaces. Like generations of queer and trans people before them, masculine-of-center parents have learned to make their own spaces of power, strength, and safety through collective action. I suggest that this work can help rhetoricians, activists, and healthcare providers reconceptualize pregnancy and birth in more just ways. The assemblages explored in this chapter point to serious gaps in care and support for masculine-of-center pregnancy and birth; listening to and learning from these worldmaking strategies provides a useful model for working toward trans reproductive justice practices.

I present these parallel assemblages to demonstrate the harms of an exclusionary discourse of reproduction. The centrality of the feminine restricts access to community and resources for people who do not fit the ideal image of a pregnant person. Such exclusion has led masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people to find new ways to access support networks, drawing from an assemblage of countertactics to do so. The queer assemblage of the counterstories of Ryan, J, and Vanya highlight the need for these tactics, as each experienced pregnancy and birth as periods of dissonance and isolation. Counterstories and other worldmaking countertactics do the work that critical race theory calls for, centering experiential knowledge to challenge the dominant ideology of feminine reproduction. These worldmaking strategies represent an act of reproductive justice, working toward the goal of a united, inclusive struggle against reproductive oppressions while also imaginatively constructing more just futures. Rhetoricians, activists, and healthcare providers have much to learn from these queer models of reproductive justice, expanding study and care to include masculine-of-center voices.

The assembled experiences of Ryan and the other guests on *Masculine Birth Ritual* highlight the ways healthcare and medicine fall short of caring for masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people. Wehman-Brown explains to Mac that a significant impetus for the podcast was an actively transphobic nurse they encountered while in the ICU after their traumatic birth. Mac comments that in creating the podcast, Wehman-Brown is saving "a heck of a lot of other people" from having the same experience ("Possibility" 00:55:01-00:56:38). Though *Masculine Birth Ritual* does not necessarily exist for healthcare providers, it still has something valuable to offer. Novotny orients her own model of storytelling toward the fields of health and medicine, arguing that queering counterstory through assemblage "make[s] space to question biomedical practices and discourses that construct bodies of health within paradigms of 'normalcy.'" For Novotny, this means disrupting infertility narratives, "which perpetuate cultural ideals of normalcy in the contexts of both ableism and sexuality" (121). Similarly, masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people have the right to expect pre- and postnatal care that is not predicated on their genital anatomy. Counterstories and other worldmaking countertactics like those highlighted on *Masculine Birth Ritual* complicate "understandings of the spaces of becoming" (122). There is no one way to be a masculine-of-center pregnant person, meaning there is no one experience that runs counter to the stock story of reproduction in the US—as evidenced by the stories I have retold here.

As Ratcliffe suggests, rhetorical listening demands a responsibility to the other in meaning-making. This logic of responsibility, she says, "asks us, first, to judge not simply the person's intent but the historically situated discourses that are (un)consciously swirling around and through the person and, second, to evaluate politically and ethically how these discourses function and how we want to act upon them" (210). Rhetorically listening to the counterstories told on *Masculine Birth Ritual* reveals the reproduction discourses that shape a bleak experience of pregnancy and birth for many masculine-of-center people; the evidence of these "(un)consciously swirling" discourses signals a troubling gap in practices of reproductive justice. The responsibility to bridge that gap, however, does not lie with the storytellers. Rhetoricians; activists; healthcare providers; and friends, family, and caregivers of masculine-of-center pregnant and birthing people have an ethical responsibility to take these queer assemblages and listen for the gaps, the silences that signal injustice. In doing so, they can work together with masculine-of-center parents to imagine trans models of reproductive justice that make it possible for masculine-of-center people to experience pregnancy and birth as joyful.

Chapter 3: Anti-colonial trans worldmaking through body hair

> when cis women
> tell me to shave "if i want to look like a 'real' woman"
> i remember
> that men are so lazy
> they make women
> do the work
> of patriarchy
> for them.
>
> i smile back.
> say: "no thank you!" by which i mean:
> what could be more real than this?
>
> —Alok Vaid-Menon, "Lazy," September 29, 2016

Alok Vaid-Menon's Instagram account is a gallery of their resplendently feminine, hairy, brown body. Their profile page features a grid of images – through which a visitor can scroll endlessly – characterized by bright colors, bold fashion, and a fierce, uncompromising locking of eyes with the camera. The captions that appear alongside these photos are often lengthy, blog-like commentaries that defy the popular conventions of a platform structured around the visual; these texts are usually in conversation with cisheteronormative resistance to Alok's embodiment, and particularly their passability. Alok's brazenly non-conforming gender embodiment provokes reactions from others ranging from rapport, solidarity, disgust, to outright hostility. The commentary Alok composes is always gracious and never defensive; they do not return the antagonism, but rather affirm the identity that is inscribed at the surface of the body onlookers have marked as deviant.

In this chapter, I analyze Instagram as a site of visible defiance of the colonial ideals that uphold the gender binary A primarily mobile, app-based platform, Instagram provides a space for users to share photos with an audience, usually accompanied by captions. Because of its centering of the visual, Instagram foregrounds trans embodiment in ways that are more anonymous, text-based platforms like Tumblr do not. Unlike YouTube, Instagram posts are almost always still images, meaning there is often a high level of intentionality and deliberation in the staging of photos and composition of captions in order to communicate meaning; this deliberation generates a curated embodiment of identity that is both visual and textual. I see Instagram posts as curated both in the intentionality of the staging of the photos as well as the deliberate composition of text. In the case of Alok's account, however, it is important to note that many of their photos have been professionally curated by hair stylists, makeup artists, and/or photographers (the text, at least, is always Alok's own composition). The collaboration required for the production of these images, though, is highly intentional and deliberate, visually emphasizing the gender expansive elements of Alok's body image, encouraging engagement in a way that amateur selfies rarely do.

One effect of this curation is heightened visibility of Alok's non-conforming body. As of this writing, their Instagram page has well over one million followers (Profile). Each follower experiences Alok's images differently, but they are all witness to a project of anti-colonial trans worldmaking. As this chapter will explore, Western attitudes about body hair are rooted in European colonial ideologies of race and gender, where categorization of the other is crucial for maintaining European supremacy. For centuries, hair practices that did not adhere to white and binary-gendered norms not only marked bodies as deviant, but also signaled social indecency. Alok's indecent, hairy, nonwhite, trans body attracts attention of both regulators and other trans people who look upon Alok's embodiment with feelings of resonance. The love and vibrancy that characterizes Alok's Instagram—rather than hostility or self-defense—makes conditions in which trans bodies and experiences are treasured; at the same time, the admiration of Alok's embodiment contributes to the work of subverting colonial gender ideologies.

What makes Alok's Instagram an example of worldmaking, then, is their body hair. Geraldine Biddle-Perry argues that it is the *sight* of hair—rather than its materiality—that makes hair significant. As this chapter will show, body hair gets its meaning from the racial, gender, and class signifiers alongside which it appears. When visible body hair meets the expectations presented by these signifying categories, a body is perceived as belonging to a normal, correct citizen. Likewise, a visible mismatch between, for example, body hair and perceived gender renders a body deviant. Laden with cultural meaning, hair is one of the "most powerful symbols of our individual and collective identities" that "triggers an immediate and fundamental either/or response: male or female, friend or foe, good or bad, danger or safety" (97). In other words, hair makes it possible to perceive deviance or correctness in a single glance. Combined with their feminine presentation, the sight of Alok's body hair triggers an "either/or response" that, in the context of colonial gender ideologies, provokes a compulsion to correct.

This chapter examines that compulsion as a reaction to the sight of body hair. I begin with a brief history of European hair practices. Although body hair norms have fluctuated over time, they have always functioned as a material symbol of social decency. The history I provide here is predominantly binary as I attempt to establish the context from which the colonial regulatory impulse emerges. Following this, I move outwards from Europe with imperialism to offer an overview of the origins of racialized and gendered attitudes about body hair. On the bodies of non-white others, hair came to represent not only social decency but an individual's capacity for civility. The rest of the chapter looks at trans people's manipulation of body hair norms for passing and disruption. I argue that although both purposes are in service of trans worldmaking, Alok's body hair practices are an act of anti-colonial trans worldmaking that not only supports trans expression and experience but also offers a model for disrupting colonial gender ideologies. The colonial context is useful for considering Alok's worldmaking practices because their nonwhite body transgresses both masculine and feminine norms, figuring it as multiply deviant within that context—thereby highlighting the force of the colonial regulatory system.

A brief European hair history

"All human bodies are created hairy," aver Sarah Cheang and Geraldine Biddle-Perry (246). Humans are born with lanugo—soft, fine hair developed in utero for warmth—which is replaced by more permanent growth from head to toe over the course of our lives. Zoologist Desmond Morris calls hair our "species signal": although amount, color, and texture vary widely, our hairy heads and furless bodies "identif[y] us immediately as human," even at a great distance (qtd. in Biddle-Perry 97). Not only does hair allow for visual species differentiation, it is also a crucial metric by which social and cultural differences are categorized. Management and meanings of hair are the result of "both social exterior and psychic interior regulatory forces" informed by the colonial racial and gender ideologies that mark bodies as (non)conforming (Biddle-Perry and Cheang 5).

As these ideologies have fluctuated over time, so too have attitudes about body hair—i.e. hair growth below the scalp. Such attitudes and their concomitant hair practices evolved along different paths for men and women's hair, though they serve the same purpose: to actively maintain distance from racial, gendered, and class others. Before unpacking that purpose, it is important to briefly go over the recent history of the hair on white European bodies to elaborate the context from which hair norms emerge. Focusing her attention on Britain, Susan J. Vincent offers a comprehensive overview of the last several centuries of hair practices and the beliefs that shaped them. For men, the Middle Ages were a time when facial hair was considered evidence of the mortal sin of pride; great (literal) pains were taken to maintain a clean-shaven chin (121). Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries facial hair became ubiquitous in Britain as a marker of virility and maturity (122); they fell out of fashion again during the long eighteenth century (128). During this period—from about 1660-1820—the methodical removal of hair with pumice stones and straight razors was crucial for the production of an acceptable masculinity. Tedious and painful, shaving was usually considered a loathed task (100). Even so, Vincent points to several eighteenth-century men's diaries that show the prerequisite of a hairless face for social interaction: the presence of stubble left these men feeling ill at ease and inadequate, leading them to deliberately avoid the company of others—especially women (98). The removal of facial hair was thus physically risky, but its presence was even more socially and psychically risky.

