CYBORG TRANS/CRIPTIONS:

GENDER, DISABILITY, AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

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Advisor: Chris Boesel

Max Thornton

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

CYBORG TRANS/CRIPTIONS

Max Thornton

The term "trans/criptions" names both the interconnectedness between transness and disability and the methodology of analysis that foregrounds this interconnection. This dissertation brings together queer theology, trans studies, and disability and crip theory to explore the capacitation of gendered personhood in the image of God, and to offer a constructive theological proposal more adequate to the needs and experiences of what Hil Malatino calls "queer corporealities." Under racial capitalism and global neoliberalism, gendered personhood is capacitated by the thinly secularized legacies of theological discourses of humanity created in the image of God. Foregrounding trans/crip lives reveals the urgent need for a reformulation of what it means to be created in the image of God, building on and expanding the relational interpretations proposed by feminist disability and trans theologians.

Using Clarke et al.'s framework of biomedicalization, I interpret the medical assignment and reassignment of gender as instantiations of inadequate interpretations of the image of God. The assignment of gender, paradigmatically though not exclusively to intersex infants, capacitates gendered personhood as a reified and God-given property of the body, imposed through the colonizing intervention of white western technoscientific practices. The reassignment of trans people's genders embodies a more inclusive vision of gendered personhood, yet one that is still beholden to racial capitalism and the market forces of neoliberalism. Trans/cripping the biomedicalization of gender and its attendant theological commitments involves denaturalizing and dismantling the categories and ideologies at play:

whiteness, cisness, dis/abledness, the body, and hierarchialized distinctions between the human and its others.

Thinking with feminist cyborg theory and new materialisms, I propose an alternative, trans/crip-centered way of understanding embodied personhood as affective assemblages. Reframing the image of God as inhering in the affect of all matter, I suggest that all of creation embodies God's image in its concrete, specific, and multifarious becomings. Using both the Deleuzoguattarian assemblage concept and feminist thinkers who have continued and expanded the work of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," I propose a posthumanist understanding of personhood in the image of God as trans/crip cyborg affective assemblage, explored through a range of materialist becomings: becoming-animal, becoming-earth, becoming-machine, becoming-fictional.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

a queer crip future grows in the UNDERLANDS, the WASTELANDS and the FALLLOW LANDS … WE are breeding, building up our strength in numbers, pleaching our roots together to form Hybrid, Techno-Reinforced, Ism-Resistant SUPER-CREATURES.[1]

Remade/fReemade

In China Miéville's Bas-Lag novels, those convicted of crimes are subjected to the process of Remaking – the thaumaturgical reshaping of their bodies in fantastical disfigurement to become what Jonathan Newell calls "Abject Cyborgs,"[2] with limbs added or subtracted, orifices sealed or opened, nonhuman or nonorganic material sutured or embedded (usually ironically twisted to ensure, with far from innocent merriment, that the punishment fit the crime). Recalling the visceral corporal punishment described in the opening pages of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Remaking is a biomedical technology of capacitation and debility inscribed on flesh marked as deviant. This extreme instantiation of biopower's capacity to organize and reorganize human flesh literalizes a fantasy portrayal of techniques to which we are all subject within the system of biomedicalized gender and disability.

This dissertation will address the biomedicalization of gender and disability in relation to theological anthropology. I argue that there is a connection between theological anthropology – specifically, the definition of personhood, expressed theologically as the image of God (the *tselem Elohim* in which humans are created in Genesis 1:26-27) – and the biomedical

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[1] Romily Alice Walden, "Notes from the Underlands," *Crip* 3 (2019).
[2] Jonathan Newell, "Abject Cyborgs: Discursive Boundaries and the Remade in China Miéville's *Iron Council*," *Science Fiction Studies* 40.3 (2013): 496-509.

capacitation of gendered and disabled bodies. Remaking is the figure I deploy for this construction, emphasizing the material and discursive violences enacted on flesh by state and scientific biopower to make abject cyborgs of us all. However, the contours of Bas-Lag proffer an alternative in the resistant figure of the outlaw Jack Half-a-Prayer, whose identity and political praxis as "fReemade" embodies a deeply coalitional cyborg reclamation of his Remade flesh: a folk-heroic union of nonconsensually altered bodies, bastard hybrids fighting back against biopower, "turning your Remaking on the Remakers."[3] This constructive theological project seeks to demonstrate resonances between certain theological anthropologies and the harmful Remaking enacted through the biomedicalization of gender and disability, and to propose a resistant, fReemade alternative.

What's theology got to do with it?

That a project focused on gender, disability, and biomedicalization should be a theological project is not necessarily self-evident. Much of my thinking on these topics has been developed in contexts that are not explicitly theological (in the disciplinary spaces of feminist, queer, trans, disability, and cultural studies), and I can envision a version of this dissertation – perhaps one that is more broadly palatable to a non-theological audience – that does not tangle with theology at all. Other than my rather flip contention that all critical theory is crypto-theology, why is this a *theological* project?

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[3] China Miéville, "Jack," in *Looking for Jake* (New York: Ballantine, 2005), 199-212.

One answer is that the "other side" – the side of transphobia, ableism, and the preemptive

foreclosure of trans and disabled flourishing – is doing theology. Sometimes this theological

work is implicit and occluded – as Jakobsen and Pellegrini put it, "the assumptions that underlie

sexual regulation are so deeply embedded that people no longer recognize them as being derived

from religious thought."[4] But sometimes it is explicit, as in the case of short-lived North Dakota

House Bill 1476. This bill, which was thankfully withdrawn three days after its initial proposal

on January 18, 2021, proposed:

> to create and enact a new chapter to title 14 of the North Dakota Century Code, relating to nonsecular self-asserted sex-based identity narratives, to prohibit the state from creating or enforcing policies that directly or symbolically respect nonsecular self-asserted sex-based identity narratives or sexual orientation orthodoxy pursuant to the establishment clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and section 3 of article I of the Constitution of North Dakota; to provide for the continued enforcement of secular marriage policies; to prohibit discrimination for nonsecular beliefs pursuant to the free exercise clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and section 3 of article I of the Constitution of North Dakota.[5]

The bill defines "nonsecular" as "faith-based, not proven, predicated on naked assertions,

or emotional feelings, not self-evident objective fact," and repeatedly refers to "the religion of

secular humanism," which we are told is "a faith-based worldview" and "a series of unproven

faith-based assumptions and naked assertions." Thus, counterintuitively, "nonsecular" in this bill

frequently refers specifically to "secular humanism." While scholars of secularism and post-

secularism have certainly probed the extent to which the supposedly secular is often less than

secular, ND HB 1476 is clearly a cynical, bad-faith deployment of question-begging and

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[4] Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 21.

[5] North Dakota Legislative Assembly, House Bill 1476, 67th legislative assembly, bill text 21.0831.03000, https://www.legis.nd.gov/assembly/67-2021/documents/21-0831-03000.pdf.

doublespeak in service of a Christian supremacist agenda. The extraordinary phrase "nonsecular

self-asserted sex-based identity narratives" is defined within the bill as

> an unproven faith-based identity implicit religious moral stance [sic] that is not
> predicated on self-evident neutral truth and is a story that provides the individual with a
> sense of purpose and serves as a commentary on sexual practices, sexual preference,
> faith, morality, and life. The term includes expressions and speech that are
> controversial, sexualized, questionably moral, questionably plausible, and have a
> tendency to erode community standards of decency and promote licentiousness.[6]

The clear purpose of the bill is to present transness as a fringe religious belief and cisness

as a "self-evident neutral truth," occluding the (religiously-derived) assumptions underlying

sexual regulation so thoroughly that this sexual regulation can be portrayed as religiously,

morally, and epistemologically neutral. This is an instance of what Megan Goodwin terms

"contraceptive nationalism": the process of portraying religious outsiders as a sexual threat that

seeks to impregnate the body politic with its foreign ideology.[7] In this case, the contraceptive

nationalism functions in a self-reinforcing loop: the sexual outsider is portrayed as a religious

outsider, in order to capitalize on existing narratives of religious outsiders as sexual threat.

Excavating the theological underpinnings of ableism and transphobia usually requires

more digging (perhaps this is why ND HB 1476 was withdrawn so swiftly – it gave the game

away?). Either way, I believe it is important to be able both to identify the religious

commitments at work and to respond in a similar register. I do not necessarily disagree that

transness is "predicated on naked assertions, or emotional feelings, not self-evident objective

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[6] ND HB 1476.

[7] Megan Goodwin, *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 3.

fact," but I am committed to exposing how cisness is equally so, if not more so. In the wake of the UK's ruling in *Tavistock vs. Bell*, which devastated the provision of medical care to trans minors, and with the renewed spate of anti-trans bills cropping up across the US, the united forces of anti-trans feminism and conservative Christianity are gathering strength.[8] Opposition on both feminist and religious grounds is crucial.

But there is also a second, more affirmative reason for this project's location within theology, specifically within constructive theology. John Thatamanil has defined constructive theology as "the labor of faithful innovation that seeks to enrich, deepen, and grow the tradition's wisdom in meaningful and creative continuity with the past but without repetition."[9] The creativity of this theological work is *theopoiesis*, a double-edged God-making in which "we might *make up* the divine and *be made by* the divine."[10] With Catherine Keller's reading of Nicholas of Cusa, I understand the "we" of theopoetics not anthropocentrically but cosmologically: the co-creativity of creation and creator.[11] As we make and are made by ourselves and each other, so too we make and are made by God.

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[8] On *Tavistock*: Heron Greenesmith, "Aberration of Common Sense: Anti-trans activists and the ramifications of the Bell v. Tavistock decision for transgender youth," *Political Research Associates*, January 30, 2021, https://www.politicalresearch.org/2021/01/30/aberration-common-sense. On the relationship between anti-trans feminists and conservative Christians, see Jay Michaelson, "Radical Feminists and Conservative Christians Team Up Against Transgender People," *The Daily Beast*, September 4, 2016 [updated April 23, 2018], https://www.thedailybeast.com/radical-feminists-and-conservative-christians-team-up-against-transgender-people.

[9] John Thatamanil, ""Constructive Theology as Theopoetics: Theological Construction as Divine-Human Creativity," in *What is Constructive Theology?: Histories, Methodologies, and Perspectives*, ed. Marion Grau and Jason A. Wyman (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 37.

[10] Thatamanil, "Constructive Theology," 35.

[11] Catherine Keller, "Theopoeisis and the Pluriverse: Notes on a Process," in *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness*, ed. Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 188.

Between Jewish and Christian

This project took shape during a time of upheaval in my own religious life, a recalibration of my understanding of my own interfaith heritage and ties. To lay formal claim to be doing "interfaith theology" seems both grandiose and unjustifiable within the scope of the project as is; so I have tried, perhaps recklessly, to skirt the issue of precise religious location. What little scripture I invoke lies in the Hebrew texts common to both traditions; my theological interlocutors, historical and contemporary, are drawn from both traditions; and I have bracketed questions of Christology, Trinitarianism, and other uniquely Christian doctrines from consideration. The omission is most glaring in chapter 1, since many Christian interpretations of the image of God embed Jesus and/or the Trinity into creation. While Christianity remains my native theological tongue, I can no longer fail to heed the call of my forebears in Yiddishkeit. If the resulting theology seems incoherent or noncommittal, I can only request forbearance. A hyphen is an uncomfortable place to stand.

Between ability and disability

It is still customary within much of disability studies for the writer to name their personal experience with disability. I am simultaneously wary of deploying identity as a legitimating strategy and mindful of the important disability activist cry, "nothing about us without us." Fittingly, perhaps, I am uncomfortable locating myself on either side of the abled/disabled binary (though my intimate familiarity with crip time certainly suggests more of an affinity with the latter than the former). I am, however, firmly committed to Alison Kafer's definition of "claim[ing] crip critically," which means "to recognize the ethical, epistemic, and political

responsibilities behind such claims; deconstructing the binary between disabled and able-bodied/able-minded requires *more* attention to how different bodies/minds are treated differently, not less."[12] My use of "trans/crip" throughout this project seeks not to conflate trans and crip but rather to acknowledge their co-imbrication, their coalitional possibilities, and the need to account for their particularities.

Between bio- and medical

Basic to most scholarship in disability or trans studies is a rejection of the medical model that defines either transness or disability as a purely medical issue. Nonetheless, I focus primarily on the biomedical because it is a particularly potent site of theological anthropology in action. As an especially overt challenge to the divisions between "natural" and "artificial," medical intervention into the body tends to activate people's most deeply held presuppositions about what it means to be human. While the biomedical is the main focus of my attention here, at the same time I try to hold on to the truth that there is much more to gender, embodiment, and personhood than what can be circumscribed by the biomedical. This project is an attempt to theorize the biomedical and also put it in context, as part of the transcorporeal assembling of our being in the world.

Plan of the work

Chapter 1, "Image Remade: Perspectives on Theological Anthropology," introduces the theological terms of the project. The *tselem Elohim*, the image of God, in which humans are

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[12] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 13.

created according to Genesis 1:26-27 is underdefined in the text but extensively theorized in the history of theological interpretations. Following Douglas John Hall, I categorize interpretations of the image of God broadly as substantialist or relational, aligning myself with the many feminist, queer, and disability theologians who prefer the latter. I analyze four recent relational interpretations of the image of God: Deborah Beth Creamer's disability theology of limits, Molly Haslam's constructive theology of intellectual disability, Michelle Voss Roberts' interfaith theology of body parts, and Joy Ladin's transgender theology of God the *ger*, the stranger. All four are rich, generative theological anthropologies, and all four are ripe for expansion in two directions: first, a move away from biocentrism to account for the relationality of all matter; secondly, an inward turn to explore the paradoxical nonrelation at the heart of relation. I discuss this nonrelation in Lee Edelman's terms, interpreting God the *ger* as God the *sinthomo*sexual whose self-inversion is the act that makes creation possible.

Chapter 2, "Queer Disability, Disabled Queer: Trans/Cripping Theology," provides an overview of the theoretical and theological discourses within which this project is situated. Key texts in the development of trans theory, crip theory, trans theology, and crip theology are introduced, and the tools and techniques they use are identified. I discuss the small amount of extant literature that discusses transness and disability together, in order to assemble the notion of "trans/cripping" as a lens for analyzing the co-constitution of gender and dis/ability under racial capitalism, and I lay out the principles of trans/cripping theology.

Chapter 3, "Remade in Which Image?: Capacitating Gender through Biomedicalization," applies the trans/crip lens to the history of gender's medicalization in the United States. Using

Clarke et al.'s account of the distinction between medicalization and biomedicalization, I focus

on the assigning of genders (particularly, but not exclusively, to intersex infants) as paradigmatic

of the former and the reassigning of trans people's genders as exemplary of the latter. I trace the

workings of colonialism and racial capitalism in order to frame the US gender schema as a

project of capacitating gendered personhood. Assigning gender reflects and reinforces an

understanding of personhood that broadly corresponds to the substantialist interpretation of the

image of God, while reassigning gender corresponds to the relational interpretation. I argue that

both are ultimately inadequate, and we need an alternative approach to gender and an alternative

interpretation of the image of God.

Chapter 4, "Feeling Cyborg: Feminist Assemblage Theory," assembles the theoretical

tools for this alternative. Feminist assemblage theory or FAT is my name for a cluster of

interweaving discourses – posthumanism, new materialism, and theories of Deleuzoguattarian

assemblage – which seek to continue and develop the commitments expressed in Donna

Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto." I draw on two sets of feminist interventions into the

Deleuzoguattarian assemblage: the first using the posthumanist and new materialist work of Rosi

Braidotti, Jane Bennett, and Karen Barad; the second taking up Jasbir Puar's analysis of the

relation between assemblage and intersectionality. Finally, I discuss theories of the prosthetic in

order to propose the figure of the trans/crip cyborg as prosthetic-assemblage.

Chapter 5, "Image fReemade: Toward a Trans/Crip Theological Anthropology of

Affective Assemblage," brings together all the preceding pieces into a constructive theological

proposal. Returning to the question of how to interpret the image of God, I propose that it should

be understood as matter's affect – not affect in the sense of potential or capacity, which I argue perpetuates an ableist logic of abstraction and hierarchy, but affecting and being affected as it happens in the world. I interpret dysphoria as the embodied call of God the *ger*/*sinthomo*sexual, a confrontation with the paradox of nonrelation at the heart of relation which may open a space for attunement to matter's affect. Finally, I discuss a number of trans artistic, theoretical, and performance practices as examples of trans/crip cyborg assembling: practices of becoming-animal, becoming-earth, becoming-machine, and becoming-fictional as ways of embodied feeling that image God.

CHAPTER ONE

IMAGE REMADE: PERSPECTIVES ON THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Behold, the Highest Wisdom is spread over all the creatures – the inanimate, the growing, the living, and the speaking.[1]

In John Wyndham's 1955 science fiction novel *The Chrysalids*, a strict Christian community lives in fear of the mutations caused by generations-old nuclear fallout. The creation narrative in their bible is supplemented by "The Definition of Man," a delineation of strict specifications that prescribe human physiognomy down to the number of toes: "…And each leg shall be jointed twice and shall have one foot, and each foot five toes … And any creature that shall seem to be human, but is not formed thus, is not human. It is neither man nor woman. It is a blasphemy against the true Image of God, and hateful in the sight of God."[2] The creation narrative in our real-world bible, by contrast, provides no definition of humanity, stating only: "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27).

Theologians have attempted to fill the gap with many centuries' worth of interpretation. The image of God is evidently significant, defining humanity as uniquely God-adjacent among creation; and yet in what precisely does it consist? Queer, feminist, and disability theologians have worked hard to demonstrate the extent to which the traditional answers to this question have tended to enforce both an abled, masculine God and a terrestrial hierarchy whereby

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[1] Moshe Cordovero, *Sefer Tomer Devorah* 3.6.
[2] John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids* (1955; repr., New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 13.

godliness decreases in direct proportion to one's distance from ability and maleness. Wyndham's "Definition of Man" may be an exaggeration, but not by much: the dehumanization of those who deviate from the norm spans from Plato's claim that walking upright makes us human[3] through to Pope Francis' suggestion that gender transition is a (no doubt mutagenic) nuclear weapon.[4] The solution for many has been to reject the location of God's image in any specific trait or capacity, in favor of identifying the image with relation: the relation of humans with God, with each other, and perhaps with the rest of creation.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the interpretations of the image of God, following Douglas John Hall in dividing them broadly into two categories, the substantialist and the relational. Guided by queer, feminist, and disability theological commitments, I reject substantialist interpretations and their focus on rationality and freewill. Yet I also have critiques of the forms that relational interpretations often take, particularly the critique of biocentrism and the critique from queer negativity that stresses the structural outside of relation. The bulk of this chapter examines four recent theological proposals from feminist and disability theologians: Deborah Beth Creamer's theological anthropology of limits; Molly Haslam's theological anthropology of profound intellectual disability; Michelle Voss Roberts' comparative theological anthropology of "body parts"; and Joy Ladin's reading of Torah and God from a transgender perspective. Each of the four provides invaluable contributions to my theological project, but each is also subject to both the critique of biocentrism and the critique from queer negativity. I

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[3] Pavel Gregorić, "Plato's and Aristotle's Explanation of Human Posture," *Rhizai: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 2 (2005): 183-196.

[4] John McElwee, "Francis strongly criticizes gender theory, comparing it to nuclear arms," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 13, 2015, https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-strongly-criticizes-gender-theory-comparing-it-nuclear-arms.

discuss what I draw from each, as well as the ways in which I hope to push each further in service of radical theological and political goals.

Image

The question of what precisely is denoted by *tselem Elohim* is one of the most discussed but least definitively answered in the history of theology. The acknowledged underdetermination of the term in the biblical text, combined with its evident significance for human self-understanding and relation to the divine, has allowed for centuries of midrash, eisegesis, and theological flights of fancy in attempting to define precisely what it means to be made in the image of God. Surveys of the relevant literature find a seemingly endless array of possible interpretations, though a few stand out in their persistent recurrence through the centuries: the image as the human power of reasoning, as the human role of God's regent on earth, as the human relationship with God. Additionally, attempts to systematize the history of these interpretation have yielded no singular classificatory schema – are there ten categories of interpretation?[5] Four?[6] Three?

For the present purposes, Douglas John Hall's division of perspectives on image into two groups will be most useful. Borrowing from Paul Ramsey,[7] Hall categorizes views of the image of God broadly as either "substantialistic" or "relational."[8] The substantialist view defines the

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[5] W. Sibley Towner, "Clones of God: Genesis 1:26-28 and the Image of God in the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 59.4 (2005): 341-356.

[6] Andreas Schuele, "Made in the Image of God: The Concepts of Divine Images in Gen 1-3," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117.1 (2005): 1-20.

[7] Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 89.

[8] I am persuaded that, philosophically at least, the commonly cited third category of "functional" – humans as God's representatives or regents – should be considered a subcategory of relation, though it will not be discussed as I do not find it to be theologically fruitful in the unfolding of relationality I am attempting in the present work.

image of God as something identifiable possessed innately by human beings: "'capacities,' 'qualities,' 'original excellences,' or 'endowments' that inhere in our creaturely substance."[9] Throughout the theological tradition, the two traits most commonly identified as the image of God are rationality and free will.[10] While I see no need to rehearse many decades' worth of feminist critique of the overvaluing of rationality, it is important for my purposes to stress the (related yet distinct) disability critique: it is not just that the overvaluing of rationality carries a concomitant denigration of those associated with irrationality, but also that those with severe mental health conditions or profound intellectual disabilities – those who will never be able to "think rationally" – must be recognized and valued as full bearers of the image of God. Given the cognitivist bias that still creeps into many versions of image even as they try to challenge rationality, this disability critique is well worth bearing in mind. The critique of freewill is also well established, in this case underwritten by queer/crip suspicion of the very notion of the (unitary, freely willing) subject. Indeed, a major reason for the importance of posthumanism in this project is my view, influenced by new materialism as well as Deleuzoguattarian affect theory, that the fiction of the willing subject is continuously produced in our neoliberal context by processes of division and domination, and that recognizing the distribution of agency and will is crucial to imagining a liberative postcapitalist horizon.

Like Hall, I reject the substantialist interpretation of image in favor of a relational interpretation: "The human creature images (used as a verb) its Creator because and insofar as it is 'turned toward' God. To be *imago Dei* does not mean to have something but to be and do

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[9] Hall, *Imaging God*, 89.
[10] Hall, *Imaging God*, 92.

something: to image God."[11] Certainly, there are aspects of relation to be found throughout the traditional texts on the image of God; but especially in the past few centuries some version of relation has come to dominate most western philosophical and theological understandings of human being.[12] So it is hardly novel to prefer the relational interpretation, nor is it innovative to note certain problems with established versions of it. For example, I have not only theological objections to Luther's notion that the image of God can be lost, but also a specifically disability-related wariness regarding his suggestion that the image can be "deformed";[13] and while Barth's attempt to develop a strongly relational reading of image is commendable, I find the depth of his commitment to heterosexuality beyond redemption. A more fundamental risk is that, by focusing on the "ability" for relation, relational theologians end up inadvertently smuggling substantialism back in (relation thus becoming the innate capacity of our substance that was previously understood to be rationality or free will).

I do, however, have some additional critiques that I have not found to be sufficiently addressed by other theological commentators: namely, what I consider to be an unwarranted biocentrism, and an inattention to the constitutive outside of relation. These critiques respectively address the two key purposes of the image of God identified by many interpreters: (1) to separate humanity from the rest of creation and (2) to connect humanity with the divine.

Regarding (1), I have no interest in maintaining an ontological gulf between humanity and the rest of creation. This is partly as a historical corrective; one need not fully accept the

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[11] Hall, *Imaging God*, 98.

[12] F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[13] Cited on Hall, *Imaging God*, 105.

Lynn White thesis[14] to believe that an anthropocentric interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27 has

contributed to justifying a great deal of harm. Critiques of anthropocentrism from critical race,

gender, and disability theory are also important for revealing how easily the "human" comes to

mean the abled white male, and all deviations therefrom less than human. Add in the critiques of

anthropocentrism from animal theology too, and it becomes clear that one of the major tasks of

theological anthropology (if we may even still use this term) must be to *reverse* the traditional

gap between humanity and other creatures. David Cunningham notes the obvious yet rarely

articulated point that, while the Genesis narrative states that humans are created in God's image,

it never states that other creatures are *not* created in God's image.[15] Cunningham goes on to

argue that the image of God should be more properly located in *flesh* rather than in humanity, for

an assortment of fairly persuasive biblical and theological reasons. Yet even Cunningham's

proposal, out of an interest in privileging animacy over inanimacy, stops short of affirming that

the image might be found in all *matter*. Again and again, as will be shown in the remainder of

this chapter, proponents of a relational interpretation of image make theological and

philosophical arguments that could easily be used to argue that matter is the image of God; and

yet few if any take this step, restrained from it by a biocentrism that prioritizes living creatures.

However, I find no compelling theological or philosophical reason to restrict the image of God to

flesh or living matter, and many compelling reasons to extend it to all matter (many of which

will be discussed in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5): the very difficulty of defining "life,"

scientifically speaking; the affective complexities of matter's animacies (to use Mel Chen's

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[14] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155.3767 (1967): 1203-1207.
[15] David S. Cunningham, "The Way of All Flesh: Rethinking the Imago Dei," in *Creaturely Theology: God, Humans and Other Animals*, ed. Celia E. Deane-Drummond and David Clough (SCM Press, 2009), 106.

term);[16] the constant motion of subatomic particles that comprise even what we commonly think of as inanimate matter; the porosity of the boundaries of things, including the concatenation of biota, microbes, and other molecules that we call the human body; the prosthetic nature of creatures' interactions with the world – all of these seem to me to scramble any purported distinction, theological or otherwise, between life and non-life, animate and inanimate, relational and nonrelational. As such, one goal of this project is to think relation much more expansively than it is usually understood: to argue that all matter is relational, and thus that all matter bears the image of God. As Nicholas of Cusa put it, "God is in the enfolding and unfolding of things, […] as God is the unfolding, in God all things are God, and […], as God is the unfolding, God is in all things that which they are, like the truth in an image."[17]

At the same time, however, it must be recognized that the radical extension of relation to all matter is not without its philosophical and theological consequences. In particular, a relational interpretation of image should grapple with the concept of the constitutive outside of relation, as articulated by the so-called antisocial thesis in queer theory. Edelman's coinage *sinthomo*sexual fuses homosexuality and the Lacanian *sinthome* to name the figure who stands outside of relation, the one who is opposed to "the characteristically 'human' traits that conduce to sociality…: compassion, identification, love of one's neighbor as oneself."[18] If the Lacanian sinthome is "the knot that holds the subject together,"[19] the site at which intelligibility confronts

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[16] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

[17] Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 137.

[18] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 70.

[19] Edelman, *No Future*, 35.

and is structured by its own limit, the *sinthomo*sexual enfleshes this structural limit which is at once necessary and threatening to being. The *sinthomo*sexual is made to bear the figural burden of the negativity that is inherent to all sexuality and subjectivity, but disavowed as unbearable: "the *sinthomo*sexual embodies intelligibility's internal limit,"[20] the nonrelation inside relation that is externalized as a structural outside. Queerness is here made to represent "the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void (replete, paradoxically, with jouissance) always already lodged within, though barred from, symbolization."[21] Someone must always occupy this figural position as the embodiment of the "nonrelation that's internal to relation and that threatens to overwhelm our attempts to manage it by *reasserting* relation."[22]

Relational theologies' attempts to reassert relation, to expand the image of God, to extend humanity to an ever-widening circle of people to be included, can never overcome the structural necessity of the *sinthomo*sexual. As Linn Tonstad puts it, "expanding the boundaries of what counts as the human – rendering others fully human as well – does not shift the need to distinguish the human from the inhuman."[23] If it is true that relation expels its own internal nonrelation to a structural outside, that the social always produces an other who must occupy the abject position of the *sinthomo*sexual, then in theological terms the *sinthomo*sexual is whoever is excluded from bearing the image of God, whether that is the intellectually disabled person whose grasp on rational thinking is diminished, the non-human animal, or the inanimate matter excluded from the term "flesh." Yet, if, as I am arguing, all matter – all creation – bears the

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[20] Edelman, *No Future*, 101.
[21] Edelman, *No Future*, 22.
[22] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) ,10.
[23] Linn Marie Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and its Others," *Theology and Sexuality* 21.1 (2015), 16.

image of God, who or what constitutes the remainder or the outside? Who can occupy the position of the *sinthomo*sexual if all that *is* is considered to be within the realm of relation? I will return to this question later, less to resolve it than to push it to its logical yet paradoxical conclusion. For now, the difficulty remains, the question chafes, the critique continues to trouble any too-easy solutions.

The question of the structural outside of relation may also be considered in terms of the disability critique of the concept of the normal.[24] To invoke a norm, whether in the statistical sense or in the sense of an ideal, necessarily entails the demarcation of those deemed abnormal – a group structurally outside of "normal," whose boundaries must then be maintained, policed, and continuously produced. The great trick of the "normal" is to present itself as natural, inherent, unproblematic, or just "there," obscuring the fact the borders of normal have been imposed. Expanding the bounds of normal cannot eliminate the structural necessity of these bounds' having an outside, only shift its location (and potentially disguise the fact of the outside – see Tonstad's "The Limits of Inclusion" for an analysis of how this contradiction can show up within queer theology). The very idea that we can expand the definitional norm of "humanity" to include "everyone who naturally belongs" (or "image bearers" to include "all matter") is fundamentally structurally incoherent. This structural incoherency at the heart of this project motivates a constant, fluid, dynamic drawing and redrawing of boundaries, a perennial project of Remaking with no possible endpoint. As such, my interest lies in a reconstructed version of point (2) above: connecting creation with the creator. What *is* that connection? What *is* that relation?

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[24] Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995).

How can and should we make and remake, assemble and reassemble, a universe that bears the image of God and One whose image it bears?

Addressing these questions also requires considering the more fundamental question of why it matters. What is so significant about being made in the image of God; conversely, what is so bad about *not* being made in God's image? My answer is twofold: first, as discussed above, the maintenance of an ontological gulf between the human and the nonhuman – between the image-bearers and those who do not bear the image – has been used to not only justify but sacralize hierarchies of domination. But my second answer perhaps draws on a rather traditional, foundationalist view: that to be made in the image of God endows us with inherent, infinite worth, and that there is nothing we can do that can make us *not* bear the image of God. In fact, even the language of "worth" implicates a monetary framework that the image of God transcends; to bear the image of God is, by definition, to *not* be subject to valuation and exchange. Being made in the image of God means having an ontological and moral baseline of non-exchangeability. Hedging, compromising, or differentially distributing the image of God entails commodifying what should not be commodifiable, and thus opening the doorway to enslavement and exploitation. To claim that all creation is made in the image of God is to assert that, theologically speaking, communism is the organizing principle of existence.

This claim raises further ethical questions: to aver that all matter bears the image of God is not to say that everything that happens is good, any more than a traditional interpretation would argue that, because humans are made in God's image, then everything that humans do is good. Again, to be made in God's image is to be morally irreducible and non-exchangeable, not

morally perfect. But if God is good(ness), should that not suggest that to be made in God's image should reflect or connect us to goodness in a meaningful way? The traditional Christian answer to this question is lapsarian: due to the Fall, the image of God is obscured, attenuated, marred, or even lost through sin, and can only be restored through Christ. In this project, I avoid this account, both for the reasons stated in the "Between Jewish and Christian" section of my introduction, and out of concern that it can be used to reinstall the exact hierarchalism I seek to undo, by making the (abled, white, male) Christian the closest to godliness and the (racialized) "unsaved" less human. I also suspect that, as theodicy, traditional interpretations of the Fall let everyone off the hook too easily: it makes it too easy to claim to be speaking the truth in love while actually perpetuating oppression; it makes it too easy to claim to value each individual as being made in the image of God while in fact only doing so insofar as they conform with the norms handed down by power and tradition, and blaming every deviation therefrom on the Fall.[25]

Viewing all matter's relations as bearing the image of God requires us not to fall back on given narratives, but rather demands that we do the work of accounting and accountability – accountability, to foreshadow chapter 4's use of Karen Barad, to marks on bodies. That matter's affective relations bear the image of God does not mean that everything that happens is morally good, but rather that every aspect of relation bears witness to God. Did the asteroid that ended the age of dinosaurs bear the image of God? Yes, insofar as it was a relational event that partook in an affective assemblage of causes and effects. Does that mean it was "good"? This is, I think,

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[25] For one example of this, see Jennifer Anne Cox, *Autism, Humanity and Personhood: A Christ-Centered Theological Anthropology* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), which explicitly states that autism is "one result of the brokenness of the good world which was changed by the presence of sin" (64). Coincidentally, Cox also begins her first chapter with Wyndham's *Chrysalids*, though my use of it predates my knowledge of hers.

not quite the right question: from a distance of 65 million years, we can say that it was very bad

for the dinosaurs, but helped create the conditions of possibility for the eventual evolution of

Homo sapiens. A more useful question is *cui bono*: for what and for whom was it good or bad?

Everything that happens is good for some and bad for others: a delicious steak dinner is good for

the diners and bad for the cows; a diamond ring is good for the fiancée and bad for the child who

mined it; a flight to Edinburgh is good for reuniting me with my family but bad for the

environment. This is not a crude utilitarian cost-benefit analysis so much as an attempt to get the

fullest picture possible, to account for as many effects and relations as you can in order to be

accountable to them. To acknowledge the Covid-19 pandemic as an event of relations in the

image of God is not to passively accept it as God's will, but rather to attempt to understand the

diffuse agencies at work in the interactions among people, viruses, nonhuman animals that may

have been the initial vector of transmission, air droplets, public policies, internet disinformation,

and so forth – and then to *act* in service of the God to whom these relations bear witness. Bearing

witness to God often means bearing witness to the cry for justice that suffuses creation; working

out what that justice looks like is our collective task. My hope is that this project might

contribute to this task, by helping us attend more precisely to causes and effects and how they

concretely, practically happen (instead of handwaving them away as somehow the consequences

of sin, or blaming structural disadvantages on individual choices, or exculpating those in power),

in order to better establish what precisely justice entails.

Four contemporary versions of relational image

I Limits: Deborah Beth Creamer

Deborah Beth Creamer's *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*[26] is a comparatively early entry in the annals of disability theology. Although disability theology as a distinct subfield is generally traced to Nancy Eiesland's 1994 *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*,[27] in-depth constructive disability theology has only really begun to flourish in the past ten years or so. Prior to this, many of the landmark texts (such as Kathy Black's *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*[28] and Jennie Weiss Block's *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*[29]) had more of a practical and liberation focus. As Creamer notes, none of these three books, important as they are, was written by a theologian, and all lack theological sophistication.[30] Creamer's is one of the first attempts by a theologian to provide a robust constructive proposal in disability theology. Inevitably, perhaps, it now seems modest in its scope; yet Creamer's limits model of theological anthropology has proved valuable to subsequent theological work (including that by Molly Haslam and Michelle Voss Roberts, both discussed below), and its intriguing potential has by no means been exhausted.

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[26] Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[27] Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

[28] Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

[29] Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

[30] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 88.

The limits model attempts to think disability beyond the two standard approaches, the medical and minority models. The first wave of disability scholarship, drawing on the approaches of other rights movements, proposed the minority model of disability as a way of challenging the dominance of the medical model. Medical approaches treat disability as a defect of the individual's body, to be corrected as far as possible using medicinal, surgical, and therapeutic techniques. The minority model arose in the context of identity politics to challenge the individualizing and stigmatizing effects of the medical model. Advocates for disability rights proposed splitting *impairment* (the material fact of what a body cannot do, such as the inability to walk) from *disability* (the difficulty imposed by society and environment, such as the lack of a wheelchair ramp). On this model, social meaning was cleft from the flesh: one was disabled not by the value-neutral bodily difference of, say, blindness, but by society's failure to provide access and accommodations. To be disabled was thus to be part of a minority social group which, like people of color and LGBT people, deserved equal rights and protections.

The impact of the minority model of disability has been enormous. It contributed to disability pride, protests, and activism throughout the 1980s, and is reflected in the language of 1990's landmark Americans with Disabilities Act, which defines disability as not only having an impairment but also as "being *regarded* as having such an impairment" (section 12102(1), emphasis added) – that is to say, one may be "disabled" through social treatment, whether or not one has an impairment. However, the minority model presents problems of its own: first, how can it account for conditions in which the disabling effects of social treatment and the disabling effects of the impairment cannot be easily separated? Can a sufferer of chronic pain or severe depression truly claim that her condition is a problem for her *only* because of society's attitudes?

What place is there for profoundly intellectually disabled people in a movement focused on consciousness-raising? Secondly, by treating impairment as a self-evident material fact of the flesh, the minority model risks further reifying some of the very medicalization it seeks to challenge. An exclusive focus on the ways that an inaccessible society produces disability will pay insufficient attention to the ways that society also produces impairment. Severing "disability" from "impairment" may have rhetorical and political power for the purposes of demanding access and rights, but it is ultimately an unsustainable separation. (The analogy with the sex/gender distinction will be explored in chapters 2 and 3.)

