

“We’re Doing Nothing Less Than Fucking Ourselves Real”

In the United States, one of the most pressing issues that trans people face is being oversexualized, mainly by transphobic people who want to frame us as sexual predators or pedophiles to make our existence illegal. Even outside of this more malicious intent, cisgender people often misunderstand the point of transness, thinking that the ultimate goal of being trans is to make yourself straight: if you were a straight woman, why would you want to be a gay man? Due to this misguided thinking by cis people, many trans people emphasize the idea that gender and sexuality are unrelated, that these issues are completely separate ones, with their own unrelated nuances—that though they were once thought to be intertwined, we now know better. Despite these well-meaning ideas, this is not true. For many trans people, they find that when their gender changes, so too, does the way that they frame desire. I have seen time and time again people who thought they were cisgender lesbians do not necessarily become straight trans men, but gay or bisexual trans men, because the way that they come to desire their own body makes possible a new way to desire other bodies. It is understandable that people don’t want to over-emphasize the sexual component of transness, since transphobes tend to try to frame transgender people as forcing kids to be trans, who would be cisgender if not exposed to “sexualization” by transgender people. While it is not unreasonable to want to move away from these ideas by trying to divorce ideas of gender and sexuality, to do so is to erase the nuance and truth of transness in order to avoid stereotypes related to trans sexuality.

This evolves into a kind of respectability politics, something that history has seen Black people use as an (ineffective) strategy during the Civil Rights Movement: if we

prove that we are worthy of rights—if we prove we are not who they say we are—, then they will give them to us. By participating in this politics of respectability, transgender people who try to emphasize this nonexistent separation between gender and sexuality feed into the hyper-conservative idea that all sex is bad. More than that, they feed into the machinations of racial capitalism (which is just capitalism, because all capitalism is racial capitalism)¹, which looks to create minorities so that it can separate and divide them, to focus their problems on each other, rather than the system that oppresses them.

In the United States—as well as across the world in nations that have been colonized or influenced by the West and/or adopt Western influences—racial capitalism hinges on several practices that aim to separate people from land and each other. One way this occurs is through overtly violent means, such as war, land-grabbing, dispossession, and neo/colonialism; however, an equally important component of maintaining a capitalistic state is the technology of antirelationality, which necessitates “the disjoining or deactivating of relations between human beings (and humans and nature)... for capitalist expropriation to work.”² Essentially, its goal is to separate people from each other so that they cannot successfully group together to upend oppressive forces. Once racial capitalism has divided these people, it seeks to densely populate communities and control who can relate to other people and to greater state forces, in order to limit and prevent connections. This helps shift blame from systems of power;

¹ I note this because as explained below, capitalism creates minoritized groups, racial groups being one of them. Because it is impossible to make a social species be truly antirelational, Marx claimed that capitalism would fold in on itself, thereby “rationalize social [and therefore, racial] relations,” implying that all capitalism is not necessarily racial capitalism. However, because he does not take into account the ways that capitalism creates racialized peoples, his logic is faulty.

²Melamed, Jodi. "Racial capitalism." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 78

the individual becomes responsible for their own worth, which is ultimately determined by their ability to benefit capitalism—also a pillar of neoliberalism, also known as the “American Dream.” Once people are densely populated and at each other’s throats, it makes it easier for the state to over police them and kill them, justifying violence through claiming that people of marginalized identities (which capitalism as created in the first place) are a danger to the ruling classes—those who *are* able to relate to state forces.

If, as transgender people, we choose to ideologically separate interconnected parts of our identities, we (unknowingly) succumb to the forces of (racial) capitalism. Apart from refuting the machinations of racial capitalism, it is important to talk about all aspects of our being, including the sexual parts. If we maintain that there is nothing sexual about transness in an attempt to redirect the narrative, we may lose parts of ourselves in the process. Therefore, we must ask,

What possibilities does trans^{*3} present in transnational conversations about sex, trauma, and embodiment at this political moment? As a related question, where is the place of the sexual in/against trans studies? What happened to the sex that the term *transsexuality* made explicit (even in its interpretation of sex as bodily, not sexual)? Does the domain of the sexual still have a communal or worldbuilding capacity? What does trans/trans* contribute to that vision?⁴

I am particularly interested in questions of what *trans* does to *sex* and the *sex* of *transsexual*. Although this essay is focused on having sex, it is important to note that asexuality is still a part of sexuality, especially because it is a nuanced identity and exists on a spectrum. In talking about sex and sexuality, I want to emphasize that all forms of

³ “trans*” with an asterisk just refers to the identities under the trans umbrella rather than specifically transgender.

⁴ Aizura et al., “Thinking with trans now.” *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020). 137.

sexuality are important, even if they are thought of as the “lack” of sexuality or the “opposite” of it by some.

Through trans sex, trans joy becomes more concrete and legible, and all kinds of new opportunities for worldmaking open up. When one experiences ecstasy and pleasure outside of the oppressive forces of capitalism, you can imagine what could be. When you are with your partner(s), experiencing something bodily that may, at times, feel otherworldly, you are refuting capitalism and antirelationality: you are not in conflict with others, you are not having things stolen from you or being forced to evaluate your worth in relation to how it benefits corporations or billionaires. For many trans people, especially trans people of color, we are often outside of our bodies, imagining how they could be different, or imagining harm that could come to us, due to narratives that only talk about trans people as if we are always already dead. By having trans sex, we are allowed to be joyfully in our bodies, experiencing a unique type of pleasure that exists outside of the gender binary: “one of the allures of t4t as a mode of desire is the possibility—not a guarantee, mind you—of unlinking sex and intimacy from sex-as-anatomy, gender-as-role, and the obligation to be especially well formed as a subject or body.”⁵ Although many trans people do receive gender affirming care that may make their bodies align more with binary gender, our bodies are queer⁶ just by being transgender.