For a few decades in the mid-nineteenth century, a "beard movement" took hold, with proponents of facial hair asserting that beards were a hygienic, aesthetic, and God-given aspect of male physiology. The title of an 1847 pamphlet stresses this valuation of facial hair: "Beard Shaving and the Common Use of the Razor; an Unnatural, Irrational, Unmanly, Ungodly, and Fatal Fashion among Christians" (Vincent 134). Facial hair thus had divine backing and soon, when Charles Darwin and his prodigious beard came on the scene, was endorsed by science as well. The two opposing forces of religion and science agreed: men were meant to have beards. The beard once again enjoyed cultural currency—at least until the end of the century when germ theory suggested beards might actually be "dangerous, lurking home[s] for microbes" (101). By the start of the twentieth century, facial hair was a visual signal of poor hygiene and has, for the most part, maintained this connotation ever since.

There have been some exceptions to the requisite clean-shaven faces, of course. For a few decades after World War I, mustaches came to popularity as a result of the dearth of razors in the trenches. Its prevalence on the upper lip of returning soldiers imbued the mustache with connotations of "duty, discipline, patriotism, and self-sacrifice" (Vincent 147). Stars of the silver screen like Clark Gable and John Barrymore wore mustaches that came to symbolize "heroic virility" (Joan Melling qtd. in Vincent 148). This heyday was brief, however, descending into seediness by the 1950s, owing in no small part to the iconic mustaches of Hitler and Stalin (149). Full beards, on the other hand, never quite shook the implication of uncleanliness imposed at the end of the nineteenth century. Associated in the 1920s with bohemians and in the 1960s with hippies, the beard became figured as running counter to "proper" culture and a "repudiation of traditional values" (150). As a symbol of these countercultures, beards held political potential; as Vincent suggests, "revolutionaries [e.g. Che Guevara] are always hairy" (151). In the last several decades, the beard has once again seen a resurgence, this time on the faces of hipsters. However, the hipster beard seems to have lost the political teeth of its recent forebears, grown as a personal choice rather than social disruption and thus gaining traction as a fashion statement (151). Looming over these exceptions has been the dominant belief that clean-shaven faces signal social fitness and proper masculinity. As we will see below, these qualities of "fitness" and "propriety" are rooted in deeply racialized attitudes about hair.

As men's facial hair practices fluctuated over the past several centuries, expectations for hair that grows on women's bodies has generally remained consistent: that is, this hair must be removed or otherwise made invisible. Although all bodies are hairy, women's body hair—particularly on the face—has essentially been erased from our cultural vision. After so long being kept in check, the presence of women's facial hair became regarded as unnatural—a state that was reinforced when Darwin provided a schema by which “smooth femininity” could be considered an evolutionary imperative as men’s sexual preferences “weeded out” hairy women (Vincent 108). Visible body hair, then, was a true affliction and its victims were susceptible to “severe depression, self-imposed seclusion, and nausea” and were often “embittered, melancholy, and resentful” (Herzig 75). Recipes for homemade depilatories filled the pages of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century etiquette guides and there has always been a market for women’s hair-removal tools (e.g. tweezers, razors, waxes, etc.). Women have taken on great personal risk to remove their body hair, including abrading growths away with sandpaper, applying thallium acetate depilatory cream, or undergoing x-ray hair removal procedures (78-82).

The idealized hairlessness of the female body provides a tangible inverse of hairy masculinity, making it easy to maintain distance between these binary gender categories. Anthony Synott’s theory of opposites only allows for two subjectivities: men, whose hair practices have been driven by ideals of civility and propriety, and women, whose hair has always been a symbol of beauty and sexuality (Vincent 117). Such a clearly delineated binary renders outsiders particularly conspicuous. As both a personal and public entity, hair is as Biddle-Perry and Cheang suggest: “pivotal to the mechanisms of social and cultural differentiation” (5). They add: “The discourses that surround hair’s removal, trimming, shaping operate as ideological mechanisms, culturally regulating the display and management of the individual and collective body” (246). In other words, hair management practices have historically been a means of distancing oneself from class, national, and racial others; for this reason, hair works well as a tool for enforcing colonial gender ideals.

Hair as colonial tool

Because of its striking visibility, hair often plays a crucial role in differentiation—of species, race, culture, gender—particularly during periods of imperialist expansion. Sarah Cheang identifies three characteristics that lent hair an almost "talismanic" status as an "indicator of racial identity" during this era (27):

1. Hair can be viewed and interpreted at a distance, requiring minimal interaction or training for analysis;
2. Hair has an "immediate visual impact," which allows for instantaneous racial categorization;
3. Hair can be removed from the field for later study without risking the loss of identifying characteristics. (29-30)

Throughout the centuries of European imperialism, anthropologists amassed prolific collections of hair samples from indigenous peoples around the world, many of which are still held in institutions like London's Natural History Museum. To establish racial differences, hair samples were compared with "anthropoid apes" for indicators of similarities or "closeness" of humans to animals; when Caucasian hair is considered the least like animals, characteristics of non-white hair types gave Europeans cause to deny a common humanity and assume racial supremacy (29).

In addition to characteristics like texture and color, management of hair also contributed to defining racial categories. To illustrate this, Rebecca M. Herzig offers an in-depth consideration of the role of hair in the colonization of North America. As Europeans expanded their reach, white writers frequently remarked on the bodies they encountered; of particular concern in North America was the "scanty" hair on the bodies of indigenous men. Europeans dwelled on the question: were indigenous men naturally hairless, or did they appear so as the result of "some strange habit" (19)? From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, naturalists, missionaries, and politicians debated the cause of indigenous men's smooth faces as a matter of natural and political order. As a naturally occurring characteristic, the hairlessness of indigenous men suggested some inborn "defect of vigor" (William Robertson qtd. 25). Lacking the manhood symbolized by body hair figured indigenous men as needing the paternalistic hand of European settlers—and, importantly, whether indigenous peoples were inherently too “feeble” to adapt to “civilized modes of life” (24).

Intentional hair removal, on the other hand, posed a troubling question: was it possible to manipulate racial and gender boundaries through deliberate effort? Early anthropologists had pointed to body hair as indicative of fundamental racial differences and had consistently used hair as an index of natural social order. The idea that this order could be disrupted with a set of tweezers threatened Europeans’ assumed racial superiority. This perhaps explains why Euro-Americans perceived the exceeding diligence of hair removal among indigenous men as evidence of incivility: no “civilized” person would devote so much of their time to “plucking, shaving, and singeing” (Herzig 30).[5]

Indigenous people’s body hair patterns and (imagined) practices played a significant role in Europeans’ understanding of indigenous gender systems, understandings that then informed the implementation of colonial regimes. For example, the fevered speculation over indigenous men’s hairlessness contributed to their characterization as feminine: if they lacked the virility to grow and maintain a proper beard, white men could claim “rights of dominance” over the land (Herzig 22).[6] Europeans thus saw an opening for the operationalization of male colonial power, instituting a paradigm in which indigenous bodies were figured as particularly susceptible to colonization. As “explorers” moved west across North America, they mapped the land as well as the bodies they encountered, setting a precedent for colonial gender violence that could be picked up and reinscribed by later waves of settlers.

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[5] Here, we are presented with a conundrum: during this era of preoccupation with indigenous men’s body hair, men in England were engaged in their own painstaking hair removal practices. Neither Herzig nor Vincent touch on this inconsistency, though we can infer that the value of any action practiced by a white person is not transposed when practiced by a non-white person.

[6] Importantly, these beliefs about hair merely served as justification for what the Europeans were already doing.

The oddity of indigenous body hair practices remained a prominent issue in white cultural and political discourse, contributing, Herzig says, "to a body of racial thought that helped to buttress those policies and practices of physical removal" (22). Body hair practices worked as a barometer of gender and sexual deviance, which in turn justified the violence and displacement inflicted on indigenous peoples in North America. In the years following the presidency of Andrew Jackson, white obsession with indigenous bodies waned as other concerns, such as slavery in the South, demanded the nation's attention. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, naturalists became invested in establishing a "natural history" of "man" and again took up the question of body hair (32). As we have seen, comparative analyses of hair – color, texture, shape, and amount – were used to "reveal fundamental differences between races and fundamental similarities between other animals" (30). For example, microscopist and lawyer Peter A. Browne supported slavery in the U.S. because he believed, based on his taxonomy of hair types, there were "three distinct species" of humans, necessarily creating a hierarchy at the top of which sat Euro-Americans, with Africans on the bottom (32).

Nineteenth century studies of hair – and the subsequent categorization of people – fueled work like Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man*, which made explicit and uncomfortable connections between body hair and our "primate forebears" (Herzig 57). Taking up Darwin's vocabularies and frameworks, the popular media fanned cultural anxieties about the animality inherent in hairy bodies: where hairlessness had marked indigenous bodies as deviant, the presence of Euro-American body hair became the mechanism that delimited the boundaries of a "civilized" society. By the turn of the twentieth century, hairiness was well and truly pathological, signaling “sexual, mental, and criminal deviance” (56). Helped along by increasingly “racialized ideals of hygiene,” hair removal became a normalized practice for maintaining racial boundaries and achieving “social fitness” (77).