Disability theorists have proposed a number of other "third" models to address the weaknesses of the medical and minority models – later chapters will draw particularly on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's misfitting model and Alison Kafer's political/relational model – but Creamer's limits model is the first one I know of to have been proposed specifically in the context of theology, and as such it deserves special attention. The limits model draws on theologies of embodiment, especially work by Sallie McFague, but corrects these theologies' inattention to disability by centering "the recognition that 'disability' is actually more normal than any other state of embodiedness."[31] It's not just that a large percentage of the world's population has a disability of some kind, nor even that anyone who lives long enough will inevitably become disabled in some way, but that limits of one kind or another are "an unavoidable aspect of humanity."[32] Instead of taking disability (or impairment) for granted as an aberration, the shift to viewing limits as a norm of existence encourages critical reflection on

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[31] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 32.
[32] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 32.

limits: which limits do we take to be normal or natural (e.g. I cannot fly), and which are seen as

"defective" (e.g. I cannot run)?[33] By thinking in terms of *limits* (things we have) rather than

being limited (something we are), we can think about limits not as deficits but as boundaries – a

permeable, movable, impermanent, but often appropriate and necessary delimitation.[34] If limits

are intrinsic to human experience, and they are not inherently evil or defective, then we can

reflect carefully on how "limits constitute our self-understandings and our relationality with

others."[35] How are limits drawn and re-drawn in their various specific situations in time and

space and community? What purposes are served by any given limit, and who benefits?

Creamer's limits model is able to address complex cases that are often flattened or

overlooked by both the medical and minority models. She demonstrates this with three examples.

First, the Deaf community rejects the idea that inability to hear is a defect. Distinguishing

themselves with a capital D, the Deaf wish to be recognized as a cultural and linguistic minority.

The deafness of the Deaf community is a limit which defines their community and the

adaptations they make, but it also makes clear the corresponding limits of the Hearing: "a

Hearing person is typically not able to read lips or converse (as through ASL) across a large

room."[36] Secondly, people with intellectual or cognitive disabilities reveal the self-imposed limit

within much of disability studies and activism: "Though the point is seldom made explicit,

intelligence is typically assumed to be central both to disability politics and to theological

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[33] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 33.
[34] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 94.
[35] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 95.
[36] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 102.

reflection and construction."[37] Critical reflection on the construction of the limit might impel

disability politics and theology to reconsider who is excluded even by discourses of inclusion.

Creamer's third example succinctly expresses the value of the limits model:

One might consider the experiences of two wheelchair users: one paralyzed from birth, another paralyzed in a skiing accident. Neither the medical nor the minority model differentiates between these two experiences. The medical model sees similar physiological conditions: an inability to walk and a loss of sensation and motor skills in the legs. The minority model would see similar experiences: barriers of architecture and attitude due to societal interpretations of wheelchair use. The limits model offers a third way, a new perspective, one that allows us to reflect on each individual's unique experiences, recognizing that what is interpreted as normal or limiting by each individual may be quite different. The limits model recognizes that these two individuals may vary in terms of their attitudes toward their disabilities, their own definitions and understandings of disability, and the way and degree to which they see limits as affecting their lives.[38]

As this illustration makes clear, the limits model is a situated, partial model that embraces

the granular and the specific. It has the potential to speak to multiple different groups, forming a

coalitional solidarity that does not erase the particularities of each individual's experiences. It is

helpful for thinking about the ambiguities of ability and disability, the cracks and crevices, the

fluidity and complexity and the conditions that lie in the borderlands of dis/ability. An example,

to which I will return in more detail in chapter 2, is the comparison between transness and

disability: Alexandre Baril uses the term *debility*[39] to denote affinities between the two; but what

possibilities might open up if this were framed in terms of *limit* instead? Theologically speaking,

the limits model could be understood as a relational interpretation of the image of God. Creamer

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[37] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 106.
[38] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 116-17.
[39] Alexandre Baril, "Transness as Debility: Rethinking Intersections Between Trans and Disabled Embodiment," *Feminist Review* 111 (2015): 59-74.

nowhere states explicitly that she is proposing limits as the precise site or definition of the image of God, though she acknowledges that her claim of limits' inherence in human existence has implications for thinking about God: "When we imagine an unlimited God, there is a subtle implication that the more limits we have, the less we are like God. … The notion that God includes limits counters this implication."[40] While Creamer carefully states that this is "a metaphorical understanding of God that is open to limits,"[41] I am (perhaps recklessly) more comfortable experimenting with the stronger statement that limit is the site of the image of God. This provides a strong form of the relational interpretation which avoids smuggling substantialism back in. Limits not only exist in and through relation, but they are what make relation possible: without the individuation, however partial, fluid, and temporary, imposed by the boundary or limit, there could be no relation because there would be no relata. Creation can be conceived as God's act of drawing limits (of making the agential cut, to foreshadow chapter 4's use of Karen Barad's language) – or, in Catherine Keller's language, "The scission, the cut, of the actual amidst the matrix of the possible makes *something*"[42] – and it is these cuts, these limits, that constitute the act of creation *in* and *as* God's image.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that I find a great deal of potential in the limits model, and that my criticisms of it primarily concern the modesty of its scope. My twin critiques of relational interpretations of image, the one concerning biocentrism, the other regarding nonrelation, are both essentially saying, "This doesn't go far enough." As to the first, the fact that

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[40] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 112.
[41] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 112.
[42] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 180.

limits are by no means exclusive to humanity practically demands consideration of nonhuman

creation, from my cat's inability to understand the concept of dinnertime to the physical

delimitation of a boulder's extension in space. Creamer's extensive engagement with Sallie

McFague and her notion of creation as the "body of God" hints at an openness to applying the

limits model beyond the human, but it is not to be found within the text.

As to the second, limits offer a particularly useful way of thinking about the structural

outside of relation. Edelman's discussion of the *sinhomo*sexual uses the language of limits: "the

subject strives to make sense of itself in the face of a limit – an internal limit, not one that

confronts it from without –encountered in the *sinthome*'s, and in the *sinthomo*sexual's, senseless

jouissance."[43] The excess beyond all meaning and self-understanding is encountered as a limit;

but what happens if we think the limit that the *sinthomo*sexual embodies not (only) as a

foreclosure of possibilities, but also as Creamer's theologically significant limit, or even as the

site of God's image? The paradox intensifies, as relation is constituted through its own inherent

nonrelation. At this point it is necessary to ask, what exactly *is* relation, and how can profound

intellectual disability help to reframe relation in terms that move away from self-aware

subjectivity and symbol-use?

II Intellectual Disability: Molly Haslam

Of the four texts discussed in this chapter, Molly Haslam's *A Constructive Theology of

Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response*[44] is perhaps the most directly

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[43] Edelman, *No Future*, 36.
[44] Molly Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham, 2012).

focused attempt to construct a relational theological anthropology that takes very seriously the risk of smuggling back in substantialist or cognitivist biases. Like disability theory writ large, disability theology tends not to prioritize intellectual disability; and Haslam demonstrates that even those theologians who do (including Thomas Reynolds, Amos Yong, and Hans Reinders) are still susceptible to a creeping cognitivism that prioritizes self-awareness, thought, and a certain degree of capacity or ability.[45] Haslam's contribution is to locate the image of God in *responsive relation*. Crucially, "This is not another capacity-based anthropology. It is not enough to simply have the ability to respond, for mutually responsive relations require the involvement of the other responding in kind."[46] The image of God does not lie in the *capacity* for relation (the smuggled-in substantialism trap into which relational theologies can so easily fall), but in the concrete, dynamic playing out of this relation between mutually responsive subjects.

Haslam finds value in the theological anthropologies of George Kaufman and George Lindbeck, while using a disability critique to reframe their proposals. Kaufman and Lindbeck both attempt to decenter substantialist conceptions of humanity, but both wind up reinforcing a certain degree of ability, which necessarily implies that intellectually disabled people are less human: Kaufman privileges "the capacity for intentional agency, and the requisite capacity for symbolization,"[47] while Lindbeck "assumes that to be human requires the ability to negotiate linguistic material and that to participate in experience of any kind one must have the capacity to negotiate symbols."[48] Haslam suggest a way to hold onto the focus on relation and

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[45] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 4-8.
[46] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 9.
[47] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 30.
[48] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 37.

communication while jettisoning the cognitivist assumptions: "To conceive of 'the means of expression' more broadly to include nonsymbolic means is to open up the concept of experience to include those unable to employ symbolic material as a means to express it."[49] Why restrict agency, expression, and experience to those who are able to use the abstract, the linguistic, and the symbolic? The real effect of such restriction is to dehumanize and devalue people with profound intellectual disabilities – a dehumanization and devaluation whose harmfulness is evident in the many decades of institutionalization, forced sterilization, neglect, abuse, and murder to which intellectually disabled people have been subjected.[50]

To rethink relation nonsubstantialistically, Haslam employs Martin Buber's thought. Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It relations can be thought of as a way of expressing the difference between a strong relational anthropology and one that smuggles substantialism back in. The I-It relation involves objectifying the other to which one is relating, creating a hierarchy in which "I" am prioritized over "It." It is a one-sided relation, in which "I" am only concerned with my relationship to "It" from my perspective. I-Thou relations, on the other hand, "involve a mutuality of effects," in which the other is not objectified but met in the realm between subject and object.[51] As such, Haslam argues, it is possible that the symbol use prioritized by Kaufman and Lindbeck might actually *hinder* I-Thou relations rather than facilitating them, since the kind of abstract thinking required for symbol use necessarily involves objectification. This is not to romanticize intellectual disability – viewing disabled people as

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[49] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 42.
[50] James W. Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Intellectual Disability in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[51] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 73.

childlike, innocent, and closer to God than nondisabled people is a tendency strongly critiqued by disability theologians – but rather to approach relation more humbly, acknowledging that what we language-users think we know about communication and interaction might be overlooking some important aspects of relation.

Haslam makes her point explicit: for her, "the *imago Dei* in human being is understood in terms of participation in relationships of mutual responsiveness, whether symbolic or nonsymbolic, and not in terms of the possession of a particular, 'essential' capacity, such as the intellectual ability to employ signs and symbols for intentional communication or intentional agency of any kind."[52] Imaging God is not something that occurs abstractly in the essence of human beings, but a dynamic process that is enacted through relation: "to image God is to respond to the world around us."[53]

The success of Haslam's constructive theology lies in its avoidance of the smuggled-in substantialism trap. Haslam's relational anthropology repudiates substantialism by providing an in-depth, robust philosophical exploration of what relation *is*, rather than taking for granted a commonsense definition of relation that would maintain a cognitivist bias. Responsive relation in Haslam's sense does not require an implicit hierarchy of humanness, and defines the image of God in a way that excludes no one.

It is this last point that makes Haslam's project so fruitful for my purposes. Though she is only concerned with human beings, Haslam does indicate her awareness that her proposal

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[52] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 106.
[53] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 110.

provides no reason to restrict the image of God to our species. Noting that "the theological anthropology I am proposing challenges not only the emphasis on rationality as that which defines human being, but also the traditional distinction between the human and the nonhuman," she suggests that her model could thus be useful for environmental and animal rights ethics as well as feminist, disability, and children's rights ethics.[54] Yet I think the radical possibilities of the responsive relation concept are vaster than Haslam realizes. When promoting recognition of profoundly disabled people, a certain reluctance to think beyond humanity is legitimate, given the fraught history of devaluing disabled people through dehumanization, comparing them to animals or inanimate objects in order to denigrate them and objectify them (e.g. Peter Singer). But the path tantalizingly laid out by Haslam's theology, scattered with the breadcrumbs of Buber's apparently passing comment that one may engage in I-Thou relation with a tree,[55] is too alluring for me to avoid.

The fundamental difficulty of trying to think theological anthropology non-anthropocentrically manifests in the language slippage of Haslam's claim that the concept "human being" can include "not only individuals with profound intellectual disabilities but also all beings with the capacity for responsiveness."[56] My own attempts to avoid such slippage will likely fail; and yet I must press on the gap opened up by the language of "all beings with the capacity for responsiveness." If responsive relation images God, and such relation is not exclusive to humans, on what grounds do we exclude the non-human creation from bearing

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[54] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 115.
[55] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 82, 88.
[56] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 89.

God's image? Haslam notes some comments of Buber's that state that I-Thou relations are not exclusive to human-human interactions; they can also occur in human-animal and human-nature interactions, though we cannot know the specifics of the effects of our interactions with the non-human.[57] If this is the case, then surely we must at the very least leave open the possibility for I-Thou relations to be found in animal-nature interactions, or even nature-nature. One could argue that a rock's physical being in a space is always already an act of responsive relationality with respect to the surface on which it sits, the air molecules dancing around it, and in terms of its own internal atoms' constant motion. This may or may not constitute relation in any theologically meaningful sense, but it certainly seems recklessly biocentric to entirely foreclose on the possibility.

Haslam provides descriptions of a profoundly intellectually disabled person's movements and interactions as specific examples of how limits are negotiated and renegotiated in granular acts of responsiveness that constitute relation. She invokes pseudo-Dionysius to suggest that God is both yearning itself and the object of that yearning, and that intellectually disabled people participate in this yearning not as intellectual longing but in body and soul.[58] Profoundly intellectual disabled people "image God not because of some intellectual capacity they possess, but because their participation as responders in relationships is expressive of the longing that God is."[59] This yearning or longing might also be termed desire, and understood in terms of the jouissance figured by the *sinthomo*sexual: might it be that, so far from the rational freely willing

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[57] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 73.
[58] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 108-9.
[59] Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 110.

self-possession of classical theology, we in fact image God most clearly in experiences beyond language, beyond symbolization, beyond the coherence of the self? In the ever-dynamic oscillation of drawing limits to facilitate relation and dissolving limits in the jouissance of nonrelation, all creation proliferates becoming in and as the image of God; but what does this divine multiplicity look like?

III Body Parts: Michelle Voss Roberts

Michelle Voss Roberts' *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology*[60] also begins by asking some of the same questions that drive me to challenge the relational interpretation of the image of God: how does the coma patient or the person with profound intellectual disabilities image God? How can we reframe the traditional notion of the *imago Dei* in a more expansive manner, without simply "finding the lowest common denominator"?[61] Voss Roberts takes a comparative theology approach, putting Christian image-language in conversation with the Hindu image-language of Abhinavagupta's non-dual Saivism. "This comparative encounter expands the *imago Dei* from the single flat surface of a mirror into a brilliant jewel, reflecting light from many facets."[62] With a focus on embodiment and multiplicity, Voss Roberts explores the image of God across thirty-six body parts, "affirming that divine consciousness permeates each part."[63] The thirty-six body parts in question are not physical body parts in the ordinary sense, but aspects of existence ranging from pure consciousness to the gross elements of the universe. Voss Roberts groups them into five sets, which she terms the conscious body, the limited body, the subjective

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[60] Michelle Voss Roberts, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).
[61] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, xxix.
[62] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, xxxvi.
[63] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, xxxix.

body, the engaged body, and the elemental body – each set "a facet of the jewel of embodied existence that reflects divinity."[64] Using these Hindu principles allows for a more complex examination of embodiment existence than is usually found in Christian theology, which tends to recognize at most an Augustinian tripartite structure of the human person as body, mind, and soul. In Voss Roberts' account, consciousness, limits, subjectivity, sensory engagement, and the elements of the universe are all necessary aspects of what it means to be an embodied creature who bears the image of God.

Whereas Molly Haslam's focus on profound intellectual disability turns her away from self-consciousness to focus on responsive relation, Voss Roberts tries to "reconsider consciousness … in a way that includes people with profound intellectual disabilities."[65] She asks: "Is it possible to imagine the emergence of consciousness without diminishing those in whom it does not develop to the point of self- or self-other awareness?"[66] The gradations within the conscious body – the set of five faculties or principles collected under this name – "can be described as a gradual perception of an object distinct from the subject," analogous to the infant's growing self-differentiation or the transition from sleeping to wakefulness.[67] What this multiplicity of consciousness means for the coma patient or the person with profound intellectual disability is that "the blurry realms of consciousness between pure subject and awareness of objects are recognized as reflections of the divine."[68] Rather than assuming that to be fully self-conscious is to be fully human, we should instead acknowledge that "[e]ach state of awareness is

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[64] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, xl.
[65] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 6.
[66] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 6.
[67] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 8.
[68] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 9.

an important part of being human. Each reflects God's experience. Each is worthy of attention in its own right, regardless of its potential to develop into self-recognition or any other cognitive capacity. Instead of lack, a theologian might see distinct ways of being."[69] Similarly, the subjective body parts (the individual subject, matter, intelligence, ego, and mind/heart) all image the divine in different but meaningful ways, and none is privileged as the exclusive or primary site of God's image.

Voss Roberts' exploration of the limited body draws on Deborah Beth Creamer's limits model (discussed above) to argue, as I do, that limits are a necessity for the being of creation – "they are the very conditions of our constitution as individuals."[70] Like Creamer, Voss Roberts emphasizes the need for critical thinking about limits and for challenging those limits that are instance of exploitation and harm; but she makes the statement more strongly than Creamer does that "Limits are part of the *imago Dei*."[71] For Voss Roberts, the way that limits image God functions through the concept of desire, which is framed by limited satisfaction: "Desire … propels both the creation and the redemption of the world. God's desire never becomes fixed on anything other than the good creation. The human protest against suffering participates in this divine yearning, and human responses to suffering answer the divine desire for the good. The very ability to ask whether something could be different is part of the *imago Dei*."[72] Like Haslam's invocation of pseudo-Dionysius, this seems to hint at the longing, lack, and nonrelation at the heart of relation, without exploring its fuller implications.

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[69] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 24.
[70] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 26.
[71] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 67.
[72] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 71.

Overall, *Body Parts* offers a theological anthropology that in many important ways chimes with my project here: it grapples seriously with the questions raised by disability, including intellectual disability; it affirms some theoretically rich and exciting possibilities such as finding God's image in our prosthetic engagement with the world (to be discussed in later chapters); it expands on Creamer's limits model in a nuanced and compelling way; and it draws from multiple religious traditions with subtlety and creativity. Voss Roberts engages in what we might, with a nod to Laurel Schneider,[73] refer to as promiscuous theological modeling from the multiplicities of embodiment. Whereas thinking in terms of *the* (singular) image of God requires setting up an idealized norm of the kind so thoroughly critiqued by disability scholars, Voss Roberts instead explores the varieties of how actually existing bodies and body parts refract the image in singularly partial but collectively coalitional ways.

At the same time, however, my two critiques remain in place for this theological anthropology as it does for the others. Like Haslam, Voss Roberts puts all the pieces in place to affirm the image of God in the nonhuman world, and even makes some statements that might be interpreted as affirmations thereof: in a brief discussion of Aquinas' understanding of the Great Chain of Being, she states that "a hierarchy of image-bearing is not theologically necessary. Because the creatures together manifest more of God's image than any could do alone, the chain might be replaced by a prism: all reflect the creator, but from diverse angles."[74] It is undeveloped and unclear whether Voss Roberts' use of "creatures" refers to animals, to all living things

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[73] Laurel Schneider, "Promiscuous Incarnation," in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 231-245.

[74] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 90.

including plants, or to all creation. A reading of Voss Roberts' anthropology that finds the image in all of creation is certainly supportable, particularly in her chapter concerning the elemental body. The facets of the elemental body span both the "gross" elements (space, air, fire, water, earth – the "stuff" of creation) and the "subtle" elements (those through which we perceive and interact with the world: sound, touch, form, taste, smell).[75] These gradations of the elemental body seem particularly compatible with my goal of an affective understanding of matter, in which matter bears the image of God through its relations of affecting and being affected by. Additionally, Voss Roberts' theopoetics of the expanding and contracting cosmos[76] comes very close to affirming that this too images God; and yet even a statement as explicit as the following is not given the attention and emphasis it deserves: "The basic elements of worldly experience are no less permeated by divinity than the states of consciousness one might experience as transcendent."[77] Even more so than Haslam, Voss Roberts lays all the groundwork for recognizing the image of God beyond humanity, and yet she does not take the step beyond biocentrism to strongly affirm this, nor to explore the implications.

A striking example of the constraints imposed by a creeping anthropocentrism is found in the otherwise very interesting chapter on the engaged body. This facet encompasses the organs of sense (hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, smelling) and action (speaking, grasping, walking, excreting, procreating).[78] It is fascinating and theologically rich to think of sense perception and action as belonging to a continuum of ways to relate to the world, rather than as two separate

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[75] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 126.
[76] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 129-30.
[77] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 137.
[78] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 104.

ways of engaging, one involving passively receiving (or being acted upon by) the world and the

other involving acting upon the world. Rather, Voss Roberts encourages us to think of sensation

and action as inextricable parts of relation: "Through the organs of sensation, human beings are

hardwired to attend to our surroundings [and] through the organs of action, human beings enact

that awareness in community with others."[79] Like Haslam's responsive relation, this is an

affective understanding of relation rooted in mutuality and allowing for more forms of

communication than are traditionally recognized; but also like Haslam, Voss Roberts' use of the

term "human beings" here seems unnecessarily narrow. The theological hamstringing effected by

such overly cautious terminology is immediately evident in the following section on sexuality,

which is noticeably underdeveloped.[80] To think sexuality in terms of desire and dissolution of the

self would seem to offer more promise, particularly for considering the nonrelation inherent to

relation.

Yet sexuality is by no means the only site for thinking desire, self-dissolution, and

nonrelation. The sixteenth-century kabbalist Moshe Cordovero stresses humility and abnegation

as the route to God, suggesting that "Only in the undoing of the ordinary self can the individual

come close to the condition of *tzelem 'Elohim*."[81] To image God (which Cordovero defines in

terms of one's actions – surely a form of relational image) requires the humility of recognizing

responsive relation in all kinds of I-Thou relations, including ones that would not traditionally be

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[79] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 106.

[80] Voss Roberts, *Body Parts*, 109-113.

[81] Eitan Fishbane, "A Chariot for the Shekhinah: Identity and the Ideal Life in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 37.3 (2009), 402.

understood as forms of communication or relation. It also requires the humbleness of estrangement – what Joy Ladin calls "the soul of the stranger."

IV Trans: Joy Ladin

As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2, trans theology is still embryonic as a field, and there is little that directly engages with the concept of the image of God from a trans perspective. Joy Ladin's *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective*[82] does not contain a sustained theological treatment of image, but its guiding trope of strangeness is certainly framed in the same terms that drive my interest in the *tselem Elohim*:

> Torah doesn't tell us what being created in the image of God means, or explain how human beings are similar to the invisible, disembodied, time- and space-transcending Creator of the Universe. That, to me, is the point of reading God and the Torah from a transgender perspective: to better understand the kinship between humanity and the inhuman bodiless God in whose image we are created, a God who does not fit any of the categories through which human beings define ourselves and one another.[83]

The idea of strangeness, of God's *unlikeness* to us, can sometimes be too easily elided in our haste to define our likeness to God, and merits dwelling on. I find in Ladin's work both a helpful Jewish challenge to a Christian tradition that has too often divinized the earthly power of specific types of humans (with a corollary devaluing of everyone else), and a queer fly of nonrelation inherent in the ointment of relation. As she states: "if our goal is to recognize our kinship with God, then we need to look to the aspects of humanity that can't be conceived in

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[82] Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2019).
[83] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 34.

terms of gender, to the ways in which we, like the God in whose image we are created, exceed or confound human categories."[84]

Ladin's goal is to show how trans being can unveil the too-often occluded strangeness of God. Although she would not put it in these terms, in the framing that I am using from queer negativity, a transgender perspective can help us see how God is the structural outside of, or nonrelation inherent to, relation. What is particularly interesting about Ladin's work is that she is guided by an accommodationist trans politics, with incremental aims of inclusion and tolerance; and yet her theological argument has much more radically queer implications than her politics might suggest.

Ladin expresses her goal of inclusion in both theological and political terms. Theologically, she proposes, "if we take seriously the idea that human beings are created in the image of God, then whenever we expand our understanding of humanity, we can expand our understanding of God."[85] As has been discussed above with respect to disability, it is not that this is a bad goal, especially compared to the current situation of exclusion and hierarchy; rather, a more radical reconstruction of theological anthropology is necessary to address the limitations and paradoxes of liberal tolerance.[86] In other respects, Ladin is highly attuned to theological paradox, particularly in noting how it is in her difference from other people that Ladin feels she most closely images the God in whose image *all* people are created:

> All the things that cut me off from other people – my lack of a body that felt like mine, my inability to fit into gender categories, my sense of being utterly, unspeakably

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[84] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 34.
[85] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 8.
[86] Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion."

different – made me feel closer to God. …We were an odd couple, me struggling with a body that didn't feel like mine, God existing beyond all that is, was, and will be. But when it came to relating to human beings, God and I had something in common: neither of us could be seen or understood by those we dwelt among and loved.[87]

This estrangement, this inability to be seen, is key to both theology and many trans experiences; and yet how can estrangement and imperceptibility be so important to the theological anthropology I am proposing, which centers relation and materiality? The answer, it seems, lies in the recognition that imperceptibility and materiality (God and creation; spirit and matter) are not opposites so much as mutually enfolding modes. Relation is what matter does. God, the unseen, the disembodied, creator, is the constitutive outside of relation that is nonetheless at the heart of relation. That constitutive outside-inside, that unaccounted-for remainder, is what calls us and troubles us and compels us, driving our longings and desires.

Politically accommodationist goals cannot dispense with this radical difference and unknowability of God: "even though I have expanded my definition of humanity to include people who, like me, do not fit the terms of binary gender, God seems as queer to me as ever – inhuman, incomprehensible, unlike anything I can say or know."[88] God's strangeness will be no less strange even if we expand the definition of image-bearers to include all of creation, because of the structure of God's relation to creation: "God's estrangement from human communities is not a moral or modern or secular problem; it isn't caused by mass media, the internet, the rise of science, the decline of the traditional family, or defects in faith or worship or theology. It is built into God's relationships with human beings."[89] Such is the nature of creation: we can only *be* by

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[87] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 3.
[88] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 65-66.
[89] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 130.

being separated from the very ground of our being. "If we don't recognize God's incomprehensible strangeness, we aren't recognizing God."[90]

When it comes to trans politics, Ladin's nuanced theological insights again undercut the accommodationist approach she calls for. She identifies three general responses to trans people: forced conformity, expanding gender, or eliminating binary gender. These first two may be thought of as normalization and accommodationist responses respectively; Ladin opts for the accommodationist category, using the analogy of Passover laws to emphasize a "middle path: instead of enforcing or eliminating the Israelite/non-Israelite binary, God adds additional categories to accommodate those who identify with Israel strongly enough to want to participate in religious rituals but who were not born or raised as Israelites."[91] The implication seems to be that we should not want to radically change or destroy the gender system we have, only to expand it enough to accommodate more people. Later chapters will explain in detail why I disagree with this perspective; for now, I will note only that the troublesome outside crops up again here – "no matter how we alter human categories, there is one stranger we can never accommodate: God."[92] The limitations of accommodationism become clear when Ladin draws out the ethical implications of her title. The stranger in question is the *ger*, the outsider whom Israel is commanded to welcome in memory of having been strangers in a strange land. For Ladin, this means not only recalling the collective memory of Jewish diasporic experience, but also that on an individual level we must all remember the universal experience of feeling like an

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[90] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 130.
[91] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger,* 121.
[92] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 121.

outsider. This memory should motivate both a social and a spiritual openness to absolute difference: "to welcome God into our communities is to welcome a stranger who will never assimilate."[93] If God is the ultimate *ger* whom we can never accommodate, and if our own human experiences of being a *ger* is what brings us to recognize our kinship with God and each other, then how can accommodation possibly be enough? Keeping a narrow, stifling system like the gender binary in place, with only a bit of expansion to accommodate those who don't fit, is hardly an example of welcome and openness to the radically other. Ladin's beautiful closing words demand far more of us than mere accommodation:

> Regardless of our religious tradition or affiliation, to welcome God into our communities is to welcome a stranger who will never assimilate, who will not go along to get along, who will not follow our rules, accept our judgments, embrace our values, affirm our doctrines, confirm our biases, or look or behave the way we expect – a stranger who may bless us or curse us, who is responsible for all the good and all the evil that befalls us, who takes without asking and gives without explanation. To love God, we must learn to love someone who will always be a stranger. To serve God, we must serve the needs of a stranger. To grow close to God, we must become intimate with a stranger. To open ourselves to God, we must open ourselves to a stranger. To make a place for the God who dwells invisibly and incomprehensibly among us – to show that God belongs with us, and that we belong to God – we must know, and build our lives and communities around knowing, the soul of the stranger.[94]

Ladin's focus on God's strangeness, queerness, and disconnect from the world is a valuable corrective to the risk of too easily identifying creation *with* God. While on one level it arguably divinizes creation to find God's image in all matter, on another level the fact that creation *images* God means that, by definition, creation is *not* God. Emphasizing estrangement allows us to take seriously the experience of discomfort and dissatisfaction with embodiment,

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[93] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 147.
[94] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 147.

which is important to avoid the is-ought fallacy whereby creation's imaging of God means that everything is just fine the way it is (a fallacy employed in some anti-trans theologies, where platitudes like "God doesn't make mistakes" are used to argue against medical transition). Ladin's argument from transness acknowledges the specifics of trans experience while also extrapolating universals therefrom: transness makes more visible what was already true of everyone in terms of alienation, change, and the construction of identity.

While the biocentrism critique can be leveled against Ladin – thinking the image of God beyond humanity is evidently not an interest of hers at all – her theological insights, like those of Creamer, Haslam, and Voss Roberts, can easily be extended to the nonhuman world. The commandment to welcome the *ger*, to know and make space for the radically other, carries clear environmental and ecological implications if nonhumans can also be recognized as *gerim*. Our communities would look quite different if the flourishing of nonhuman animals, plants, rivers, and other parts of creation were taken into account. Indeed, the proliferation of environmental racism, oil pipeline spills on native lands, the disproportionate impact of climate change on the global south, all reveal that to prioritize the human means in practice to prioritize only some humans, and that the majority of the world – human and nonhuman alike – suffers for it.

Despite her stated accommodationist goals, Ladin's work is particularly in tune with the queer critique of relation. God the *ger* is the constitutive outside of relation, the troublesome remainder, the agent who makes the cut whereby relata are comprehensible as such. If my overall focus is on reconstituting the *anthropos* of theological anthropology, then Ladin reminds me to consider also the *theos*. If created matter is relation, it might seem logical that God's

uncreatedness means that God is therefore *not* relation; yet if relation is the image of God, how could God not be relation? It is not that God is not relation, but that creation makes of God the *sinthomo*sexual: creator and creation exist not in separation or binary opposition, but more like the two sides of an infinitesimally thin membrane. Creation is God turning inside out, which brings creation (matter/relation) into being but structurally separates God from creation *even as* God's image suffuses all creation. God is not banished from creation, God is not *not* relation/matter/creation, but God's presence is obscured, perceptible only queerly, gimpily, on the slant. The condition of our existence ("our" = creation's; anything existing at all) is the *sinthomo*sexualization of God. Ladin's statement that "God is the ultimate *ger*"[95] is true in a radically ontological way.

Image remade

Each of the four theological anthropologies discussed above contributes valuable concepts to this project. Their theological ideas provide a foundation for my attempted remaking of the image of God, ideas that will be focused through a trans/crip lens in chapter 2, applied to the biomedicalization of gender and disability in chapter 3, and remade through feminist assemblage theory in chapter 4, all in order to build a constructive theological anthropology of affective assemblage in chapter 5. From Creamer, I take the limits model, which provides a disability-oriented reframing of the feminist theological focus on vulnerability. While I still find vulnerability important, limits are more conceptually useful in this project because there is less risk of valorizing self-sacrifice in a way that perpetuates the marginalization of minoritized

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[95] Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger*, 146.

groups,[96] and because there is a focus not on vulnerability as an innate capacity (the smuggled-in substantialism trap) but on limits as something processual, something drawn and done and (re)negotiated. From Haslam, I take the concept of responsive relation, understood in a way that explicitly avoids cognitive bias and lays down the path for thinking matter's radical relationality. From Voss Roberts, I take a commitment to promiscuous theological modeling from the multiplicities of embodiment, which demonstrates how the radical extension of image does not have to mean a flattening, colonizing oneness imposed on everything, but rather is fulfilled through the collective mattering of all creation. From Ladin, I take a profound theological elaboration of God as the stranger, the *ger*, the *sinthomo*sexual whose image is paradoxically both relation and the subject-dissolving nonrelation at the heart of relation.

Even as I find so much to work with from these four versions of image, I am nonetheless trying to push them into farther theological territories by bringing to bear two strands of critique, the one a critique of biocentrism, the other a queer negativity. Weaving these four works together with a queer sensibility already yields theological fruit, and yet I hope to build further upon them. My quest for a radically relational, posthuman, affective interpretation of the image of God requires not just feminist and disability theology, but trans/crip theology, and that is what the next chapter will explore.

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[96] Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 19-32.

CHAPTER TWO

QUEER DISABILITY, DISABLED QUEER: TRANS/CRIPPING THEOLOGY

Tzef Montana: Do you believe in God?
SOPHIE: Yes, God is Trans.[1]

This chapter assembles the theoretical and methodological tools that constitute a

trans/crip lens. While chapter 1 engaged with disability and trans theologies of the image of God,

more robust theory enters here to provide a sharper focus for chapter 3's discussion of

biomedical technologies and their theological underpinnings. First, this chapter provides an

overview of the relevant aspects of trans theory and the conceptual tools it provides: a challenge

to the cisnormativity of queer theory; recognition of how racial capitalism constitutes the

gendered subject; and the denaturalization of sex, gender, body, and humanity. A brief

discussion of trans theology follows, demonstrating that most of the specifically trans theology

written to date has aimed primarily at promoting trans inclusion in religious spaces. While this is

a perfectly understandable and valuable goal, its dominance has hampered the development of

more sophisticated theologies of transness. I suggest that there is an enormously rich untapped

vein of potential for theologies that take seriously the methods and tools of trans theory.

The chapter then turns to crip theory, highlighting five important texts that enact crip

theory's goal of thinking critically about the very foundation of the field of disability studies. Not

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[1] Justin Moran, "SOPHIE's Whole New World," *Paper*, June 18, 2018, https://www.papermag.com/sophie-pride-2579165152.html.

unlike trans theory, crip theory works to show how abledness is always already heterosexual; how neoliberal capitalism constructs ability and disability; and how we might begin to denaturalize certain taken-for-granted assumptions about impairment, dis/ability, the body, and humanity. Crip theology (such as it is) is then discussed, focusing primarily on Sharon Betcher's crucial work in this field. As with trans theology, I argue that there is a great deal of important work yet to be done in theology with the tools and concepts of crip theology.

Finally, the discourses are brought together in the process I name trans/cripping. Trans/cripping entails making a trans intervention into crip theory as well as a crip intervention into trans theory, in order to think through the mutual co-constitution of abledness and cisness in the capacitating framework of racial capitalism. I provide an overview of some thinkers working at the intersections of trans and crip, before concluding with a brief prolegomenon to the work of applying a trans/crip lens to the *tselem Elohim*, which will be undertaken in the remaining chapters.

It must be noted that the fundamental contradiction of academia is brought into especially stark relief by trans and crip theory: certain constraints on what is thinkable are inevitably imposed by the fact of being in academe. The more obvious constraints include having to look recognizable to the authority structures of the university; having to be productive and meet the administrative criteria of the neoliberal university even when you want to critique those things; and the fact that any trans and/or disabled people in the academy are by definition not the ones who are most precarious. But there are also more insidious constraints on thought: what do we not even realize we are excluding? What injustices do we reproduce even as we try to correct

others? This has at least two major intellectual consequences (to say nothing of the obligation it

imposes on those of us assimilated into university structures to ensure that we do everything we

can to support and elevate those less assimilable): (1) trans and crip theory must be dialectical

discourses, engaging in constant self-contradiction and self-correction (and, if necessary, when

the time comes, self-abolition); (2) scholars of trans and crip studies must not limit ourselves to

the echo chamber of our own academic work, but understand that some of the most interesting,

provocative, and important trans and crip work is happening in places outside, excluded from, in

some cases not even legible to the academy. What is to be done about this? Are we to

cannibalize trans and crip lives, objectifying them for our own advancement in academia? I hope

not, but it is a serious ethical issue that must not be elided (though again hardly a unique

difficulty when it comes to the moral conundrums of working inside higher education). As C.

Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn put it, "How do the deaths, both social and actual, of trans

people of color provide the fuel and the raw material" for the "academic industrial complex"?[2]

That is, "trans women of color act as resources – both literally and metaphorically – for the

articulation and visibility of a more privileged transgender subject,"[3] such as the one writing this

dissertation. I am convicted by Snorton and Haritaworn's words:

> Instead of those most in need of survival, the circulation of trans people of color in their
> afterlife accrues value to a newly professionalizing and institutionalizing class of
> experts whose lives could not be further removed from those they are professing to
> help. Immobilized in life, and barred from spaces designated as white (the good life, the
> Global North, the gentrifying inner city, the university, the trans community), it is in

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[2] C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Aren Aizura and Susan Stryker (New York: Routledge, 2016), 68.