I have named that desire is important because it often helps frame the way we see ourselves and each other, as well as because it is part of the sexual truth of many trans people. More than this though, more than being a part of a subjective truth, desire is a

⁵ Aizura et al., "Thinking with trans now." *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (2020). 138.

⁶ Queer as in nonnormative, queer as in refuting oppressive forces such as white supremacy and ableism, queer as in weird and beautiful

component of portraying realness⁷, portraying people wholly. In her interview with Isaac Julien, bell hooks and Julien critique the well-known documentary, *Paris Is Burning*, which documents vogue, drag, and house culture in the 1980s and 90s, in their conversation of the way Blackness is portrayed within media:

“[Julien] to me, one of the problems in *Paris Is Burning*, is that the subjects in the film are, to an extent, presented to us as objects of a certain gaze... [hooks] That's why there can be no portrait of desire there. The profound, voyeuristic narcissism of the camera can't pick that up, because it finally isn't interested in desire, in the erotics of this spectacle. Who's interested in how the drag queen fucks, or who the drag queen fucks? The whole emphasis is really on the pageantry and the style.”⁸

Paris Is Burning, in some ways, is more interested in the spectacle rather than the people. We learn about figures like Pepper la Beija, but we never get to know her; she is an avenue for us to understand the spectacle of drag, vogue, and house culture. We learn about the ways that the queens want to be famous, how they want to be on the covers of magazines and become household names, but in many ways, those are surface level desires, shown to us by those behind the camera who ask the questions. If we had truly learned *who* and *how* the queens desired, we may have seen the utopias they dreamt about that moved us away from showing us how they try to accept the capitalist hellscape that they live in.

In his foundational text, *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz tells us that “we are not yet queer,”⁹ because queerness, as an ideality and a praxis, allows us to imagine a

⁷ “Realness” is a term that originates in vogue scenes, whereby, as a category, (typically) queer people of color put on the dress, stature, and mannerisms of their white, heterosexual counterparts. In this context, to be “real” is to pass, successfully and accurately, for a short time—embody someone who you can never be. When I am talking about realness here, I am talking about a version wherein realness is reframed to accurately show the experience of the individual rather than accurately emulating someone else.

⁸ hooks, bell, and Isaac Julien. “States of Desire.” *Transition*, no. 53 (1991), 175-176.

⁹ Muñoz José Esteban et al., *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). 1.

world where there is no suffering, no norms to conform to. What we may envision as being a queer politic now may become the norm in the future. Because norms are always changing, so, too, must queerness. Many of the examples of queerness that Muñoz shows us lie in the quotidian. Those moments of the joyful present and past allow us to imagine a hopeful future. One such example I am quite fond of comes from one of my favorite poems, SICK4SICK by torrin a. greathouse. They say, “I think my lover’s cane is sexy. The way they walk/ like a rainstorm stumbles slow across the landscape.... I whisper the names of our medications/ like the names of saints. Orange bottles scattered around/ the mattress like unlit candles in the dark.”¹⁰ Through the lens of normative subjects (straight, cis, white, able-bodied people), the relationship of greathouse and their partner may seem sad; however, by showing their love for their trans and disabled partner, greathouse shows us how desire can be reframed through trans and disabled subjects just through viewing your lover’s cane as sexy. “Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life,”¹¹ which is amplified for queer, trans, and disabled people, whose sex is inherently viewed as non-reproductive, and therefore useless. But, In the words of Sassafras Lowrey,

“When I have sex it’s not insert tab A into slot B, it’s not formulaic or clean or simple... I find nothing hotter than transgressive bodies, and gender is the lubricant I can’t get enough of.... As complicated bodies touch, we are molded like soft clay into something resembling a form we can be comfortable enough to live in. Sex is the glue that has held my jigsaw body together.... it’s given me back the body I lost to abuse and dysphoria, it has in fact made me real.”¹²

¹⁰ Academy of American Poets, “Sick4Sick by Torrin A. Greathouse - Poems | Academy of American Poets,” poets.org, 2022, <https://poets.org/poem/sick4sick>.

¹¹ Muñoz José Esteban et al., *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). 22.

¹² Autor: Morty Diamond, *Trans/Love: Radical Sex, Love, and Relationships beyond the Gender Binary* (Editorial: San Francisco Manic D Press, 2011). 96.

When we have trans sex, “[w]e’re doing nothing less than fucking ourselves real.”¹³ We are telling the whole and accurate truth of our complex beings. We resist the narrative that we cannot and should not be sexual, that it is bad for society, that trans people are always already dead and never experience joy. By speaking about the necessity of relating gender to sexuality and refusing the responsibility to interact with stereotypes, we show how speaking about trans joy and trans life is just as important as speaking about injustices against trans people. In short, when we choose to have trans sex, we choose to *trans*-form sex. “Trans” is a prefix, and we use it to change, modify, and destabilize. We *transform* sex. We *transform* relationality. We refuse to be what capitalism wants us to be. We choose to be real.

¹³Autor: Morty Diamond, *Trans/Love: Radical Sex, Love, and Relationships beyond the Gender Binary* (Editorial: San Francisco Manic D Press, 2011). 98.

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