Today, the management of body hair remains a signifier of (white) social fitness for both sides of the gender binary. The prominence of hairlessness in ideals of social fitness is particularly evident in current views of hair on men’s bodies. In their study of attitudes toward body hair, Gareth Terry and Virginia Braun found that “the idea of men’s body hair as natural, and unproblematically indicative of masculinity, has been unsettled in its cultural dominance [...] now jostl[ing] with a meaning more commonly associated with women’s body hair: that much of men’s body hair is unpleasant, even disgusting” (22). The authors suggest this “unsettling” is the result of shifting ideals of hegemonic masculinity; as these ideals shift, so too do their (re)production on and across bodies. This is evident in the body hair practices of adolescent or racially marginalized men, who “improve” their bodies in order to gain social power or “masculine capital” (15). For many participants in Terry and Braun’s study, the distinction between men’s body hair as “natural” and disgusting was the qualification of excess. Although participants had no common definition of what counts as excessive body hair, many made an explicit link between hairy men and the animality advanced by Darwin (20). Matthew Immergut, writing about the phenomenon of manscaping, too makes this connection, saying, “The hairy male body has become a type of grotesque natural body. It’s a body emblematic of a boundary breaching and wild nature and therefore anathema to contemporary-classical aesthetics. [...] Body hair breaks borders” (294). Manscaping not only maximizes the distance between the body and nature, but also works as “a reaffirmation and a bulwark to establish the boundary between an alluring controlled-civilized natural body and a grotesque uncontrolled-uncivilized natural body" (297).

Social fitness in the U.S. is predicated on two conditions: whiteness and binary gender expression. The implementation of a colonial model of power co-constitutes these organizing categories, and their boundaries are maintained by attitudes about body hair. Describing the utility of hair for European anthropologists, Cheang calls the relationship between hair, the body, and identity metonymic: the arrangement and management of body hair was imbued with such meaning that it served as a decent substitute for the individual (36). This relationship never went away. The absence or abundance of body hair—depending on the body—may still be read as a sign of social indecency; body hair is an especially potent indicator of indecency when a body is already marked by other signs of deviance. Hair removal has always been implicitly driven by this fact, serving as a means of distancing oneself from racial, gendered, and class others (Herzig 79). Because of this power, hair also plays a big part in shaping the identity we want others to read on our body.

Trans hair practices for passing

As a stand-in for the individual, body hair conveys much more than personal hygiene. Whether a signal of propriety or counterculture, hair is a significant tool for identity expression. Anthropologist Grant McCracken considers hair crucial for "self-invention," explaining that it allows one to "audition and annex new selves, to seek out new versatility and variety" of identity; hair, he adds, is "the best instrument of self-invention, our best solution to the problem of constant change" (qtd. in Cole p. 80).[7] There are several reasons for hair's utility as McCracken describes it. First, changes made to hair's appearance are impermanent: styling products wash out, haircuts grow back, and dyes fade. Wigs heighten this versatility. Second, the meaning behind hair management is so embedded in our shared cultural knowledge that styling has nearly the rhetorical power of speech. Finally, the public nature of body hair allows it to be perceived and interpreted almost instantaneously. Hair, then, has a lot to say about us—and we make varying choices every day to dictate what, exactly, it says.

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[7] I will, in fact, suggest in the next chapter that clothing is perhaps the *best* such instrument because the the speed and easy with which one can move between embodied expressions.

As discussed above, hair practices have been instrumental in crafting "socially fit" identities for centuries; the racial, gendered, and class meanings that suffuse hair's appearance can be traced to the organizing ideologies enforced by colonizing Europeans. Synott suggests that in hair these ideologies are "made flesh … as people conform to, or deviate from, the norms, and even deviate from deviant norms"; thus, hair becomes a symbol of an individual's social identity (123). Hair is not only a symbol of the social self, Synott adds, but also "*is* the self since it grows from and is a part of the physical human body" (122, original emphasis). Hair practices, then, have serious implications for an individual's visibility. As we have seen, the social self is perceived in an instant, informed in part by the appearance of body hair: not only are categorizations such as race, gender, and class made on sight, but hair management also helps determine who is civilized—or can be made to be. Visible incivility invites correction. Trans people, whose bodies are already targets of corrective measures, tend to be hyperaware of how to manage the visible aspects of their social selves in order to pass.

For trans people, the presence or absence of body hair is often used in the assessment of whether one passes for male or female. Many transwomen, for example, take advantage of depilatory technologies such as electrolysis for the removal of body hair with the goal of passing as cisgender women. The bodies of these women might already bear signs of deviance in their bone structure, mannerisms, or dress; visible "male" patterns of hair compound the weight of the disciplining gaze. In her historical account of hair, Vincent discusses etiquette guides of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—whose presumed audience was white cis women—which not only included recipes for depilatories and tips for other hair removal devices, but also provided suggestions for how to style the remaining hair to maximum feminizing or masculinizing effect (111). This genre still exists in magazines and style blogs, though the impact of such texts is especially striking when the audience is trans women and men.

Trans people have always found ways to collectively build spaces of power, strength, and safety within the confines of cisheteronormative regulatory mechanisms. During the latter half of the twentieth century these spaces passed through the mail in the form of newsletters and zines. For many trans people, these periodicals were the only source of information and community available. In addition to editors' letters and news reportage, newsletters and zines of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s often included practical advice and service advertisements alongside requests for pen pals and directories of regional social groups. While some publications focused on cultural news and happenings, others were intended as guides for social and physical transition. One such newsletter was *Phoenix Monthly International*. *Phoenix* was published in the early 1980s by the Gateway Gender Alliance out of Northern California, though it circulated internationally. The newsletter was aimed at a primarily transfeminine audience and most often centered information related to passing as cisgender, such as how to remove body hair for a more feminine appearance (*Empowerment*).

The February, 1982 issue of *Phoenix* included an editorial called "Complete Guide to Hair Removal." The article opens:

> "American women", says one respected endrocirnologist [*sic*], "are almost obsessed with body hair; anything less than flawlessly smooth skin isn't aesthetically acceptable to them!" So it is not surprising that the male-to-female worries about body hair. In reality,

> it is perfectly natural and healthy to have a fair amount of body hair. It's a question of where it's visible to the point of bothering *you*. (Gateway 10, original emphasis)

The quoted endocrinologist points to the requisite hairlessness for women's social fitness, figuring any visible hair as unacceptable. What is interesting is that the author of the article immediately follows this by saying that not only is body hair "natural and healthy," but that the decision to keep or remove it is wholly personal. (Unsaid is the fact that so-called personal decisions are inevitably informed by external forces.) Given the context in which it appears, this statement may be seen as a consolation to readers who have been unsuccessful in their pursuit of smooth skin. The "Complete Guide" provides information on shaving, waxing, chemical depilatories, tweezing, bleaching, and electrolysis. Each entry includes pros and cons; a description of which method to use where; and instructions for each method's use. The information is comprehensive and candid: waxing is expensive, tweezing hurts, and electrolysis is "often hit-and-miss" (11). The guide allows readers to choose the most suitable method for their needs without a process of trial and error. Newsletters like *Phoenix* were often trans people's only source of information for how to pass as cisgender.

Another notable example of a mail-order guide to passing is Lou Sullivan's *Information for the Female-to-Male Crossdresser and Transsexual.*[8] The first edition appeared in late 1980, and it was updated and republished in 1985 and 1990. This booklet was a centralized compilation of information for transmasculine individuals, and included sections on accepting one's identity, coming out, transition, and more. It was a significantly more accessible resource than what had existed before, and became, for many, a sort of 'bible' (Smith 112). On the first page of

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[8] During the 1980s, 'transsexual' was the primary term used to signify a trans person who identified as the opposite sex/gender, and (usually) wished to transition. The history of this term is fraught; however, as this is the term Sullivan uses, I will as well when discussing his work. See Rawson and Williams for a more complete genealogy of terminology.

Information, Sullivan states that "the unique problems and needs of the female-to-male transsexual and crossdresser[9] have largely been ignored in the literature to date" (1). Whether this is because transfeminine people are more numerous or because they are more readily read as trans by others, Sullivan saw that the necessary information was not available: someone needed to teach transmasculine people how to become men. According to anthropologist Steven Gilmore, manhood is a "test that must be passed" at all costs; it is not a process that is contingent on biology, but rather a "precarious or artificial state boys must win" (qtd. in Gauthier and Chaudoir 376). In other words, maleness is a status that can be attained, but the path to get there is unknown, precarious. *Information* and other texts acted as cheat sheets, with experienced or post-transition trans people seen as experts in the field with all the answers. By compiling this expertise into a single document that was then widely circulated, Sullivan and other creators set the foundation for the collaborative worldmaking work that would flourish on the internet.

In October 1980, Sullivan began assembling a pamphlet that would fill the void he saw in resources for trans people (Smith 112). Its purpose was twofold: first, he wanted to construct an accessible transmasculine genealogy. While the first edition of *Information* contained a few pictures, the 1985 version contained pictures as well as footnotes on most of the pages detailing the "true stories of females who crossed over" (back cover). In illustrating this lineage, Sullivan does the work of validating trans identities in the present: trans people can look to the past and see that others like them have always persisted. The second and primary purpose of this publication was to consolidate all of the information Sullivan had painstakingly learnt for himself; his goal for *Information*, like *Masculine Birth Ritual*, was to save others the struggle for answers he had faced himself (Smith 232). The booklet represents years of lived experience and an earnest desire to help other trans people navigate the daunting process of accepting and living a trans identity.

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[9] Sullivan differentiates between the transsexual and the crossdresser by suggesting that the former feels a profound disconnect between mind and body, while the latter feels a sexual thrill from wearing men's attire. For further reading, see *Information* p. 5-15.