[3] Snorton and Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics," 71.

their death that poor and sex working trans people of color are invited back in; it is in death that they suddenly come to matter.[4]

So it is that "the ascendant politics [of trans inclusion] are symbiotic with the death-making capacities of the market and the state, and cannibalistic upon the lives of other sexually and gender non-conforming people. What would a trans politics and theory look like that refuses such 'murderous inclusion'?"[5] I have no straightforward answers, but I hope to keep this incriminating question within view as I proceed.

Trans theory

Why is trans theory necessary? Susan Stryker famously named transgender studies "queer theory's evil twin," challenging the gender categories that formulations of sexuality as "hetero" or "homo" often take for granted.[6] While theorizing sexuality and embodiment cannot be done without at least some analysis of gender, the past thirty years' worth of queer theory can sometimes seem to be a story of gender transgression that omits the most obvious gender transgressors. One wonder, for instance, if gender performativity might have not been so widely misunderstood had *Gender Trouble* included the nuanced analysis of transness that Butler would go on to demonstrate in *Bodies That Matter* and beyond. Trans theory seeks not only to restore trans lives to the queer narratives that they have always been a (disavowed) part of, but to give accounts of gender that make sense of the cisheterosexual matrix that circumscribes all of us and to find ways to make all lives livable.

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[4] Snorton and Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics," 74.
[5] Snorton and Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics," 74.
[6] Susan Stryker, "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin," *GLQ* 10.2 (2004): 212-215

A full genealogy of trans studies would include the histories of feminist and sexuality studies that fed into queer theory and is thus beyond the scope of this dissertation, but its divergence from queer theory can be identified in the field's twin foundations: Sandy Stone's 1992 essay "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto"[7] and Susan Stryker's 1993 performance piece turned 1994 text "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage."[8] Revisiting these two landmark texts, one is struck both by the things that have fundamentally changed in the discourses around transness in the intervening few decades (thus obviating certain aspects of what they call for), but also, and perhaps more so, by the degree to which both still make necessary interventions into queer and trans studies.

Sandy Stone's piece is in part a response to direct and vicious personal attacks on her by anti-trans feminism's own evil emperor, Janice Raymond. Stone had been involved, apparently uncontroversially, in lesbian feminist communities throughout the 1970s; but Raymond's vile 1979 philippic *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, in the course of codifying many of the transmisogynistic tropes still leveled at trans women today, identified Stone by name as an example of how, aided by a patriarchal medical system, trans women supposedly rape, colonize, and invade women's bodies and spaces.[9] Stone's manifesto gives a much more nuanced account of trans women's complex experiences with the medical system. By examining historical trans narratives, she analyzes how these stories have helped to form and perpetuate the

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[7] Sandy Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," *Camera Obscura* 10.2 (1992): 150-176.

[8] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1 (1994): 237-254.

[9] Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

narrow bounds of diagnostic criteria for transsexuality, but also how trans women's strategic

adherence to such stereotypes for the purpose of receiving recognition and medical care has been

treated by the medical establishment as evidence of the stereotypes' truth – rather than as

evidence that people in need of medical care will say whatever they are required to say in order

to get this care. Stone's manifesto is a clarion call for a broader view of transness, both in terms

of what is required by the gatekeepers of medical transition and from society at large. Some

changes have certainly taken place: perhaps most obviously, there is no longer so much pressure

on all trans people to "complete" their transition and then disappear, living in stealth so that no

one in their lives knows their trans history. Most of the improvements in trans healthcare and

visibility, however, are partial and differentially distributed, varying enormously depending on

which providers and what kind of insurance you have access to – which itself depends on

(interrelated) factors such as location, income, racialization, health and disability status, etc. It is

true that we now see more than one narrative of transness in popular culture and clinical

literature; that medical providers are now more likely to recognize that trans individuals need not

conform to strict gender roles to receive treatment; that we now have more vocabulary and space

for nonbinary people, including nonbinary people who medically transition. There is still plenty

of room for improvement in all of these areas, but progress has undeniably been made, thanks to

Stone and others who have fought for these changes.

At the same time, "The *Empire* Strikes Back" raises a prescient and still much-needed

challenge to the dominant framing of transness: medical transition is still framed by a colonial

logic that seeks to foreclose on the queer possibilities of trans subjectivity. This colonial logic is

perpetuated not only by the clinical gatekeepers, but also by trans people themselves – the essay

opens with an excerpt from Jan Morris' memoir of her surgery in Casablanca, and Stone notes the "oriental[ism]" of Morris' description.[10] Trans people participate in this colonial logic not only because the people most likely to have access to surgery were and are white wealthy trans people, but also because they have been required to conform to this logic in order to receive treatment. "The initial fascination with the exotic, extending to professional investigators; denial of subjectivity and lack of access to the dominant discourse; followed by a species of rehabilitation"[11] – the mainstream transnormative narrative in the 2020s1 might look a little different, most notably in that, rather than disappearing into quiet normalcy, its poster children are now expected to be hypervisible ambassadors for transness who endlessly educate (and titillate) a gawking public through reality shows titled *I Am Jazz*/*Cait*/*[insert name here]*; but the logic remains exactly the same. Nearly thirty years after her introduction to the world, the figure of the posttranssexual – one who boldly announces her "postmodernism, postfeminism, and … large debt to Donna Haraway"[12] – still calls on us to find ways to resist the colonialism of the clinic.

Susan Stryker's "Words to Victor Frankenstein" is also in part a response to Janice Raymond and her teacher Mary Daly. These anti-trans feminists crystallize their belief that trans women are violent, subhuman creations of a patriarchal medical establishment in the accusation that trans women are Frankenstein's monster. Stryker adopts this role with prophetic flair,

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[10] Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back," 152.
[11] Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back," 163.
[12] Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back," 154.

occupying the monster's subjectivity to speak back to those who would deny her agency and personhood:

> Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself.[13]

These words, no less powerful on the umpteenth reading than on the first, serve as a mission statement for trans studies, a call to recognize the technoscientific construction of all bodies – including, perhaps especially, those aspects of embodiment most fervently defended (even by some feminist, queer, poststructuralist thinkers) as natural, given, unaltered. In a genre-blending brew of academic analysis, personal reflection, and poetic lyric, Stryker cites this construction in the compulsory and nonconsensual gendering of the newborn infant; in Man's attempts to master and control materiality; in the rage that marks the affective limit of signification. All of these continue to be sites of intervention by scholars in trans studies, and none have been exhausted through the recent explosion of the field.

For a sense of how trans studies has proliferated in the past few decades, one could do worse than to consult the two doorstopper volumes of *The Transgender Studies Reader*, published in 2006 and 2013 respectively (hereafter, *TSR1* and *TSR2*).[14] Between them, they give

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[13] Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," 240-1.
[14] Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, ed., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, ed., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

a solid overview of the field, but also raise the questions of institutionalization discussed above

in this chapter's introduction: what lines of flight, what modes of critique, which trans lives are

defined out of "trans studies" when it takes official disciplinary shape? How much of "trans

studies" is simply queer theory repackaged with the latest trendy academic buzzword sprinkled

in (as Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager argue in "After Trans Studies"[15])? If a novel

subfield now has canonical texts, what is conspicuously missing from among them? Religion, for

example, is largely absent, as Max Strassfeld and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza note in their

introduction to 2019's special "Trans*/Religion" issue of *TSQ*.[16] Yet *TSR1* in particular offers a

useful sense of the historical formation of both the transgender subject and the realm of

transgender studies: its first section, "Sex, Gender, and Science," includes excerpts from early

titans of transsexology Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Harry Benjamin, but

also features Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," which, despite being neither by a trans person nor

explicitly about transness, has been heavily influential in trans studies through Haraway's

student Sandy Stone. The reader goes on to trace "Feminist Investments," including excerpts

from Raymond's eyewateringly transmisogynistic *The Transsexual Empire*; and only then turns,

in the third section "Queering Gender," to Stryker's and Stone's pathbreaking essays discussed

above, as well as other important early trans studies writers such as Leslie Feinberg and Kate

Bornstein. The volume's other subsections are concerned with "Selves," "Transgender

Masculinity," "Embodiment," and "Multiple Crossings."

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[15] Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, "After Trans Studies," *TSQ* 6.1 (2019): 103-116.
[16] Max Strassfeld and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, "Introduction," *TSQ* 6.3 (2019): 283-296.

TSR2, meanwhile, is less restrained with its section titles, which reflect both the good (wide-ranging, interdisciplinary possibilities) and the worrying (might "trans-" indeed, as Chu and Harsin Drager suspect, too often be little more than a hip rebranding of queer with no actual content?) about trans studies as a discipline: "Making Trans-Culture(s): Texts, Performances, Artifacts" and "Being There: The (Im)material Locations of Trans-Phenomena" are particularly dramatic examples of the kind of overstuffing with coy punctuation and awkward prefixes that can at times take the place of substance. Nonetheless, *TSR2* successfully demonstrates the multiplicity of sites where trans interventions are taking place, from temporality to materiality to movement and biopolitics and policy interventions. There are many important currents in trans studies that this project simply does not have space for (even though some of them are relevant in some ways and could provide valuable perspectives): transness and surveillance;[17] historical trans studies;[18] trans childhood studies;[19] transness and carcerality/prison studies;[20] international trans studies, transness in the global south;[21] and so forth.

In this project, I am limiting myself to three specific theoretical interventions from trans studies, which together comprise "trans theory" as I am using it here: interrogating cisness; analyzing how racial capitalism constitutes the gendered subject; and denaturalizing sex, gender, and humanity itself.

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[17] Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

[18] Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[19] Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[20] Eric Stanley and Nat Smith, eds., *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Oakland: AK Press, 2011).

[21] Claudia Sofía Garriga-López, Denilson Lopes, Cole Rizki, and Juana María Rodríguez, eds., "Trans Studies in las Américas," special issue, *TSQ* 6.2 (2019).

Interrogating cisness takes place on two levels. On the first level, the most obvious intervention from trans studies is its function as a corrective to the cisnormativity of much of queer theory. Too often, queer theory has really been LGB theory, with the T subsumed, tacked on, ignored, or disavowed. Centering transness is not only a historical corrective, but often a way of sharpening queer analysis by recognizing the centrality of gender and gender transgression to the formation and regulation of non-normative sexualities – if not, to some extent, to all sexualities. (Consider, for example, how often behaviors and acts deemed "gay" are more accurately understood as instances of gender transgression.) The trans/crip formulation to which this chapter is building attempts to name and demonstrate the fact that all heterosexuality is first and foremost *cis*heterosexuality, and that an analytic that does not name this is incomplete. On the second level, however, interrogating cisness means querying the very formulation of "cis." When cis is too quickly normalized as "the opposite of trans," a new binary is reified – one that flattens complexities and occludes its own constructedness. Finn Enke identified this danger as far back as 2012,[22] and yet "cis" is still too rarely interrogated in either the classroom and activist settings in which it is often laid claim to as an identifier or the academic texts of trans studies. As Enke pointedly notes:

> Cisgender may hold appeal for maintaining gender and women's studies as an arena
> that produces and disciplines "women" and "men" as self-evident categories, contrary
> to gender and women's studies' more radical potentials. How troubling: Just when
> queer and trans theory remind us that gender and sex are made and have no *a priori*
> stability ("one is not born a woman"), cisgender arrives to affirm not only that it is
> possible for one to *stay* "a woman" but also that one *is* "born a woman" after all.[23]

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[22] Finn Enke, "The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies," in *Transfeminist Perspectives in and Beyond Gender Studies*, ed. Finn Enke (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 60-77.
[23] Enke, "The Education of Little Cis," 63.

The ontologizing of cisness reinforces both its distance from transness and its unmarked whiteness.[24] My ultimate aim in interrogating cisness is, as I hope will become clear over the course of this project, dismantling "cisness" altogether.

The unmarked whiteness of cis to which Enke draws attention is the subject of the second theoretical intervention of trans theory, namely the question of how racial capitalism constitutes the gendered subject. This too can be understood on (at least) two levels, the historical and the metaphysical. The historical constitution of the sex/gender schema as a technology of whiteness can be understood by reading together C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*[25] and Kyla Schuller's *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century.*[26] Schuller's book is not framed within trans studies, but has been recognized as a valuable intervention in the field (demonstrating again the unresolved questions around the disciplinary bounds of "trans studies").[27] Schuller traces the history of impressibility discourse, which (like affect theory) concerns the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected by their milieu. Racialization names the processes by which impressibility is differentially distributed for the purposes of managing colonial resource extraction: those bodies deemed white are most capable of affecting and being affected by their environment, while blackness is the most intractable flesh. Blackness is defined by its inability to accomplish the delicate feedback regulation processes through which a race advances toward civilization. Schuller invokes Mel

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[24] Enke, "The Education of Little Cis," 69.

[25] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[26] Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[27] Chu and Harsin Drager, "After Trans Studies," 112.

Chen's concept of animacy hierarchies (discussed toward the end of this chapter) to clarify this point: racialization ranks the races according to their affective capacities, with whiteness at the top and blackness at the bottom. This is a philosophical framework that both enables and justifies the chattel enslavement of black flesh and the extraction of resources under colonialism: only the white race has advanced sufficiently to be entrusted with the management of the world.

At the same time, however, the heightened affective sensitivity of whiteness makes it uniquely vulnerable to nefarious influences that could result in racial backsliding. Schuller argues that sexual difference solidified in the nineteenth century as a mechanism for stabilizing whiteness in the face of this vulnerability: men and women have different, complementary affective roles which work together to maintain the dominance of whiteness. Sexual dimorphism now goes all the way down – in body, mind, and spirit, humanity is divided into two halves which must come together in physical and spiritual union to maintain and perpetuate the race. Female sentimentality and male rationality balance each other and prevent racial backsliding. In this way, sexual dimorphism is a civilizational achievement of whiteness, which the "lower" races have achieved imperfectly at best. Sex difference is thus an affective technology of racialization and colonial biopower.

If Schuller describes the formation of whiteness and cisness as technologies of empire, Snorton examines the underside of these technologies – blackness and transness as the constitutive outsides of whiteness and cisness. Black and trans "have been constituted as fungible, thingified, and interchangeable, particularly within the logics of transatlantic

exchange."[28] For Snorton, enslaved bodies are subject to the rearranging powers of whiteness, never allowed to exist on their own terms but always on the terms of the white sex/gender schema. Whereas white genders must be stable, black flesh is the site for "mutable ... amendable" gender. Snorton evokes both Hortense Spillers' famous formulation about the ungendering of black flesh[29] and Fanon's assertion that under white supremacy a black man cannot be a man.[30] It is precisely because whiteness reserves sex differentiation for itself that black gender is made fungible – what Snorton calls "an anagrammatical quality" ascribed to black genders.[31]

These two ways of understanding black bodies are at first blush contradictory: Schuller describes how black flesh is fixed and made static, while Snorton describes how black flesh is made fungible and mutable. But I see these as complementary perspectives, the one being a view from above (how did biopower organize racing and gendering) and the other a view from below (how did fungible flesh experience this thingification). Whether black flesh is unimpressibly inanimate or mutably fungible depends on whose viewpoint is being emphasized – the white biopower that attempted to master blackness and fix it in place, or the black bodies that experienced being reorganized by white standards. The animacy of whiteness makes blackness static, while the stability of whiteness makes blackness fungible; and both are aspects of the processes of white mastery, directed at white racial improvement. As such, Snorton and Schuller demonstrate how gender as we know it cannot be understood apart from the processes of

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[28] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 6.
[29] Hortense Spillers, "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe': An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81.
[30] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008).
[31] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 135.

whiteness to which it is intimately tied. (This will be examined in terms of intersexualization and dis/ability in chapter 3.)

The second level of critical race analysis in trans studies comes from scholars connected to Afropessimism. This strand of thought thinks transness in relation to blackness' position as the Other of western metaphysics and ontology. Marquis Bey's reflections on "The Trans*ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*ness" connect the two as "disruptive orientations"[32] that "move in and through the abyss underlying ontology, rubbing up alongside it and causing it to fissure."[33] Thinking metaphysically about blackness and transness entails examining how they "exceed bodyness":[34] what do these overdetermined abstractions "blackness" and "transness" do to cisness and other technologies of white supremacy? For Bey, blackness and trans*ness are "nodes of one another, inflections that, though originary and names for the nothingness upon which distinction rests, flash in different hues because of subjects' interpretive historical entrenchment. That is to say, they are differently inflected names for an anoriginal lawlessness that marks an escape from confinement and a besidedness to ontology."[35]

Calvin Warren's "Calling into Being: Tranifestation, Black Trans, and the Problem of Ontology" frames the disruptiveness and fugitivity of black and trans in terms of the limitations of humanism: work by and about black trans subjects still hinges on *subjectivity*, something that is forever foreclosed to blackness by the antiblack structures of ontology.[36] "Black trans" should

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[32] Marquis Bey, "The Trans*ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*ness," *TSQ* 4.2 (2017), 278.
[33] Bey, "The Trans*ness of Blackness," 276.
[34] Bey, "The Trans*ness of Blackness," 278.
[35] Bey, "The Trans*ness of Blackness," 278.
[36] Calvin Warren, "Calling into Being: Tranifestation, Black Trans, and the Problem of Ontology," *TSQ* 4.2 (2017): 266-74.

not be about the doomed humanist project of centering black trans subjects, but should instead "unravel ontological humanism."[37] In Warren's vision, "'black trans' serves a speculative function, in that it foregrounds the gap between black existence and being through the coordinates of gender. Instead of thinking of black transgender as a nonnormative (gendered) subject in the world, we can think of it as instructive, philosophically. … What black transgender is teaching us is the impossibility of finding symbolic coherency in the world."[38]

This "impossibility of finding symbolic coherency in the world" is also a large part of the third theoretical contribution from trans studies, namely the denaturalization of sex, gender, and humanity itself. Popular discussions of transness tend to promote a simplistic separation of sex and gender, whereby sex denotes the physical body while gender refers to a sense of one's identity (see, for example, the dreaded Genderbread Person, which locates "identity" in the brain and "sex" in the crotch[39]). This warmed-over Cartesian dualism may satisfy Trans 101 training requirements in the workplace, but it crumbles under scrutiny: what does it mean to "identify as" a specific gender, and why (to use a favorite "gotcha" of internet transphobes) do we accept a person's self-identification as any given gender but not as a different race or an attack helicopter? Which and how many of the body parts commonly named "sex characteristics" must be altered before one's sex is considered to be "changed"? (And how does this square with the fact that "sex change" is now considered a crude, outmoded, even offensive term?)

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[37] Warren, "Calling into Being," 272.
[38] Warren, "Calling into Being," 271.
[39] www.genderbread.org

Many of these questions can be answered, but not by a framework that splits (physical) sex from (psychological) gender. No serious trans studies contributions can be content with "sex is between your legs, gender is between your ears" as a heuristic. Yet it is still unfortunately common to attempt to anchor claims about the veracity of gender in the supposedly more concrete materiality of sex, whether using Anne Fausto-Sterling's work demonstrating the polyvalence of so-called biological sex, or invoking intersex bodies as evidence against strict sexual dimorphism. As I will discuss later in this chapter and into the next, I believe that trans studies needs to take intersex people and scholarship onboard, but this must be done with humility and nuance, not in a tokenizing way that treats intersex bodies as the physical proof-text for transgender legitimacy. This does a disservice to intersex people, turning them into objectified fodder for trans theorizing in exactly the way that trans people object to queer theory using trans people; but it also implicitly accepts the dualistic logic that requires transness to prove itself on the material substrate of "biological sex." Chapter 3 will explain why I reject the language of "(biological) sex" altogether; while this is in no way an innovation of mine, a remarkable number of even pro-trans commentators still take "biological sex" for granted.[40] Refusal to take "sex" as a given, insistence on examining and critiquing the ways that flesh is inscribed with meaning that is then naturalized: this is still sadly unpopular. At least some of this unpopularity, I suspect, stems from an instinctive sense of the broader implications: if it forces us

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[40] To give just one recent example, in the June 2020 internet kerfuffle surrounding J.K. Rowling's fallacy-ridden essay detailing her antagonism toward trans people, I lost count of the number of rebuttals that included some variant of the concession, "No one is saying that sex isn't real." For a given value of "real" – another term that merits far more scrutiny than it generally faces – I was and am saying exactly that.

to alter our sense of what is "natural," rethinking "sex" might also require us to rethink humanity itself.

Myra J. Hird's "Animal Transex"[41] considers queerness and nonhuman animals together while avoiding the easy fallacies – after all, moralizing from nature can go both ways: the moral superiority of "the natural" is counterweighed by the association of animality with what is base or inferior in humans. Just as we should be wary of anchoring our claims about gender in the supposedly realer physical substrate of "sex," we should be cautious of the temptation to name nonhuman behaviors as "queer"; nonetheless, the multiplicity of sexes and sexual behaviors among animals, plants, fungi, and even bacteria does have implications for how we think of such things among humans: "most living organisms on this planet would make little sense of the human classification of two sexes, and certainly less sense of a critique of transsex based upon a conceptual separation of nature and culture."[42] Indeed, attempting to inhabit a nonhuman lens will have radical implications for all manner of concerns raised by transness, from questions of authenticity and artificiality to "the limits of trans as a transgressive identity or being."[43] As Hird points out, "[t]o argue that human transsex relies entirely upon technology is to significantly circumscribe the definition of technology to the human sphere," since "[a]t a basic level, life itself is, and has always been, technological in the very real sense that bacteria, protoctists and animals incorporate external structural materials into their bodies."[44]

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[41] Myra J. Hird, "Animal Transex," *Australian Feminist Studies* 21.49 (2006): 35-48 (reprinted in *TSR2* as "Animal Trans").
[42] Hird, "Animal Transex," 41.
[43] Hird, "Animal Transex," 42.
[44] Hird, "Animal Transex," 44.

Eva Hayward takes a slightly different perspective on what the *TSR2* calls "Transsexing Humanimality" in her lovely "Lessons from a Starfish."[45] Hayward explores what may be considered an instantiation of Barad's agential cut in her analysis of Antony and the Johnsons' song "Cripple and the Starfish," which she (presciently, given that "Antony" is now Anohni) connects with vaginoplasty. The lyric "I'll grow back like a starfish" prompts reflections on the surgical cut not as loss, amputation, or (as transphobes like Janice Raymond would have it) mutilation, but as generative: "*The cut is possibility*."[46] The surgical cutting of the penis into the vagina is not about the absence of something, but the production or growing back of something else: "We [transsexuals] create embodiment not by jumping *out* of our bodies, but by taking up a fold in our bodies, by folding (or cutting) ourselves, and creating a transformative scar of ourselves."[47] This is a beautiful meditation on the transsexual body in counter-discourse to the dominant (popular, feminist, and medical) portrayals of trans surgeries; and yet something significant is missing from Hayward's analysis. Where are the disability politics of the "cripple"? When Hayward asserts that "To cut off the penis/finger is not to be an amputee, but to produce the conditions of physical and psychical regrowth,"[48] what is being omitted, overlooked, or lost in this hasty move away from amputation and opening, as though these must necessarily be opposed to selfhood and regrowth and possibility? At least as far back as "Evil Twin," Susan Stryker explicitly recognized the need for disability and intersex scholarship to work with and in trans studies,[49] but these are still underutilized in the field. This chapter will go on to argue for

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[45] Eva Hayward, "Lessons from a Starfish," in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Myra Hird and Noreen Giffney (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 249-63.

[46] Hayward, "Lessons from a Starfish," 255 (italics in original).

[47] Hayward, "Lessons from a Starfish," 255.

[48] Hayward, "Lessons from a Starfish," 255.

[49] Susan Stryker, "Evil Twin."

the necessity of these fields working together, under the name "trans/cripping"; but first it will consider the relevance of trans theory to theology.

Trans theology

Despite the richness, vibrancy, and complexity of trans studies as a field, there are nonetheless still surprisingly few sustained engagements with theology from transness. In part, this seems to reflect the fact that, until very recently, most queer theorists and theologians have not really known what to do with transness and so have chosen not to engage with it at all. The lacuna is starkly illustrated by, to take just two examples, the 2007 anthology *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*,[50] whose index contains no entries at all for any word beginning with "trans-"; or by the fact that, as of 2021, the American Academy of Religion continues to have no units dedicated specifically to trans theology. There is a large volume of queer theology that thinks in depth about sexuality but still in many ways takes gender for granted; that is completely silent about the formation of gender in non- or not-obviously-sexual contexts; that throws in a token T with its LGB but never pays it any specific attention; that focuses on bodies and genitalia and queerness and fluidity without ever once mentioning trans people.

The definitional questions, which remain unresolved in trans studies writ large, certainly bedevil theology too: what does it mean to do trans theology? Does it differ meaningfully from queer theology, and if so, how? Who is, or should be, the subject and/or practitioner of trans theology? It is no doubt clear that I believe that a specifically trans approach to theology can

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[50] Gerard Loughlin, ed., *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

provide something that is overlooked by the majority of queer theology; but, unfortunately, most

trans theologies so far developed largely fail to provide much beyond apologetics. I will

delineate some of what I hope that trans theology can be; but first I will give a brief overview of

the sparse state of the field as it stands.

Perhaps even more so than its secular counterpart, as lesbian and gay theology gave way

to (or, more cynically, rebranded as) queer theology in the 90s, it at best took transness for

granted and at worst was actively hostile to it.[51] One of the first book-length engagements with

theology from a trans perspective was Justin Sabia-Tanis's 2003 *Trans-Gendered: Theology,*

Ministry, and Communities of Faith,[52] which attempted to introduce transness to religious

communities, to provide resources for ministry to trans people, and to propose some exploratory

ideas for what trans theology might be. When rereading Sabia-Tanis alongside Austen Hartke's

2018 *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*,[53] it is startling to see

just how little trans theology has appeared in the intervening 15 years. The major differences

between the two works are aesthetic: some of Sabia-Tanis's language inevitably seems dated by

today's standards ("transgendered" is no longer used by most trans people; "FTM" and "MTF"

have similarly fallen out of favor), but otherwise Sabia-Tanis and Hartke both strike similar

tones and most of the same beats. Both books combine personal anecdotes (from the authors and

others) with biblical and theological scholarship to promote the acceptance and inclusion of trans

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[51] For an overview of this process, see Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

[52] First published as Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003); reissued as Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

[53] Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

people in churches and trans voices in religious reflection. Both books accomplish their task well; and yet the fact that the task has not changed in a decade and a half is an indictment of both academic and popular theology as a whole.

The literature that promotes trans inclusion in religion circles a few recurring themes. One is the search for "transcestors" (the term used by, among others, Lewis Reay[54]): forebears in gender transgression who may be claimed under a broad trans umbrella as representing centuries of gender nonconformity within religious traditions. The quest for transcestors is an attempt to refute conservative claims that trans people are a novelty, a fad, a creation of twentieth-century medical science, and to demonstrate the long and cross-cultural history of gender-variant behavior. Apologetics for trans existence often point to specific figures in scripture or other religious texts, seeking to legitimate present-day trans identities by connecting them with instances of gender nonconformity of one kind or another. Popular sites for this kind of intervention include mention of eunuchs, notably the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 and Jesus' teaching about various kinds of eunuchs in Matthew 19:11-12,[55] gender-crossing saints like Joan of Arc,[56] and of course Jesus himself.[57] An obvious danger in the search for transcestors is the risk of anachronistically reading into the text identities and modes of being that could not have existed at the time. Although anti-trans commentators tend to apply it in bad faith,[58] there is

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[54] Lewis Reay, "Towards a Transgender Theology: Que(e)rying the Eunuchs," in *Trans/Formations*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press, 2009), 148-67.

[55] Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender*, 72-79.

[56] Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 21ff.

[57] Michelle Wolff, "A Diptych Reading of Christ's Transfiguration: Trans and Intersex Aesthetics Reveal Baptismal Identity," *Theology & Sexuality* 25.1-2 (2019), 98-110.

[58] As in the poisonous volume *Inventing Transgender Children and Young People*, ed. Michele Moore and Heather Brunskell-Evans (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing [no relation, as a disclaimer on the website states, to Cambridge University Press or the University of Cambridge], 2019).

nonetheless a sense in which the conservative critique is true: trans identities as we know them in the 21st-century western world *are* formed by the historical contingencies of our era, and it is both erroneous and colonizing to project a universal trans identity onto people of other milieus, who were formed by a very different gender matrix.

Ahistorical or essentialist approaches to transcestors are thus both colonizing and unlikely to convince anyone who does not already accept their premises. Better approaches acknowledge these risks, and attempt to find family resemblances among gendered behaviors deemed transgressive in different cultures without necessarily imposing 21st-century categories on them. However, even these more careful strategies often fail to interrogate what it is that these past behaviors were transgressing. As Rachel Stuart and Jane Nichols point out in their article "Transgender: A Useful Category of Biblical Analysis?",[59] it is not only that reading the transgender subject into the text is anachronistic, but that the whole normative gender system that we take for granted in the formation of today's transgender subject *is also anachronistic*. To assume that transcestor figures were transgressing the same norms we transgress today is to overlook the crucial role of racial capitalism in the formation of these norms, and so also to overlook the differently formed norms of yesteryear. On this basis, Stuart and Nichols "insist on a transgender hermeneutic that can truly exist only when the reader gives up any notion of recovering transgender subjects as such."[60]

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[59] Rachel Stuart and Jane Nichols, "Transgender: A Useful Category of Biblical Analysis?" *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 1.2 (2020): 1-24.
[60] Stuart and Nichols, "Transgender," 21.

A more careful legitimation strategy, obviating the need to find subjects who might anachronistically be positioned under the transgender umbrella, is to find in religious texts language or concepts that can be interpreted to challenge the notion of a strict gender binary. For Christians, a favorite proof-text is Galatians 3:28, which states, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."[61] Jews, meanwhile, often invoke the Talmudic discussions of *tumtum* and *androgynos*, which have been variously interpreted as what might now be considered either nonbinary gender categories or intersex conditions.[62] In the texts shared by both traditions, it is common to cite the creation stories, including the verse of particular interest to this project, Genesis 1:27: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Joy Ladin,[63] Justin Sabia-Tanis,[64] and Austen Hartke[65] all argue that "male and female" in this context does not necessarily denote a strict binary, since other apparent binaries in creation self-evidently do not obviate the existence of spaces between: if God's separation of land and sea still permits the existence of shores and marshes, why should the separation of male and female imply that no intermediary sexes or genders are possible?

This argument from creation demonstrates another major theme in the genre of trans apologetics: the notion that trans people help break down binary thinking. By challenging the

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[61] Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender*, 80-83.

[62] Noach Dzmura, "Intersexed Bodies in Mishnah: A Translation and an Activist's Reading of Mishnah Androgynos," in *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, ed. Noach Dzmura (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

[63] Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2019), 20-23.

[64] Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender*, 55-59.

[65] Hartke, *Transforming*, 52-57.

strictness of the gender binary, so the thinking goes, trans people can encourage those around

them to rethink the strictness of their thinking in other areas, and thus develop a more nuanced

understand of the world and of God. Some commentators even go so far as to invoke historical

and cross-cultural examples of non-normatively gendered people who had important roles in

their communities, suggesting that transness is inherently liminal, special, or spiritual.[66]

(It is worthy of note that, other than Joy Ladin, all of the authors cited in this section,

whether trans or cis, were assigned female at birth. This reflects a much larger issue in the

academy and in society at large. Among trans scholars of my acquaintance, a running gag

defines trans scholarship as "trans men explaining to cis women what it's like to be a trans

woman."[67] This is perhaps intensified in religion and theology, and for many of the same

reasons: the historical constitution of gender studies within feminism and women's studies

departments; the long shadow of Mary Daly and Janice Raymond;[68] and, more importantly,

transmisogyny's material and social effects – even trans women who have the resources for

graduate study face a culture of hostility and inaccessibility in both explicit and implicit ways.

While trans men certainly face transphobia and other issues, masculinity among people assigned

female at birth is in general more culturally acceptable than femininity among people assigned

male at birth, and indeed the Christian tradition is not lacking in examples of what we might now

term transmasculinity, from the saying of Jesus in the extrabiblical Gospel of Thomas 114 to the

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[66] Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

[67] I believe Avery Everhart is the originator of this quip.

[68] Max Strassfeld, "Transing Religious Studies," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34.1 (2018), 44-49.

story of Perpetua and Felicity. As such, the sidelining of trans women and other transfeminine

people from the discourses of transness and religion is both systemic and unsurprising.)

Without wishing to negate the value of what might be called the inclusion genre of trans

theology for many individuals and communities, I nonetheless find it profoundly unsatisfying. In

"The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and its Others," Linn Tonstad identifies three major

flaws with inclusion-focused queer theologies, which all apply to trans-specific inclusion

theologies too: contrasting inclusion with the excluding other in a way that deploys antisemitic

tropes; ignoring the affective life of binaries (in ways that I would note perpetuate the favoring of

transmasculinity and the devaluing of transfemininity described above); and seeking legitimation

in origins.[69] Trans-inclusive theologies also risk over-correcting for the history of religious

transphobia in a rather patronizing way, tokenizing and objectifying trans people into teaching

tools for the non-trans majority. This is similar to the ways that incautious attempts at disability

inclusion can, with the best of intentions, continue to dehumanize disabled people.[70] The

argument from liminality often falls prey to this risk, but it also has a larger theoretical problem:

the argument that the creation of binaries allows for in-between spaces still conceptually

confines sex and gender to a two-dimensional spectrum between the poles of maleness and

femaleness. To commit to plotting all sex and gender possibilities along a single axis not only

takes for granted that the two poles are both well-defined and mutually exclusive, but it also

preemptively forecloses on alternative multi-dimensional schemata, such as Anne Fausto-

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[69] Linn Marie Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and its Others," *Theology and Sexuality* 21.1 (2015), 1-19.
[70] Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 75ff.

Stirling's five-sex model[71] or indigenous third genders that were violently suppressed by western

colonialism.

In addition, I worry that the inclusion genre defangs both God and queerness. By this I

mean that – often in reaction to the hellfire-bringing tyrannical God of anti-queer Christianity –

inclusive portrayals of God can at times lose sight of the strangeness of God (so powerfully

described by Joy Ladin, as discussed in chapter 1), and reduce the Holy One to little more than

an overzealous PFLAG mom. The unsettling potential of queerness – its ability to trouble

received notions of the self, the body, humanity, nature – can similarly fall away, leaving behind

a normative humanist anthropology of transness defined in terms of "true self" and

"authenticity." Even some of the more compelling theological ideas about transness have yet to

be subject to any sustained queer trans critique: for example, what happens to Justin Sabia-

Tanis's lovely notion of gender as calling[72] when it meets Calvin Warren's black trans argument

that western ontology necessarily precludes blackness from the possibility of being called?[73]

What possibilities might be generated by an analysis of Genesis 1:27 that takes seriously the

historically contingent construction of cisness? How might Joy Ladin's intense analysis of the

estrangement of human existence be transformed by an encounter with Myra Hird's animal trans

perspective?

These are just three of the kaleidoscope of questions that arise when considering what

trans theology could be doing. A robust, exciting subfield of trans theology has yet to be called

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[71] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
[72] Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender*, 146-60.
[73] Warren, "Calling into Being."

into existence, but it can be envisioned as a mode of doing theology that takes on board the

insights, methods, and interventions from trans theory: critically reflecting on the role of cisness

in queer theologies (not just expanding inclusion to account for trans people but challenging the

very foundations of how we think about gender and sex); denaturalizing sex, gender, and

humanity; accounting for critical intersections, such as the crucial role of whiteness in

constructing and maintaining cisheteropatriarchy; describing the specifics of trans experience as

a lens on all of society; auto-critique and doubt and messiness. The best in queer theology makes

many of these same theoretical interventions – see Linn Tonstad's *Queer Theology*[74] for both

methodology and examples – but on the whole queer theology still overlooks the specifics of

trans experience and theory.

One scholar who does this queer trans theological work is Robyn Henderson-Espinoza,

whose approach uses the thought of Gloria Anzaldúa and Gilles Deleuze to theologize queer

fleshly becoming in the borderlands: the borderlands of trans/nonbinary gender, of Latinx

mestizaje, of academe and activism. As they write, "To mobilize a religious discourse that is

grounded in the methodological approaches of transing means that becoming animates the logic

that historically frames religion and also becomes the condition of possibility for new contours of

gender and sexuality to materialize."[75] Trans theology needs to heed Henderson-Espinoza's

words and embrace a more radical and unsettling queerness if it is to get beyond apologetics,

while queer theology needs to embrace trans theory if it is to get beyond its cisnormative

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[74] Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).
[75] Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, "Transing Religion: Moving Beyond the Logic of the (Hetero) Norm of Binaries," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34.1 (2018), 91.

assumptions. Trans theology needs more Althaus-Reid; those following in Althaus-Reid's footsteps could use some Susan Stryker.

Crip theory

Crip theory is sometimes described as being positioned in relation to disability studies as queer theory is to lesbian and gay studies: that is, it attempts to trouble the identitarian framework (in part by reclaiming a slur for its own name), question the material and discursive foundations of both the field and its subject(s) of inquiry, and interrogate the formations of categories and concepts that too often get taken for granted. Explicit claims to work within crip theory are still unfortunately the minority within disability studies, but crip thought is essential for this project because it brings queerness and disability together. The two most essential texts in crip theory are Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*[76] and Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip*,[77] while other crucial thinkers for my understanding of crip include Ellen Samuels, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Anna Mollow.