Information's section on appearance is titled "How to Look 30 When You Are 30." Sullivan provides guidance regarding clothing, hair, body language, and chest binding. Much of the information he uses is pulled from style guides written for cisheterosexual men, adapted for trans readers. For haircuts, Sullivan's advice is just long enough to recommend cutting sideburns while keeping the rest of the hair short and neat; he cautions readers to "remember that fine line between a 'cute' man and a 'cute' boy" when going for a more tousled look (23). Sullivan makes a similar suggestion regarding facial hair: "Take a razor to the peach fuzz on your cheeks and chin. It may be hair, but men do not have that soft down on their faces ... only women do. So shave it" (23). The critical point for Sullivan—and other creators of trans style guides—is to fashion oneself counter to the expectations of the opposite binary gender: if you want to be read as male, you must not bear any signs of the feminine. The guides of this time period were built on this principle and were therefore alert to cultural trends and gender expectations. However, the nature of being published once a month—or, in the case of *Information*, every 5 years—necessarily meant that these documents were slow to reflect the immediacy of changing trends, nor could readers directly engage with each other in the worldmaking project.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, this began to change: personal computers with internet access became more readily available, either at home or in public spaces such as libraries. The internet allows users to bridge temporal and spatial boundaries, enabling the rapid growth of a wide-reaching community. The internet also affords a certain amount of anonymity for individuals to explore their identities; for trans people, this exploration takes place primarily in forums and personal blogs, though social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have overtaken these in the last fifteen years. Like *Information*, these online spaces provide more accurate information than what a trans person would receive from a cis person, especially in terms of practical advice for everyday life. Also like *Information*, the atmosphere of these spaces is largely supportive; Sullivan saw building a support network for transmasculine people to be one of the central purposes of his work, and that attitude has carried over into many online trans spaces (*Information* 42). As much as these spaces can be the first point of contact to trans issues, they can also be a refuge: for many trans people, online communities are their only source of support and celebration of their identity.

Nancy Baym characterizes these online communities as having “a sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities and interpersonal relationships” (qtd. in Raun 174). In many ways, the internet was one of the most significant technological inventions for trans people, as it provides easy access to information and the ability for individuals to cultivate their trans identity in relative safety (Cavalcante 110, 114). The internet allows people to reach out to others for guidance with an immediacy that had not been available before. If manhood (and womanhood) is a test that must be passed, then these online spaces are the ultimate answer key, with thousands of individuals pooling their knowledge to negotiate the “real-world” pathways toward binary gender expression (Gauthier and Chaudoir 379). In this way, online spaces make it possible for trans people to engage in more immediate worldmaking than the print resources of previous decades. As trans people share their experiential knowledge online, they open space for others to explore their gender identities and feel supported as they do so.

Print documents such as *Phoenix Monthly International* and *Information for the Female-to-Male Crossdresser and Transsexual* emulated 18th and 19th century etiquette guides for maintaining gender-appropriate body hair. Such guides for passing eventually found a home online, where they were able to reach an exponentially wider audience and allow for more tangible interactivity. The experiences and advice shared in these spaces is founded in the colonial origins of western hair attitudes: their emphasis on opposite hair practices (**Synott?**) as requisite for passing unconsciously reifies the colonial ideology of white, binary-gendered social fitness. In order to be considered socially fit—i.e. civilized—a trans person must assimilate to colonial gender norms. However, meeting colonial standards for civility is not the end goal for all trans people. In fact, some trans people deliberately reject such civility, subverting binary gender norms for body hair practices in a trans worldmaking project that could be considered anti-colonial in their effort to remake—to "trans"—those norms.

In the remainder of this chapter, I look at Alok Vaid-Menon's Instagram posts in order to explore this anti-colonial trans worldmaking. The particular post – the images, caption, and comments taken as a whole – works as a response to an incident of body hair policing and colonial regulation. The historical and cultural grounding laid out here inspires three questions that guide my analysis of Alok's non-conforming presence on Instagram: 1.) How does the policing of body hair reify the boundaries of colonial gender categories?; 2.) How does Alok's Instagram and engagement with body hair policing dismantle those boundaries?; and 3.) What can we learn from Alok? I suggest here that Instagram can make anti-colonial trans worldmaking visible, prompting both a sense of community and further discipline; but we can see in Alok's Instagram a model for engaging with these disciplinary measures to affirm non-conforming gender identities, and begin to subvert and remake Western notions of gender.

Trans hair practices for disruption

Scholars of digital space and social media have acknowledged that these ubiquitous technologies provide trans users with opportunities to experiment with and “try on” subjectivities and embodiments.[10] Tobias Raun, drawing on Jay Prosser’s *Second Skins,* argues that trans vlogs on YouTube, for example, facilitate processes of transition and self-invention for vloggers as well as their audience; Raun sees the virtual presence of trans bodies and the “free flow of self-speak” as enabling new possibilities for self-representation (140). Likewise, Olu Jenzen suggests that the negotiation of cisheteronormative online paradigms allows young trans people on the microblogging site Tumblr to “[stake] out their own methods and aesthetics for self expression” (1627). In other words, social media spaces empower queer and trans users to explore and express an embodied identity for an unseen other.

The Instagram post I analyze here is a series of four images plus an accompanying caption that, together, act as a representation of body hair and its relationship with colonial gender expectations. Alok takes up cisnormative signs in these images, communicating a non-conforming gender identity; although they visibly deploy these binary signs, the effect is a clear *mis*use of those structuring rules. The photos invite viewer engagement in the first place because of the contradictions apparent at the surface of Alok’s body: in this particular post, Alok wears a colorfully striped top – with darts, suggesting it was designed for a person with breasts – and a string of pearls around their neck. Blue eyeshadow and purple nail polish stand out against Alok’s dark skin, and a pink gloss emphasizes their pouting lips. In three of these images, Alok appears to vogue, the movement of their hands gesturing toward an idealizedfeminine sensuality. Finally, a tall pink bouffant sits atop their head, an unabashed marker of Alok’s feminine performance. On their own, these feminine signs obey the rules required to be visibly within colonial gender boundaries; taken together with Alok's body, however, these signs become indicative of an inability—if not refusal—to assimilate to colonial ideals of civility.

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[10] See Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, *Techne*; Olu Jenzen, “Trans Youth and Social Media;” Tobias Raun, *Out Online*; Oliver Haimson et al., “Tumblr Was a Trans Technology.”

One of the most visible markers of Alok's gender non-conformity—and therefore incivility—is their abundant body hair. The top Alok wears in these Instagram portraits is sleeveless, baring the dark hair covering their arms and shoulders; in two of the four photos, the thick hair under Alok's arms is on prominent display as an indicator of their non-conforming gender embodiment. The body hair—and Alok's evident refusal to remove it—is a tangible flashpoint for adherents to rules for colonial propriety: among the many reactions Alok receives—online and off— comparisons to animals are frequent ("for"). The same discomfort with body hair is present in above the style guides whose objective is passing as cisgender. Such guides use colonial attitudes about body hair to help people avoid performing gender non-conformity. The exigence for this is clear: obeying the rules generated by those attitudes is a means for ensuring personal safety. Visible gender non-conformity puts trans people at risk of condemnation, disenfranchisement, and violence.

Regulatory practices for maintaining the security of colonial gender boundaries often manifest as gender policing. Alok's Instagram photos often invite a specific mechanism of gender policing known as concern trolling. This phenomenon is characterized by a person offering undermining criticisms under the guise of concern. In the context of these practices, concern trolls are often binary cis or trans people who offer unsolicited advice for passing while claiming to have the gender non-conforming subject's best interests at heart. In the caption for this particular Instagram post, Alok describes a trans support group they once participated in; as with most support groups, it was intended to be a safe space where people could explore their identities and experiment with pronouns. Alok describes how, when they wore a dress to these meetings, some group members would "treat [them] like a woman," while others would say, "if you want to be taken seriously as a trans person then you need to remove your body hair and start a medical transition" ("When"). The trope of being taken seriously is fundamental here: if trans people can be taken seriously as women/men/people, then perhaps they will no longer be policed by regulatory mechanisms—perhaps they will finally be granted social fitness. By invoking this trope alongside "necessary" steps to fulfill it, concern trolls not only categorize Alok as deviant, but also indicate that there are strict rules for the management of body hair.

As a result of the visibility of their non-conformity, Alok is a frequent target of concern trolls, both in-person and through social media; everyone, it seems, feels they have the right to tell Alok how they're doing gender "wrong." Alok, however, does not use their platform for self-defense; instead, their Instagram posts are in conversation with concern trolls and serve as models for anti-colonial trans worldmaking. In the photos and text shared online, Alok deliberately "un-passes," foregrounding the characteristics—such as plentiful body hair—that concern trolls scorn. In the above Instagram post, Alok directly engages with the rhetoric of concern trolling in a few important ways. The text of the caption recalls an experience with concern trolling and calls out the practice for what it is: a manifestation of the cisnormative pressures that produce trans "unfitness" in the first place. The suggestion that Alok remove their body hair in order to be "taken seriously" is juxtaposed with Alok's professionally styled and photographed gender expansive body: the caption credits a hairstylist (@deetrannybear), a makeup artist (@makeupbyslater), a photographer (@brianvu), and even links to an article written for the BBC in which Alok expands on the concern trolling phenomenon ("When"). The images themselves are characterized by bold colors and an unapologetic breaking of colonial expectations and rules. Although the content of the caption does the work of making Alok's embodied gender "serious," the visual gendered contradiction of their body is so affective that concern trolls continue to reproduce the cisnormative rhetoric of the colonial gender system.

The final image in this series has a different tone than the three that precede it: the pursed lips remain, but they no longer suggest a feminine sensuality; the pink bouffant has been largely cropped out of the photo, emphasizing Alok's otherwise shaved head; and although Alok is dressed and styled the same way, they do not vogue, instead squarely facing the camera and posing with their arms crossed and head tilted forward. The image is not exactly confrontational, though Alok's posture does read as defiant; this is especially true when the photos and the caption are taken as a whole, as they are meant to be. The end of this photo series seems to challenge the concern trolls who would disdain the visibility of body hair: Alok's body *is* feminine, it *is* hairy, it is *not* white, and its visible presence on Instagram is an exemplary challenge to colonial organizational categories like gender. There may be "big consequences for choosing to maintain [one's] body hair as a trans person," but Alok's deliberate misuse of binary gender signs—and the subsequent appearance of concern trolls—underscores the disciplinary function of those consequences ("Perhaps").

Anti-colonial body hair

On April 6, 2019, Alok posted a series of three images and a caption to their Instagram account. In the photos, Alok wears a patterned pleated skirt, matching off-the-shoulder crop top, and yellow leather knee-high boots. Their pink hair is knotted on top of their head. Their stance is open, shoulders back, head tilted and hip cocked. Their smile is radiant. The caption reads:

> blessed to be brown, bearded, and bountiful! blessed to be blanketed by my thick, lush, dark body hair! blessed are you to witness this tremendous beauty. what a joy to belong irrevocably to me & not cisheteropatriarchy! ("blessed")

Nothing about Alok's embodiment is apologetic: every photo on their Instagram is a profound challenge to the system of colonial power that props up Western gender and racial categories. Alok's 1.3 million followers see these posts every day; that's 1.3 million people confronted with a visibly non-conforming, nonwhite body on a daily basis. Many of these viewers likely glance at the images and continue scrolling; others may feel driven to leave some form of regulatory comment; but there are still others who see Alok's posts and experience trans resonance: the feeling of identification with a similar non-conformity. In this way, Alok's Instagram—and its wide reach—engages in anti-colonial trans worldmaking.

We can see others begin to take up this anti-colonial worldmaking project in the comments posted on Alok's portraits. Of the hundreds of comments usually made on Alok's Instagram posts, the majority follow the same formula: the Instagrammer thanks Alok for sharing their photos and prose; praises Alok's appearance and confidence; and then reflects on their own resistant use of gender signs. User @jedakos_parent left the following comment on the post analyzed above:

> If I could bring half your confidence, I would look as good as you always do! Exactly! Especially from loved ones, when did unconditional love become so conditioned? This is why I am so thankful for role models like you and Jacob Tobia. I always thought it was all or nothing. Thank you for showing me otherwise and helping my confidence. Surpess [*sic*] what makes you happy because you are no extrovert queen (I always thought). Never wanting to mock as well as any attempt bringing hard criticism from all communities(especially those loved ones), left me rationalizing cis lifestyles without realizing internal consequences. I am still searching for that community support, but am blessed to have a few foundational pillars. (Cardozo-Warszawski)

The love and support Alok projects through their Instagram posts creates the conditions under which trans joy can flourish. Their non-conforming body represents a "foundational pillar" of trans worldmaking, where binary and non-conforming trans people see space for support and celebration of their trans embodiment. As others are encouraged to reflect on their own bodies' encounters with the world, the non-conforming signs seen in Alok’s gender embodiment get taken up and reproduced, an ever-widening anti-colonial ripple effect.

Chapter 4: Trans Worldmaking Through Dress

Roland Barthes, in his attempt to establish a "language of fashion," suggests that "meaning is not located in the finished object [i.e. article of clothing], it can be found in a tiny detail or in a complex outfit" (28). Just as the biological growth of body hair has little significance, a dress on its own does not hold much meaning; but if that dress appears on a body with otherwise masculine signifiers, a kind of language begins to emerge. For example, when Alok Vaid-Menon wears a colorful dress against the backdrop of their hairy body, both of these separate signifiers form a grammar that expresses a message about the gender binary. The "finished object" examined in this chapter is simply a gown that—while representative of the creative effort taken to design it—only gains its meaning in the context of the body on which it is worn. In that context, the dress signals the precarity of the colonial gender binary—the very system which grants the body of the dress's wearer significance. This chapter will explore the dress, the context in which it gets its meaning, and the language these two constitute to ask how clothing functions as a tool in the project of trans worldmaking.

Eric Darnell Pritchard talks about style of dress as a practice of "restorative literacy": a deliberate response to white, cishet literacy norms through which Black LGBTQ people "address this harm and create a life for themselves in its midst" (*Fashioning* 26). For Pritchard, literacy and racialized sexualities are similarly regulated by mechanisms that figure certain bodies as "normal;" each can be "cast as good things so long as you do them in a way that is deemed acceptable" (15). Of course, for a group as multiply-marginalized as Black LGBTQ people, "doing" literacy and sexuality—and, I would add, gender—acceptably is a tall order. However, the goal is not to be acceptable, Pritchard argues, but rather to "fashion a life that is aberrational to the dichotomies imposed by normativities; a life that is stable but not fixed, where one belongs but is not possessed" (17). Although this dissertation has yet to examine Black trans worldmaking, I suggest that Pritchard's "restorative literacy" is a useful framing for thinking about the deliberate response to cis binary pressures and the ways in which conditions for support, protection, and celebration of trans lives are created through fashion.

This chapter focuses on the mis/use of gendered dress norms in the disruption of the colonial gender binary. Beginning with a brief history of cross-dressing in the West, the chapter discusses how dress is a particularly contentious aspect of binary gender maintenance. Like body hair, clothing is a textual signifier that has strong implications for the un/readability of a body. Aspects of dress such as cut, style, and color and print are regulated by binary expectations to the extent that clothing itself is intensely gendered. Thus, dress has become a powerful criterion for gendering another person's body in a glance; the result is immediate discomfort at the sight of nonconforming bodies.

The chapter explores the ways trans people use dress in order to explore and express their gender identities as part of creating trans joy. The style of dress analyzed in this chapter involves clothing which is a blatant rejection of regulatory mechanisms rather than that whose purpose is passing. I begin with an overview of sumptuary and cross-dressing laws in early modern England and nineteenth-century America to demonstrate how dress regulation shaped the ideal Western citizen. In this maintenance of the boundaries of binary gender categories, colonial power could be shored up through classification of race, gender, class, and nationality. I then discuss how these criteria provided specific norms to reject in the self-conscious expression of gender nonconformity. I see such rejection as an act of protest that challenges colonial gender norms by revealing the constructedness of the gender binary. When these acts are publicly visible, shared experience and identity can be recognized in others; as a result, worlds come into being where joy in trans genders is a given. I close with a reading of Carl Clemons-Hopkins, a nonbinary actor whose red carpet look was remarked upon by nearly every outlet covering the 2021 Emmys. Because of this publicity, Clemons-Hopkins' dress became a symbol with which other nonbinary and gender nonconforming people could resonate and experience collective joy. Ultimately, I argue that the easy donning and doffing of clothes make dress an ideal tool for experimentation and interpretation of gender; in other words, dress is an accessible means for trans people to visibly reject colonial gender categories. Not only is clothing accessible, it is also a fast, nonpermanent way to experiment with embodied gender: a person can easily enter this space of nonconformity to explore and, importantly, quickly escape if necessary.[11] Because of this, worldmaking strategies rooted in dress can be widely seen and taken up across communities based on a collective identity—making space for the creation of trans joy.

Dress as regulatory mechanism

By their nature, dress codes are designed to regulate. Ruth Rubenstein suggests that dress codes formalize "the ideas, and values underlying institutional patterns of discourse;" Carmen Rios argues that these patterns are fundamentally "racist, sexist, classist, and xenophobic" (qtd. in Manthey and Windsor 202). From schools, offices, and social clubs, dress codes specify who can wear what and when, "turn[ing] people into objects or policies" (Manthey and Windsor 203). For example, dress codes in school settings are ostensibly intended not only to install a visual class-based equality, but also to forestall offense or "distraction"—e.g., no graphic tees with violent or vulgar language, no visible bra straps, no shorts or skirts that fall above mid-thigh.

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[11] Although Clemons-Hopkins' designer gown is not an example of the accessibility of dress as a worldmaking tool, there are two reasons I discuss it here. The first is that the red carpet is a site of high visibility—and the style norm for red carpet wear is high fashion. The second is that, like Alok's highly-curated Instagram photos, a gown created by a well-respected designer lends legitimacy to Clemons-Hopkins' sartorial choice and, consequently, their nonbinary identity.

Such codes—and the extent to which they are enforced—unfairly police girls and young women as they construct a body characterized by a colonial sense of propriety. In a similar sense, the use of school uniforms also creates a student body with visible markers of respectability and class. Marjorie Garber calls this "classing up," the curation of an appearance that evokes a higher social standing and suggests the potential for upward mobility (23). The existence of dress codes thus implies that clothes themselves have rhetorical power. So is it the person or the cloth that makes an identity?

Sumptuary laws in medieval through early modern Europe served the inverse purpose of current dress codes. These laws were meant not only to promote local commerce—i.e. through regulations regarding the importation of cloth—but also to restrict "conspicuous consumption," or the appearance of markers of the upper class on the "wrong" bodies (Garber 21). In other words, sumptuary laws made bodies legible in the production of visible markers of class, social role, and gender. These markers were imagined to coalesce into a visible nationality: bodies clad in domestically-produced clothing appropriate to their station were recognized as belonging to this conceptual nation (26). An Englishman wearing imported French fashion not only confused supposedly fixed identity categories but also appeared unpatriotic. Queen Elizabeth I was particularly bothered by the confusion wrought by conspicuous consumption: more sumptuary orders were issued during her reign than at any other point in English history (26). In 1597, she blamed such excess for a rise in crime—because the lower classes had supposedly been "infected by pride" and turned to theft to fill their wardrobes—and the erasure of visible class boundaries as "the meanest [were] as richly dressed as their betters" (27). *Confusion* thus became the rationalization for the codified enforcement of dress codes.

Legible bodies were crucial for upholding belief in social stability and the integrity of identity boundaries. Sumptuary laws made it possible to enforce and maintain these boundaries. Despite the laws, however, fashion still evolved from decade to decade; this inconstancy complicated the ability to read identity on bodies and kindled anxiety about social order. This anxiety was bolstered by what Garber calls the “God-ordained dress code” in Deuteronomy (26): “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the lord thy God” (*King James Bible*, Deut. 22.5). Elizabeth I thus commanded the preaching of the “Homily Against Excess of Apparel" in which fashion was painted as the profligate enemy of “patriotism as well as of social order and legibility” (27). Early modern antitheatricalists frequently invoked these god- and royal-ordained decrees to vilify cross-dressing in the theater: while it was standard practice for male actors to play female roles, the practice necessitated a level of cross-dressing that some considered immoral (31). Not only did it seem to be in conflict with biblical law, but theatrical cross-dressing also forced a public reckoning with the possibility that identity—indeed, the “self”—was not fixed (32).