The key insight of crip theory is that capitalism produces the heterosexual abled subject, and that heterosexuality is not incidental to abledness (nor vice versa) but mutually co-constitutive with it. This is important to thinking about queerness because of the long history of queerness being constructed as a form of disability. The pathologization of queerness as something that needed to be treated or cured was codified in fin-de-siecle sexology, solidified in mid-century medical experimentation with institutionalized queers and the DSM diagnoses, and

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[76] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

[77] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

lingers on in the unfortunately still extant process of conversion therapy. Queerness as pathology

forms from older ideas of gender and sexual transgression as deviation and degeneracy, failure to

progress developmentally, and ultimately inability to contribute meaningfully to society in terms

of either production or reproduction. And of course the *racial* nature of capitalism means that

racialization is also part of how heterosexuality and abledness are produced, and become crucial

to the formation of citizenship in the colony, the postcolony, and under global neoliberalism.

It should be noted that as yet there is no universally agreed upon term for the opposite of

disability. Able-bodied, temporarily able-bodied (or TAB), and McRuer's preferred abstract

noun able-bodiedness are all subject to the critique that they have contributed to disability

studies' historical foregrounding of physical disabilities and marginalization of psychological

and intellectual disabilities; Kafer's corrective able-bodiedness/able-mindedness is unwieldy;

and all of the above implicitly accept the terms whereby the physical and the mental are

conceived as two separate realms. My own preference is to use *abled* and *abledness,* to

emphasize the fact that ability is constructed and produced, while also avoiding (even

inadvertent) perpetuation of mind/body dualism.

Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory* expands on Carrie Sandahl's pathbreaking analysis of

queer and crip together.[78] McRuer proposes the concept of compulsory able-bodiedness on the

model of compulsory heterosexuality, not as simple analogy, but as two systems that are

intimately bound up together: "compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-

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[78] Carrie Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance," *GLQ* 9.1-2 (2003), 25-56.

bodiedness, and vice versa."[79] The heterosexual is always already abled; abledness is always

already heterosexual. McRuer is particularly interested in the novel ways neoliberal capitalism

finds for deploying compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness to manage bodies,

populations, cultures, and capital. The privatization, deregulation, and globalized technocracy

that characterize our present neoliberal economic regime function to unmoor a certain fixity of

identity and then to direct it in ways that serve capital. Neoliberal capitalism prizes flexibility

and innovation not in service of individual and collective liberation, but as tactics for crisis

management; neoliberal capitalism values tolerance and diversity not out of a true embrace of

difference, but to quell demands for more significant change.[80] The truly troubling potential of

the queer or the crip must be contained and reabsorbed into the dominant structures of the global

economy and its state, military, business, and financial actors.[81]

At the same time, however, able-bodiedness and heterosexuality are impossible ideals

that must always be striven for and can never be fully attained once for all.[82] To be critically crip,

like Judith Butler's explication of critically queer, is to deliberately occupy the space between

the impossible norm and the impossible subversion of the norm, "working the weakness in the

norm."[83] McRuer observes that most uses and theorizations of crip have emerged more readily in

activist and artistic venues than in academia;[84] anecdotally, this remains true in my experience of

academic spaces (which still foreground "disability"), whereas activism and art are much more

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[79] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 2.
[80] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 16-18.
[81] A flagrant recent example is the ghoulish parading of the nonbinary Raytheon employee, visible on the official Raytheon Technologies Instagram account at https://www.instagram.com/p/CB8dhRUH8Ah/.
[82] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 9.
[83] Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ* 1.1 (1993), 26, quoted on McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 30.
[84] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 34.

comfortable using "crip" (e.g. Crip Camp, #CripTheVote). Perhaps this is evidence of the

collectivism of crip: "the birth of the crip comes at the expense of the death of the

(individualized, able-bodied) author."[85] Coming out crip involves both concrete demands for

accessibility and complicating the very terms by which disability is understood[86] – working from

the classic disability rights slogan "nothing about us without us" while simultaneously

interrogating the meaning and boundaries of "us." The queer crip project requires us to actively

resist becoming normate:[87] to critique rehabilitative logics;[88] to find ways to "survive, and

survive well, at the margins of time, space, and representation";[89] to seek to "welcome the

disability to come."[90]

In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer develops this notion of welcoming the disability

to come through "a politics of crip futurity."[91] From pre-natal genetic counseling to feminist

science fiction novels, our cultural, political, and medical systems all assume that a good future

is self-evidently a disability-free future. Even disability advocates themselves can perpetuate a

version of this, uplifting people with certain forms of disability by devaluing others. This is not

to say that we should reflexively promote disability *tout court* as desirable, but rather that we

should interrogate the received wisdom dispensed as common sense and ask what possibilities

are foreclosed on when we accept without question the inherent undesirability of disability.

Kafer proposes a hybrid political/relational model for thinking about disability in a way that is

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[85] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 52.
[86] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 71-72.
[87] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 198.
[88] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 110ff.
[89] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 183.
[90] McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 208.
[91] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 3.

critical of the medical model but does not accept the social model's cleavage of impairment from disability. The social model commonly defines impairment as the material fact of the body's limitations, while disability is the effect of the social meanings imposed on impairment; but Kafer has three major critiques of this separation. First, it overlooks the fact that impairment itself is *also* socially constructed, not merely a natural fact to be read off the body; second, it "overlooks the often-disabling effects of our bodies,"[92] including pain and fatigue; third, it narrows the possibilities for thinking about the broader role of compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness in society as a whole.[93] (In many ways, I find this to be an instructive analogy with the problems generated by the conceptual separation of sex from gender, discussed in an earlier section; the connection will be explored further in chapter 3.)

Like Garland-Thomson's misfit concept discussed below, Kafer's hybrid political/relational model thinks disability in terms of environments and relation, generating multiple angles on disability as assemblage, as collective affinity, as a fluid and unstable site of questions and critique.[94] Her specific focus on temporality and futurity produces a range of important interventions, of which the most relevant to this project are the ones concerning time, cure, and medical technology. Kafer develops an idea of "crip time" associated with failure, excessive, flex, and waste; a refusal of the capitalist demand for productivity at all costs; and, especially, in contrast with "curative time," which operates on "an understanding of disability that not only *expects* and *assumes* intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything

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[92] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 7.
[93] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 8.
[94] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 10, 11.

other than intervention."[95] The interventions demanded by curative time include the controversial "Ashley treatment" as well as reproductive technologies and prosthetic technologies. Kafer explores how contested all of these interventions are, reveals the normative assumptions at work in them, and (to cite McRuer citing Butler) works the weaknesses in these norms. The story of Ashley X describes an instance in which the parents of a profoundly disabled child chose to subject her to surgical and hormonal treatments so that she would always remain physically small and never go through puberty. The Ashley treatment is a visceral materialization of the logic of the curative imaginary: disability is a temporal disruption; the child and the disabled adult are "unfinished" adults who will never achieve the independence, autonomy, and productivity that comprise adulthood; the female body is defined in terms of its reproductive use-value; disability is a wholly privatized affair within the nuclear family; to name just a few of the assumptions at work.[96]

The uses of assistive reproductive technologies similarly "reveal profound anxieties about reproducing the family as a normative unit,"[97] normalizing and depoliticizing assumptions about the proper use of such technologies. The famous case of a Deaf lesbian couple who sought a Deaf sperm donor in hopes of having a Deaf child brought widespread condemnation: in the curative imaginary, reproductive technologies should only be used to eliminate disability, never to willingly, knowingly proliferate it. Finally, cyborg discourses are often used (even at times by Haraway herself) to universalize and depoliticize disability. Kafer calls for a cripped cyborg

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[95] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27.
[96] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 47-68.
[97] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 69.

politics where disability is not reduced to a metaphor, but is considered in political and social context and used to map a feminist, queer, crip future.[98]

Ellen Samuels' 2003 piece "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse"[99] was an important pre-*Crip Theory* discussion of sexuality and disability together. Her focus on analogies between coming out as gay and coming out as disabled carefully teases out the similarities and the differences, but this comparative mode entails thinking sexuality and disability as two distinct things and thus stops short of the crip theory analysis of how the two depend on each other. Samuels' 2014 book *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*,[100] however, while not explicitly claiming to be crip theory, nonetheless thinks through the mutual co-constitution of gender, ability, and race in a way that is significant for crip theory. Samuels argues that the titular fantasies of identification "seek to definitively identify bodies, to place them in categories delineated by race, gender, or ability status, and then to validate that placement through a verifiable, biological mark of identity."[101] "Fantasy" refers to the cultural imagination that mediates "text, body, and nation," forming a collective community through the legal, political, medical, scientific, and cultural apparatuses that biopolitically administrate populations of individual bodies. The book traces fantasies of fakery, in literary and cinematic portrayals of disability cons and racial and gender passing; fantasies of marking, in court cases where medical expertise was deployed to resolve

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[98] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 103-128; I discuss Kafer's intervention into the cyborg in more detail in chapter 4.

[99] Ellen Samuels, "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse," *GLQ* 9.1/2 (2003): 233-255.

[100] Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

[101] Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 2.

legal ambiguities through bodily marks; and fantasies of measurement, in the institutions of biocertification. The coinage "biocertification" names "the massive proliferation of state-issued documents purporting to authenticate a person's biological membership in a regulated group,"[102] which is demonstrated in the realms of disability, Native American "blood quantum," and the DNA testing of athletes suspected of being intersex.

The processes by which socially constructed categories become solidified as legal, medical, and cultural facts have some striking characteristics: they "claim a scientific, often medical framework and function to consolidate the authority of medicine yet in practice often exceed or contradict any actual scientific basis"; they "invariably penetrate into the wider culture, influencing law, policy, and representation"; they "operate on the level of the 'obvious,' the 'commonsense,' yet simultaneously claim that only the expert can fully discern their meaning"; they "merge imagination and the real through desire, a desire that manifests in material effects on actual people's bodies and lives'; and they "are haunted by disability even when disabled bodies are not their immediate focus, for disability functions as the trope and embodiment of true physical difference."[103] All of these aspects will be important for my account of biomedical processes capacitating gender in the next chapter, but it is the last one that really makes this crip theory, since it provides an account of how disability and gender depend on each other. To show how this works Samuels analyzes Ellen Craft's escape from slavery, which involved posing as a disabled white gentleman. The assumed disabilities play a crucial role in enabling Craft to pass as white, male, and wealthy: a sling on her right hand disguises her

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[102] Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 9.
[103] Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 2-3.

inability to write; a bandage around her cheeks disguises her lack of facial hair; fainting spells

remove her from situations where she may face excessive scrutiny. As such, "the validity of

Ellen's racial, gender, and class passing hinges upon the *invalidity* of her body."[104]

Despite this crucial function in Craft's escape, depictions and discussions of Craft rarely

focus on the disability con, stressing instead the racial, gender, and class passing. So disability

comes to play a shadow role, to "hold the fact of physicality,"[105] taking on all the displaced

otherness of race and gender and class – instead of blackness signifying the inability to write, the

bandaged hand makes this signification, which becomes a basic physical fact rather than a chain

of social signifiers (blackness = slavery = illiteracy).[106] Race, gender, and ability all get affixed

in imaginaries of the flesh; but it is disability that is made to bear the brunt of the physical

burden. Noticeably, transness is entirely absent from the book, even though it would provide a

superb example of the larger argument concerning fantasies of fakery, marking, and

measurement. It would both strengthen her argument and shed light on transness to explore

transness in terms of fantasies of identification, since being trans so often defined in these terms

and since it so clearly inhabits many of the loci Samuels discusses, such as the epistemology of

visibility, the privileging of medical authority, and biocertification. These concepts will prove

useful in chapter 3 for thinking about transness and/as disability.

The volume *Sex and Disability*, coedited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, collects a

range of chapters exploring the topics relevant to crip theory.[107] Through literature, history,

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[104] Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 30.
[105] Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 36.
[106] Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 37.
[107] Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, eds., *Sex and Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

theory, and personal narrative, the anthology considers sexuality in relation to an array of

disabilities and differences from intellectual disability to HIV to autism to amputation to

deafness, in order to explore how disability and sex "might transform and confuse" each other.[108]

For this project, the most important of the chapters is Anna Mollow's "Is Sex Disability? Queer

Theory and the Disability Drive,"[109] which crips Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani to provide a

disability analysis of the anti-social thesis in queer theory. Mollow's central assertion is that

sexuality and disability "share profound structural similarities; in some instances, they could

even be described as two names for the same self-rupturing force."[110] Understanding the death

drive as the "disability drive" entails "theorizing disability in terms of identity disintegration,

lack, and suffering" – just as Edelman follows conservative negativity about queerness to its

logical end in *No Future*, Mollow here follows negativity about disability to its conclusion,

"highlighting those aspects of sex and disability that undercut and perhaps even preclude

assertions of humanity."[111]

Much of Mollow's chapter is dedicated to demonstrating the disability embedded in *No*

Future's argument: to name just one of her examples, the reproductive futurism that Edelman

describes is bound up with what Mollow names "rehabilitative futurism"[112] – the logic, also

discussed by McRuer and Kafer (above), of framing disability's futures only in terms of the

quest for cure and foreclosing any imaginative possibility of welcoming or desiring disability.

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[108] Mollow and McRuer, "Introduction," in *Sex and Disability*, 32.
[109] Anna Mollow, "Is Sex Disability? Queer Theory and the Disability Drive," in *Sex and Disability*, 285-312.
[110] Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 287.
[111] Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 287.
[112] Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 288.

Rethinking the death drive as the disability drive is Mollow's attempt to provide another angle

on the paradox of the Lacanian *sinthome* (and the Edelmanian *sinthomo*sexual). The *sinthome* is

what provides each subject with access to the Symbolic, but the uniqueness of the individual's

sinthome also threatens this same Symbolic order. "Both this access and this threat are figured as

disability."[113] That is to say, in both Edelman's own language and the words of Lacan that he

cites, both subjectivity and the lack thereof are described in disability metaphors: subjectivity

requires a figurative "blindness" to how the *sinthome* functions, but to understand one's *sinthome*

would result in "psychotic autism" and "disfiguration."[114] The paradox is that "when it comes to

recognizing the senselessness of one's sinthome, it seems we're disabled if we do, disabled if we

don't."[115] The disability drive, and its entanglement with sex, might help to explain the

simultaneous attraction and repulsion exerted by images of disability, from the nineteenth-

century freak show to the enduring popularity of Philadelphia's Mutter Museum: "in the cultural

imagination (or unconscious), disability is *fantasized* in terms of a loss of self, of mastery,

integrity, and control, a loss that, both desired and feared, is indissociable from sexuality."[116]

While acknowledging disability politics' interest in reclaiming disability from its

negative associations, Mollow is, like Edelman, interested in what happens when, instead of (or

even alongside) refuting negative cultural narratives, we embrace their "correlative truths":[117]

what happens if we accept that sexuality *is* destructive, that disability *is* failure, and instead of

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[113] Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 295.
[114] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 36-38; discussed on Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 295.
[115] Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 295.
[116] Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 297.
[117] Edelman, *No Future*, 22; cited on Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 297.

seeking "redemptive reinvention,"[118] we embrace and explore the threat that sex and disability

pose to integrity of the self? Mollow is sensitive to the pragmatic requirements of disability

politics and activism, but she also suggests that "perhaps disability theory should, rather than

seeking to humanize the disabled (insisting that disabled people be treated as 'human beings'),

instead ask how disability might threaten to undo, or disable, the category of the human."[119] This

is an enormously fruitful possibility for a project that is ultimately seeking to do posthumanist

trans/crip theology.

The last piece of crip theory I want to bring in at this point is Rosemarie Garland-

Thomson's "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept."[120] Misfitting is Garland-

Thomson's proposal for a way of thinking about disability that avoids the pitfalls of both the

medical and social models. As described in chapter 1, the medical model defines disability solely

as a defect of the individual body, while the social model corrects for this by separating

impairment (bodily difference) from disability (social effect of discrimination) – but this risks

overcorrecting in a way that minimizes or ignores certain aspects of disability such as chronic

pain or intellectual disability. The idea of the misfit attempts to give a robust account of

disability that minimizes neither the embodied nor the social aspects. Misfit names "an

incongruent relationship between two things," such that "[t]he problem … inheres not in either

of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition."[121] Fitting or misfitting is thus not an inherent,

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[118] Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 22; cited on Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 301.
[119] Mollow, "Is Sex Disability," 308.
[120] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26.3 (2011): 591-609.
[121] Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 592-3.

universal quality of certain bodies, but it is *produced* through relations in specific contexts by "[t]he discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is."[122] On this model, disability is defined neither as individual bodily deficiency nor as purely social effects, but as "a way of being in an environment, as a material arrangement."[123] A body in a wheelchair among an environment of stairs constitutes an obvious instance of misfitting, but there is also misfitting when a body with chronic fatigue syndrome encounters the 40-hour workweek, or when the celiac body is born into a pasta-loving society.[124]

The constant shifting and dynamism of "mutually constituting relationships among things in the world" means that no perfect fit is ever accomplished, but "fitting and misfitting occur on a spectrum that creates consequences."[125] Misfits make themselves noticed, while "[a] good enough fit produces material anonymity," the ability to move through the world "predominantly unmarked and unrecognized."[126] Of course, the very nature of movement is such that most of us experience varying degrees of fitting and misfitting throughout our lives, but it is misfitting that makes itself known to us: "When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us. When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting. Any of us can fit here today and misfit there tomorrow."[127] Although Garland-Thomson does not explicitly discuss queerness in the way that crip theory proper does, I include this piece

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[122] Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 593.
[123] Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 594.
[124] Claudia Trotch, "It's Not Easy Being G-Free: Why Celiac Disease Should Be a Disability Covered Under the ADA," *Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law* 22.1 (2013): 219-236.
[125] Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 594-5.
[126] Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 596.
[127] Garland-Thomson, "Misfits," 597.

under my crip theory heading because of its positioning within materialist feminism, and because I think it is extraordinarily amenable to crip theory generally and to my trans/crip project specifically. This will become particularly clear in chapters 3 and 4, where I will discuss cisness as a prosthetic technology to enforce fitting with whiteness.

Crip theology

If self-identified "crip theory" is a minority discourse within disability studies, "crip theology" as such is zygotic. There is an abundance of excellent disability theology from the past 25 years, but very little theology explicitly identified as crip. I believe that there is a need for a specifically crip theology: as rich as I find Creamer's, Haslam's, and Voss Roberts' work, as described in chapter 1, none of them interrogate heteronormativity as crip theory does. Just as there is a significant gap in queer theology that could be filled by work bringing the insights and methodologies of trans theory to bear in a theological context, so too disability theology needs the work of crip theory: specifically, its recognition of how abledness is always already heterosexuality too; its analysis of how neoliberal capitalism constitutes the abled subject; and its challenge to assumptions about the body, about disability and impairment, about humanity, which in many cases still reign unexamined within disability theology.

Crip theology is to date essentially a one-woman endeavor, in the person and work of Sharon Betcher. Betcher examines how disability is framed in the global context of geopolitical empire as well as the theological context of transcendental idealism, and deploys crip figures to resist and find alternatives to both the empire without and the empire within. In 2007's *Spirit and*

the Politics of Disablement,[128] she examines the thinly secularized afterlives of Christian transcendence found in the ravages of the global economic system, the neocolonialism of charity and humanitarianism, and the biotech industry. All three manifest modernity's continuity with the totalizing Christian Spirit, envisioned as sweeping over the world and transforming it in the image of "an idealist and hallucinatory whole(some)ness."[129] What would it look like to decolonize Spirit when it "has conceptually been made to collude with the powers of normalization"?[130] For Betcher, this decolonization entails centering disability – not as liberation theology or identity politics, but "to swerve the colonial optic so as to open out spaciousness in the cultural imaginary."[131] The crip is the unresolved and unresolvable problem for a totalizing metaphysics, a site of trouble that cannot be assimilated and made whole.

Betcher traces a host of ways that transcendent Christian idealism has been deployed to colonize disabled bodies, from the Fall to miracles to compassion to spiritual practice; at the same time, she attempts to imagine these theological tropes otherwise. The production of disability – both discursively and materially – occurs with and through processes of Christian colonial racialization. Betcher cites Augustine's argument that "monstrosities" exist in order to show God's power as an influential example of how Christian discourses imagine Spirit colonizing the body of the other. This imagining takes explicit shape in Bede's mapping of "monstrous races" at the ends of the earth and the limits of humanity, in need of conversion to Christianity.[132] The subsequent history of western Christianity proceeds to frame colonialism as

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[128] Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
[129] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 10.
[130] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 38.
[131] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 44.
[132] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 54-55.

a beneficent project bringing salvation to those whose deviance places them at the borderlands of personhood: "the Western world's sense of itself as an advanced civilization […] depended upon the delimitation of degeneracy."[133] Distance, both conceptual and physical, from Christian whiteness is *per se* disablement, which must be resolved through the colonizing Spirit, leading Betcher to suggest that "the fact that we construe wholeness as the epitome of sacred encounter […] collude[s] with the ideation of global empire."[134] The charitable model of Jesus as healer, reflected in liturgical and theological emphasis on "being made whole," expresses the operations of the totalizing Spirit of empire. One of the important contributions of Betcher's crip theology is to show how liberal, inclusive forms of Christianity (and its secularized successors in humanitarian projects) still perpetuate this colonizing Spirit. "Inclusion does not undo the hegemony of normalcy,"[135] and can in fact divert energy, attention, and resources from more substantive change; similarly, too often "compassion aligns itself with the coercive power of superiority" and serves empire.[136]

One of the most significant aspects of Betcher's work for this project is her approach to biotechnology. Betcher's approach to the cyborg is not unlike Kafer's: she is critical of how the cyborg is often used in ways that undermine Haraway's aims, promoting "totalistic holism parading as technological hybridism."[137] Like Kafer, Betcher stresses the need for a crip intervention in the uses of cyborg, particularly when it concerns prosthetics. Popular deployments of cyborg tend to emphasize a seamless integration of body and technology,

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[133] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 56.
[134] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 65.
[135] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 87.
[136] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 116.
[137] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 93.

portraying the cyborg body as a disabled body either restored to normal functioning through technology or surpassing normal through its enhancement. As Betcher observes, even when dressed up in flashy postmodernist language of prosthetic embodiment, this is at heart just another incarnation of the colonizing Spirit.[138] The cripped cyborg, on the other hand, is "stitched together imperfectly":[139] not a transcendent dream of wholeness, but one whose seams and sutures (like those of Susan Stryker) are visible. The imperfect prosthetic embodiment of the cripped cyborg will play a crucial role in the remaining chapters of this project.

Taking a Deleuzian turn, Betcher proposes becoming disabled as a potential "line of flight for becoming revolutionary."[140] By paying attention to pain, illness, limping, falling, all the limits and vicissitudes of the flesh, it might be possible to reject the "scopic dynamics" of the idealized body and to attempt instead to do "visceral philosophy"[141] As an incarnation of the Deleuzian body without organs, "becoming disabled and postcolonial … may be among the innovative technologies for taking leave of empire – at the very least, for taking leave of the empire of the ego."[142] In subsequent work, Betcher develops other angles on this practice of becoming disabled and postcolonial, focus on decolonizing Spirit so that it might be "a prosthesis of world feeling,"[143] something that facilitates "a critical and agonistic engagement with all forms of objectifying discourse" for the sake of "the flesh of the world."[144] Betcher's is a

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[138] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 97.
[139] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 104.
[140] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 174.
[141] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 73, 179.
[142] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 192.
[143] Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 90.
[144] Sharon Betcher, "The Picture of Health: 'Nature' at the Intersection of Disability, Religion and Ecology," *Worldviews* 19 (2015): 9-33, 30.

crip theology that remains ever alert for the workings of empire, so that we might instead inhabit "the shared embrace of social flesh, of intercorporeal generosity."[145]

A very recent contribution to crip theology is Karen Bray's 2020 *Grave Attending: A Political Theology for the Unredeemed*.[146] Bray's "theology for the affect alien"[147] uses crip theory and the theorization of madness to dismantle compulsory able-mindedness, arguing that "'madness' can become a kind of queer site of insight, desire, and resistance."[148] In the concept of bipolar time, Bray brings together McRuer's crip critique of capitalism's demands, Elizabeth Freeman's analysis of queer times,[149] and a theological dwelling in the unredeemed time of Holy Saturday: "Bipolar time is not rehabilitated out of its damage as much as it cares for what happens within the damage."[150] The rush to redemption and rehabilitation, which Sharon Betcher identifies as the collusion of Christian imperialism with biomedical regimes of the productive body, must be countered by "queer attentiveness."[151]

Rather than treating them either as medical pathologies to be cured in order to restore functioning under neoliberal capitalism, or as spiritual brokenness to be resolved through resurrection, Bray calls us to think with our "mad feelings," whether they are feelings of "extreme sensitivity to the world" or "extreme de-sensitivity."[152] Importantly, this entails a

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[145] Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*, 193.
[146] Karen Bray, *Grave Attending: A Political Theology for the Unredeemed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).
[147] Bray, *Grave Attending*, 148.
[148] Bray, *Grave Attending*, 25.
[149] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
[150] Bray, *Grave Attending*, 60.
[151] Bray, *Grave Attending*, 61.
[152] Bray, *Grave Attending*, 25.

reconfiguration of agency, away from the willing self-mastery of the contained individual subject and toward a "partial agency" enacted collectively.[153] If we are to value and care for one another in ways not structured by the totalizing demands of capitalist productivity and the curative imaginary, we may have to "give ourselves over to […] madness": "What if this craziness and this dream of another place came not only in a wild beyond, but also in a depressive attention to the everyday? Might a crazy beyond be a melancholic bad investing? Might it be a sociopathic refusal to be rehabilitated?"[154]

Betcher and Bray both provide models for how to do crip theology, and both point the path for crip theology to come. Theology influenced by crip theory must take seriously the heteronormativity of abledness (and the corollary queerness of disability and disabledness of queerness), the role of empire and capitalism in forming the abled subject, and the assumptions about impairment and embodiment that are too often taken for granted. Crip theology must wrestle with the afterlives of ontotheology that manifest in the global structures of neoliberal capitalism and their dis/abling effects. Cripping theology means decolonizing theology, never losing sight of how whiteness and empire (and their theological history, underpinnings, and aftereffects) shape what is deemed normal or abnormal, desirable or undesirable. Resisting easy answers, staying with the trouble, and attending to the bodymind in the world are all essential to the crip theological project of opposing the structures of empire and the internalized

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[153] Bray, *Grave Attending*, 61.
[154] Bray, *Grave Attending*, 103.

microfascisms empire produces. In these ways, crip theology uses the very aspects of our queercrip bodyminds that neoliberal capitalism deems "disabling" as sites for prophetic critique.

Trans/cripping theory

If crip theory brings together queer and disability studies to form its argument that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory abledness are co-constitutive, and if trans studies is, as Susan Stryker suggests, queer theory's "evil twin," it follows that a trans eye might be able to nuance crip theory in important (if not evil) ways. What interventions might a specifically trans approach bring to bear on crip theory? I suggest that crip scholars need to recognize that heterosexuality, and thus ability, is always already *cis*heterosexuality: to be legible as heterosexual, one must first and more fundamentally be legible as cis. The cisness of ability and the abledness of cisness become clear when we attend to a site where gender is capacitated, such as the public restroom. The very structure of the classic bathroom signage triptych – male, female, and disabled – signals the conceptual mutual exclusiveness of these categories: disability ungenders a person, removing them from the possibility of belonging to either recognized gender category; failure to fit into the gender binary disables a person, consigning them to the ungendered disability category. So trans/cripping both names something that is always already going on and attempts to sharpen our analysis by attending to both the material concerns shared by trans and disabled people and the conceptual co-imbrication of the categories of gender and abledness under racial capitalism and its neoliberal manifestations.

Though my concept of trans/cripping was initially formed independently of Alexandre Baril's, its subsequent development owes a debt to his important thought in this area. Baril has

paid particular attention to the realm of trans/crip temporality, identifying practical similarities in the ways that trans and disabled people experience time in non-normative ways through both subjective experience and sociopolitical barriers. Time is lost waiting for the accessible bathroom stall, limping, binding or tucking flesh; and time is lost educating others about access needs or pronouns, explaining your body to doctors and TSA agents, obtaining paperwork.[155] Time is also stretched and squeezed by the irregular rhythms of a trans or crip life: impatience for a treatment to begin, a sense of time lost or gained, the accelerated time of having to adjust quickly to new social roles and environments.[156] The slowness and flexibility of trans/crip time mark it as waste time, time that is "lost, expensive, and unproductive, both in the capitalist, neoliberal sense of the word and in terms of reproduction."[157]

Baril has noted that in general trans studies tends to assume an abled subject, while disability studies tends to assume a cis subject, and he stresses the importance of overcoming these assumptions, not least because there are plenty of disabled trans people in the world.[158] He observes that many aspects of transness manifest aspects of disability: gender dysphoria can cause acute mental distress; in some parts of the world, sterilization is required before legal gender recognition can be obtained; complications from genital surgeries are common – and yet transness and disability are still too rarely considered together. In Baril's account, a major reason

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[155] Alexandre Baril, "Doctor, Am I an Anglophone Trapped in a Francophone Body?: An Intersection Analysis of 'Trans-crip-t' Time in Ableist, Cisnormative, Anglonormative Societies," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 10.2 (2016): 161.

[156] Alexandre Baril, "Temporalité trans: Identité de genre, temps transitoire et éthique médiatique," *Enfances familles générations* 27 (2017), online.

[157] Baril, "Doctor, Am I an Anglophone," 162.

[158] Alexandre Baril, "Needing to Acquire a Physical Impairment/Disability: (Re)Thinking the Connections between Trans and Disability Studies Through Transability," trans. Catriona LeBlanc, *Hypatia* 30.1 (2015): 30-48.

for this gap in thought is that disability studies takes for granted that disabilities are "involuntary," while transition is "voluntary."[159] Baril makes the important and provocative move of connecting transness with "transability" – that is, wishing to acquire a disability, whether through amputation, blinding, deafening, or other means. Even more so than transsexuality, transability troubles the distinction between voluntary and involuntary (and its medical framing as elective versus necessary treatment).

Another significant writer on trans and disability is Eli Clare, whose work is particularly notable for his interest in the rural, "natural" world and how a trans disabled body interacts with it,[160] as well as for his nuanced engagement with ideas of cure and healing.[161] He explores the profound ambivalence toward the medical establishment that many trans and disabled people feel: many of us rely on medical science for the treatments and therapies that alleviate pain and distress and facilitate our living in the world, and yet – precisely because of this intimate relation and dependence with the systems in question – we have first-hand experience of the immiseration they can cause, from battling an insurance company to knowing more about your condition(s) than your doctor does. Interrogating the curative imaginary does not mean rejecting all treatment (or even declining the magic panacea pill of countless hypotheticals), but it does mean inhabiting a critical stance toward the medical system and cultivating the ability to recognize what possibilities the curative imaginary renders unthinkable.

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[159] Baril, "Needing to Acquire," 37.
[160] Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, rev. ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
[161] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Other thinkers who must be mentioned here are Mel Chen and Jasbir Puar. Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*[162] superbly analyzes the entanglements of transness, disability, materiality, animality, affect, and race. Chen examines "animacy hierarchies" that frame "which things can or cannot affect – or be affected by – which other things within a specific scheme of possible action":[163] while the dominant animacy hierarchy encourages us to accept as self-evident the classifying of certain things as more affective, more animate, and more alive than other things, Chen probes the failures and leakages of this system in order to explore the webs of animacies that operate in and among monkeys and metals. In their analysis of "the constant interabsorption of animate and inanimate bodies in the case of airborne pollution," they place a queercrip emphasis on "the physical nonintegrity of individual bodies and the merging of forms of 'life' and 'nonlife.'"[164] Their discussion of queer, racialized, and sexual animals "makes use of the simultaneous mobility, stasis, and border violation shared among transgender spaces and other forms of trans-being: transnationality, transraciality, translation, transspecies."[165] Ultimately, Chen's project pursues the trans/crip goals of "opening to the senses of the world, receptivity, vulnerability."[166]

Puar too considers race, transness, and disability together, though with a focus on international geopolitics and war. Guided by recognition that the binary of ability/disability is an inadequate hermeneutic, as well as rightful suspicion of the rehabilitation of certain disabled

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[162] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
[163] Chen, *Animacies*, 30.
[164] Chen, *Animacies*, 11.
[165] Chen, *Animacies*, 128.
[166] Chen, *Animacies*, 237.

subjects within a neoliberal framework, Puar proposes "that the three vectors, capacity, debility, and disability, exist in a mutually reinforcing constellation, are often overlapping or coexistent, and that debilitation is a necessary component."[167] Debility names that which is obscured and even produced by neoliberal inclusion of disability,[168] particularly in the case of the global south, in which debility is dealt by the environmental racism, warmongering, and neocolonial extraction policies of the global north. As she observes, "some are living the disability that does not get codified or recognized as such."[169] Puar is particularly interested in the Foucauldian processes through which bodies become ability-machines,[170] and much of her analysis is dedicated to unmasking the production of queer bodies in particular as ability-machines. She describes "the new transnormative body" whose apparent transgressiveness is in reality an artifact of the neoliberal "commodification … of plasticity."[171] Puar's framing will be extremely important in the coming chapters, particularly her invocation of Hortense Spillers to describe how "whiteness is … constitutive of the consolidation of gender-normative yet disabled difference."[172] In Puar's words, "The potential for gender differentiation *in the first instance* is already the potential – indeed the capacitation – of whiteness; the capacity to lean into gender 'undecidability,' the province of that same whiteness"[173] – or, as will become clear over the coming chapters of this

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[167] Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), xv.

[168] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xvi.

[169] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 12.

[170] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 14.

[171] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 46.

[172] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 39.

[173] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 40.

project, cisness (and in some cases its strategic transgression) is a prosthetic technology that capacitates whiteness.

One way for trans/cripping to proceed begins with cripping trans theory and transing crip theory. What insights could a crip perspective bring to bear on Eva Hayward's analysis of the cripple and the starfish,[174] or to Calvin Warren's framing of blackness as ontologically mute? What understandings could arise from putting Alison Kafer's chapter on Ashley X in conversation with trans youth who are often refused hormonal treatments they have explicitly requested, as well as intersex infants who are still too often subjected to medically unnecessary cosmetic surgeries? How could Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting contribute to thinking about gender misfits? In addressing questions such as these, trans/cripping deploys the tools of trans theory with and through the tools of crip theory: interrogating the cisheterosexuality of abledness; analyzing how racial capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal manifestations, capacitates the gendered subject; and denaturalizing assumptions about the meanings of sex and gender, impairment and disability, the body, and humanity itself. With critical intersex scholarship as a valuable partner, chapter 3 will apply a trans/crip lens to biomedical technologies of gender in order to excavate their ideological and theological underpinnings.

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[174] Discussed briefly by Chen, *Animacies*, 152-4.

Trans/cripping theology

I hope that this chapter so far has successfully argued for (i) the importance of trans and

crip theory generally, (ii) their untapped potential for theology, and (iii) the unique value of the

lens I am calling trans/crip. It is my hope that the remaining chapters will demonstrate just one

small example of the possibilities of trans/cripping theology – something that has yet to be

attempted in any detail. To date, the only theologian I know of who works at the intersection of

transgender and disability is Susannah Cornwall, who focuses primarily on intersex. Cornwall

carefully differentiates trans and disability concerns from intersex ones while also noting their

points of overlap. In "'State of Mind' versus 'Concrete Set of Facts': The Contrasting of

Transgender and Intersex in Church Documents on Sexuality,"[175] she is critical of the church

documents' tendency to mobilize intersex as material, embodied, and "real" in contrast with the

psychological, and thus less real, condition of being trans. This approach reinforces a naïve

mind-body dualism, ignores the ways in which "biological sex" (including intersex) is a matter

of social construction and interpretation, and instrumentalizes intersex people as a foil for trans

people, rather than attending to them as people in their own right. A more robust engagement

with intersex scholarship will follow in chapter 3, since, as Cornwall rightly notes, it is crucial

for our thinking about gendered embodiment to account for intersex bodies without objectifying

and instrumentalizing them. Cornwall's 2010 book *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*[176]

explores both the uses and limitations of trans and disability approaches to intersex; however, it

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[175] Susannah Cornwall, "'State of Mind' versus 'Concrete Set of Facts': The Contrasting of Transgender and Intersex in Church Documents on Sexuality," *Theology & Sexuality* 15.1 (2009): 7-28.
[176] Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ* (Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2010).

does not engage with crip theory, and the abundance of superb work in trans and crip theory that has appeared in the past decade demands further engagement. A trans/crip lens will also provide deeper interrogation of the role of racial capitalism in capacitating the gendered subject, as well as an exploration of posthumanist possibilities.