The theater and changing fashion norms conjured a “specter” of the cross-dresser, a locus of the anxiety surrounding unstable identity categories (Garber 32). Cross-dressers troubled legibility of both class and gender to the extent that these categories were revealed to be arbitrary constructions. Garber adds that

> To transgress against one set of boundaries was to call into question the inviolability of both, and of the set of social codes … by which such categories were policed and maintained. The [cross-dresser] in this scenario is both terrifying and seductive precisely because s/he incarnates and emblematizes the disruptive element that intervenes, signaling not just another category crisis, but—much more disquietingly—a crisis of “category” itself. (32)

Without the categories of class and gender, social hierarchies have no meaning or basis for regulation. Identity categories, then, needed to be "zealously and jealously safeguarded" to maintain social order (32). Medieval to early modern sumptuary laws codified dress codes and identified appropriate punishment for breaking such codes, creating rubrics by which bodies could be read as gendered, classed, and patriotic.

Over decades and centuries, the codified means of shoring up these boundaries became more precise—and explicit. During the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries in the US, laws prohibiting cross-dressing were prevalent in urban centers: such laws were on the books in over forty cities across the country. Cross-dressing laws were subsumed under broader injunctions against public indecency: concerns about decency existed as part of a "broader legal matrix" intended to maintain categories of sex, race, citizenship, and city space (Sears 3, 10). Clare Sears notes that public indecency laws during this time intersected with federal immigration policies whose tacit purpose was to define the "terms of national belonging and construct a gender-normative nation" (3). Although the focus on clothing seemed to commit cross-dressing prohibitions to the project of gender normativity, Sears points to these laws as

> a central mechanism for policing a whole series of "belongings"—not only the items of clothing that "belonged" to a specific sex but also the types of people that "belonged" in public space and the types of bodies that "belonged" in the categories of man and woman. (6)

Logics of belonging necessitated regulation and discipline to determine which bodies did and did not belong. These bodies were typically Black, brown, queer, disabled, and/or gender nonconforming—and they continue to be today. Bodies that did not belong evoked anxieties over fixed identity categories: decency and immigration laws constructed a specific image of the ideal citizen but the presence of other bodies suggested that ideal might be unattainable.

The explicit language of cross-dressing laws in this era enhanced the legibility of identity categories on the body. Bodies read as indecent were defined as “an unsightly public nuisance” in the same category as refuse, sewage, and slaughterhouses; consequently, these bodies were figured “not as some *body* whose actions created public disorder but as some *thing* whose existence constituted urban blight” (Sears 10, original emphasis). However, these problem bodies were still human and so could not simply be eradicated; instead, decency laws aimed to conceal or confine problem bodies by enforcing compliance and imprisoning those who refused to conform (10). As codified discrimination, cross-dressing laws were a “specific strategy of government that constructed normative gender, reinforced inequalities, and generated new modes of exclusion from public life” (3).

The goals of dress expectations have always been about regulating boundaries of gender, race, and class in the interest of shoring up colonial power. The crossing of these boundaries is particularly visible in the appearance of “incorrect” dress. Garber locates cross-dressing at “sites of crisis”: Black-white, male-female, rich-poor, gay-straight (270). The cross-dresser is a crossover figure, one that exposes the permeability of identity categories, particularly when passing is a goal or effect of that movement. Drag performers, for example, weaken the zealously-guarded boundary between male and female in their mimicry of legible femininity or masculinity. Garber identifies this crossing over as a “rupture or disruption” which “enters the discourse of gender and power with an unsettling force” (271). In the US, as we have seen, power is inflected both by gender and race, meaning the disruptive force is even more unsettling when the cross-dressed body is nonwhite. The Black cross-dresser (and particularly the AMAB cross-dresser[12]) “foregrounds the impossibility of taxonomy, the fatal limitation of classification

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[12] Assigned male at birth

as segregation, the inevitability of 'miscegenation' as misnomer" (274, original emphasis). The vision of crossed gender boundaries by a racialized body inspires fear that racial boundaries could be as easily crossed—what Garber calls the realization of "the latent dream thoughts—or nightmares—of American cultural mythology" (274).

Another example of the potential for disruption in dress is in the figure of the dandy. Monica Miller calls the dandy a "complicated figure that can, at once, subvert and fulfill normative categories of identity at different times and places as a gesture of self-articulation" (5). In his self-conscious attention to his clothing, accessories, and mannerisms, the dandy defined and performed a self that revealed the precarity of boundaries of gender, sexuality, class and nationality. The Oxford English Dictionary cites the first appearance of the term as circa 1780, meaning "one who *studies* above everything to dress elegantly and fashionably" ("dandy," emphasis added). The deliberation implied by "study" emphasizes the dandy's commitment to a continual self-definition based on changing fashion trends. Because the dandy's performance of self crossed identity boundaries, Miller sees dandyism as "above all a lesson in interrogating identity (of the self, race, nation) and analyzing representation of that identity" (9). For example, the dandy "use[d] his characteristic style and charisma to distinguish himself when privileges of birth, wealth, and social standing might be absent" suggesting potential "societal transition." He also rejected demands for traditional masculinity and "threatened normative standards of sexuality" in often preferring the company of men. Finally, the dandy's apparent "passion for the foreign" decisively marked him as a "gender, class, sex, and national traitor" (9). Like the subjects of medieval and early modern sumptuary laws, dandies signaled a "crisis of category" that threatened the foundations of western social systems.

This sense of crisis is aggravated when the dandy's extravagance plays out on a Black body. Miller considers dandyism particularly suited to Black people whose identities were re-ordered and erased during the slave trade. Whether destined to become field hands, house slaves, or urban domestics or apprentices, Africans always began their new lives with new clothes. Africans frequently manipulated what they were given to "fashion new identities and … indicate their ideas about the relationship between slavery, servitude, and subjectivity" (10). Dandyism as it is defined above first became racialized on the bodies of "luxury slaves" in eighteenth-century England (6). These dandies' "sartorial novelty and sometimes flamboyant personalities" challenged ordering social norms beyond the capabilities of the European dandy (6); the Black dandy simultaneously threatened "supposed natural aristocracy, [was] (hyper) masculine and feminine, aggressively heterosexual yet not quite a real man, a vision of an upstanding citizen and an outsider broadcasting his alien status by clothing his dark body in a good suit" (11). Black dandies thus crossed identity boundaries and continually "propose[d] new, more fluid categories within which to constitute themselves" (11).

Miller identifies dandyism as a form of disidentification, José Esteban Muñoz's process of rewriting identity categories from within a "phobic majoritarian public sphere" (Muñoz 4). As a strategy of the Black dandy, disidentification "exposes the hybridity, syncretism, mixedness of all people, deconstructs race and Blackness, sex, gender, and class into moments of productive ambivalence, agency, and capitulation" (Miller 12). Disidentification, in the context of Black dandyism, revealed the constructedness of the gendered and racial regulatory boundaries maintained by social norms; ordering systems of colonial power were thus threatened and required more stringent shoring up. The disidentificatory nature of Black dandyism was self-consciously repeated and revised according to the social and cultural contexts in which it was performed, beginning with the "luxury slaves" Miller identifies as the first Black dandies. Although dandyism as it was originally conceived is no longer recognizable in the twenty-first century, there are certainly instances where fashion is *studied* and performed as a practice of disidentification—and they almost always function as a challenge to regulatory norms.

Dress for protest

As described in previous chapters, "trans" can be considered a "disidentificatory relation to the dyadic, cissexist, and faulty assumptions of sexual dimorphism" (Patterson and Spencer). Muñoz defines disidentification as "descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). Such survival strategies are foundational to trans worldmaking and the creation of conditions in which transness can be experienced as joyful; as a deliberate response to (or defiance of) cishet pressures, disidentification can also function as an act of protest. Engaging in acts of protest helps individuals identify as part of a group. This is especially true for marginalized people: acts of protest—either in the form of a large gathering of activists or quieter, more individual actions—make marginalized identities visible despite structural and social efforts to conceal them. For example, *Masculine Birth Ritual* and Alok Vaid-Menon's Instagram posts are smaller, more individual acts of protest that name and confront the regulatory structures designed to enforce the gender binary: the experiences of masculine-of-center pregnancy and birth and Alok's presentation of body hair reveal the changeability of binary norms and the permeability of gender boundaries. By making these experiences visible, Grover Wehman-Brown and Alok not only engage in protest against the gender binary but also make it possible for individuals to identify as part of a group. This group identification makes it possible for people to experience their personal identity with joy.

As I have mentioned, protest takes different forms on varied scales. However, a primary function of all social protest is to “influence the ways in which social actors make sense of, find meaning in, and narrate their own views of reality” (Shepard 20). Additionally, community-organized protest spaces and cultures are often “integral to forging a sense of queer identity, political agency, and collective power” (Jennex 415). Through spaces and cultures of protest such as pride parades and public social media presences, queer and trans people are supported in disidentifying with colonial gender norms and the production of their own nonconforming identity. This is especially true where individual bodies have been regulated, sanctioned, and even dictated by dominant social discourses (Shepard 20). In these cases, protest is a means of “challeng[ing] the discourse [and offering] differing interpretations of the body” (David Roman qtd. in Shepard 20-1).

For the project of finding trans joy, it is useful to view protest through a lens of play. Benjamin Shepard calls play a “tactical frivolity,” creative activities that produce an “exhilarating feeling of pleasure, the joy of building a more emancipatory and caring world” (2, 1). The purpose of play is sometimes policy change but more often community-building. In the context of protest, Shepard describes play as “an activity encompassing a range of affects and outcomes, including joy, social eros, liberation, and policy change” and may also contribute to “personal change, community development, and pleasure” (13-4). Playful protest asks us to subvert and remake regulatory boundaries in order to challenge dominant gender ideologies. Engaging in acts of collective joy rejects the expectation that marginalized groups be quelled by regulation; indeed, acts of collective joy are considered subversive for this reason, giving rise to further regulation (e.g. the sumptuary laws designed to reign in "over" dressing) (16). Although certain acts of playful protest can lead to policy change, the joy and community-building are its most powerful effects.

Drag is a clear example of playful trans protest. Drag kings and queens weaken zealously-guarded gender boundaries with their spectacular mimicry of legible femininity or masculinity. Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor see drag as a "transgressive action" that adorns the ostensibly cisgender male or female body with hyperbolic signs of binary gender, revealing the constructedness of that gender (212). As acts of protest, drag performances acquire a "political edge" through three characteristics: 1.) their role as sites of contestation where dominant symbols and norms are named and confronted; 2) the careful, deliberate use of "cultural entertainment" as a medium; and 3) the production and affirmation of a collective identity (217-9). This political edge takes shape in the exchange between performers and audience: drag queens' and kings' portrayal of "ambiguity and in-betweenness … invites audience members to consider what it means to be a man or woman" (212). Audience members are forced to think about gender in new ways as drag performances "articulat[e], defin[e], and redefin[e]" the boundaries of the identity categories the colonial binary produces (219). In other words, drag provokes cisheteronormative anxiety in the same moment that it makes space for trans identifications.

The collective identity drag performers and their audience produce is one that "manipulates, modifies, and reinterprets group boundaries by drawing (and then crossing)" the boundaries that separate trans-cis, queer-straight, female-male (Rupp and Taylor 219). These crossings deconstruct and disrupt the "historically negative and stigmatized identities" forged from systems of colonial gender; over the course of a drag performance, "new and more positively valued" identities are constructed and expressed (219). In this identity creation we see an act of protest: by (mis)using the signs of masculine and feminine dress, drag kings and queens disidentify with binary gender ideologies and highlight the extent of colonial regulation in the process.

Shaun Cole points to the queer sartoriality and “genderfuck practices” of London’s Gay Liberation Front (GLF) as another example of protest through dress. In the 1970s, the GLF practiced what Cole calls radical drag: the mixing of “extreme stereotypes” of the masculine and feminine whose goal is not to pass but rather to make queer politics publicly visible. Radical drag becomes all the more political—and “terribly wonderful and terribly threatening”—when it is used as a form of everyday dress (166). The combination of a feminine dress, full makeup, steel-toed boots, and a mustache for a trip to the supermarket has the potential to evoke “the angry outrage of the person who finds [their] signals have been confused” (Roger Baker qtd. 166). Radical drag takes the gender blurring of traditional drag to ordinary public places as a form of direct action: the “genderfuck practices" of the GLF exacerbated anxieties about the gender binary and indicated “the emergence of new identities and styles of dress based on androgyny, gender neutrality, and trans positioning” (167).

Trans protest through dress is not always as ostentatious as a drag show; sometimes, it is simply in the wearing of an incongruous piece of clothing that one can confront the gender binary. Ames Hawkins, for example, describes the way the act of wearing a tie on their genderqueer body is both a connection to and critique of binary gender boundaries. In their video essay, “Exhuming Transgenre Ties,” Hawkins presents their trans body—stripped and redressed over the course of the video—as an illustration of a multiply-situated subject whose donning of a tie shapes their relationship with dominant discourses. As an object, the tie is a representation of a “decidedly [white] American tradition of liberal arts intellectualism, fiscal conservatism, elitist desires” (00:03:00-00:03:11)—all characteristics that have depended on the enforcement of binary gender. Hawkins’ genderqueer body is linked to this tradition through the tie’s historical power as a sign of male decency and social standing. This provokes the anxiety that fueled the sumptuary and cross-dressing laws: are the categories of class and gender really so unstable that a mere tie threatens to upset them?

These acts of protest call into question the fixedness of gender and the idea that people can be categorized based on their appearance. This is a problem because it suggests that the entire structure on which colonial power is built is likewise precarious.

Dress as trans worldmaking

Pritchard suggests that fashion has always been a crucial part of queer worldmaking: from practices of “sartorial respectability” for LGBTQ+ advocacy to the use of handkerchief codes as “a solicitation or expression of [queer] desire,” the sartorial is a mode of queer survival that makes joy possible (“Grace” 4). For trans people, this is especially true. Although clothing can function as a cage—for example, when one is required to wear a certain style for safety reasons—it also holds the potential for joy: it is an easy way to experiment with and control gender presentation. For Pritchard, dress is an “accessible material through which to self-create, to self-affirm, and to adorn oneself into a sense of belonging or community, among other practices of self-conceptualization” (“Black Girls” 129).

As an embodied practice of disidentification, dress allows trans people to “[resist] dominant, oppressive power structures” through rejecting the binary system that figures certain clothes as masculine or feminine (Gutierrez-Perez and Andrade 5). Alok, for example, often wears dresses in bright colors and loud prints, clothing deemed feminine by the colonial binary system. Clothing, then, can be a tool for what Annette Harris Powell calls “transformative empowerment" (185). She talks about transformative empowerment in the context of "undress," or the discarding of the "oppressive weight" of dress norms and the regulatory mechanisms which underpin them; the undressing of Black male bodies, she argues, is a rejection of the "bestiality, brute crudeness, and oppressed subordination" that characterize the stock image of Black male bodies in the US (186). The transformative empowerment that emerges from "undressing"—the deliberate choice to wear something that "breaks down the boundaries of exclusion that affect identity"—is a form of worldmaking that makes an article of clothing more than a mere object: rather, something as simple as a tie or a dress becomes a message that can subvert and remake regulatory gender boundaries.

In her discussion of masculine-of-center fashion, Erin J. Rand identifies the "affective force" of clothing as a sign of its worldmaking potential. This force exerts a "pull" than she argues draws viewers "into the shared orientation and attachment of community" (15). In other words, clothing builds worlds by allowing viewers to resonate with the meaning imbued in the sartorial objects—meaning that arises from such objects' appearance on the "wrong" body. Rand describes this resonance as the "exhilarating and terrifying moment of one's connection to a culturally forbidden aesthetic object," which allows for "the possibility [...] to envision a previously unthinkable community and a queer world" (13). The next section considers a designer ball gown that becomes "culturally forbidden" when it appears on a Black masculine body. I argue that not only does this sartorial choice allow Carl Clemons-Hopkins to resist the oppressive weight of dress norms but also that its forbidden nature allows viewers to resonate with the visible transness—thereby creating a world in which gender nonconforming identities exist.

Subversive dress

Carl Clemons-Hopkins came to prominence when they joined the cast of *Hacks*, an HBO series about comedians. In 2021, Clemons-Hopkins was nominated for Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series at the Emmys. This was a significant moment of their career, but it was overshadowed by the press' focus on one particular fact: Clemons-Hopkins was the first openly nonbinary person to be nominated for an acting Emmy. News outlets were generally preoccupied with this "historic moment" in the run-up to awards night (Allaire). This meant that interviews with the press rarely centered on their Emmy-nominated performance, but Clemons-Hopkins recognized the weight of the moment:

> I'm super grateful for it, but it's somewhat daunting to me having been othered [for being nonbinary], and now I'm being celebrated for it … I'm hoping and praying that this will be something that encourages people—and the industry—[to realize] that actors are humans, and humans are more than two genders. How a human identifies has nothing to do with if they can play the part. (Allaire)

The coverage brought the idea of nonbinary gender into mainstream conversation. This conversation unfolded in such a way that gave Clemons-Hopkins the opportunity to define their gender on their own terms; and publications like *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* let those terms stand without editorializing.

The repetition of "first openly nonbinary nominee" primed audiences to scrutinize Clemons-Hopkins' appearance on the red carpet. What would a nonbinary person look like? On awards night, Clemons-Hopkins arrived wearing a dress designed for them by Christian Siriano. Siriano is known for "creating gender-busting fashion on the red carpet" (Ilchi); one of his most notable creations was Billy Porter's tuxedo ball gown designed for the 2019 Oscars (Gonzales). Clemons-Hopkins' own dress featured a white off-the shoulder blouse-style top, a black skirt-trouser hybrid, and a long, flowing belt in saturated yellow and purple. The top revealed Clemons-Hopkins' dark chest hair and emphasized their muscular shoulders; a full beard and bald head completed the look. Compared to Porter's gown, the dress was understated, remarkable only because it adorns Clemons-Hopkins' masculine Black body. The dress was beyond merely remarkable for some onlookers familiar with the significance of the colors: yellow, white, purple, and black are the colors of the nonbinary pride flag. Its presence on the red carpet seemed for these viewers to signal a sort of acceptability of gender non-conformity.

Designed in 2014 by a 17-year-old activist, the nonbinary flag serves as a symbol of a broad identity not represented by the pink-blue binary seen on the trans pride flag. The four colors each depict a different experience of nonbinary gender:

- Yellow stands for people whose gender doesn't exist within the binary.
- White represents people with all genders or many genders.
- Purple stands for people with genders that may be a mix of female and male.
- Black represents people that identify as not having any gender at all. ("What")

As a whole, the flag is a visible celebration of identities and experiences that reject and subvert the boundaries of the colonial binary. Its creation and subsequent inclusion in LGBTQ+ spaces is an act of community-building: it gave a group a symbol around which to construct a collective identity category and solidarity for resistance to the gender binary. Clemons-Hopkins' dress—along with their openness about their gender identity—made nonbinary as a category visible to the public; it was not merely a "gender-busting" piece of fashion, but a manifestation of the *act* of busting gender. Onlookers saw Clemons-Hopkins' nonbinary body in this dress while being simultaneously inundated with commentators' feverish repetition of "first openly nonbinary nominee." In this context, the significance of the colors was also often brought up. For nonbinary audiences, Clemons-Hopkins' appearance on the red carpet signaled the extent of this identity-based community: look, you are not alone. Binary audiences were perhaps introduced to the concept of gender outside the male-female binary for the first time; unsurprisingly, their responses were not always supportive.

As is common with visible gender nonconformity, many onlookers experienced varied levels of unease and revulsion by the appearance of a Black, masculine body in a dress. Many comments on Siriano's Instagram expressed feelings of offense at Clemons-Hopkins' body in the gown; for example, user @wonealart sarcastically opined "[t]his is Absolutely STUNNING!!! There is nothing more aesthetically pleasing than seeing big, hairy, muscular arms, shoulders, and chest stuffed into an exquisite, delicate, white corset!!!" (Siriano). This user's outrage seems to be about perceived disrespect toward the gown—as though it had not been specifically designed for Clemons-Hopkins. However, the outrage betrays the anxiety manufactured by the colonial gender binary; namely, that clothes are intended to signal one of two binary genders—and nothing more. It is not surprising, then, that many of the comments on Siriano's Instagram appear to originate in a perceived threat to binary masculinity. One user goes so far as to imply that the outfit is the latest in a long line of gender transgressions by Black men: something other non-white men would never do. Clemons-Hopkins' Black body seems to intensify feelings of discomfort, illustrating how Black people—and especially Black queers—cannot be granted civility by the colonial machine.