Trans/cripping the *tselem Elohim* entails expanding on chapter 1's discussion of a radically relational image. This radically relational image attempted to overcome biocentrism and recognize the image-bearing relationality of all matter, but it also attended to the nonrelation within relation and the paradox of God the *sinthomo*sexual. A trans/crip lens on the radically relational image leans into the paradox and disruption: what happens to the image of God when we recognize the disability inherent to God the *sinthomo*sexual? How might the trans/crip God disable the totalizing theologies we erect in His [sic] name? Could the disability drive express the processes through which God turns Godself inside out and thereby creates? How can we seek to decolonize the image of God in the quest for a trans/crip posthumanist affective mattering? This will certainly entail examining the historical material processes by which discourses of image have legitimated violence and suppression: manipulation and misprision of the image of God have been, and in many ways continue to be, the underpinnings of the racial-capitalist capacitation machine of gendering. Chapter 3 will explore this in detail, with a view toward promoting an alternative understanding of the image that delights in the polymorphous perversities of matter.

CHAPTER THREE

REMADE IN WHICH IMAGE?:

CAPACITATING GENDER THROUGH BIOMEDICALIZATION

Promise that you're okay with my gender coming from violence. …
Promise me that you will allow me to narrate the story of my body.[1]

The goal of this chapter is to use a trans/crip lens to make visible the theological-anthropological

presuppositions that underlie the capacitation of gender through biomedical technologies. As

detailed in chapter 2, a trans/crip lens involves looking for ways to interrogate cisness and its

interrelation with abledness; accounting for how racial capitalism and its neoliberal

manifestations capacitate gendered subjects; and denaturalizing body, sex/gender,

impairment/disability, humanity. I begin with a historical analysis of the development of the

biomedicalization of gender in two stages: first, the medicalization of gender in the processes of

intersexualization; second, biomedicalization through transsexualization. Both stages

demonstrate the role of racialization and colonization in the formation of the US sex/gender

biomedicalization system, which hinges on capacitation for bio- and necropolitical purposes of

nation-making. I then proceed to examine these ideologies in theological terms, specifically

using the framework of theological anthropology developed in chapter 1: intersexualization and

medicalized gender can be understood to reflect a substantialist interpretation of the image of

God, while transsexualization and biomedicalized gender reflect a relational interpretation. The

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[1] Alok Vaid-Menon, "Transmisogyny," in *Vetch* 1 (2015): 19-20.

inadequacies of both must be understood in order to lay the groundwork for a radically relational trans/crip theological anthropology of affective assemblage.

The Biomedicalization of Gender

For the most part, I follow in the feminist tradition exemplified by Kessler and McKenna[2] in using "gender" rather than "sex," partly for the purposes of destabilizing the givenness of biological "sex." Gender is fraught, messy, elusive, contradictory, and deeply implicated in violent biocertificatory regimes; I think that acknowledging this history makes it *more* useful as a term, not less as some feminists contend,[3] since other terminology is equally messy and non-innocent but may more easily be used to obscure this history.

There is an instructive connection between the sex/gender split and the impairment/disability split. In both instances, the separation of the two terms has been promoted by those interested in liberation, as a way to distinguish the social meanings placed upon bodies from the physical differences those bodies possess. In the first case, separating gender from sex enabled feminists to identify and challenge the social roles, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices laid upon bodies deemed female; it then enabled queer thinkers to theorize from and about bodies of one sex that engaged in practices associated with a different sex. By analogy, disability theorists and activists separated impairment from disability in the development of the social model, which argues that bodies are disabled not by the value-neutral material fact of a bodily variation (such as lacking legs) but by negative social attitudes, discrimination, and

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[2] Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 7.
[3] Jemima Repo, *The Biopolitics of Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

inaccessible environments (such as multi-story buildings that lack wheelchair ramps and operative elevators).

This intervention has been crucial for fostering disability consciousness and solidarity, fighting for access, and inviting critical reflection on what exactly is considered negative about having a disability and how the downsides might be ameliorated. So it is a fact that in both cases the distinction between the physical body and the socially constructed meanings laid upon it – the distinction between sex and impairment on the one hand, and gender and disability on the other – has been used to great effect for advancing the rights and life possibilities of women, queer people, and disabled people. However, it is also true that, as the distinction has become widespread, it has been uncritically reified with unfortunate consequences. When taken for granted, the splitting apart of sex and gender or of impairment and disability can end up reinstalling the very hierarchical dualisms they aimed to displace: the discursive construction of gender or disability becomes the site of all theorizing, and the physical "fact" of sex or impairment is assumed to be self-evident. In this way, the body's status as sexed or impaired is taken as natural or unconstructed, occluding the fact that the assigning of sex or impairment to a body is an *intervention*, something that is *done* to the body. What we see when we look at the body is framed by the heuristics of "sex" and "impairment" that underwrite our language, culture, society, legal and medical systems. Too narrow a focus on the social construction of gender and disability can hamper our ability to recognize that sex and impairment are *also* socially constructed, and that they are therefore also implicated in the regimes of racial capitalism that structure our norms of embodiment.

Analogy, however, cannot fully explain the connection between the sex/gender split and the impairment/disability split. Their mutual entanglement will become clear through an examination of how gender became biomedicalized, which will show that the twentieth-century development of the sex/gender split was always a matter of impairment and disability: of the disabling of sexes and the gendering of impairments.

In their now-classic 2003 essay and their subsequent development of it into a hefty 2010 reader,[4] Clarke et al. describe biomedicalization as a process that has not fully superseded medicalization but has "extended and reconstituted" it,[5] if in uneven and stratified ways.[6] Medicalization names the modernist paradigm of attempting to control socially unruly problems – such as drug addiction or obesity – by redefining them as medical conditions; whereas biomedicalization takes a postmodernist focus on transformation of the body or life.[7] Biomedicalization is characterized by five processes:

> (1) the political economic constitution of the Biomedical TechnoService Complex Inc.; (2) the focus on health itself and elaboration of risk and surveillance biomedicines; (3) the increasingly technoscientific nature of the practices and innovations of biomedicine; (4) transformations of biomedical knowledge production, information management, distribution, and consumption; and (5) transformations of bodies to include new properties and the production of new individual and collective technoscientific identities.[8]

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[4] Adele E. Clarke, Laura Mamo, Jennifer Ruth Fosket, Jennifer R. Fishman, and Janet K. Shim, eds., *Biomedicalization: Technoscience, Health, and Illness in the U.S.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[5] Clarke et al., *Biomedicalization*, 47.

[6] Clarke et al., *Biomedicalization*, 83.

[7] Clarke et al., *Biomedicalization*, 55.

[8] Clarke et al., *Biomedicalization*, 49.

The political economy they dub Biomedical TechnoService Complex Inc. is

"*corporatized* and *privatized* (rather than state-funded),"[9] as well as increasingly globalized,

specialized, and stratified. In a two-page chart, the authors provide an overview of "the shift

from medicalization to biomedicalization," of which I reproduce only the final section on

"transformations of bodies and identities":[10]

MEDICALIZATION	BIOMEDICALIZATION
CONTROL	TRANSFORMATION
Normalization	Customization
Universal Taylorized bodies; one-size-fits-all medical devices/technologies and drugs; superficially (including cosmetically) modified bodies	Individualized bodies; niche-marketed and individualized drugs and devices/technologies; customized, tailored, and fundamentally transformed bodies
From badness to sickness; stigmatization of conditions and diseases	*Also* new technoscientifically-based individual and collective identities, and biosocialities

In an expansion of the chart spanning 14 full pages of the reader, Clarke et al. compare

numerous aspects of medical structures, ideas, and practices across three eras: the rise of

medicine ca. 1890-1945, medicalization ca. 1940-90, and biomedicalization 1985-present.[11] This

later development and refinement of the biomedicalization thesis is a valuable reminder that, like

any classificatory schema, this one is partial and subject to correction. My purpose here is not to

cling dogmatically to a rigid framework, but to sketch broad trajectories and imperfect analogies,

in hopes of generating new insights.

This framework is particularly useful for thinking through the (bio)medicalization of

gender, and it is enhanced by a trans/crip lens. As described in chapter 2, trans/cripping names an

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[9] Clarke et al., *Biomedicalization*, 57 (emphases in original).

[10] Clarke et al., *Biomedicalization*, 54.

[11] Clarke et al., *Biomedicalization*, 90-103.

approach that brings the insights of trans and crip theory to bear in a way that recognizes the intertwinement of gender and ability, interrogates the role of biopolitical forces in their constitution, and attempts to denaturalize commonsense assumptions about the body and humanity. Viewed through a trans/crip lens, biomedicalization clearly involves the management and differential distribution of capacitation according to the racialized dictates of neoliberal capitalism. Gender is a particularly important vector or modality of this capacitation, and so a trans/crip analysis of the medicalization and biomedicalization of gender will serve to demonstrate one way that capacity is managed and distributed in service of capital.

Intersexualization: the medicalization of gender

In his remarkable book *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*,[12] Hil Malatino places intersexuality at the heart of the modern (bio)medical construction of gender and sexuality as disciplinary processes. The story of the invention of "gender" as such is the story of sexually deviant bodies and behaviors being rehabilitated back into reproductive heterosexuality. Malatino refers to these deviant bodies as "queer corporealities: bodies that don't cohere according to cis-centric, sexually dimorphic, ableist conceptions of somatic normalcy."[13] Religious, legal, medical, and scientific institutions have sought to manage and contain queer corporealities, primarily concerning reproduction. Reproduction must here be understood in an expansive sense, encompassing not only sexual reproduction but also (and, as we will see, sometimes more importantly) social reproduction. The

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[12] Hil Malatino, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

[13] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 2.

administration of bio- and necropolitics – the management of society writ large, in the material

sense of the distribution of resources and in the underlying theopolitical decision-making about

which people are rendered disposable and which are not – is structured around the reproduction

of social institutions and behaviors, and so queer corporealities that threaten this reproduction are

key sites of intervention and control. The significance of intersexuality to the construction and

disciplining of gender and sexuality has not always been recognized; but if we are to understand

the medicalization of gender, we must attend to "the utilization of intersex bodies as impossible

objects, as limit-figures that become interred in the ground upon which legitimate, recognizable,

and acceptable sexed bodies are built."[14]

Histories of intersex tend to note that contested interpretations of intersex bodies date

back to antiquity, with divergent understandings found in the Hippocratic and Aristotelian

traditions. The Hippocratic view imagines a continuum between the poles of male and female,

with the intersex body falling in between; whereas the Aristotelian model envisions maleness

and femaleness as non-contiguous qualities that are both possessed by the intersex body, which

is thus a site not of intermediacy but of excess – "an overabundance of genetic material," in

Alice Dreger's gloss.[15] Dreger suggests that, unlike the bothness inherent to the etymology of the

older and no longer accepted term "hermaphrodite," the very language of "intersex" implicitly

endorses the Hippocratic perspective.[16] (The question of terminology will receive more attention

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[14] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 4.
[15] Alice Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 32; discussions of the Hippocratic and Aristotelian perspectives on intersexuality can also be found in Katrina Karzakis, *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority and Lived Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 33, and Lena Eckert, *Intersexualization: The Clinic and the Colony* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 16-17.
[16] Dreger, *Hermaphrodites*, 31.

below; for now, I will note only that "intersex" seems to be the least bad option. As Eckert ruefully points out, the paradox of discussing intersexuality is that "[i]n order to remain intelligible, one needs to repeat the medical taxonomies even though they will be reinstalled as legitimate and thus reproduced."[17]) The assorted premodern and early modern approaches to intersexuality are fascinating, but largely beyond the scope of this chapter.[18] Like Malatino, I am particularly interested in how the processes of medicalization transformed queer corporealities from monstrous things of wonder into the merely "abnormal,"[19] and specifically into "disabilities."[20]

Prior to the onset of medicalization as such, which Clarke et al. date to approximately 1940, was the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which they dub "the rise of medicine," in which the professionalization of medicine solidified and strengthened. During this period, probably influenced by the new visibility of feminists and homosexuals in social movements that threatened the heteropatriarchal order, the increasingly empowered medical professionals evince a spike in interest in "hermaphrodites" – specifically, in finding a way to determine their "true sex" in order to manage, and preferably eliminate, ambiguity.[21] The heterosexual matrix, not yet separated into its constitutive trinity of sex/gender/sexuality, may ultimately be said to rest upon intersexualization: the medical processes of identifying and classifying, in order to control and eradicate, the anatomical basis of divergence from cisheterosexuality. These processes are most clearly manifest in two historical events: first, the

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[17] Eckert, *Intersexualization*, 8.
[18] For details, see Dreger, *Hermaphrodites*; Karzakis, *Fixing Sex*; and Eckert, *Intersexualization*.
[19] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 4.
[20] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 47.
[21] Dreger, *Hermaphrodites*, 26.

reclassification of the vast majority of "hermaphrodites" as "pseudohermaphrodites" whose anatomically "true" sex may be identified; and secondly, through the development of "gender" as we know it, as a biopolitical technology of capacitation.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, there was not yet a transnational medical consensus on the classification of sexually ambiguous bodies. An individual might have been diagnosed with "first class neuter hermaphrodism" in France, only to cross the channel and find themself merely a "spurious hermaphrodite" in Britain.[22] It was Theodor Klebs' 1876 taxonomy, however, that reigned supreme in what Dreger designates "the Age of Gonads." As expounded upon and disseminated by an influential 1896 article by George Blacker and Thomas Lawrence, the Klebs system pinpointed the locus of "true sex" in the anatomical structure of the gonadal tissue. Microscopic examination of this tissue would determine definitively if an intersex individual was a "feminine pseudohermaphrodite" possessed of ovarian tissue, a "masculine pseudohermaphrodite" with testicular tissue, or – in exceedingly rare cases (thought by some at the time to not even exist) – a "true hermaphrodite" whose ovotestis had both.

The implications of this seemingly pedantic taxonomic hairsplitting were profound: first, the vast majority of cases of hermaphroditism, both historical and contemporary, could be reclassified as instances of "true" males or females who only *appeared* to be ambiguously sexed; and secondly, the technology for examining gonadal tissue at this time required either castration or death of the individual under scrutiny, making it almost impossible to know for certain that

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[22] Dreger, *Hermaphrodites*, 142-3.

someone was a true hermaphrodite while they were alive.[23] While other markers of maleness or femaleness would continue to be used in the assignment of gender – genital morphology, facial and body hair, breasts or lack thereof, the direction of sexual desire, and so forth – there was now a definitive, singular, scientific answer to the question of what fundamentally makes a person male or female, and it conveniently banished the alternative ("true" hermaphroditism) from existence almost entirely. For Malatino, this laser focus on the gonadal tissue marks a crucial moment in the move from earlier understandings of intersex as a kind of monstrous mixity to the modern perspective that it is mere medical abnormality. This is a profound ontological shift, making intersex intelligible within the framework of western science, rather than a confounding mystery at the limits – and, as the price of intelligibility, making "the enactment of something like intersex subjectivity" impossible: "One can be intersex but only if it's a trait or disorder; one is always, despite being intersex, also irrevocably male or female – and it's the job of modern Western medical science to discern which of those one is."[24] Intersex has been made to disappear, subordinated to a cisheterosexual ontology in which "male" and "female" are accorded the status of theological truth, and any deviation from this fundamental dimorphism is a statistically insignificant aberration that I propose can only be understood in relation to the underlying theological anthropology: "male and female [exclusively and discretely] God created them."

If the consecration of the gonadal tissue is the prerequisite for the medicalization of gender, the full flowering of this medicalization occurs in the mid-twentieth century. Earlier

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[23] Dreger, *Hermaphrodites*, 149.
[24] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 53.

sexology had deployed an assortment of sexual taxa to make sense of those whose gendered behaviors and sexual desires did not conform to a strictly cisheterosexual norm: distinguishing up to four orders of sex characteristics, separating "anatomical" from "functional" sex, or writing of "sex roles" or "sexual behavior."[25] By the 1940s, the importance of "psychological sex" had been established as a mechanism for mediating the (mis)match between anatomical sex and gendered behaviors, and a psychosexual model would guide the influential work of John Money and his collaborators, who developed treatment protocols for intersexuality that would dominate until 2006.[26]

A great deal has been written about Money, and I have no space to expand upon the existing literature on this strange and fascinating figure. In a nutshell: John Money was a psychologist who wrote his doctoral dissertation in the early 1950s on "Hermaphroditism: An Inquiry into the Nature of a Human Paradox," and who would go on to shape the formation and medicalization of gender in the twentieth century. For Money, there was no singular biological determinant of "true sex," but rather a half-dozen variables which, in the vast majority of cases, presented no contradiction. Trouble arose when one or more of these characteristics – "assigned sex and sex of rearing, external genital morphology, internal accessory reproductive structures, hormonal sex and secondary sexual characteristics, gonadal sex, and chromosomal sex"[27] – failed to align with the others. In order to resolve the mismatch presented by intersexuality, Money united earlier work on "sex roles" with psychologist Robert Stoller's coinage of "gender

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[25] Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.

[26] Karzakis, *Fixing Sex*, chapter 1.

[27] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 91.

identity" and wrote of "gender-identity/role": one's self-understanding as male or female and self-disclosure as such. This formulation, as Malatino notes, "opens onto the realm of the performative,"[28] offering a glimpse of the Butlerian understanding of gender as constituted by and through repeated acts – but Money's ideological commitments led him in a very different direction than Butler. So far from queer poststructuralist feminism, Money was guided by what Malatino aptly names "heteronormative morphological pragmatism."[29]

Recognizing that it was seemingly impossible to alter an adult's gender identity through psychotherapy or other means, Money focused on shaping the gender identity of the intersex infant, which he believed to be thoroughly malleable up until the age of eighteen months. Parents and doctors together should assign a gender to the infant, chosen largely on the basis of what was surgically pragmatic. In practice, this meant female more often than not, due to both heteronormativity and phallocentrism: when the infant's projected adult sex life is assumed to center on penis-in-vagina intercourse, sexual "function" is defined solely through the ability of the penis to penetrate or of the vagina to be penetrated, and ensuring the latter was less surgically complicated. Money believed that being a boy with an "abnormal" penis was more psychologically damaging than being a girl with a surgically constructed vagina – even if that vagina had little to no sensation and had to be painfully dilated throughout childhood.[30] The result would be a hyperreal heterosexuality: penetrative sex that precluded the possibility of both procreation and female pleasure, but served its primary purpose of banishing the specter of

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[28] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 92.
[29] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 94.
[30] Sharon E. Preves, *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 53.

nonheterosexuality and thereby reinforcing the participants' normality. This horizon of

heterosexual normality was the promised future against which parents mortgaged their babies'

bodies and behavior: as long as the parents consistently reinforced the assigned gender, Money

assured them, the child would grow up to be psychologically healthy and heterosexual – which,

in the social order of the postwar US, were near synonymous.

It is important to understand precisely what problem Money was attempting to solve. The

mismatch of sex characteristics named intersexuality is not first and foremost a health problem.

There is universal agreement that, in those cases in which intersex conditions do present a direct

threat to life or health (an inability to eliminate waste, for instance), medical intervention to

address the threat is appropriate and desirable. The "problem" presented by intersexuality as such

is its threat to the givenness of the cisnormative dimorphic sex/gender system, and above all to

the heterosexuality that this system enables and enforces. Money was not primarily interested in

assigning sex based on gonadal tissue, as were the luminaries in the Age of Gonads; nor was he

interested in challenging cisnormativity or prioritizing the autonomy of the intersex child, as

queer theorists have proceeded to do – he was interested in the reproduction of heterosexuality

and the associated social forms.[31] In fact, social reproduction was so crucial that physical

reproduction could be sacrificed on its altar: surgery that eliminated the possibility of an infant's

future fertility was considered acceptable if the infant genitalia would thereby be made to look

"normal."[32] The problem for Money was that the aesthetics of the intersex body might be a

stumbling block to the development of healthy heterosexual subjectivity (psychological health

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[31] Eckert, *Intersexualization,* 61.
[32] Eckert, *Intersexualization*, 61.

and heterosexuality being inextricable); the solution was surgical "normalization" coupled with a behaviorist indoctrination into the associated gender. Gender in its current sense – as role and identity, distinct from and yet signifying sex – is a coinage of the clinic, specifically in the context of disciplining gender-ambiguous bodies into good heterosexual members of society.

Here, a crucial intervention is signaled by Lena Eckert's subtitle, *Intersexualization: The Clinic and the Colony*. The whiteness and coloniality of the western gender system are sometimes marked only superficially, by making cross-cultural comparisons to show that other ways of framing gender are possible; but Eckert makes their centrality clear: "It is not the fact of male and female that produces a third – the intersexualized body – but the very processes of intersexualization that produce white hegemonic heteronormative maleness/masculinity and femaleness/femininity as natural and normal."[33] That male and female are "normal," and intersex a rare variant, is not the self-evident fact it is often presented as, but rather the product of classificatory schema embedded in western socioscientific practices born in the context of white supremacist social and reproductive control. The histories of the clinic and the colony are intertwined.

Eckert describes a particularly arresting instance of intersexualization, which is worth analyzing at length because it implicates Robert Stoller, originator of the term "gender identity," which has become taken for granted in liberal spaces today. It should perhaps give us pause that a term so common in trans-inclusive parlance comes from a figure whose subsequent work on sex and gender exemplified the colonizing western gaze. In 1983, Stoller and his collaborator

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[33] Eckert, *Intersexualization*, 10.

Gilbert Herdt conducted anthropological research in Papua New Guinea, where they deceived and pathologized a shaman whom they suspected of being intersex, in order to elicit details he was reluctant to share, and thus to classify him according to the western scientific sex/gender paradigm.[34] Apparently, the first indicator of his suspected intersexuality was his reputation as "an enthusiastic and skillful fellator."[35] While this is an obvious instance of the mid-twentieth-century clinical linkage of non-heterosexuality with intersexuality, it is also quintessentially colonial: it hardly seems likely that an American psychoanalyst would have imputed intersex status to an enthusiastic fellator in the context of, say, a San Francisco bathhouse, quite as readily as he did when the fellatio occurred in the context of indigenous initiation rites.

The unintelligibility of indigenous religiosexual practices to western eyes is concretized as a sexually unintelligible indigenous body. Herdt and Stoller are mostly interested in how they might clinically classify the shaman's body, but to unearth the details of his anatomy they tell him that they want to know about his work as a shaman.[36] They also give him to understand that Stoller too is both intersex and a kind of shaman,[37] using both medical/anatomical and religious/cultural lies to put the indigenous shaman at ease so that he will speak more freely. The intersexualization of the shaman occurs through this set of colonial/clinical practices: the extraction of indigenous resources for the enrichment of the west (in this case, publishable academic research); the imposition of the western medical paradigm as the arbiter of truth; the use of western deceit to uncover information concealed by indigenous practices and self-

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[34] Eckert, *Intersexualization*, chapter 4.
[35] Quoted on Eckert, *Intersexualization*, 141.
[36] Eckert, *Intersexualization*, 139.
[37] Eckert, *Intersexualization*, 141.

understandings. "Whenever the differently sexed savage is constructed in cross-cultural intersexualization, two interdependent processes are at work: racialization and sexualization. Both processes pathologize that which is not 'fully' developed – the one as civilized and the other as heterosexual."[38] As we saw in chapter 2's discussion of Kyla Schuller's and Riley Snorton's work, cisheterosexuality is a technology of whiteness because only the white race was considered advanced enough to have perfected gender difference; intersexualization names and tames a challenge to this differentiation.

Herdt and Stoller's treatment of the shaman is particularly egregious, but the coloniality of the clinic is embedded in more insidious ways too. For one thing, the well-intentioned cross-cultural survey of non-western gender/sexuality systems can inadvertently end up reinforcing the western gender binary. Lumping nonbinary gender categories together does not "challenge the Western categorization of sexuality but reiterate[s] its parameters by positioning the sexuality of the 'other' as 'other.'"[39] The common practice of referring to other genders, implicitly or explicitly, as "third gender" serves to reinforce the naturalness and primacy of male and female as the first two genders. This is another manifestation of what Malatino describes as the subordination of intersex to a cisheterosexual ontology. Eckert's critique of the category of "the Third" resonates with Malatino's critique of the medical language of DSD (disorders of sex development) in place of intersex, introduced in 2005 and adopted in many medical contexts since. For Malatino, the terminology of DSD "presumes typical cisgender embodiments of

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[38] Eckert, *Intersexualization*, 206.
[39] Eckert, *Intersexualization*, 195.

maleness and femaleness as the be-all and end-all of nonpathological forms of embodiment."[40]

Both cases tame the Other – the third genders or the intersex conditions – by fencing them off

from the untouched reified dimorphism of "male and female," so that they present no real

challenge to the norm. Similarly to how the medical model of disability locates the problem of

disability in the anatomy of the individual body and seeks to correct it in line with a presumed

norm, Malatino argues that classifying intersexuality as DSDs ignores the larger social context

that produces bodily meaning and focuses too narrowly on the medical context.[41] And yet the

medical context is perhaps not so narrow as all that: the treatment protocols for intersex children

require constant parental monitoring and surveillance in order to reinforce the assigned gender,

thus turning the nuclear family into a colonial outpost of the clinic.

The last important piece necessary to understanding intersexualization as the

medicalization of gender is the operation of debilitation and capacitation. Intersexualization may

be understood as the process of debilitation *in order to* then capacitate. To diagnose a body as

intersex is to dis-able it, sometimes literally: Sharon Preves records the horrifying piece of

medical slang "hypospadias cripples" used by doctors to refer to "patients who experience

ongoing and debilitating iatrogenic, or medically induced, complications as a result of surgery on

the urinary tract" – surgery often undertaken for aesthetic rather than functional reasons.[42] But

the disablement enacted by intersexualization is larger-scale than surgical complications, as

devastating as those are: "intersex" names a body incapable of intelligibility within the

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[40] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 74.
[41] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 80.
[42] Preves, *Intersex and Identity*, 31.

framework of heterosexuality and its entwined co-constitutor capitalism.[43] As such, to be intersex is to be debilitated under global neoliberalism: to have a social role, to be legally and politically recognized, to be a laborer, requires biocertification as either male or female. The intersex individual must therefore be rehabilitated into legible cisheterosexuality in order to be capacitated as a member of society and a future economic and social contributor. Intersex bodies are produced through the colony/clinic's workings to discipline flesh into the (socially) reproductive forms Male and Female, which together comprise "heterosexuality," a technology for the maintenance and naturalization and reproduction of whiteness. To be intersex as such is to be unintelligible to the heterosexual matrix and thus to require chopping up and reassembling in intelligible form. Thus, intersexualization is one of the ways whiteness produces its own offcuts which must then be circumscribed, neutralized, and reabsorbed (like the dough around the edges of the cookie cutter). Intersexualization produces debilitated bodies so that it might rehabilitate them. Like the Remade criminals of Bas-Lag introduced in my Introduction, those who are intersexualized are interpellated as threats to the social order and bodily refashioned so that they might be intelligible within this social order.

Transsexualization: the biomedicalization of gender

If the processes of intersexualization, reaching their pinnacle mid-century, demonstrate the medicalization of gender (with its drive toward medicalizing previously unmedicalized social problems, its focus on normalization, its production of one-size-fits-all treatment protocols), the

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[43] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), discussed in chapter 2 above.

*bio*medicalization of gender is better demonstrated through the phenomena of medical transition. In the twentieth century, critiques of transness – even friendly ones – tended to frame transition as medicalization par excellence: for example, Kessler and McKenna, in a text that is otherwise fairly generous to trans people, claim that transsexuality is merely a tool for medical science to enforce a genital-based gender binary and would not exist in a society that could tolerate a mismatch between genitals and gender identity, even when this claim requires them to ignore the very words of the transsexuals they interviewed.[44] Today, it seems, critics are more likely to see transition as biomedicalization par excellence, whether as self-indulgent individualism or as capitulation to the demands of neoliberalism. I think that it is a misplacing of emphasis to single out trans people as uniquely culpable "dupes of gender,"[45] as well as a misattribution of agency to blame individuals' capitulation rather than neoliberal powers' cooptation – but there is a germ of truth in the framing of medical transition as biomedicalization, which can be explored through the use of a trans/crip analysis of transsexualization.

Parallel to Eckert's formulation of intersexualization to name the racialized processes of medicalizing queer corporealities, I suggest *transsexualization* to name the racialized processes of biomedicalizing queer corporealities. Just as biomedicalization, in Clarke et al.'s account, does not fully displace medicalization, but coexists with it throughout an extended and ongoing period of messy overlap and stratified supersession; so too, intersexualization and transsexualization should not be understood to periodize (bio)medical gender technologies in an

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[44] Kessler and McKenna, *Gender*, 120-124.
[45] Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 140.

orderly, linear, sequential fashion, but rather to identify one set of processes that broadly aligns with the medicalization paradigm (control, normalization, one-size-fits-all) and another that broadly aligns with the biomedicalization paradigm (transformation, customization, individualization). These processes do generally tend to be sequential in a person's life – intersexualization mostly takes place at birth or soon thereafter, whereas transsexualization occurs later – but even this generalization cannot be said to be universal, since intersex status is sometimes discovered at puberty, and the increasing prevalence of trans children complicates the valorization of autonomous self-actualization in the biomedicalization paradigm. Transsexualization names both the historical bio/medical coming into being of "transsexualism" as such, and the ongoing disciplinary processes of biomedical transition which are inextricably bound up in racial capitalism and global neoliberalism.

It makes sense to speak of transsexualization as a set of complex processes arising over decades because this is the historical trajectory of medical transition. The once popular, now quaint language of "sex change" evokes a unilateral bodily transformation, a triumph of medical technology in which an individual might lie down a man and wake up in every respect a woman; but this has never been an accurate depiction of transition, notwithstanding the fact that it makes for great soap-opera dramatics.[46] A later section of this chapter will address the experience of the processes of transsexualization in an individual's life, but here it is important to note that the unilateral transformation model is also not an accurate portrayal of the clinical invention of

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[46] I think fondly of the mid-aughts ABC dramedy series *Ugly Betty*, in which the character Alexis, undergoing extensive reconstructive surgery after a skiing accident, invites her medical team to throw in a full sex transformation along the way, thus rendering her unrecognizable to her estranged brother except for her eyes. Even Caitlyn Jenner's tabloid-savvy self-unveiling was not so melodramatic as this!

transsexuality. For most people, transition is piecemeal, ongoing, and a little chaotic; the same is true of the development of transition technologies.

In fact, hormonal and surgical transition technologies antedate the word "transsexual" by several decades. In the 1910s, Austrian physiologist Eugen Steinach was studying the effects of castration and ovary implantation on the sexual development of rats, and soon applied some of what he had learned to human subjects of testicle transplants. In a vivid illustration of the inextricable nature of gender and sexuality, some of the testicle transplants were attempts to cure homosexuality, on the theory that homosexuality was caused by insufficient masculinization.[47] While doctors in the US were reluctant to undertake elective hysterectomies and orchiectomies for those who requested them – Meyerowitz finds only one example of each during this period – European doctors in the 1910s and 1920s seem to have been performing these surgeries more regularly, eventually coalescing around Magnus Hirschfeld's Institut für Sexualwissenschaft in Berlin.[48] Changing one's gender was for many decades more possible in Europe than in the US, not because the technology did not exist in the States, but for social and ideological reasons: interwar Germany was a hub of movements for sexual emancipation, driven in part by the theory of universal bisexuality. Bisexuality here meant not a sexual orientation, but a potentiality for maleness and femaleness thought to reside in every person. In this perspective, pure maleness and pure femaleness were theoretical abstractions at the far ends of a spectrum along which every person existed in some degree of mixity. If the Hippocratic view of intersexuality placed intersex individuals on a continuum between the sexes, the theory of universal bisexuality

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[47] Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 17.
[48] Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 18.

located *all* individuals on this continuum. Meyerowitz argues that this is both a significant

departure from the Victorian insistence on two wholly discrete sexes, and an ideological

prerequisite for the development of transsexuality.[49]

The word "transsexual," shortened and anglicized from Kraft-Ebbing's sexological

diagnosis of *psychopathia transsexualis*, is generally recognized to have entered the US context

with the psychologist David O. Cauldwell's 1949 article on the topic[50] (though it should be noted

that Hirschfeld, and likely others who worked in conversation with him, had used the term

seelischer Transsexualismus or psychic transsexualism as early as the 1920s[51]). Cauldwell's

article clarified the distinction between homosexuality, intersexuality, and transsexuality in a

way that was rarely if ever found in US media at this time, but it was hardly a ringing

endorsement of medical transition: Cauldwell was profoundly skeptical of transsexual surgeries,

and strongly advocated for psychological treatment instead.[52] Even Harry Benjamin, the great

champion of transsexuals and namesake of the global organization for transgender care until its

2007 rebranding as the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, was extremely

cautious about recommending surgery, though he did encourage hormone replacement therapy

rather than the psychological conversion therapy promoted by Cauldwell.[53] While surgeries

continued to be performed in other parts of the world, postwar US medical professionals rarely if

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[49] Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 20-28.
[50] David O. Cauldwell, "Psychopathia Transexualis." *Sexology* 16.5 (1949): 274-280.
[51] Richard Ekins and Dave King, "Pioneers of Transgendering: The Popular Sexology of David O. Cauldwell," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 5.2 (2001).
[52] Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 42-44.
[53] Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 46.

ever provided them, even as they worked to create and delineate the diagnostic category of "transsexuality."

The most dramatic moment in US transsexual history is, of course, the 1952 coming out of Christine Jorgensen, who returned from medical treatment in Denmark to a barrage of possibly self-instigated publicity proclaiming her transformation: "EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY," the headlines famously screamed. Jorgensen brought "sex change" into the spotlight and made its possibility visible to both the US public at large and many individuals who had never before been able to articulate their own desire to transition. It is by now a truism to point out that Jorgensen exerted such a hold on the 1950s imagination precisely because her transition perfectly straddled the boundary between transgression and respectability; that she skillfully mobilized raced and class discourses of femininity to reinforce her womanhood in ways that would not have been accessible to women of color or of lower socioeconomic status; that, in ways she could never have anticipated, she contributed to the production of the One True Trans Narrative against which so many trans people (non-heterosexual, nonbinary, poor, etc.) have struggled for so long.[54] But it is worth reiterating the extent to which the enshrinement of Jorgensen as THE transsexual of the 1950s helped to frame and uphold the medical narrative of transsexuality in its raced and classed dimensions, including tropes that would dominate the popular *and medical* perspective on trans people for decades to come.

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[54] For a fuller elaboration of these points, see Emily Skidmore, "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press," *Feminist Studies* 37.2 (2011): 270-300.

At the same time, it is crucial to note that the dominant narrative of Respectable Transsexuality tells less than half the story. Stryker describes two divergent paths through the 50s, 60s, and 70s, the one of respectable transness, the other of the street queens.[55] Respectable transness – encompassing both medical transsexuality and non-medical transvestites, the latter led by Virginia Prince – sought inclusion and legal protection through strategies of assimilation. Like Jorgensen's inclusion, the path of respectable transness was premised on a whiteness and class status, and often heterosexuality, that is nonetheless frequently occluded in one-dimensional accounts of transness. The street queens, on the other hand, lacked both the markers of respectability and the desire to draw neat boundary lines around their identities. Street queens were more likely to be poor, to be people of color, to engage in sex work. Their history includes conscious enactments of what we would now call nonbinary identities decades before the popularization of that language, fluidity around hormone use and other technologies of medical transition, and a general refusal to reify identities. Both during the second wave of feminism and unto today, the Respectable Trans narrative is used to present trans people as dupes of gender, inherently regressive, non-threatening to gender norms – but this overlooks trans wiliness and disidentification,[56] as well as activism both within and against the medicolegal systems.

By the 90s, the pieces were in place for the full biomedicalization of gender. Cultural and linguistic trends developed the ideas of pomosexuality and the transgender umbrella, realigning "lesbians and gays" into fluid and playful "queers." Medical transition was subsumed into the

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[55] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2017), chapters 2 and 3.

[56] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*.

political economy of biomedicalization: "No trend had greater impact than the privatization of

medical treatment."[57] If in the wake of Christine Jorgensen transsexuals had to work hard to

convince medical professionals to provide transition treatment at all, in the past 30 years medical

transition has been defined primarily by attempting to convince insurance to cover treatment.

This was made more difficult by, first, the inclusion of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in 1980's

third edition of the psychiatric bible *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and

secondly the explicit exclusion of transsexuality from the protection of the 1990 Americans with

Disabilities Act (ADA). The invention of GID was not coupled with any push or requirement for

insurance plans to cover medical transition, while the ADA formalized the contradictory position

of transsexuals as medically diagnosable and pathologized but not legally guaranteed either

accommodation or treatment.[58] As Jasbir Puar observes, under the ADA "transsexuality – and

likely those versions of transsexuality that are deemed also improperly raced and classed – is

understood as 'too disabled' to be rehabilitated into citizenship, or not properly disabled enough

to be recoded for labor productivity."[59] The Affordable Care Act of 2011 has continued,

expanded, and stratified the quest to convince insurance to cover transition care: insurance plans

increasingly cover transition, *if* you have good insurance (which itself depends on location, job,

money, and so on) *and* if you jump through the right hoops to "prove" your need. This is

quintessential biomedicalization: the customization and transformation of individuals' bodies

becomes ever more available to those who can gain access to the biotechnologies involved, who

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[57] Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 271.
[58] Stryker, *Transgender History*, chapter 4.
[59] Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 40.

can pay the price of risk management and surveillance, who have access to the knowledges

produced and circulated.