At the same time, these images were flooded with comments expressing well-wishes and resonance. The presence of the nonbinary flag in such a public venue as the red carpet signaled the existence of a nonbinary identity to a wide audience; and, for users who resonated with this visible identity, the prevalence of positive comments on Clemons-Hopkins' posts demonstrated the existence of a supportive community. As with any online space, this ecosystem of Instagram makes it possible for individuals to identify with others and affirm their own identity. Although they did not engage with negative comments in the same way Alok does, the power and confidence Clemons-Hopkins exudes in these public images are clearly in defiance of such regulatory pressure. In this way, I see the outfit as an act of protest and—in the extravagance of a red carpet look—quite playful. As evidenced by the resonance expressed in the comments, the dress also functions as a form of trans worldmaking, announcing to gender nonconforming viewers that it is okay to visibly resist colonial binary structures—to which viewers react with gratitude and joy.

In the next chapter, I conclude the dissertation with a consideration of the politics of trans visibility. I look back at these projects of trans worldmaking to ask by whom the efforts are meant to be seen. Podcasts, Instagram, and reportage from the red carpet are widely available and visible to global audiences; I suggest that such visible worldmaking practices present coexisting risks and rewards for trans people. Although the risks of high visibility include hostility and violence, as we have seen, the reward of experiencing a trans identity with joy is the ultimate goal of the trans worldmaking project.

Conclusion: Implications of Visibility

> the thing about ppl who constantly call for visibility is that they never actually outline… *who* they want to see them. Whose gaze are they hoping to attract? Who is not seeing them?
>
> —b. binaohan *decolonizing trans/gender 101*

In April 2023, *Brides Today*, an Indian bridal fashion magazine, posted three digital covers for that month's issue to their social media. Each image showcased Alok Vaid-Menon in elegant, vibrant Indian formalwear. The magazine invited Alok for a conversation ostensibly about the fight for same-sex marriage in India.[13] However, the decision to feature Alok rather than a visibly cishomonormative model in an issue about marriage equality speaks volumes beyond legal rights for same-sex couples. In fact, Alok repeatedly refuses to follow the interviewer's lead to frame same-sex marriage as the ideal of LGBTQ+ equality:

> Marriage equality is necessary, and the continued denial of it constitutes a form of discrimination. I'm also committed to the creation of a more loving society—one where we aren't required to be a couple to get access to basic rights, resources, dignity, and community. (Verma)

It is unclear why *Brides Today* chose Alok as their visual representation of the fight for marriage equality in India; between the views expressed in the interview and Alok's U.S. citizenship, the poet is not a prominent stakeholder in this fight. What is clear, however, is *Brides Today*'s refusal to remove the covers from the internet despite transphobic outrage. The magazine and Alok both shared the images to their social media accounts, and the response was not at all surprising: in general, viewers lamented the erasure of women by a publication purportedly about the cisheteronormative institution of marriage; there was also vocal disgust at Alok's apparent "spreading" of an American "sickness" to India (Brides). Although they did not engage with commenters, *Brides Today* held their ground and left the images online, where they will remain an example of visibility politics in perpetuity.

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[13] The Indian Supreme Court struck down bids to codify same-sex marriage in October 2023 (Yadav).

Dan Brouwer defines visibility politics as “theory and practice which assume that ‘being seen’ and ‘being heard’ are beneficial and often crucial for individuals or a group to gain greater social, political, cultural, or economic legitimacy, power, authority, or access to resources” (118). Visibility politics suggest that the growing presence of trans people in TV shows and movies, on magazine covers, and on the red carpet is necessary for trans people to achieve liberation. However, as Michel Foucault warned: “visibility is a trap” (200). Mia Fischer expands on this, suggesting that visibility and representation “produce a pathway to biopolitical management, promoting techniques of surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-responsibility for marginalized communities” (13). These techniques put trans bodies at risk of violence or assimilation at the same time as they figure those bodies *as* a risk. For the reasons outlined in Chapter 1, trans—and particularly nonconforming—bodies are a risk to the security of the state and thus subject to surveillance and enforcement of the gender binary. This enforcement unfolds in public spaces like bathrooms and airport security checkpoints and can involve humiliation and/or violence. In this cyclical way, transness is systemically risky.

Visibility also risks the normalization of trans bodies; because of high-profile trans people like Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner, this normalization promotes expectations for the ability and desire to pass. For example, Caitlyn Jenner’s 2015 appearance on the cover of *Vanity Fair* was lauded as another sign of the “transgender tipping point.” It was her first major appearance after coming out and the image made it very clear that Jenner would express her gender identity in a binary, cisnormative way. She is clad in a white bustier leotard, legs modestly crossed and arms tucked behind her. The outfit and pose emphasize her augmented breasts and the absence of a crotch bulge. She gazes into the camera with her head tilted, a hint of a smirk on her face; together with the text superimposed over her body—”Call me Caitlyn”—

the look seems to dare the viewer to see her as anything other than a woman. Who is the intended recipient of this challenge? Certainly, there must have been trans people who saw the cover as proof that society was becoming more accepting of transness. I suggest, though, that the cover—as well as Laverne Cox's celebrated *Time* cover from the previous year—was created specifically for cisgender consumption. Although the cover story explicitly identified Jenner *as trans*, her body carries all the signs of cisheteronormative white femininity; combined with her success as an athlete; her conservative politics and support of Donald Trump; and her vocal opposition to the participation of trans women on women's sports teams, popular media could convince cis audiences that Jenner was a "prominent role model for trans people" (Fischer, 172; La Force). Fischer argues that Jenner's "white, transnormative and transpatriotic bod[y]" resists recognition as a threat to the state and highlights the contingency of cultural belonging: her politics, race, and normative femininity "make up" for her gender transgression to the extent that she becomes representative of a "good" trans citizen (172). This contingent cultural belonging—bestowed by cisgender audiences—normalizes a certain kind of trans body, one that not only passes as cis but also assimilates.[14] Normative trans bodies inform systems of surveillance, thereby figuring nonconforming trans bodies as threats to the state and putting them at risk of violent enforcement of the binary.[15]

Despite these risks and realities, there is enormous potential for worldmaking and joy in trans visibility. I would argue that visibility of nonconforming trans bodies in particular is crucial for creating conditions in which trans identities and experiences are protected, supported, and celebrated. Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to illustrate the ways visibility not only makes space for trans joy in the face of cisheteronormative surveillance and control, but also allows for the potential for recognition: for a listener or viewer to see these joyful nonconforming bodies and think “I didn’t know that was an option.” Chapter Two, “Worldmaking Countertactics for Trans Reproductive Joy,” explored *Masculine Birth Ritual* as a site of trans resonance—the reverberation of shared experiences—through counterstorytelling. The collective knowledge gathered in the podcast offers information and exemplars of survivable—and sometimes joyful—masculine-of-center pregnancies**.** *Masculine Birth Ritual* demonstrates that trans pregnancy is not an inherently miserable experience; by making these experiences visible, the podcast participates in trans worldmaking.

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[14] For trans people whose goal is not to "overcome" their transness and pass as cisgender, the pressure to assimilate might pose the greatest existential threat to trans joy and vibrancy.

[15] I do not mean to suggest that all normative trans bodies inherently serve the state, nor that being gender non-conforming is inherently subversive. However, the visibility of certain trans bodies necessarily inflates these characterizations.

Chapter Three, “Anticolonial Trans Worldmaking Through Body Hair,” centered the hypervisible difference of Alok Vaid-Menon’s nonconforming body as a model for disrupting colonial gender ideologies. The manipulation of Western, gendered norms of body hair maintenance makes Alok’s body a spectacle and prone to wider circulation online. While this certainly puts Alok at increased risk of surveillance and violent correction, it also visibilizes their joy in the composition of each image and the frequently evident self-assurance. I argued that not only do Alok’s social media accounts become spaces of trans celebration, and not only is their loving engagement with transphobic comments acts of protection, but the easy circulation of images of their nonconforming body makes the trans worldmaking project visible and accessible to a wide online audience.

Chapter Four, “Making Trans Worlds Through Dress,” argued that the presence of nonbinary celebrities—whose nonconformity is evident in their clothing choices—on the mainstream “stage” of the red carpet expands the reach of trans worldmaking beyond the internet. Clothing has a long history as a mechanism for regulating race, gender, class, and national belonging; this is especially evident in the stripping of the Black bodies of newly arrived enslaved Africans. Subversion of racialized, gendered, classed, and patriotic dress norms contributes to the project of dismantling regulatory boundaries rooted in colonial ideologies. Out of this dismantling emerges the potential to experience categories like transness—which run counter to colonial norms—with joy.

Brides Today's refusal to yield to transphobic outrage over its cover lends legitimacy to Alok's embodiment and anti-colonial trans worldmaking as a whole. That a mainstream Indian magazine—a publication with an extremely binary gendered readership—would stand by its choice to feature a visible gender non-conforming person on its cover signals to the public that it is possible to remake regulatory boundaries: it is possible to not only exist outside those boundaries but to also reveal their artificial and therefore changeable nature. This is especially compelling given *Brides Today* is published in a country that bears the deep effects of British colonialism.

This dissertation has, I hope, made it clear that not only is binary gender a colonial effect, but also that trans rhetoric has the potential to subvert and remake gender to be a category that enables joy rather than regulation. Trans worldmaking is one project of an embodied rhetoric that is especially powerful when it plays out visibly on a wide-reaching stage: when audiences resonate with a non-conforming embodied gender, they see that their own identity is possible—that, in fact, there is a world in which their identity can (and should) be protected, supported, and celebrated. The inherent visibility of podcasts, social media, and celebrity can be risky, but it also allows trans people to find empowerment and joy in their gender nonconformity—and to pass it on by tapping "share."

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