It is worth quoting Clarke et al. at length on the relationship of biomedicalization and

identity:

> There are at least four ways biomedical technoscience engages in processes of identity
> formation. First, technoscientific applications can be used to attain a previously
> unavailable but highly desired social identity. … Second, biomedicalization imposes
> new mandates and performances that become incorporated into one's sense of self. …
> Third, biomedical technosciences create new categories of health-related identities and
> redefine old ones. …Fourth, biomedicalization also enables the acquisition and
> performance of identities as patients and communities through new technoscientific
> modes of interaction, such as telemedicine.[60]

All four of these pieces are evident in the procedures of twenty-first-century

transsexualization. The example Clarke et al. use of "a previously unavailable but highly desired

social identity" is that of parenthood, achieved through infertility treatments, but medical

transition is an equally clear example. Of course, it has become a transgender axiom that gender

is not defined by physiognomy, and that a person need not undergo any form of medical

transition to be their gender; but those trans people who do seek medical transition often consider

these technoscientific applications to compose part of their gendered identities. This distinction

is clarified by the general shift in language in recent years from "gender reassignment surgery"

(which implies that the surgery itself acts to change the person's gender) to "gender confirmation

surgery" (which suggests that the surgery merely reinforces a gender that was already present).

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[60] Clarke et al., *Biomedicalization*, 81.

However, the subtlety of this distinction is still often flattened into one of two anti-trans assumptions: either that medical transition is indeed what makes the man/woman, or that medical transition is not needed at all. The reality of trans lives is that biomedicalized identities are complexly negotiated: deliberately refused, contingently accepted, self-consciously performed, fluidly reinterpreted. Malatino warns of the imposition of "transnormative structures of feeling,"[61] whereby a particular narrative of trans identity is legitimated as the singular True Trans Story. Access to treatment may then be dependent on the individual's assimilation and reproduction of this story, which in turn serves to reinforce its dominance in the clinical and medical literature. Biomedical technologies of gender may make possible new materializations of gender and thus new gender identifications, but these identities are then sedimented in research and practice which seeks to stabilize and classify them. A nonbinary transmasculine person seeking a mastectomy may have no desire to present themself, live, or be identified as a man, but they may nonetheless have to truncate, occlude, or lie about the reality of their gender in order to convince their insurance to pay for the surgery. Dynamically dancing with and beyond the possibilities presented by biomedical technologies, trans selves and becomings proliferate far in excess of any medical taxonomy – yet for practical reasons many trans people are "coerced into fabricating a gendered essence that accords with diagnostic criteria."[62]

The biomedicalization of gender increasingly complexifies the role of race and racialization. The longer-standing forms of inequity and white supremacy associated with medicalization have by no means vanished – medicine as a whole, like all major US institutions,

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[61] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 111.
[62] Malatino, *Queer Embodiment*, 185.

is still framed and undergirded by systemic racism; a normative whiteness is still assumed and

unquestioned in many cases – but they have also fragmented and transformed in line with the

moves of neoliberalism. As such, the racialization of biomedicalized gender must be thought in

terms of globalization, neocolonialism, and stratification between as well as within the global

north and south. Medical transition is shaped by practices of mobility that implicate race and

colonialism: within the US, the concentration of medical specialists in urban centers makes care

inaccessible to many rural and poor trans people; while globally the construction of certain

locations as sites for the wealthy westerner to practice "gender tourism" has a long history of

exoticization and neocolonialism.[63] Surface-level invocations of diversity can distract from

deeper structural injustices, allowing organizations to invoke trans women of color as a group in

need of "protection" without addressing racism and transmisogyny within their own ranks.

The risk management and surveillance practices of biomedicalization may be experienced

very differently by white people and by people of color, given the latter's vulnerability to the

police and carceral system. Legal and administrative changes that may seem unproblematic to

homonationalist trans subjects, such as the expansion of hate-crime legislation or the availability

of a non-binary gender marker on driver's licenses, might be viewed with trepidation by trans

people of color who have experienced disproportionate criminalization and who already have

enough cause to be wary of police traffic stops without additional signs of difference.[64] Within

the diagnostic context, gatekeepers may demand the performance of gender in ways legible to

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[63] Aren Aizura, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[64] Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

white colonial knowledge, for example refusing to provide a therapist's letter of approval for surgery unless the patient wears clothing deemed appropriately "masculine" or "feminine" according to western norms.

The unintelligibility of non-white, non-western genders within white US culture is vividly illustrated by the experiences of Nigerian novelist Akwaeke Emezi, whose identity as a nonhuman *ogbanje* is rooted in Igbo spirituality, but who is frequently interpellated as "nonbinary." The biography on Emezi's website begins:

> Akwaeke Emezi (b. 1987) is an artist and writer based in liminal spaces. Their art practice is located in the metaphysics of Black spirit and uses video, performance, writing, and sculpture to create rituals processing their embodiment as a nonhuman entity/an ogbanje/a deity's child.[65]

Emezi has written about the difficulty of meeting the requirements of western medical gatekeeping in order to obtain surgeries – surgeries that they frame as "a bridge across realities, a movement from being assigned female to assigning myself as *ogbanje*; a spirit customizing its vessel to reflect its nature."[66] Their autobiographical novel *Freshwater* explores *ogbanje* embodiment, rooted in Igbo metaphysics, and yet western readers continue to interpret the novel in diagnostic terms of mental illness – despite Emezi's observation that preemptively dismissing Igbo ontology in favor of western thinking is "probably colonialism."[67] Emezi directly confronted the transphobia of the Anglophone world's literary establishment when they

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[65] "Biography," *Akwaeke Emezi*, https://www.akwaeke.com/biography.

[66] Akwaeke Emezi, "Transition," *The Cut*, https://www.thecut.com/2018/01/writer-and-artist-akwaeke-emezi-gender-transition-and-ogbanje.html.

[67] Concepción de León, "'This is a Possibility': Akwaeke Emezi Writes a Trans Story Where Nobody Gets Hurt," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2019 [updated September 12, 2019], https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/09/books/akwaeke-emezi-pet-freshwater.html.

challenged the Women's prize for requiring information about their "sex as defined by law."[68]

Emezi's medical and literary experiences demonstrate the entwinement of colonialism,

transphobia, and ableism in western medicolegal discourses of gender.

Biomedicalization rearranges the medicalization model of capacitation and debilitation

without fundamentally altering the underlying structure. If intersexualization names the

processes of debilitating certain bodies in order to capacitate them as legible re/productive

subjects under racial capitalism, transsexualization simply tailors these processes more to

individual experience. There is now greater flexibility regarding who might be capacitated, and

under what circumstances, but capacitation is still the name of the game, and it is still defined in

terms of capitalist re/productivity. So, for example, the political economy of the Biomedical

TechnoService Complex Inc. can frame biomedical treatments as "elective" or "necessary": to be

able to get access to medical transition technologies, trans people are succeeding (in partial,

stratified, differentially distributed ways) in getting treatments moved from the "elective"

category to the "necessary" one so that insurance will pay for them; but as long as we have our

current medical system in place we cannot abolish the elective/necessary binary, even though it

adequately accounts for neither transition nor many other medical interventions.

None of the above is theologically neutral. In fact, as the remainder of this chapter will

argue, the bio/medicalization of gender reflects, rests on, and upholds specific theological

presuppositions about (gendered, dis/abled) human being. There is a broad but useful

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[68] Alison Flood, "Akwaeke Emezi shuns Women's prize over request for details of sex as defined 'by law,'" *The Guardian*, October 5, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/05/akwaeke-emezi-shuns-womens-prize-request-for-details-of-sex-as-defined-by-law.

correspondence to be drawn between the medicalized practices of assigning gender and the theology of the substantialist image; and, similarly, between the biomedicalized practices of reassigning gender and the theology of the relational image. Examining both in turn will demonstrate the limitations of both, clarifying the stakes of the alternative to be proposed in chapters 4 and 5.

Assigning gender

As detailed in chapter 1, interpretations of the biblical image of God – the *tselem Elohim* in which humans are created – can be divided into two broad categories, the substantialist and the relational. Substantialist interpretations identify the image with some capacity or substance possessed by humans, whether that be rationality, language, the soul, or some ineffable yet ineradicable birthright with which humanity is endowed uniquely among creatures. Relational interpretations, meanwhile, focus on the image as it is enacted through relation – with God, with other humans, with creation. Taking feminist critiques of the substantialist image as established, chapter 1 focused on four specific disability or queer relational interpretations of image, finding value in each but also critiquing each for biocentrism (overemphasis on relation among living creatures, to the exclusion of relationality with and among the non-living) and for insufficient attention to the paradox of nonrelation inherent to relation (Edelman's *sinthomo*sexual, understood as the structurally necessary outside to any concept of intelligibility or relation). In order to address these two challenges, my attempt to propose a radically relational affective interpretation of matter as the locus of the image of God requires trans/cripping theological anthropology: uniting the tools and insights of trans theory and crip theory to demonstrate the

role of racial capitalism in capacitating the gendered subject, and to denaturalize gender, dis/ability, the body, and humanity itself. In what follows, I attempt a trans/cripping of the theological anthropologies of assigning and reassigning gender, in order to pave the way for the constructive proposal to come.

Substantialist interpretations of the image of God locate personhood in an essence or substance possessed by human beings, usually in the form of a cognitive capacity (or set of capacities): for reason, free will, abstract thought, and so on. The assigning of gender *activates this capacity for personhood* through a series of interventions that obfuscate their own status as interventions. Assigning gender to an infant is rarely conceived of as an intervention, but is generally understood to be a neutral observation of bodily fact – the presence of a penis/vulva simply *is* a marker of maleness/femaleness. I contend that, on the contrary, the observation and classification of gendered bodies is far from neutral, and is in fact a continuum of intervention imposed to enforce cisness as a norm and a technology of whiteness. Assigning gender mobilizes and materializes a specific theological anthropology in line with the substantialist image. From the gender reveal party to cosmetic genital surgery, the medical technologies used to assign infant gender enforce an essentialist, reified cisnormativity that requires to be accepted as natural, neutral, and taken-for-granted. More than one writer has noted the centrality of gender to recognition as a person, which is made evident when the failure to attribute gender to an intersex infant makes the child unrecognizable as a person: "In a culture where so much emphasis is placed on the appearance of genitalia in initial sex categorization, clarity of genitalia literally grants an individual 'personhood'; that is, being clearly sexed gives a person the capacity to be

socially understood and accepted," writes Sharon Preves.[69] Katrina Karzakis clarifies exactly

how this happens, or fails to happen, when "clinicians often rush to stabilize the sex of infants

with intersex diagnoses" because to file a legal notice of birth you need a name and for that you

need a sex: "biology determines – or confuses – the newborn's entire social and legal identity.

Physically alive but denied a sex and a name, the infant has no social existence. Personhood

depends on gender assignment."[70] The theological power of cisness is such that if you are not

clearly, bodily classifiable as either male or female you cannot be recognized and related to, and

you cannot be granted personhood. (Gendered recognition is not solely the provenance of human

personhood, either; think of the distress of the pet owner who has just learned that sweet Bella is

actually male, or who is affronted by the very idea of putting Max on a pink leash.) It seems that

the capacitation of gender – understood as both subjective and objective genitive, as both the

processes of making gender possible *and* the making-possible which gender enacts – enables

personhood.

The process Karzakis describes, of naming and gendering a newborn in order to file a

legal notice of birth, is an instance of what Ellen Samuels calls biocertification. As discussed in

chapter 2, biocertification names "the massive proliferation of state-issued documents purporting

to authenticate a person's biological membership in a regulated group."[71] Under biocertificatory

regimes, legal/medical/social categorization becomes affixed to the body through the production

of documentation to both reflect and reinforce the material reality of the categories involved. The

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[69] Preves, *Intersex and Identity*, 22.

[70] Karzakis, *Fixing Sex*, 96.

[71] Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 9.

sex marker recorded on a birth certificate is the first and most potent instance of gender

biocertification in an individual's life, with far-reaching ramifications that will unfurl as each

additional document is procured (from social security card to passport to driver's license) and as

each gendered moment occurs (from the color of onesie deemed appropriate to whether or not

one must register for selective service).

And yet, as the administrative difficulty ensuing from the birth of an intersex infant

attests, "biological membership" in one gender or another is not always straightforwardly

defined. Biocertification involves a complex and fundamentally fallacious interplay of surface

and depth: the surface – what is self-evidently visible on the body, in this case the physiognomy

of neonatal genitalia – is expected to bear faithful witness to the depths, to a biologically

indisputable maleness or femaleness that is permanently stamped through every cell of the body.

Yet the very separation of surface from depth means that mismatch between the two is always a

possibility, whether framed as error or deception. A system of certifying full-body biological

truth based on what is visible will always be susceptible to mismatch, and so upholding the

integrity of such a system requires paranoid vigilance to identify and resolve instances of

mismatch. This is the basic contradiction of a culture in which genitals must be hidden from

view and yet accurately signaled through secondary markers such as clothing. In Samuels'

account, the contradiction is worked out through legal and cultural paranoia around instances of

fakery (faked disabilities, racial and gender passing). In the case of gender assignation, cases of

surface-level indeterminacy must be resolved by appealing to a deeper, unfalsifiable internal

truth that can always be made visible with close enough scrutiny – the subordination of intersex

to cisheterosexual ontology, as Malatino calls it. We might also call it the confirmation bias of

gender attribution: if what is initially seen makes sense within the cis sex/gender schema, it is assumed to accurately bear witness to the expected interior; if not, experts must peer deeper within the body until the plain truth can be found, and then make the surface bear witness to it. That is to say, if the newborn's genitalia can be classified as a visibly normative penis or vulva, a corresponding maleness or femaleness is imputed to the whole body without further study; whereas if the genitalia are ambiguous, the body's interior will be investigated – its internal organs, its chromosomes – in quest of its "true" maleness or femaleness. The chosen gender is then made visible, whether through normalizing surgery or only through the certification and announcement of the baby as "boy" or "girl." Gender, a property innate to the newborn, is made known through observation of the body's depths, and the child's personhood is thereby capacitated.

That observation is itself an intervention is far from a novel insight, though one that is perhaps less widely acknowledged than it should be. The primary mode of gender assignation and capacitation is *visual*. (It should be noted that I use the term "intervention" advisedly; while it may seem to imply that an unmodified, "pure" body pre-exists intervention, I reject this implication and follow Nikki Sullivan[72] in claiming that *all* bodies are intervened upon, modified, and constituted in their contexts – whether or not they are acknowledged as such. My use of "intervention" is intended to draw attention to the active role of seemingly neutral processes of observation, classification, and naming in producing – and capacitating – the body as such.) In the 21st-century United States, the first site of visual intervention and capacitation is

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[72] Nikki Sullivan, "The Somatechnics of Intersexuality," *GLQ* 15.2 (2009): 313-327.

usually that of ultrasonography. Ultrasound imaging, as Janelle S. Taylor discusses at length, operates on contradictory logics: simultaneously medicalizing the fetus into an object to be assessed for defects *and* humanizing it into a reality for the mother to bond with.[73] Depth – the otherwise inaccessible interior of the uterus – becomes surface, rendered a flat image for all to see. Anyone can look at a sonogram, but it takes the trained eye of the medical professional to interpret the monochrome blobs. (I have certainly cooed over many a friend's fetal sonogram that may as well have been a Franz Kline painting to my ignorant eyes.) As Taylor observes, the self-same processes that make the fetus a person, a tiny human who can arouse fellow-feeling, protective urges, and even love, also and at the same time make the fetus a commodity, an item produced, consumed, and assessed in capitalist terms.

This paradoxical logic of the visual – that it makes both subject and object, both person and commodity, of the one upon whom it is turned – permeates the capacitation of gender. To gender the fetus makes it a person, one who can be related to; but it also circumscribes its personhood, subordinating it to cisheteronormative ontology before it has ever taken a breath. This is the tragic flaw of the substantialist view of the image of God: to locate the image in an essence possessed by each human being is to commit uncompromisingly to the inherent worth and dignity of all; but it is also to ossify the image, to confine it to a specific and static *thing* that is simultaneously too reified to play a meaningful role in the dynamism of living and too abstract to be recognizable in material bodies in the world. The paradox becomes heartbreakingly clear in a footnote of Karzakis', which I have unfortunately been unable to find any research elaborating

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[73] Janelle S. Taylor, *The Public Life of the Fetal Sonogram: Technology, Consumption, and the Politics of Reproduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

on: while "ultrasonography turns the fetus not simply into a 'real' baby but into a fully gendered

person," it rarely identifies genital ambiguity, with the result that the gendered expectations

placed on the fetus can make parents less prepared for and more disoriented by the birth of an

intersex baby.[74] In these cases, observation leads to less clarity, not more. So far from being a

neutral "view from nowhere" that simply notices what is "there," observation implicates the

observer and the ideological systems in which the observer is imbricated. This is a point well

made in feminist standpoint theory, disability studies, and postcolonial critiques of the gaze.[75]

Framed by a commitment to cishet ontology, the medical gaze upon the fetal/neonatal genitalia

colonizes and dis/ables its object by and through gendering it. As Karen Barad relates in their

agential realist account of ultrasonography, "ultrasound technology designates specific material-

discursive practices, *constraining and enabling* what is seen and produced."[76] Technologies of

looking are practices of capacitation and disablement: making-visible is always already making-

possible.

Biocertification of an infant's gender, through medical-social-legal practices of observing

and classifying in order to capacitate social and legal personhood, is a fundamentally racialized

schema. This is true on both the micro and the macro levels, in terms of both the specific

procedures that comprise gender biocertification and the larger political underpinnings that

justify such bureaucracy. The visual assessment used to classify infant genitalia as male or

female, acceptable or inadequate, necessarily invokes norms of masculinity and femininity which

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[74] Karzakis, *Fixing Sex*, 305 n.2.

[75] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[76] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 212.

were formed in the crucible of the colony and the clinic, as described earlier in this chapter. Though I have not found any research specifically addressing the role of racial stereotypes in diagnosing intersex infants, it is surely the case that the diagnostic context is affected by racialized gender stereotypes, such as expectations of penile length, as well as the western history of constructing markedly dimorphic sexual differentiation as a crowning achievement of whiteness (discussed in chapter 2).

Zooming out to the wider context, the very existence of biocertification is itself a function of white supremacy and capitalism. After all, why does anyone need their identity to be biocertified by the state? Surveillance and control are always unequally applied in raced and classed ways: consider the impact of voter ID laws, which function to suppress certain voting populations who cannot afford to obtain the requisite identification, who belong to populations with sound historical reasons for distrusting government collection of data, who may be judged not to match the information on paper (a visual judgment, which is itself raced and classed). The documentation of birth in the United States is inextricable from the history of chattel slavery, when Black infants were born a possession to be inventoried. The legal and medical mechanisms may have changed, but the goal essentially remains the same: biocertification is a technique for bio- and necropolitical management of production and reproduction.

None of the above should be understood as moral condemnation of the individuals involved in the assignation of gender to infants, from parents to doctors to ultrasound technicians to friends who send "it's a boy!" balloons (with the exception of surgeons who perform cosmetically "normalizing" genital surgery on children, who certainly merit censure). Gender, as

Judith Butler has extensively chronicled, far exceeds any individual's hope of resisting it, and the impossibility of singular gestures to enact large-scale change is made abundantly clear by each news story of parents attempting to raise an ungendered child, the uproar that inevitably ensues, and the brute fact that the state will have already biocertified the child as male or female and this classification will be inescapably present at any point of interaction with medical, legal, or bureaucratic authorities. We will not undo the coloniality and violence of gender simply by refusing to disclose a child's gender assignment; nor, alas, will it suffice to acknowledge the possibility of transition while continuing to assign genders. The theological foundations of cisness will not be so easily exorcized.

Reassigning gender

If, as I have argued, the colonizing and cisheteronormative theological anthropology subtending the medicalized processes of assigning gender reinforces a substantialist interpretation of the image of God, then the biomedicalized processes of reassigning gender may be understood to reflect a relational interpretation of the image. While those wedded to a substantialist paradigm tend to refuse the possibility of gender change, granting ontological primacy and truth only to the assigned gender, relational perspectives can be more open to transness. Of course, relational interpretations of image may be deployed in service of a cishet ontology, as in "complementarian" theologies that locate the fullness of humanity's divine image in cisheterosexual monogamy; but here I am concerned with those perspectives that do try to accommodate gender variance, with identifying their potentialities and their pitfalls. Relational accounts attempt to locate personhood in relation, but they can easily fall into the trap of

smuggled-in substantialism, whereby "relation" itself becomes another capacity or substance possessed by persons. The source of this pitfall often lies in the failure to give a robust accounting of what relation means, or failure to take this accounting to its logical conclusion. In the same way, accounts of how the gendered subject is capacitated through biomedical processes of reassigned gender can fall into a similar trap of smuggled-in essentialism, even as they attempt to offer something much more liberating. When existing power structures are left intact, inclusion is at best a hollow victory.

While assigning gender at birth operates under the medicalization paradigm's priorities of normalization, the universal Taylorized body, and one-size-fits-all treatment, gender reassignment demonstrates the values of the biomedicalization paradigm: customization, individualized treatment, and bodily transformation. The rigid older process of medical transition, which required strict conformity to a single narrative of gendered identification and a linear transition from one gender to another, no longer has the stranglehold it once possessed. Of course, the single narrative had never accurately portrayed the experiences of all trans people, but now there is increasing acknowledgment of trans diversity in legal and medical arenas as well as popular and scholarly realms. Nonbinary and nonlinear transitions flourish: microdosing hormones, pursuing surgery without hormones or hormones without surgery, deliberately seeking multiple or non-normative genital configurations. Options that had previously existed without official acknowledgment can now be openly discussed with much less risk that a medical professional will dismiss the patient as unserious or too mentally unsound to transition.

If, under the medicalization paradigm, the assigning of gender activates the fullness of the capacity for personhood, then the biomedicalization paradigm reframes gendered personhood: instead of an immutable substance, observable and classifiable, personhood in the image of God is now relational. Gendered personhood is capacitated not through the assigning of a gender presumed given and immutable, but rather through self-actualization developed in social context. The theological presuppositions underlying this concept of gendered personhood can be discerned in the language often used to affirm trans people's genders: language of authenticity, self-discovery, wholeness. For the medicalization paradigm, gendered selfhood is visible to all on the surface of the body; for the biomedicalization paradigm, gendered selfhood requires a turning inward and self-examination in order to be brought to light. A deep internal truth must be excavated and actualized through recognition. In this context, the paradigmatic moment is not the "gender reveal" of the infant's genital morphology, but the "gender reveal" of coming out as trans. The emphasis shifts from the visual truth of the body to the avowed truth of the individual's self-proclamation. Yet in both cases the structuring logic – of an interior truth made exteriorly known – remains intact.

Biomedicalization might offer much more expansive possibilities for gendered being, but these possibilities are available only to those who can access them, and neoliberal stratification is such that inclusion of the few comes at the expense of the many. Puar identifies the figure of "the new transnormative body": unlike the older form of trans exceptionalism, "which seeks rehabilitation, cure, and concealment," the new transnormative citizen performs "mobility, transformation, regeneration, flexibility, and the creative concocting of the body" in a way that "appears transgressive when in fact it is constitutive not only of transnormativity but also of

aspects of neoliberal market economies."[77] Paradigmatically white and transmasculine, the new transnormative body is capacitated to enact its exceptionalism by and through the correlative abjectification of other trans bodies: the homeless trans youth, the trans sex worker, the undocumented trans immigrant. To give just one concrete example: the health insurance to which I have access through my spouse's high-prestige job is mandated by New York law to cover transition care. From my couch, I am able to request a testosterone refill from my Manhattan primary care provider, pay a small co-pay to a home delivery pharmacy, and receive this controlled substance within a day or two. Were my spouse's workplace located a mile or two west, in our state of residence, New Jersey; were we outside of the pharmacy's delivery range or lacking a permanent address; were we unable to be legally married, perhaps because one of us relied on Social Security benefits that would be withdrawn upon marriage – in any of these situations, my access to hormones would be significantly reduced.

Perhaps the nadir of the biomedicalized political economy occurs when pinkwashed venture capitalism produces tech startups aimed at trans people. The early 2020s have seen a profusion of gender subscription services with twee names, predatory pricing, and little to no utility for any trans people except the most moneyed. Rae McDaniel, founder of GenderFck: The Club, states:

> I want to build a world where gender transition is celebrated and normalized. A world where, when someone says, "I'm getting married!" "I'm having a baby!" "I'm exploring my gender identity!" the reaction to all three statements is the same: "Wow, what an exciting time! Congratulations! Where are you registered?"[78]

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[77] Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 45-6.

[78] GenderFck, https://www.genderfck.club/ (all quotes in the following paragraph are also from the same webpage).

Transition is here domesticated and commodified, classified alongside marriage and parenthood as depoliticized, individualistic life experiences of self-actualization, to which friends are expected to respond by purchasing consumer goods. Queer anti-normativity has no place in this club; negativity is explicitly rejected ("joyful and exciting"). For a mere $99 per month, or $997 for one year, the subscriber can obtain "space," "skills," "information," "confidence," "support" – in other words, the exact resources that trans communities have been sharing among themselves for decades, whether in informal networks, through local LGBT centers, or online. McDaniel is no doubt both well-intentioned and a competent therapist, but profound skepticism is the only possible response to GenderFck's claim that "This is not just-think-positive-just-be-yourself-love-and-light brand of personal empowerment. This is our-feminism-is-intersectional-yoga-isn't-always-the-answer-to-systemic-oppression-this-shit-is-hard brand of personal power." The latter string of buzzwords is belied by the same webpage's earlier assertion that "when you show up as your most authentic self … you light up the room … You change the world."

The rebranding of capitalist ventures with the language of intersectionality, liberation, and even revolution is perhaps the most insidious aspect of these startups. Health subscription service Folx claims to be "flipping the cis-tem on its head" with its hormone delivery plans (starting at $89 per month for testosterone and $59 per month for estrogen).[79] Euphoria aims to "empower transgender individuals to have agency in their gender transition by way of our technology," which includes "[a] revolutionary savings app."[80] All of these of these platforms –

[79] Folx, https://www.folxhealth.com/.
[80] Euphoria, https://euphoria.lgbt/.

funded by venture capitalists, run as companies whose *raison d'être* is profit – present themselves as tools of trans self-actualization, even liberation.

Biomedicalization permits the economically privileged, educated, white, resourced trans man fairly easy access to hormones as properly prescribed, under the care of the prescribing medical professional, with regular endocrinological monitoring. The less access a person has to the economic and social elements involved, from insurance to location to surveillance, the more they will have to seek unofficial channels of access to care. As the tentacles of neoliberal biomedicalization expand their reach, the correlative reality of black-market hormones and unauthorized substance use by those without such access must be ever more marginalized and disavowed, even as more and more people are squeezed into positions of desperation. If the old transnormativity put all the power in the hands of the medical professional, the new version distributes power among threads of neoliberal consumption and technocracy (the online patient portal of the doctor's office, the home delivery pharmacy's website); if the old version demanded assimilation as the ordinary man or woman who hid his/her transsexual history, the new version permits some of us to exploit and benefit from our transness, as I am arguably doing here. In one form of trans exceptionalism, the gendered essence of personhood must be uncovered and activated by oneself rather than by an obstetrician; for the new transnormative citizen, transness itself may become an innate essence that becomes reified through biomedical circulation under neoliberal economy. Either way, the terms of gendered being are rearranged without being fundamentally altered.

I am arguing here that the apparently relational, seemingly more liberating ontology of gender reassignment is in fact doubly susceptible to the trap of smuggled-in substantialism: either in the relocating of gendered essence from the bodily locus prioritized by cishet ontology to a vaguely defined "identity," or more subtly in the reifying of transness itself. Both cases deploy capacitation in service of a theological anthropology that cannot account for the fullness of gendered and/or disabled being. My critique of theological anthropology's biocentrism in chapter 1 was at heart a call for more imagination: a refusal to take for granted that "relation" is best defined as intellectual engagement between rational freely willing subjects, and a demand to take seriously the material entanglement of all matter as theologically meaningful relation. So too "gender" must be understood much more broadly, expansively, materially, and messily than the transnormative perspective allows for.

Transnormativity prioritizes gender identity as something that can be known and expressed, as a property of the rational willing subject. As a simple inversion of the operations of assigning gender, it purports that gender identity is a hidden depth that must be excavated through thought and reason and can only then be made manifest in/on the body. At its most oversimplified – as found in the dreaded Trans 101 diversity training – this is simply Cartesian dualism redux, dematerializing gender and discounting the constitutive role of embodiment in shaping identity. Even in its more sophisticated forms, trans analysis can be reluctant to examine the role of what Clarke et al. dub "the Biomedical TechnoService Complex Inc.," or what Paul Preciado describes as "pharmacopornographic regime."[81] This reluctance is understandable;

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[81] Paul Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), 108 and passim.

who, in a political climate in which the religious right and radical feminists are joining forces to attempt to mandate trans people out of public existence, wants to admit to the material role of necropolitical neoliberal forces in the constitution of the very identities that are under attack? Yet I think this is precisely why those of us in less precarious situations must account honestly for how what we have depends on the continued abjectification of those who cannot afford such autocritique.

Above all, to understand gender as *messy* means to recognize its inherent contradictions and instability. Triumphalist narratives of transformation tend to banish what I have called the nonrelation at the heart of relation, or the structural outside that is necessary to the constitution of any subject: to transition is to heroically overcome dysphoria and social opprobrium, to be seamlessly reabsorbed into the social fabric – whether through disavowal of one's trans history, as was formerly medically mandated and may now be a matter of personal choice, or through recognition as trans within neoliberal diversity frameworks. To have your gender legally recognized as nonbinary may be important and meaningful, but it should also propel us to query the need for legal recognition of genders at all and to challenge the metastasizing biocertificatory regimes that verify and record more and more aspects of being. In my native United Kingdom, the gender on a birth certificate may only be amended through obtaining a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC), which (among other vagaries) requires a statutory declaration of intent to "live in [the acquired] gender until death." If the state deemed you to be failing to "live in" your gender (whatever that may mean), would you be breaking the law? Could your GRC be overthrown? What actions (procreation, perhaps?) might be judged a failure to live in one's gender by the agents of state biopower?

Perhaps more significantly, the existence of legal structures of inclusion, albeit onerous ones, further excludes those who for whatever reason do not participate in them: a friend working in UK LGBT law warned me that waiting too long to apply for a GRC can be considered a reason for denial. Whether because of poverty, depression, bureaucratic overwhelm, or any other cause, failure to request gender biocertification is seen as evidence of a lack of commitment, seriousness, or need. If you *can* be legally recognized but you currently are not, this proves that you do not *deserve* legal recognition. The boundaries of inclusion may be widened, but they are not abolished. Somebody is always outside, abjectified, the *sinthomo*sexual, the stubbornly uncapacitated crip. This outside is the nonrelation that dogs any relational anthropology, the remainder that cannot be squared. How can we attend to this remainder? How can we think gendered personhood unstifled by the framework of capacitation?

In the remaining two chapters of this dissertation, I hope to offer a possible answer. Using feminist assemblage theory, I will propose a more radically relational model of gendered dis/abled being: one that does not make gender a technology of capacitation for neoliberal capitalist ends, one that does not employ cisness as a technology of whiteness, one that accounts for relation in/among/beyond the "body" and its various technologies (linguistic, medical, and otherwise) – a trans/crip theological anthropology of affective assemblage.

CHAPTER FOUR

FEELING CYBORG: FEMINIST ASSEMBLAGE THEORY

> *I write*
> *Because I (am) matter*
> *--The Red Cyborg*[1]

This chapter lays out the concept of feminist assemblage theory in order to propose the figure of

the trans/crip cyborg as prosthetic-assemblage. Feminist assemblage theory, or FAT, is my term

for a cluster of interweaving discourses – posthumanism, new materialism, and theories of

Deleuzoguattarian assemblage – which seek to continue and develop the commitments expressed

in Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto." First, I discuss the manifesto itself; then I turn to the

concept of assemblage, as discussed by Deleuze and Guattari and systematized by Manuel

DeLanda. A series of feminist interventions then take place: the first set, from posthumanist and

new materialist theories, drawing on Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman*, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant*

Matter, and Karen Barad's "Posthumanist Performativity"; the second set, from thinking about

the relationship between assemblage and intersectionality and specifically its application to

transness and disability, using Jasbir Puar's "'I Would Rather be a Cyborg than a Goddess,'"

Lucas Crawford's "Transgender Without Organs?", and Margrit Shildrick's "Why Should Our

Bodies End at the Skin?" Finally, I turn to the concept of the prosthetic-assemblage, arguing

against uses of prosthetics that rely on logics of rehabilitation or enhancement, and instead

proposing the use of FAT to make ourselves trans/crip cyborg prosthetic-assemblages.

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[1] Lindsay B-E, *The Cyborg Anthology* (Kingston, Ontario: Brick Books, 2020), 31.

Feminist assemblage theory

Feminist assemblage theory is my term for a cluster of interweaving discourses – posthumanism, new materialism, and theories of Deleuzoguattarian assemblage – that together seek to continue and develop the commitments expressed in Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto."

Feminist: as in feminist standpoint theory, as in gut feminism,[2] as in intersectional feminism, as in living a feminist life,[3] as in feminist, queer, crip,[4] as in the socialist feminism of Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," as in transfeminism and xenofeminism[5] and Marxist feminism and all the proliferations of feminism that prioritize embodiment, engage critically with gender and its other intersections, and use a political-relational approach in their analysis. This is also feminist as in committed to auto-critique and hoping for ultimate self-abolishment: I identify myself and my uses of these theorists as feminist with full recognition of the violence and exclusions of much of feminism, of its weaponization against trans people and people of color and poor people, its deployment in service of capital and empire and whiteness and cisness. These violent legacies are part of the field that has shaped me just as much as are the liberating and life-giving strains of feminism. I keep the word both for what it promises and as a self-indictment of what must be forever challenged in myself and my work.

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[2] Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
[3] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
[4] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
[5] Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (New York: Verso, 2018).

Assemblage: as in Deleuze and Guattari, as in Puar, as in Barad, as in an onto-ethico-political schema that resists both totalizing oneness and binary dualism. As in assembling (ongoing, dynamic, ontology of becoming); as in assembly (*ekklesia*, devolved powers, gathering in solidarity); as in ensemble (togetherness, a group of different instrumentalists harmonizing, the whole company contributing); as in both the coming-together and what results from that coming-together.

And of course it acronyms to *FAT*: while I have no space here to get into fat studies specifically, it is a serendipitous invocation of a field that values flesh and fleshliness (and fleshiness), that cuts across gender and race and disability in its attention to non-normative bodily being in the world, that is deeply committed to a politics of overturning normate bias and promoting material solid(ar)ity.

Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto"[6] might be considered the founding document of the lines of thought I name FAT, insofar as it lays out the pattern and goals: an unfaithful, anti-oedipal approach to filiation; resistance to both totalizing oneness and binary dualism; "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and […] *responsibility* in their construction."[7] The influence of the manifesto has been enormous, its uses and misuses many and varied (such as, notably for this work, its inclusion in the first *Transgender Studies Reader*); it haunts this dissertation, start to finish, and thus requires attention before the details of FAT can be laid out.

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[6] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

[7] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 150.

Haraway describes the manifesto as "an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism." The irony of the cyborg figure is about "contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true." The faithfulness of the cyborg is a blasphemous faith: "Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community."[8] That the cyborg is ironic does not mean it is not serious; that the cyborg is blasphemous does not mean it is not deeply committed to its convictions.

The central point of the manifesto is that we are all cyborgs – hybrids of machine and organism, imagination and material reality. While the cyborg is the offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, it is an illegitimate offspring that can be unfaithful to its origins.[9] The moral complexity of the cyborg is such that some commentators divide it into two figures: for example, Barbara Fornssler finds it useful to distinguish between "the Military Industrial Cyborg (MIC) and the Emancipatory Feminist Cyborg (EFC)."[10] A cyborg is not in itself feminist, socialist, or even materialist, as its many uses make abundantly clear; but it can, perhaps must, be used in service of these ends.

Haraway identifies three specific binaries whose borders have broken down in our cyborg age: the boundary between human and animal, the boundary between organism and machine, the

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[8] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 149.
[9] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 151.
[10] Barbara Fornssler, *Affective Cyborgs* (New York: Atropos Press, 2010), 94.

boundary between physical and nonphysical.[11] As the developments in FAT explored below will show, it is not that these boundaries were ever ontologically given, though they were often treated as such; but it is no longer possible to pretend that they hold fast. After Darwin, humans can no longer claim an exceptional origin vis-à-vis other animals, and every development in evolutionary biology makes this more evident; our intimacy with our electronics has intensified exponentially in the decades since the manifesto's publication; post-Einsteinian developments in physics continue to scramble traditional understandings of subatomic matter. The figure of the cyborg embodies "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities."[12]

The goal of Haraway's cyborg is explicitly political, aimed at developing a politics that could embrace partial, contradictory, unfinished selves and still be faithful and effective.[13] Cyborg means "embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts." And "[i]t means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories."[14]

Through the various applications of FAT, this chapter proposes an understanding of the trans/crip cyborg as prosthetic-assemblage. Following Haraway's theoretical and ethical commitments, the thinkers whose work I consider FAT examine the partial, the contradictory, the entangled; they explore the pleasures of transgressing boundaries and the need for

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[11] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 151-4. As I was in the process of writing this chapter, my cat Julian disrupted the boundaries between organism and machine by sitting on my computer keyboard and turning the word "cyborg" into "cyborg.llllllllllllllllllmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm mmmmmmmmmmmmmm."

[12] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 154.

[13] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 157.

[14] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 181.

accountability in reconfiguring them; and they provide novel, powerful ways of thinking about bodies in the world. FAT thinkers bring posthumanist and new materialist methodologies to bear on the Deleuzoguattarian assemblage, reconfiguring it in the image of the Harawayan cyborg. In order to develop a full understanding of FAT, we must first turn our attention to the concept of assemblage.

Assemblage

> What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes, and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy.' It is never filiations, which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.[15]

As Manuel DeLanda points out, "the relatively few pages dedicated to assemblage theory in the work of Deleuze (much of it in partnership with Félix Guattari) hardly amount to a fully-fledged theory."[16] Assemblage theory as such, therefore, necessitates somewhat of a departure from Deleuzianism proper; but a great deal can in fact be reconstructed from those few pages.

As many commentators have observed, "assemblage" is a rather imperfect translation of *agencement*, which in French denotes simultaneously the assembling of elements and the resulting assembly.[17] Already, then, there is an ontology of becoming embedded in the original

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[15] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 69; quoted on Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1.
[16] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 3.
[17] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 1.

terminology. DeLanda identifies four key passages of *A Thousand Plateaus* on the topic of

assemblages, each of which provides further insight into the concept.[18]

The first and shortest passage, in "10,000 B.C.: The Geology of Morals (Who Does the

Earth Think It Is?)," names the assemblage specifically as "a concrete machinic assemblage"[19]

which operates on three levels: on a stratum, between strata, and in the relation between the

strata and the plane of consistency. An assemblage brings strata together and organizes their

relations with one another and with the plane of consistency; as such it is both "*interstratum*" and

"*metastratum*."[20] It is important to bear in mind that strata and the plane of consistency are not

ontological divisions, but layers that coexist in and through one another – "The plane of

consistency is always immanent to the strata."[21] An example helps to clarify: "Must not the

Amazons amputate a breast to adapt the organic stratum to a warlike technological stratum, as

though at the behest of a fearsome woman-bow-steppe assemblage?"[22] The assemblage woman-

bow-steppe cuts across the organism, the technology, and the environment, rendering them in

ontological parity in their relations with one another.

More details emerge in "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics," in which

Deleuze and Guattari elucidate the two axes of assemblages. The horizontal axis spans from

content on the one end – "a *machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions and passions, an

intermingling of bodies reacting to one another" – to *expression* on the other – "a *collective*

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[18] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 120 n.3.
[19] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 71.
[20] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 73.
[21] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 57.
[22] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 71.

assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to

bodies."[23] (DeLanda renames the content end of the axis the "material," and for clarity's sake I

will retain his terminology.[24]) On the vertical axis, meanwhile, "the assemblage has both

territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of*

deterritorialization, which carry it away."[25]

Again, an example serves to illustrate this "tetravalence of the assemblage."[26]

Considering feudalism as an assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari plot the horizontal axis from the

content/material side ("the body of the earth and the social body; the body of the overlord,

vassal, and serf; the body of the knight and the horse and their new relation to the stirrup; the

weapons and tools assuring a symbiosis of bodies") to the expressive side of enunciation

("statements, expressions, the juridical regime of heraldry, all of the incorporeal transformations,

in particular, oaths and their variables"). Running an axis between the material and the

expressive entails maintaining a relationship between them in which neither is reduced to the

other while neither can be fully separated from the other. As the lists suggest, the material side

refers not just to the production of goods but to the "intermingling of bodies in a society," while

the expressive side means not only a linguistic system but "regimes of signs."[27] In both cases, the

relations among the elements are considered inseparable from the elements themselves.

Horizontally, meanwhile, territorialization and deterritorialization are considered first in the

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[23] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 88.
[24] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 12.
[25] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 88.
[26] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 89.
[27] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 90.

literal sense of geographic territories, but also in the "statements and acts" that can either stabilize or destabilize a given feudal system.[28]

Territorialization and deterritorialization are further explicated in "1837: Of the Refrain." Here we learn of the basically spatial nature of assemblages. "The territory is the first assemblage, the first thing to constitute an assemblage; the assemblage is fundamentally territorial."[29] Yet this does not mean that an assemblage is static. On the contrary: "The territorial assemblage continually passes into other assemblages."[30] Territorialization transforms assemblages; intra-assemblage, interassemblage, infra-assemblage shift with/in one another. They "swing between a territorial closure that tends to restratify them and a deterritorializing movement that on the contrary connects them with the Cosmos."[31] DeLanda effects another helpful transformation here by stating, as Deleuze and Guattari at most imply, that "the components of an assemblage [are] themselves assemblages."[32] It is not enough to discuss two or three levels of assemblage, to settle for an intra-/inter-/infra-assemblage triad; rather, assemblages scale all the way up and down the social realm.

The final important section is the summarization of the assemblage concept found in the conclusion to *A Thousand Plateaus*.[33] This passage briefly enunciates much of the above: that assemblages are basically spatial, that they comprise both material and expressive components, that they are engaged in both territorialization and deterritorialization. Here also it becomes clear

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[28] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 89.
[29] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 323.
[30] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 325.
[31] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 337.
[32] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 6.
[33] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 503-5.

that vectors of deterritorialization are linear – lines of flight that shift and reconfigure assemblages.

Of course, as crucial as their work is, Deleuze and Guattari hardly invented the concept of assemblage *ex nihilo*, and their philosophical antecedents continue to exert a strong influence over contemporary uses of assemblage. Brian Massumi suggests that Deleuze "reopened the path" to both Spinoza and Bergson, ushering in these two thinkers' present enjoyment of renewed academic currency.[34] Spinoza's radical monism constructs an ontology of substantial oneness, in which any given item is a "mode" of this underlying unity. A prototype of assemblage theory appears in Spinoza's suggestion that, in Jane Bennett's words, "every mode is itself a mosaic or assemblage of many simple bodies."[35] Although couched in less theistic terms, the Deleuzian assemblage is indebted to Spinoza for both its flat ontology and its formal mosaicism. Bergson too tried to avoid implying spirituality in his vitalism. For Bergson, life and matter are inextricably yoked, the one naming a tendency toward activity and change, the other a tendency toward stability and spatialization.[36] This distinction seems to bear a clear relation to Deleuzian territorialization and deterritorialization, though reframed by Deleuze and Guattari to avoid even the residue of dualism implied by separating life from matter.

With a little help from DeLanda, we are now in a position to attempt a working definition of assemblage. An assemblage is a concatenation of heterogeneous components (both material and expressive), situated in a specific contingent environment where it undergoes constant shifts

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[34] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 32.

[35] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 22.

[36] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 76-77.

and transformations through stabilizing processes of territorialization and destabilizing processes of deterritorialization. Unlike the organic totalities favored by Hegelians, assemblages are not characterized by relations of interiority, but by relations of exteriority. In totalities, "the component parts are constituted by the very relations they have to other parts in the whole"[37] and cannot be extracted without losing their identity: for example, a parent or sibling is defined by the relation to the offspring or fellow sibling, and cannot exist as such without reference to this relationship.[38] However, relations of exteriority entail that "a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different."[39] Relations constitute the assemblage, but not the components thereof. Furthermore, assemblages operate with both upward and downward causality: wholes "emerge from the interactions between their parts … in a bottom-up way," but then these wholes act "as a source of limitations and opportunities for [their] components," exerting "a top-down influence."[40] The power of the assemblage is that it offers both a metaphysical proposal and a concrete explanatory power, both a philosophical and a sociological angle, explicitly articulated in their entanglement.

As helpful as the Deleuzian assemblage is, however, it requires a certain feminist intervention to be fully satisfactory. Alexander G. Weheliye concisely diagnoses the major lacuna: "notions such as power, ideology, gender, coloniality, identity, and race jinglingly dawdle in the margins of Deleuze and Guattari's putatively asubjective and disinterested

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[37] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 9.
[38] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 2.
[39] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 10.
[40] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 21,

universes."[41] For all the exciting possibilities of the assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari seem to fumble when it comes to real-world politics. Voices in the chorus of critique express dissatisfaction with their veneration of racial hybridity as an oversimplification that fails to account for the ways that racialization is enacted;[42] with their abstraction of "becoming-woman" from the specificity of feminist perspectives and women's experiences;[43] with their "display of misogyny, fear of aging, incuriosity about animals, and horror at the ordinariness of flesh" in their discussion of "becoming-animal."[44] Clearly there is something left to be desired! The feminist intervention I will pursue comes from two related angles: posthumanism and new materialism.

There is a great deal of overlap between posthumanism and new materialism; rather than sharply divide the two, I will look at three works, one of which falls more clearly on the posthumanism side (Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman*), one of which falls more on the new materialism side (Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*), and one of which definitively exists in the area of overlap (Karen Barad's "Posthumanist Performativity"). All three perform needed interventions into the Deleuzoguattarian assemblage, challenge each other's weaknesses, and invite the furtherance of their insights through a trans/crip lens.

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[41] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 48.

[42] Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 49-51.

[43] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 111-123.

[44] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 30.

Posthumanism: Rosi Braidotti

> What is lethal is not the posthuman as such but the grafting of the posthuman onto a liberal humanist view of the self.[45]

The definitions of posthumanism are multiple and varied; here I follow Braidotti, who identifies three major strands of posthumanism – reactive posthumanism, stemming from moral philosophy; analytic posthumanism, from science and technology studies; and critical posthumanism, "from my own tradition of anti-humanist philosophies of subjectivity."[46] Like Braidotti, I am most interested in a critical posthumanism which draws on continental philosophy, anti-colonial theory, and environmental theory to develop a critique of humanism, to build on the legacy of anti-humanist thought, and to propose a way forward "as a move beyond these lethal binaries" of humanism vs. anti-humanism.[47] While drawing heavily on Spinoza and on Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti's "posthuman subjectivity" is "materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere, according to the feminist 'politics of location.'"[48] As such, it is surely accurate to consider Braidotti's work as a form of FAT.

What is this posthuman subjectivity? It is "an expanded relational self," an expansion beyond the borders of the human species to encompass relation with all living matter.[49] This posthumanist commitment to life beyond the self and the species is bolstered philosophically, from Spinozist vital materialism that understands matter as "structurally relational," and

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[45] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 286; quoted on Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 101.
[46] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 38.
[47] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 37.
[48] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 51.
[49] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 60.

scientifically, from molecular biology's understand of matter as self-organizing.[50] Of course, the

fact that neoliberal capitalism seeks to commodify every aspect of life teaches us that to be post-

anthropocentric is not necessarily to be "posthumanistic."[51] If critical posthumanist subjectivity

is to resist "[t]he opportunistic political economy of biogenetic capitalism," which "financially

invest[s] in … the informational power of living matter itself,"[52] it is not enough simply to be

aware that we are inextricably entangled with all living matter. We must also divest ourselves of

"species supremacy,"[53] the belief that we as humans are qualitatively different from all other

forms of life. Absent this divestment, life itself, in all its complexity and self-organization, is

reduced to a resource to be exploited, as is evident in the ongoing ravages of global capitalism.

To move beyond human supremacy and to truly recognize our relational posthumanist

subjectivity across species borders, Braidotti proposes three processes: becoming-animal,

becoming-earth, and becoming-machine. Each of the three offers something vital to the goal of

enacting a truly posthuman subjectivity.

Becoming-animal "entails the displacement of anthropocentrism and the recognition of

trans species solidarity on the basis of our being environmentally based, that is to say embodied,

embedded and in symbiosis with other species."[54] Rather than dominating or instrumentalizing

nonhuman animals – rather than imagining ourselves ontologically separate from and superior to

the other critters (to us Donna Haraway's term) – we need to move toward "recognition of deep

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[50] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 59.
[51] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 65.
[52] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 61.
[53] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 65.
[54] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 67.

zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals."[55] The *zoe*, the life, that animates humans is *not*

different from that which animates nonhuman animals, and to acknowledge this truth would

entail a dramatic upheaval in our ways of living, from dismantling factory farming to taking local

wildlife seriously as stakeholders, or perhaps even decision-makers, in urban planning. When I

read the website of a forthcoming apartment complex in my neighborhood, with its assertion of

being "[i]n touch with what's important,"[56] I think of the feral cat colony that used to occupy the

building site before it began to undergo development. I remember the open cans of cat food left

by neighbors (who were certainly not paying the kinds of rental prices listed on the property's

website); I recall the pleasures of sharing my city's streets with these unpredictable little beasts; I

suspect that becoming-animal might offer one way to resist ceding definitions of "what's

important" to real estate companies.

Becoming-earth "brings issues of environmental and social sustainability to the fore, with

special emphasis on ecology and the climate change issue."[57] Rather than focusing solely on the

negative register of dire warnings about our destruction of the environment, we also need an

affirmative framing of "a geo-centered subject"[58] which decenters humanity and accounts for the

vitality of matter. Subjectivity thus becomes "an assemblage that includes non-human agents"[59]

– not as the technophobic romanticism of certain forms of ecological thinking, which still

maintain a binary opposition between humanity and environment, culture and nature, while

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[55] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 71.
[56] Sawyer Jersey City, www.sawyerjerseycity.com.
[57] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 67.
[58] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 81.
[59] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 82.

simply reversing the moral polarities; but rather as a "monistic relationality"[60] which does not erase difference. After all, to pit "humanity" *tout court* against "nature" is to suggest that all humans bear equal responsibility for climate change and environmental destruction, as if there is no distinction between the CEO of a transnational petroleum company and the impoverished worker in the global south. Braidotti's nomadic egalitarianism asks us to pay *more* attention to difference, not less; to recognize "the open-ended, inter-relational, multi-sexed and trans-species flows of becoming through interaction with multiple others."[61] Through de-familiarization, dis-identification, and Deleuzian deterritorialization, we can become planetary subjects.

Becoming-machine "cracks open the division between humans and technological circuits, introducing biotechnologically mediated relations as foundational for the constitution of the subject."[62] The intimacy of organic and non-organic is no mere metaphor, but a literal entanglement of flesh with pacemaker, ocean floor with fiber-optic cable, thought with its electronic facilitators. But just as the technophobic fantasies of the ecofascists are reductive and destructive, so too is the uncritically technophilic valorization of our electronically extended being. Embodied location again makes a significant material difference: "cyborgs include not only the glamorous bodies of high-tech, jet-fighter pilots, athletes or film stars, but also the anonymous masses of the underpaid, digital proletariat who fuel the technology-driven global economy without ever accessing it themselves."[63] If my understanding of my posthumanist entanglement with my smartphone excludes the Congolese child whose bloody, exploited fingers

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[60] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 86.
[61] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 89.
[62] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 67.
[63] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 90.

mined the cobalt for my lithium-ion battery, it is both incomplete and ethically bankrupt. Braidotti demands that our becoming-machine be grounded by "a sustainable ethics of transformations,"[64] which treasures flesh *and* metal, which resists the pitiless efficiency of global capitalism in favor of "radical relationality and delight,"[65] which cultivates "transversality of relations"[66] across the animal, the planetary, and the technological.

Together, these three processes constitute ways of living the multiplicity of posthumanist becoming, of embracing the rhizomatics of difference across and through which life flows and pulsates. "At the beginning, there is always already a relation to an affective, interactive entity endowed with intelligent flesh and an embodied mind: ontological relationality."[67] In this radically relational posthumanism, the self is "a moveable assemblage within a common life-space that the subject never masters nor possesses but merely inhabits, crosses, always in a community, a pack, a group or a cluster. For posthuman theory, the subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations."[68]

As is surely clear by now, Braidotti's Spinozist vital materialist posthumanism offers a great deal of richness that is relevant to my project here: an interest in the vitality of matter; an attempt to account for personhood while decentering the human (in my theological terms, a theological anthropology without the *anthropos*); a feminist commitment to embodiment and

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[64] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 90.
[65] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 92.
[66] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 95.
[67] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 100.
[68] Braidotti, *The Posthuman,* 193.

location. However, the trans/crip lens developed in chapter 2 raises certain questions and critiques.

First, there are some perhaps minor concerns about language choice. Braidotti's use of "matter" is frequently in the phrase "living matter," and it is not entirely clear whether non-organic matter is always included. The discussions of becoming-earth and becoming-machine, discussed above, would seem to imply that it is; but the clarity and strength of her argument for posthumanism would be enhanced by an explicit statement that "living" matter means *all* matter, whether or not it is considered "alive" in the traditional sense. She additionally refers to this living matter as "intelligent" or "smart." Her definition of matter's intelligence is its self-organization; but a disability theorist must then ask, why use the term "intelligent"? What does "intelligent" do that "self-organizing" does not? From a crip perspective, "intelligence" is inextricably embedded in colonial, racist, sexist, ableist, anthropocentric histories. The valuing of intelligence has been used to subordinate and dismiss those deemed less intelligent by virtue of their race, gender, disability, species; the "intelligence quotient" continues to be the obsession of white supremacists and eugenicists (now rebranded as "race realists"). I worry that calling matter "intelligent" or "smart" is another form of the compensatory humanism that Braidotti herself critiques – the kind of anthropomorphism that attempts to cultivate empathy toward the nonhuman, but in doing so reinforces the sharp distinction between human and nonhuman (while also riding roughshod over those humans whose own humanity has never been fully permitted).

More substantively, casting my trans/crip lens upon Braidotti's account of the posthuman reveals a concerning disavowal of negativity. Braidotti is hardly naïve about the existence of

misery and exploitation in the world; yet there is a throughline of asserting positivity which deserves critical attention. She writes:

> [C]ontemporary bio-genetic capitalism generates a global form of reactive mutual inter-dependence of all living organisms, including non-humans. This sort of unity tends to be of the negative kind, as a shared form of vulnerability, that is to say a global sense of inter-connection between the human and the non-human environment in the face of common threats. The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others.[69]

The dismissal of vulnerability, which appears twice in two sentences, recurs again in a later ethical call for "a community that is not bound negatively by shared vulnerability … but rather by the compassionate acknowledgement of their interdependence with multiple others."[70] The crip commentator must ask: what's so bad about vulnerability? Disability scholarship attempts to reconsider the kneejerk disparagement of vulnerability – not necessarily to rush to redeem it, so much as to ask what happens if we recast vulnerability as constitutive of our being in the world. For Braidotti, vulnerability seems to name a reactive, perhaps even paranoid stance, a way of (temporarily?) binding together a community in the face of a threat, while interdependence is the positive valence of intercorporeal relationality, which does not require threat to function as its glue. For crip theory, however, vulnerability and interdependence are inextricable, and neither can be disavowed: indeed, our vulnerability – our capacity to be affected in ways that wound us – is precisely what makes interdependence both possible and necessary.

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[69] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 50.
[70] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 101.

Elsewhere in the text, Braidotti does acknowledge that *zoe*, her term for the egalitarian

life-force that flows through all living matter, "is not above negativity, because it can hurt."[71]

Braidotti's discussion of "life beyond death" is intriguing, but ultimately hampered by its failure

to account for disability. By focusing singularly on death as the site of negativity and finitude,

she is able to frame mental health conditions only as "spiritual death"[72] or "internally produced

and self-run ways of dying."[73] While she does "propose not to simply classify these practices as

self-destructive, but rather to see them as normatively neutral manifestations of interaction with

and resistance to the political economy of commodification of all that lives"[74] – a suggestion

very much in keeping with the insights of crip theory – she fails to deliver on this proposal,

turning instead to a valorization of death *as* part of life: "not only is there no dialectical tension

between Eros and Thanatos, but these two entities are really just one life-force that aims to reach

its own fulfilment."[75] As with her disavowal of vulnerability, Braidotti here explicitly aims at

"the transformation of negative into positive passions."[76] I worry that this is too quick a turn to

the affirmative, a failure to stay with the trouble (as Donna Haraway puts it)[77] or to engage in

grave attending (in Karen Bray's term).[78] A trans/crip perspective will not so quickly redeem the

painful and the difficult, but rather attempts to witness friction and negativity – "to remain with a

difference on the day after damage and death."[79] Rather than collapsing Eros and Thanatos in

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[71] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 131.
[72] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 114.
[73] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 130.
[74] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 114.
[75] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 134.
[76] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 134.
[77] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
[78] Bray, *Grave Attending: A Political Theology for the Unredeemed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).
[79] Bray, *Grave Attending*, 27.

order to redeem the latter, Braidotti might instead disrupt their opposition by using Anna

Mollow's formulation of the disability drive.[80] The disability drive cuts across the life-death

binary as Braidotti tries to do, offering a way to think being differently: instead of reaffirming

the traditional subject, either in opposition to disability or including it, Mollow invites us to "ask

how disability might threaten to undo, or disable, the category of the human."[81] Braidotti shies

away from accounts of the undoing of the subject that stress "primordial loss, incommensurable

lack and irreparable separation,"[82] but a trans/crip approach would ask us to be less hasty in

turning away from loss and lack.

My final critique of Braidotti's account of the posthuman is perhaps a fundamental

disagreement over disciplinary location. Braidotti's repeated avowals of secularism strike me as

rarely convincing or useful. She notes the many strong critiques of secularism that have arisen in

recent years – summarizing them aptly: "[t]o be simply secular would be complicitous with neo-

colonial Western supremacist positions"[83] – and yet she never lays out a similarly substantive

defense of her continued use of the term. Perhaps I am too expansive with my own definition of

theology, but I am simply unable to fathom the purpose of claims to secularity as in the

following sentences: "The ontological inhuman has often been rendered as the sacred, but for a

secular materialist like myself this is not convincing. What we do stretch out towards is endless

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[80] Anna Mollow, "Is Sex Disability?" in *Sex and Disability*, ed. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 185-312.

[81] Mollow, "Is Sex Disability?" 308.

[82] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 100.

[83] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 26.

cosmic energy, which is as fierce as it is self-organizing."[84] *Pace* Braidotti, I regard her

posthumanism as entirely compatible with both the sacred and the doing of theology.

Vibrant matter: Jane Bennett

There is a significant overlap between Braidotti's account of the posthuman and Jane

Bennett's account of vibrant matter. Both attempt to take matter seriously on its own terms; both

attempt to radically decenter human subjectivity and locate agency across a distributed network

of actants; both draw on the Deleuzoguattarian assemblage and its philosophical lineage.

However, both have weaknesses, and each can be enhanced by the other. While equally critical

of conservative Christian claims to support "life" in the abstract,[85] Bennett is less invested in

secularism than Braidotti, freely engaging with Augustine and Derridean messianicity, and even

ending with "a litany, a kind of Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists."[86] Bennett's

terminology is less objectionable than Braidotti's, largely avoiding the cognitive bias of referring

to matter as "intelligent," and explicitly challenging biocentrism, which Braidotti's emphasis on

"living" matter is less clear about. There is also a useful clarity in Bennett's focus on agency,

rather than subjectivity: whereas Braidotti writes of posthuman subjectivity, Bennett chooses "to

bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity"[87] in

order to stress the actual activity and effects of thing-power and avoid the anthropocentric

tendencies of ideas about selfhood. At the same time, as will be discussed below, I have serious

reservations about the political toothlessness of Bennett's project, and Braidotti's posthumanism

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[84] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 135.
[85] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 133; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, chapter 6.
[86] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 122.
[87] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.

can help to keep a vitalist materialism grounded in feminist political commitments of situated

embodiment and our ethical responsibility to act.

Bennett identifies three main tasks of her project:

(1) to paint a positive ontology of vibrant matter, which stretches received concepts of agency, action, and freedom sometimes to the breaking point; (2) to dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic using arguments and other rhetorical means to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality; and (3) to sketch a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants.[88]

Her success at the first two goals is perhaps undercut by her failure at the third, but, as I

will argue, my hope is that a trans/crip approach might begin to help supply what is missing.

The core insight of Bennett's project is that inorganic matter is intrinsically lively.[89] This

liveliness is an impersonal affect inherent in matter itself: "not a spiritual supplement or 'life

force' added to the matter said to house it."[90] (By contrast, Braidotti's account of *zoe* sometimes

seems to slip into this dualistic mode, as when she talks about life as something we "just

inhabit[…], not unlike a time-share location."[91]) Bennett aims to "theorize events (a blackout, a

meal, an imprisonment in chains, an experience of litter) as encounters between ontologically

diverse actants, some human, some not, though all thoroughly material."[92] She does this through

the concepts of thing-power and affective assemblages.

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[88] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, x.
[89] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xviii.
[90] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.
[91] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 133.
[92] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiv.

Thing-power names the capacity of matter, of literal *stuff*, to do things in the world.

Influenced by Spinoza's conatus and Henry David Thoreau's Wild, thing-power draws our

attention to the agency of matter. Bennett acknowledges upfront the limitations of thing-power as

a concept: it is too static in its focus on "things" (rather than dynamic processes or, to

foreshadow the next section's discussion of Karen Barad, phenomena), and it is too

individualistic in its implication that things act singly.[93] Still, thing-power is a useful first step to

correct for the long tradition of denying any agency to "inert" matter. Once thing-power is

established, the account can be enriched by turning to assemblage.

The concept of assemblage allows us to move past the artificial individualism and

reification of thing-power: "While the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital

impetus, *conatus* or clinamen, an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always

depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and

forces."[94] Both Spinozan affect and the Deleuzoguattarian assemblage are crucial here. Affect in

the Spinozan sense means that "each [body] is, by its very nature as a body, continuously

affecting and being affected by other bodies."[95] And "bodies enhance their power *in* or *as* a

heterogeneous assemblage."[96] Thinking about the action of these agential assemblages requires

attention to three crucial terms: efficacy, trajectory, and causality. "Efficacy points to the

creativity of agency, to a capacity to make something new appear or occur,"[97] not as the result of

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[93] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvii.
[94] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 21.
[95] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 21.
[96] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23.
[97] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 31.

a purposive or intentional subject, but from "a swarm of vitalities."[98] Trajectory is "a

directionality or movement *away* from somewhere even if the toward-which it moves is obscure

or even absent"[99] – again, not here requiring purpose or intention. And causality

> is more emergent than efficient, more fractal than linear. Instead of an effect obedient to
> a determinant, one finds circuits in which effect and cause alternate position and
> redound on each other. If efficient causality seeks to rank the actants involved, treating
> some as external causes and others as dependent effects, emergent causality places the
> focus on the process as itself an actant, as itself in possession of degrees of agentic
> capacity.[100]

Each of these three elements of action is traditionally embedded in the volitional subject,

human and/or divine, whose will is exerted on objects in order to cause events. Bennett's account

of vibrant matter acting in and through agential assemblages obviates the need for a volitional

subject, and in fact scrambles the traditional division between subject and object, actor and

acted-upon, to propose instead a multiplicity of agencies working in, among, and against each

other in dynamic motion.

My account of trans/crip affective assemblage draws extensively on Bennett's. The

trans/crip cyborg as affective assemblage is motivated by an attempt to think my/our/its agency

and constitution in ways that do not rely on subjectivity and purposive intent, and to robustly

trace the material efficacy of affective bodies in and as assemblages. As Bennett writes: "It is

futile to seek a pure nature unpolluted by humanity, and it is foolish to define the self as

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[98] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 32.
[99] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 32.
[100] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 33.

something purely human. But how can I start to feel myself as not only human?"[101] I suggest that

the trans/crip cyborg experience is precisely this, as chapter 5 will describe.

However, Bennett's attempt at drawing out political and ethical consequences leaves a lot

to be desired. Her hostility to the notion of structural forces hampers her account of fats as

actants in chapter 3:

> To take seriously the efficacy of nonhuman fat is, then, not only to shift one's idea about
> what counts as an actor but also to focus one's attention away from individuals and onto
> actants in assemblages. The problem of obesity would thus have to index not only the
> large humans and their economic-cultural prostheses (agribusiness, snack-food vending
> machines, insulin injections, bariatric surgery, serving sizes, systems of food marketing
> and distribution, microwave ovens) but also the strivings and trajectories of fats as they
> weaken or enhance the power of human wills, habits, and ideas.[102]

What is missing from this account is, crucially, any mention of the social forces and

structures of fatphobia, and their enmeshment in sexism, racism, and eugenics.[103] A truly FAT

account of fat would have to attend to these forces just as much as the ones Bennett mentions.

Relatedly, Bennett's commitment to nonhuman agency makes her much too quick to let bad

(human) actors off the hook: her analysis of the 2003 blackout that affected much of North

America culminates in the very diluted statement that, "[t]hough it would give me pleasure to

assert that deregulation and corporate greed are the real culprits in the blackout, the most I can

honestly affirm is that corporations are one of the sites at which human efforts at reform can be

applied, that corporate regulation is one place where intentions might initiate a cascade of

effects."[104] As anthropogenic climate change intensifies, driven primarily by corporate polluters,

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[101] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 116.
[102] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 42-3.
[103] Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).
[104] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 37.

such attenuated calls for reform are certainly insufficient. Bennett's vital materialism would benefit from a feminist political commitment as strong as Braidotti's.

A trans/crip approach to Bennett's vital materialism might seek to restore political urgency through the layering in of a phenomenological account of trans/crip vital materialist embodiment. While Bennett rightly notes that phenomenology tends to privilege the human agent,[105] trans/crip cyborg phenomenology might help us "start to feel [ourselves] as not only human"[106] – not least through its attention to negativity, through taking seriously the experiences of pain and dysphoria. Even more so than Braidotti, Bennett accentuates the positive, even perhaps overaccentuates it. There is a fundamental tension at the heart of the trans/crip cyborg: at once a visceral commitment to bodily autonomy and a recognition of the distributed agency of the posthuman, vibrantly material affective assemblage stuff. Pain and dysphoria are powerful affects that exceed all attempts at accounting for them, and as such they are potentially potent motors for defamiliarization, deterritorialization, and becoming-otherwise. As will be discussed later in this chapter, these affects gum up the works, grind the body-machine's gears, chafe at the joins of the assemblage – and in this they instantiate the crip cyborg's irony, its "holding incompatible things together."[107] There is a great deal of beauty in the tender attention and wonder that Bennett invites us to bestow upon the world and our distributed selves within it, but without a critical trans/crip sensibility she cannot satisfactorily account for the sheer strangeness of being.

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[105] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 30.
[106] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 116.
[107] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto."

Posthumanist performativity: Karen Barad

If Braidotti's posthumanism and Bennett's vital materialism both provide valuable but incomplete contributions to the Harawayan project of FAT, a work that explicitly takes up Haraway's mantle can be found in Karen Barad's posthumanist performativity. Like Bennett, Barad offers an account of the material efficacy of nonhuman things, describing the agency of matter as distributed among human and nonhuman actants; like Braidotti, Barad is concerned with feminist politics, but goes farther by attempting to provide a robust framework for political responsibility, in the notion of being accountable to marks on bodies.

Barad asks, "Why do we think that the existence of relations requires relata?"[108] – that is to say, they don't. This is a relational ontology in which relata (things, bodies, individuals or groups thereof) do not precede relations, but rather are constituted by them. If the relational theological anthropologies discussed in chapter 1 make this claim for the constitution of personhood or subjectivity, Barad goes a step further and applies it to matter itself: "matter is not a fixed essence; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency."[109]

Barad's proposal is posthuman insofar as it "calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of 'human' and 'nonhuman,' examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized."[110] If Braidotti invited us to recognize our

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[108] Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28.3 (2003): 812.
[109] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 828.
[110] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 808.

enmeshment with the nonhuman, to acknowledge the ways in which we are already animal/earth/machine, Barad wants to pay attention to how, why, and under what circumstances differentiation (between human and animal, animal and earth, organic and machine, "I" and "not-I") takes place. Braidotti urges us to deterritorialize; Barad wants to understand how and why (re)territorialization occurs. Barad's name for the process that enacts differentiation is the agential cut. This is contrasted with the Cartesian cut, which presumes a preexisting separation between subject and object, knower and known; rather, the agential cut *creates* this separation, temporarily and in specific materially relevant circumstances. To emphasize the lack of ontological separability, Barad writes of "intra-actions" rather than interactions, suggesting that the actions in question take place *within* a relational field, not *between* relata.

Barad does not use the term "assemblage" in this text (perhaps because it predates the Deleuzomania of the late-00s by a few years), but their use of "apparatus" functions similarly: "*apparatuses are dynamic (re)configurings <u>of</u> the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted.*"[111] The language of apparatus is perhaps more evocative than assemblage in the STS context in which Barad works, particularly when they use the process of scientific measurement as an example of the agential cut. Apparatus has the advantage of implicating humans, requiring us to be accountable for our role in enacting exclusionary boundaries; on the other hand, there is perhaps a risk that apparatus implies that there is always a purposive subject behind every intra-action. Barad is nonetheless careful to stress the role of agency beyond the human, refusing to define the

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[111] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 816 (emphasis in original).

discursive in terms of human subjectivity or intentionality, and instead understanding discursive practices as "specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted."[112] In this way, Barad shifts our understanding of performativity away from Judith Butler's usage as "iterative citationality" and toward "iterative intra-activity."[113] If Bennett's agential assemblages allow us to think efficacy, trajectory, and causality without a need for a volitional subject, Barad's use of performativity allows us to think iteration without resignification.

At the same time, Barad is concerned not to evacuate moral responsibility. In the "causal intra-actions" that enact the agential cut, "marks are left on bodies. Objectivity means being accountable to marks on bodies."[114] This is objectivity in the scientific sense, concerned with the replicability of measurements; but we may also read it as an ethical demand. The distribution of agency necessarily attenuates the scope of human responsibility; Braidotti's feminist politics of location is one way to reassert our moral obligation, but Barad elegantly makes it a part of the very intra-actions themselves. Marks *are* left on bodies; the agent constituted by the cut that made these marks is accountable to them. On this account, distributed agency does not let humans off the hook – on the contrary, this ethico-onto-epistemology requires us to attend *more* exactly to our role and our responsibility in the making of agential cuts. Knowing, being, and moral responsibility are intimately entangled, and by attending to this reality we can better and more faithfully respond to the world. Perhaps the framework of the agential cut and the marks it

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[112] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 828.
[113] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 828.
[114] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 824.

leaves on bodies would have enhanced the moral dimension of Bennett's account of the 2003 blackout.

Braidotti's posthumanism, with its call to practice becoming-animal, becoming-earth, becoming-machine; Bennett's vital materialism, with its emphasis on the thing-power of lively matter enacted in agential assemblages; Barad's posthumanist performativity, with its concept of the agential cut and the need to be accountable to marks on bodies – these are just three possibilities within the rich field of thought that I term feminist assemblage theory. FAT offers robustly relational perspectives on the dynamic entanglements of bodies in the world and the complexity of matter's enfolding. The reframing of agency and subjectivity provided by FAT is particularly valuable to this project, which attempts to reconstitute theological anthropology within a posthumanist framework. This will be detailed in chapter 5; here, one brief evocation will suffice.

Barad writes that "*agential separability* is a matter of *exteriority within (material-discursive) phenomena.*"[115] This "exteriority within" is specifically contrasted with Judith Butler's "constitutive outside," which Barad suggests gives priority to discursivity over materiality. Barad objects to Butler's implication that "language itself is an enclosure that contains the constitutive outside."[116] Their disagreement appears to hinge on the fact that Butler locates exteriority within *language*, while Barad locates exteriority within *phenomena*. Working within poststructuralist queer theory, Butler frames the constitutive outside as the exteriority

[115] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 825, emphases in original.
[116] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 825 n.31.

within meaning and subjecthood – not unlike the Lacanian *sinthome* and its embodiment in the figure of the *sinthomo*sexual Edelman suggests (see chapter 1). Like Barad, I am interested in taking queer insights from the context of human-centered meaning, relation, and subjectivity, and expanding them into the larger world of material relationality and agency. For Barad, the field-containing-exteriority cannot be limited to the human subject and/or body, but must be understood as the whole material universe of phenomena. In a similar move, but in a theological register, I attempt to reframe the field-containing-exteriority to creation, understood panentheistically. As discussed in chapter 1, God-the-*sinthomo*sexual is the exteriority within, the constitutive outside, not just of anthropocentric fields like meaning and subjectivity, but of all (affectively agential) matter – and it is my hope that this will prove to be the key to developing a non-anthropocentric theological anthropology.

Assemblage and intersections

Thus far, the feminism of FAT has largely been evident methodologically, in its commitment (most explicitly stated by Braidotti) to a politics of location and situatedness. While the use of the concept of assemblage has been explored in depth, it is still necessary to examine its relation to intersectional feminism. As Jasbir Puar has observed, the relationship between intersectionality and assemblage is often contested, if not deemed incompatible. Puar argues that both are necessary, working in productive friction, and this is what I hope to convey with the naming of FAT. This is also the goal of trans/cripping, so that "trans" and "disability" are not just the latest ingredients in the intersectionality cholent, but lenses making visible the production, discipline, and control of bodies and identities. In this section, therefore, I will read

Puar's "'I Would Rather Be A Cyborg Than A Goddess'" for its nuanced and useful discussion of intersectionality *as* assemblage. I will then turn to Lucas Crawford's "Transgender Without Organs?" and Margrit Shildrick's "Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?" to provide, respectively, trans and crip framings of assemblage. These three essays (two of which, it may be noted, use quotes from the "Cyborg Manifesto" as their titles!) together provide the pieces necessary for the trans/crip cyborg assemblage.

"I Would Rather Be A Cyborg Than A Goddess": Jasbir Puar

Puar explains that the perceived incompatibility between intersectionality and assemblage rests on assumptions about their respective political utility: "the assumption … that representation, and its recognized subjects, is the dominant, primary, or most efficacious platform of political intervention, while a Deleuzian nonrepresentational, non-subject-oriented politics is deemed impossible."[117] This is related to my concern about the political efficacy of Bennett's account of distributed agency, which seems to absolve humans of ethical responsibility: can we have moral and political agency if we do not have representational subjects? Must we choose one or the other, either intersectionality or assemblage? Is the very term "trans/crip cyborg assemblage" incoherent?

Happily, Puar offers us a way through the dilemma. Intersectionality (and, indeed, political action) turns out to already be less rigid, less static, and more amenable to assemblage theory than its reputation would suggest. Indeed, the trouble with intersectionality is less about

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[117] Jasbir Puar, "'I Would Rather be a Cyborg than a Goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory." *philoSOPHIA* 2.1 (2012): 50.

the theory itself than its (mis)uses: "Much like the language of diversity, the language of intersectionality, its very invocation, it seems, largely substitutes for intersectional analysis itself."[118] Like all representational politics, intersectionality is vulnerable to what Olufemi O. Taiwo calls "elite capture,"[119] but lazy or cynical deployments of an idea do not in themselves disqualify the idea. (Indeed, Deleuzian thought itself is hardly impermeable to malign uses – see Eyal Weizman's "Lethal Theory" for an account of how the Israeli Defense Force makes practical application of Deleuze and Guattari in the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. [120])

Fundamentally, Puar argues, intersectionality and assemblage are providing different perspectives, which are both necessary. Assemblage offers a much-needed focus on matter and a move away from endlessly multiplying subjectivities, to account for the fact that "bodies are unstable entities that cannot be seamlessly disaggregated into identity formations."[121] Intersectionality, meanwhile, "attempts to comprehend political institutions and their attendant forms of social normativity and disciplinary administration."[122] Puar proposes that intersectionality is better suited to analyze the operations of Foucauldian disciplinary societies, while assemblage is more useful to understand the workings of Deleuzian control societies – and both dynamics are at work in the world as we know it: "societies of control tweak and modulate bodies as matter, not predominantly through signification or identity interpellation but rather through affective capacities and tendencies," and, at the same time, "for some bodies—we can

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[118] Puar, "'Goddess,'" 53.
[119] Olufemi O. Taiwo, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference," *The Philosopher* 108.4 (2020): 61-69.
[120] Eyal Weizman, "Lethal Theory," *Log* 7 (2006): 53-77.
[121] Puar, "'Goddess,'" 55.
[122] Puar, "'Goddess,'" 63.

call them statistical outliers, or those consigned to premature death, or those once formerly

considered useless bodies or bodies of excess—discipline and punish may well still be a primary

apparatus of power."[123] The distinction between disciplinary societies and control societies is

reflected in the distinction between medicalization and biomedicalization discussed in chapter 3

– one does not unilaterally supersede the other, but rather emerges in unevenly distributed ways.

As such, we need *both* intersectionality and assemblage to better theorize discipline and control,

their relations, and their various manifestations.

Furthermore, it is possible to reread intersectionality *as* assemblage: contrary to the way

its detractors portray it as a reification of identities, Kimberlé Crenshaw's original image of

Black women's experience as a traffic intersection in fact describes intersectionality as an event.

> As Crenshaw indicates in this description, identification is a process; identity is an
> encounter, an event, an accident, in fact. Identities are multicausal, multidirectional,
> liminal; traces aren't always self-evident. The problem of how the two preexisting roads
> come into being notwithstanding, there is emphasis on motion rather than gridlock, on
> how the halting of motion produces the demand to locate. The accident itself indicates
> the entry of the standardizing needs of the juridical; is there a crime taking place? How
> does one determine who is at fault? As a metaphor, then, intersectionality is a more
> porous paradigm than the standardization of method inherent to a discipline has allowed
> it to be.[124]

Intersectionality is, in fact, not as far removed from Jane Bennett's vital materialist

account of a blackout as some commentators might suggest.

Ultimately, in a move that would surely make Haraway proud, Puar rejects the dualistic

premise of the closing line of the Cyborg Manifesto which she uses as her title, refusing the

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[123] Puar, "'Goddess,'" 65.
[124] Puar, "'Goddess,'" 59.

opposition between cyborg and goddess just as she refuses the opposition between intersectionality and assemblage: "why disaggregate the two when there surely must be cyborgian goddesses in our midst? Now that is a becoming-intersectional assemblage that I could really appreciate."[125] The cyborgian goddess may also be thought of as the trans/crip cyborg assemblage – a term I use to express the same productive overlap and friction that Puar finds in intersectionality and assemblage. While the terms cyborg and assemblage do much of the same work (disrupting binaries, challenging the traditional human subject, taking matter seriously), I keep the language of the cyborg as a marker of the feminist politics of location, a reminder of the structural forces at play, and a signal of blasphemous faithfulness to FAT's origins.

Transgender Without Organs?: Lucas Crawford

While this project specifically focuses on the realm of the biomedical in the constitution of the trans/crip cyborg assemblage, it is important to stress that no specific engagement with (bio)medicine is *necessary* for the constitution of such an assemblage. Lucas Crawford's "Transgender Without Organs?"[126] provides a useful intervention on this point, explicitly resisting transmedicalist accounts which define transness purely in terms of medical transition. Crawford uses Deleuzian terms to think geo-affectively about the role of *space* and *movement* in the trans assemblage – not only the conceptual movement implicit in the very term "trans," but literal movement from place to place. In asking us to take seriously the role of landscapes, buildings, and geographic (re)locations in our gender assemblages, Crawford challenges the

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[125] Puar, "'Goddess,'" 63.
[126] Lucas Crawford, "Transgender Without Organs? Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.3/4 (2008): 127-143.

metronormative narratives that construct cities as welcoming and diverse and rural areas as queer- and transphobic. He seeks to unsettle – to deterritorialize – the model of the trans subject, both to allow more people to belong to or desire transness and also to open space for those who might "revel in the deterritorializing potential of *not* being recognized, *not* being counted."[127]

In recent years, heightened trans visibility has revealed the limits of a politics of representation premised on the recognition of identities. Simply "being seen" can only achieve so much, and under some circumstances may even be counterproductive: the British writer Travis Alabanza's play *Overflow* poignantly portrays this reality, when its protagonist Rosie describes how the UK's recent heightened media scrutiny on trans women has turned the public restroom from a place of sisterhood to a site of surveillance and peril.[128] Crawford uses the Deleuzian concept of becoming-imperceptible to suggest that rural queers might not only resist recognition, but actively take pleasure in their resistance. Rather than seeking inclusion and recognition (inclusion in what? Recognition by whom? State surveillance, academic scrutiny, the non-profit industrial complex?), trans imperceptibility might be a way to make space for "the next desire, the next gender, the next…?"[129]

Crawford demonstrates the particular advantages of a FAT approach inasmuch as it allows us to think the molar *and* the molecular, the discipline-and-punish systems of power that shape bodies through structural forces *and* the control of bodily affects. While Crawford does not use these terms, his use of vignettes throughout the piece vividly portrays how a form of

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[127] Crawford, "Transgender Without Organs?" 130.
[128] Travis Alabanza, *Overflow* (London: Methuen Drama, 2021).
[129] Crawford, "Transgender Without Organs?" 141.

metronormative homonationalism marks certain (poor, rural, racialized) bodies as disposable. At the same time, the reterritorialization of subjectivization occurs literally through/with/as the physical spaces and environments in which we are located. A more explicitly posthumanist reading of Crawford allows us to put the point finely: the territories in which we find ourselves – both topological and geopolitical – have *agency* (efficacy, trajectory, causality) in constituting us.

"Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?": Margrit Shildrick

Margrit Shildrick's "Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?"[130] identifies a specific intellectual lineage within which I situate myself: phenomenologically-inflected feminism which has come to the Deleuzian assemblage through Haraway. (Or, as Rosi Braidotti put it in *Nomadic Subjects*, there is "a coalition of interests between feminist figurations of a posthuman subjectivity," such as Haraway's cyborg, and Deleuzian rhizomatics.[131]) Shildrick's focus on disability provides the last piece necessary for the trans/crip cyborg assemblage, as well as raising the question of prosthetics, which will be explored in this chapter's final section.

As the "Cyborg Manifesto" observes that we are all cyborgs, so Shildrick points out that we are all prostheticized bodies; yet this does not mean we should not attend to "the disabled body in its material specificities as a privileged exemplar of hybridity."[132] What Shildrick here terms "anomalous corporealities" have tended to be "more readily, though by no means

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[130] Margrit Shildrick, "'Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?': Embodiment, Boundaries, and Somatechnics," *Hypatia* 30.1 (2015): 13-29.

[131] Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 110.

[132] Shildrick, "Skin," 16.

exclusively, associated with various prosthetic devices."[133] The paradox of prosthetic devices

(explored more fully in the next section) is that they

> contest our faith in corporeal integrity even as they are intended to restore the clean and
> proper body. They not only demonstrate the inherent plasticity of the body, but, in the
> very process of incorporating non-self matter, point to the multiple possibilities of co-
> corporeality, where bodies are not just contiguous and mutually reliant but entwined
> with one another. Against a modernist convention of fully bounded bodies, separate and
> distinct from one another, such modes of corporeal transformation comprehensively
> undo the limits of the embodied self.[134]

Disability scholars have often critiqued the cyborg figure, both in its popular (mis)uses

and in Haraway's own description. Regarding the former, Alison Kafer is one among many who

point out that popular reporting (and, in some cases, theorizing) on celebrity athletes as cyborgs

tends to entirely undo Haraway's point: rather than using the cyborg to challenge the very idea of

separability between nature and culture, human and machine, "[i]n these news stories, 'cyborg'

represents the melding of pure body and pure machine; there is an original purity that, thanks to

assistive technology, has only now been mixed, hybridized, blurred."[135] Even Haraway's own

deployment of disability language and imagery in the manifesto tends toward the tropic and the

metaphorical, focusing on a science-fictional rehabilitation of disability rather than the embodied

specificities of lived disabled reality. Both Kafer and Shildrick point out that, rather than

depoliticizing disability and remaining beholden to a curative imaginary, a critically crip

approach to the cyborg has the potential to more fully realize Haraway's own goals, particularly

by considering the role of attendants and service animals to explore the human-human and

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[133] Shildrick, "Skin," 16.
[134] Shildrick, "Skin," 16.
[135] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 108.

human-animal aspects of cyborg entanglement, not just the human-machine angle.[136] Shildrick argues that disability, "in its inevitable bodily transgressions and modes of assemblage," might, more than any other form of embodiment, enable us "to let go of the illusions of sovereign selfhood."[137]

For Shildrick, the prosthetic cyborg entails a move from Derridean supplement to Deleuzian assemblage. In the Derridean account, "the very possibility of (prosthetic) augmentation indicates an absence of self-sufficiency or originary wholeness."[138] The supplement simultaneously "constitute[es] the object as such" and "exposes the undecidable nature of categorical distinctions."[139] The assemblage may to some degree be understood as building on this insight, while expanding our focus from a singular object to an assemblage of part-objects. But what *exactly* is the role of the prosthetic, and the supplement, in the trans/crip cyborg assemblage? To address this question, we now turn to theories of prosthetics.

Prosthetics and assemblage

In the mid-2000s, Vivian Sobchack noted rather acerbically that "fairy recently, after 'the cyborg' became somewhat tired and tiresome from academic overuse, we started to hear and read about 'the prosthetic' – less as a specific material replacement of a missing limb or body part than as a sexy, new metaphor."[140] Undeniably, theorizing about the prosthetic – not unlike

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[136] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 119; Shildrick, "Skin," 23.
[137] Shildrick, "Skin," 23.
[138] Shildrick, "Skin," 17 (drawing on Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*).
[139] Shildrick, "Skin," 17.
[140] Vivian Sobchack, "A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality," in *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*, ed. Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 19.

its cyborg precursor – has tended to elide the embodied realities of those disabled people who are

fetishized as instantiations *par excellence* of the "sexy, new metaphor," making of them an

overdetermined figure who (forgive the choice of idiom) stands in for all manner of

poststructuralist abstraction yet never has speech or agency of their own. Moreover, as Sarah S.

Jain described over two decades ago, the metaphoricization of prosthesis rarely if ever attends to

the pain and difficulties that may be involved: "technologies are simultaneously wounding and

enabling in ways for which the prosthesis trope cannot account."[141] Disability theorists have

pushed back against this dematerialization of both prosthesis and cyborg, and the disappearing of

disabled lives it enacts: Sharon Betcher, for instance, notes that nondisabled uses of the cyborg

tend to demonstrate "totalistic holism parading as technological hybridism,"[142] and similarly that

deployments of prosthetics generally focus on cure and wholeness.[143] David Mitchell and Sharon

Snyder even coined the term "narrative prosthesis" to name and critique literary uses of disability

to complete or supplement non-disabled being.[144] The dominant framing of prosthesis construes

it as something that at least completes, if not enhances, someone that was lacking – a technology

of the curative imaginary.

With all these cautions and caveats in place, I nonetheless believe there is still promise

and potential in theorizing both the prosthetic and the cyborg. I simply disagree with Jain's claim

that "technologies are simultaneously wounding and enabling in ways for which the prosthesis

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[141] Sarah S. Jain, "The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope," *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 24.1 (1999): 31.

[142] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 93.

[143] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 102.

[144] David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

trope cannot account."[145] "*Cannot* account" seems too final a foreclosure – surely "is rarely used to account" or "is often lazily deployed without bothering to account" would be more accurate (if less pithy). Theorizing the prosthetic and the cyborg must be done with a crip sensibility and with accountability to disabled people's lives and experiences; but I believe it must be done.

What is the relationship between the cyborg and the prosthetic, if it is to be something other than supersession in quest of the latest academic trend? The feminist assemblage brings them together, in the figure of the trans/crip cyborg as prosthetic-assemblage. Prosthetics may be considered a particularly fruitful inflection point for the productive tension between intersectionality as a way to address Foucauldian disciplinarity and assemblage as a way to address Deleuzian control. While prosthetic devices tend to be produced and managed by institutional medicine as a way of disciplining the non-normative body, nonetheless, as Margrit Shildrick writes in "Prosthetic Performativity," "their use may be radically subverted."[146] The prosthetic may in fact be a site for radically new embodied experiences: "The intercorporeality – or rather the concorporeality – of the organic and inorganic, the assembly and disassembly of surprising connections, the capacity to innovate, and the productive troubling of intentionality are all experienced by disabled people who are prepared to explore the uncharted potential of prostheses."[147] It is this concorporeality that makes the cyborg *as* prosthetic-assemblage such a valuable site of embodied thinking: as Haraway wrote in the "Cyborg Manifesto," "We require regeneration, not rebirth," invoking a salamander's regrown limb that "can be monstrous,

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[145] Jain, "Prosthetic Imagination," 31.

[146] Shildrick, "Prosthetic Performativity: Deleuzian Connections and Queer Corporealities," in *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, ed. Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 122.

[147] Shildrick, "Prosthetic Performativity," 122.

duplicated, potent."[148] Like Haraway's OncoMouse, the trans/crip cyborg prosthetic-assemblage is "a cyber-teratological apparatus that scrambles the established codes and thus destabilizes but also reconstructs the posthuman subject."[149]

It is often noted that "prosthetic" bilocates in the double meaning of "addition" and "replacement."[150] Does the prosthetic limb simply replace the missing arm/leg, in the rehabilitative logic of the clinic, or is it an addition to the body, in the logic of enhancement so often valorized in discussions of Paralympic athletes? Part of the point of rethinking prosthesis in terms of the trans/crip cyborg is that both of these logics still center capacity, and do so in a way that elides the material realities of actual embodied prosthetic use. FAT allows us to think prosthesis use as a reconfiguration of the bodily assemblage and a redistribution of agency – not as the completion or enhancement of a body assumed to be previously lacking, but as part of the ongoing, dynamic, performative assembling of becomings.

I find a useful framing in the perhaps unexpected site of a text that has little to do with disability theory as such: Ross Chambers' "The Queer and the Creepy: Western Fictions of Artificial Life."[151] Rather than the binary of addition/replacement, Chambers invokes that of supplement/surrogate:

> A surrogate is a substitute, and as such normally thought to be inferior to what it substitutes for. A supplement, though, is something more; it complements and tends to complete an object that it does not replace, but which the very existence of the

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[148] Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 181.

[149] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 75.

[150] Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra, "Introduction," in *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 2.

[151] Ross Chambers, "The Queer and the Creepy: Western Fictions of Artificial Life," *Pacific Coast Philology* 40.1 (2005): 19-35.

supplement indicates some perhaps previously unnoticed lack or deficiency, a "fault" that the supplement corrects. The supplement cannot exist independently of its object, and thus is not complete in itself; but it demonstrates that the object too was neither complete nor self-identical, but rather a site of split between "itself" and its supplementing other(s).[152]

Yet Chambers immediately goes on to note that there is a degree of continuity between surrogate and supplement, invoking nothing other than the prosthetic leg to demonstrate the slippage between the two: "An artificial leg substitutes for a natural limb, but it also supplements my deficient ability to walk."[153] While Chambers succumbs to the curative and normate logic that pits artificial against natural, supplementation against deficiency, his larger argument is useful for my purposes.

It is not that the prosthetic corrects some lack or deficiency of the disabled body specifically, but that it demonstrates that *all* bodies are already "neither complete nor self-identical."[154] That an artificial leg supplements the amputee's deficient ability to walk is the least significant thing about it. Much more importantly, it draws attention to the way that *every* body – whether or not its ability to walk is deficient (in comparison to what standard?) – is surrogated-supplemented by what Shildrick refers to as technics: my ability to walk is supplemented by my shoes, by the chains of production and exploitation that led to my possession of the shoes, by the configuration of the ground beneath my shoes, by the current weather conditions (and the way these may have been affected by anthropogenic climate change), by the medication that contributes to regulating my emotions so that I am not lying immobile all day, by the US medical

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[152] Chambers, "Queer and the Creepy," 20. While Chambers does not cite Derrida, note the similarity of his definition of supplement to Derrida's.
[153] Chambers, "Queer and the Creepy," 20.
[154] Chambers, "Queer and the Creepy," 20.

industrial complex in which my access to these medications is enmeshed, by the air molecules I inhale in the respiratory process that keeps me alive, etc. etc. Which of these is *not* a supplement, a prosthesis, a technological process or artefact that helps produce my ability to walk? As Margrit Shildrick took up Donna Haraway's rhetorical question, "why should our bodies end at the skin?" – I truncate it to ask: "why should our bodies end?" FAT points out that they *don't*. We exist in the world not as bounded individual entities, not even ones whose extensions and supplementations connect us; but as part-objects within the ever-undulating assemblage of creation. To be is always already to be prostheticized and prostheticizing.

The history of prosthetics is embedded in the history of war, in the rehabilitation of injured soldiers and the attempted production of enhanced super-soldiers.[155] In both cases, the aim is to restore or improve function through the assimilation of the prosthesis into the individual's conception of their own body schema – to enable the prosthetic limb (and the focus is usually on limbs) to "trick the brain and become a part of 'you' because the brain easily adopted parts like these as its own."[156] But the whole framework of the body schema, the mental map of the body's integrity and boundary, is part of the Freudian western individualist subjectivization project critiqued by FAT. The Deleuzian project of making yourself a body without organs is, I suggest, also a project of making yourself a prosthetic-assemblage – seeking to refuse the normate bounded self and to deeply, phenomenologically experience the truth of your prosthetic cyborg embodiment. Trans/crip cyborg being makes this experience particularly

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[155] David Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), chapter 1.

[156] Cassandra Crawford, *Phantom Limb: Amputation, Embodiment, and Prosthetic Technology* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 219.

accessible insofar as our prostheses are *not* seamlessly integrated into a rehabilitated normate body or self: it is in the chafing of the prosthetic limb against the sweaty nub of the flesh, the discomfort of binding or tucking, the swallowing of pills or injection of hormones, the simultaneous euphoric rightness and yearning ache evoked by the use of prosthetic breasts or penis – it is in these very moments of connection-across-disconnection, moments when the prosthesis is encountered not as surrogate or supplement but *as prosthesis*, that the BwO is most clearly evoked.

In "The Queer and the Creepy," Chambers' overall argument proposes to understand fictions of artificial life as a collective Deleuzian *agencement* deploying the queer and the creepy as cultural prosthetic. In keeping with the foundations of trans studies as a field,[157] I turn once more to Frankenstein's monster. Where Stryker inhabited the position of the monster in order to speak back to a dominant transmisogynistic society, I wish to envision figures of modified flesh – Frankenstein's monster; Miéville's Remade; every trans and/or crip person – as cyborgian prosthetic-assemblage. With Harawayan blasphemous faith and irony, I seek not to reclaim the monster's agency so much as to expand it: to claim the agencies of the doctor, of the stitches, of the wayward flesh, as also being materially meaningful components of the monster-assemblage. Gender, too, is a collective assemblage and a cultural prosthetic seething with posthuman agencies. We can attempt to tame or be tamed by it, imagining ourselves possessors of a stable unitary gender identity embodied in a narrow set of practices, endeavoring to facilitate the smooth running of the gender-machine – or we can face its true monstrosity, hurl ourselves into

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[157] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1 (1994): 237-254.

its maelstrom, and become undone in the stuttering motion of our incapacitation, in the queer and

the crippy.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMAGE FREEMADE:

TOWARD AN AFFECTIVE TRANS/CRIP THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Laura Ingraham: Their goal ultimately is the destruction or elimination of the traditional family, though, is it not? …

Paul Nathanson: I think that the trans people have taken it one step further because by abandoning gender altogether, not simply rewriting it, they're basically trying to use social engineering to create a new species … human and part machine.[1]

In my Introduction, I invoked China Miéville's Remade – those punished with magical-technological bodily alterations – as a fictional figure for the biomedical capacitation and debilitation of real-world bodies. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, while the effects of gendered capacitation are differentially distributed, we are *all* Remade: there is no body that has not been subject to intervention. At the same time, however, that we are all made to embody the violence of racial capitalism is not the end of the story. The Remade outlaw Jack Half-a-Prayer models an alternative way to live, as one of the fReemade who unite in resistance to the biopower that attempts to define them. This final chapter is my attempt to reimagine theological anthropology as fReemade and to begin to offer an account of trans/crip cyborg embodiment as the affective image of God. The first section revisits the themes of chapter 1, reframing the image of God as crip affect. The second section discusses the role of dysphoria in matter's trans/crip affective assembling. The final section explores processes and practices of trans/crip

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[1] Ewan Palmer, "Laura Ingraham Guest Says Trans People Will 'Destroy' Gender Norms to Create 'New Species' – 'Human and Part Machine,'" *Newsweek*, March 28, 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/laura-ingraham-podcast-trans-people-species-machine-paul-nathanson-1377906.

becomings – becoming-animal, becoming-earth, becoming-machine, becoming-fictional – as techniques for becoming fReemade in God's image.

Imaging God Affectively

To return to where we began: what is the *tselem Elohim* in which we are created? In chapter 1 I attempted to explore the need for a radically relation interpretation of the image of God, drawing on disability and trans theologies to demonstrate the need for a more expansive understanding of relation than is commonly used in relational theologies. I proposed that creation may be understood as God's self-*sinthomo*sexualization, making of God the structurally necessary outside at the heart of all relation. "Relation" here is not to be limited to symbol-use, or even to interactions among living beings, but names the quivering subatomic intertwinement of all matter. Relation is what matter does; the image of God is matter's affect.

Affect has recurred throughout this project, but has yet to receive sustained attention in itself. A systematic genealogy of the concept of affect is outside the scope of this dissertation (and has been well accomplished by others),[2] but it is worth making explicit what precisely I mean when I invoke affect.

Introductions to affect theory often use a Spinozist definition: affect is "a body's capacity to affect and be affected."[3] Of course, it is more complicated than that; but this is the foundational framework for thinking about "the propulsive elements of experience, thought,

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[2] See Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), for a particularly useful summary.

[3] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 2.

sensation, feeling, and action that are not necessarily captured or capturable by language or self-sovereign 'consciousness.'"[4] Posthumanist, new materialist, and trans/crip theory – discourses on which I draw and within which I situate myself – attempt to account for these elements, challenging the liberal cognitivist assumptions that have held sway in western thought for so long. At the same time, however, I believe these discourses can and must be used to push affect theory even further.

Fundamentally, our 101 definition of affect is beholden to ableist logic. Affect is a body's *capacity*, or *ability*, or *potential* to affect and be affected by. Even theories that attempt to radically displace consciousness and subjectivity still use one or more of these terms, which I argue still locates them within the framework of capacitation and debilitation discussed in chapter 3. Ableist logic is at once a foreclosure and an abstraction, dividing bodies into those who are debilitated and those who are capacitated. Those who are debilitated, dis-abled, are preemptively cast as *unable* – they are insufficiently affective, in terms of their ability to both affect and be affected. This is most obvious in the case of patients diagnosed as being in a "persistent vegetative state" or otherwise deemed to be (inert, unresponsive) plant matter. Accounts by those who have recovered from locked-in syndrome attest to the swiftness with which we assume a lack of traditionally recognizable response equates to a total lack of affectiveness – see, for instance, the story of Jake Haendel.[5] What forms of being in responsive relation to the world may we be foreclosing on; what agonies may we be causing when we

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[4] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 23.
[5] Josh Wilbur, "'Is Anybody in There?' Life on the Inside as a Locked-In Patient," *The Guardian*, November 26, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/nov/26/life-on-the-inside-as-a-locked-in-patient-jake-haendel-leukoencephalopathy.

assume affective inability? And yet this is only the most dramatic example of the foreclosure

enacted by ableist logic, which also imposes a racialized affect hierarchy in service of white

supremacy (see chapter 2's discussion of Kyla Schuller's and Riley Snorton's work). Those who

do exceed their allotted expectations are either punished – as in the case of the part-time

wheelchair user, whose ability to stand is treated as evidence of disability fakery – or

exceptionalized, as when the "supercrip" becomes both inspiration porn for nondisabled people

and a tool for the shaming of other disabled people.[6] In either case, individual challenges to the

overall structure are tamed or managed so that the underlying logic may persist.

The strictures imposed by the ableist logic of differential (racialized and gendered)

debilitation concomitantly enact a capacitation of specific other bodies which is nonetheless also

totalizing, albeit in a different way. Some are told that they *cannot*, that they must know their

place within the affective hierarchy; others are told, implicitly or explicitly, "you can do

anything." The message of infinite capacitation is in reality both the preserve of a select few and

an imposition of specific expectations. We may understand this in terms of Edelman's figural

Child, a specter of white innocence who is deployed in service of the reproduction of what came

before. The Child is a shimmering horizon of potentiality, but truthfully a narrow horizon indeed,

representing white heterosexual investment in what Edelman calls "the Futurch."[7] Actual, living

children – imperfect children, queer children, children of color, disabled children – suffer and are

sacrificed to the image of the Child. You can do anything, imagined future Child, as long as

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[6] See Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), chapter 4 for an extended analysis of this phenomenon.

[7] Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Jack [Judith] Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 821.

"anything" entails production and innovation in line with the values of neoliberal capitalism. Similar, the well-meaning habit of telling AFAB children that "girls can do anything boys can do" still maintains the logic of gendered capacitation described in chapter 3. Capacitation is always capacitation *for* specific purposes, and *not for* other specific purposes.

Framing affect as ability, capacity, or potential fundamentally accepts and perpetuates this logic. What would it mean to frame affect differently? What would it look like to think affect *against* the logic of ability? To return to Joy Ladin's theological framing from chapter 1, how might we seek to welcome the *ger*, the stranger, without preemptively circumscribing them within expectations of capacity or debility?

I suggest that it is crucial to think affect, not as a body's *capacity* to affect and be affected by, but as a body's *affecting and being affected by*. Rather than abstract potentials, which are necessarily differentially distributed according to the affect hierarchy of racial capitalism, we must attend to the ways that bodies are *always already* affecting and being affected by. As in the assemblage described by Deleuze and Guattari, these bidirectional affectings occur on the molecular level, the molar level, and every level in between: bodies – by which I mean assemblages of matter continuously and variably constituted through affective intra-actions – are in constant affective relations of touch, motion, and change, from solar winds to thriving ecosystems to four trotting paws to cellular processes. It is these affective relations, as they constantly, concretely, dynamically unfold, that image God in creation.

Defining the image of God as matter's affect in this way means refusing abstractions into ideas like "human dignity" that can be so easily wielded against queers, disabled people, and

others who want to improve their material circumstances. (As disability activists have pointed out, when movements for physician-assisted suicide demand a right to "die with dignity," they are framing a disabled life as one inherently without dignity.[8] Meanwhile, the Catholic Church has asserted "the fundamental importance of [sexual] difference for human dignity" in order to suggest that any deviation from cisheteronormativity diminishes human dignity.[9]) It means refusing to ontologically prioritize those who are "more" like God – it means refusing the very idea that anyone could be "more" like God than anyone else, whether in the affect hierarchy imposed by racial capitalism (Schuller; Snorton), or in line with a specific embodied image of normal or idealized humanity. It means refusing the logical framework whereby any body could be "more" affective than any other. And yet this is not a collapsing into sameness; rather a deep commitment to the astonishing material polymorphous perversity of the universe. That all matter partakes in the image of God means that all matter contributes to the endless shiftings and becomings of the creation-assemblage.

At the same time, to claim that the world as it is beautifully and multifariously images God must not succumb to the is/ought fallacy whereby the world that is may be considered "the best of all possible worlds." The *sinthomo*sexualization of God means that there is a radical otherness and discontinuity at the very heart of creation, a nonrelation inherent to relation itself. To seek God the *ger*/*sinthomo*sexual is to heed the cosmic call for justice which cries out in the

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[8] See, e.g., Felicia Nimue Ackerman, "Current Laws Permitting Assisted Suicide are Morally Indefensible," *Vox*, December 14, 2016, https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2016/11/21/13693016/assisted-suicide-referendums-philosophy.

[9] "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life," 5 October 2017, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171005_assemblea-pav.html.

wilderness. The universe is not a totality that runs smoothly. It is not the ableist cyborg; it's the crip cyborg misfit that chafes and stutters and gums up the works. We are called to delight in our deep material solidarity with all that exists, *and* we are called to endlessly seek to welcome the *ger* who is radically other to all our notions of relationality. And one way to do this is to begin from our own enfleshed cyborg materiality, to seek to become viscerally aware of our entanglement in the creation-assemblage that occludes the very God in whose image we participate through our very being. As Jane Bennett asks, "how can I start to feel myself as not only human?"[10] I suggest that embodiment as trans/crip cyborg prosthetic-assemblage is one way to start to feel oneself as not only human, but as affective matter imaging God the *ger*.

Trans/crip affective assembling

How do you start to feel yourself as not only human, but as materially entangled with all creation as it affectively images God the *ger*? How do you make yourself a trans/crip cyborg prosthetic-assemblage?

I suggest that this must begin with a rather painful self-accounting, a recognition of how you are constituted by the racialized capacitation of your gender: how your flesh is racialized, how and why you were assigned a gender, your location within the disciplinary apparatuses of state and capital. How is your body a site for the reinscription of racial capitalism in its gendered and dis/abled modes? How has biopower violently intervened on your flesh?

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[10] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 116.

A second step is then to use feminist assemblage theory to redescribe these and subsequent, ongoing interventions as assemblages of distributed agencies. Prosthetic devices (including clothing, accessories, IUDs, hormones injections, vocal training, all manner of material-discursive components) re/arrange the gendered assemblage and its capacitation in specific circumstances. A skirt may function as a prosthetic device for the capacitation of gender when someone interpellated as a woman is in the office where she works. This function may or may not occur in line with racial capitalist norms, or may accede to some while challenging others (a Black cis woman asserting her femininity is at once challenging racial capitalist gender norms insofar as Black cisness is seen as less stable than white cisness and Black womanhood seen as less feminine than white womanhood, *and* to some degree upholding those norms insofar as femininity is expected of all cis women; even a white cis woman is negotiating the degree of acceptable femininity in the workplace). For a trans woman, the gender capacitated by the skirt-prosthesis assemblage may be an experience of joy and relief, which simultaneously upholds the norm of woman's femininity and challenges the norm of cisness. It is a reductive oversimplification to accuse trans people (or indeed cis people) of "upholding regressive gender norms" – we are all always upholding some norms and challenging others, and our individual subjectivity is not the most useful site for analyzing the workings of these systems. Assemblage allows us to acknowledge many more actants and not place all the blame on the individual woman who just wants to wear a skirt. At the same time, of course, a skirt may function as a prosthetic device for the debilitation of gender when worn by someone interpellated as a man. Without attributing intentionality to the skirt, we may nonetheless understand its agency to be at work when it causes others to stop and do a double-take, when it disrupts expectations of

normative gender, when it makes visible what is normally taken for granted (the construction of gender through collective operations such as the fundamentally arbitrary and contingent restriction of who is expected to wear a particular piece of cloth). Such a moment of disruption deterritorializes the gender-assemblage, which is much larger than the individual who wears the skirt; as such it is potentially a site of danger, since deterritorialization is disconcerting and may be responded to with cultural scripts of violence. It is important to note, though, that *capacitation of (racial-capitalist) gender is at the same time debilitation of (trans) gender*. What capacitates my assigned gender (to be interpellated as female) debilitates my gendered self-understanding. This is what is known to trans people as dysphoria.

Dysphoria is at once a diagnosis and, more fundamentally, an affect. Both transmedicalists (who frame transness as exclusively a medical condition) and transphobes (who frame transness as a psychopathology) seek to circumscribe dysphoria as a medical symptom that can be narrowly contained, fully defined, and effectively treated (whether through medical transition or through conversion therapy). Whether as a result of a concept of "brain sex" or of internalized gender stereotypes, both groups depend on a vision of gender dysphoria as something discrete and definable, with a detectable etiology and straightforward solution. Both versions are oversimplifications, fundamentally privileging binary sex and western (bio)medicalized accounts of sex/gender/sexuality. An affective account of dysphoria refuses to reduce it to either a pre-discursive, "biological" symptom or a fully discursive mental health symptom. The one account implies that dysphoria could be entirely solved by medical transition alone – an oversimplification which fails to acknowledge the significance of non-medical interventions, such as the social transitions undertaken by prepubescent trans children. It also

assumes that the definition of "medical transition" is fixed, ignoring the reality that not all trans people seek the same medical interventions: for instance, the respective importance of genital and facial surgeries among transgender women is complicated.[11] The other account, meanwhile, suggests that there would be no more trans people if we could just get rid of gender stereotypes – again taking for granted definitions that are in fact highly disputable, and framing transness as a form of false consciousness. Understanding dysphoria affectively instead brackets the question of whether gender dysphoria is pre- or post-discursive, a problem of the body or the mind, focusing instead on what it does and how it feels.

It should be noted that there is an analogous disagreement within affect theory about whether affect itself should be understood as pre- or post-discursive. I remain agnostic on this question, since to me this distinction is minimally interesting and maybe minimally important – whether we have access to pre-discursive affects is not really relevant, since we can never conceptualize or understand affects without the discursive realm (defining the discursive realm as Barad does, in a materialist way that does not hinge on the cognition of the human subject). I also think the pre- or post-discursive dysphoria question dangerously skirts the trans etiology question, which is always a losing proposition for trans people. At least in our cisheteronormative society, the question "why are there trans people" is inseparable from the corollary question "and how can we eliminate them." Of course, on one level the reason there are trans people is the same reason there are cis people: because we assign genders at birth; I favor eliminating that practice, but that in no way means we should get rid of the practices and

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[11] See Alex Dubov and Liana Fraenkel, "Facial Feminization Surgery: The Ethics of Gatekeeping in Transgender Health," *American Journal of Bioethics* 18.12 (2018): 3-9.

behaviors and beings/becomings we presently identify as "trans." On the contrary, we should open them up to far more people. Frankly, getting rid of assigning genders would in a material sense make everyone trans, because everyone would have to think about and choose their gender prosthetics in the same way trans people do, even if the number of people who want synthetic hormones and gender confirmation surgeries would not necessarily increase. Ironically, *less* biomedicalization would mean *more* transness, even if it would not necessarily mean more dysphoria.

On an affective assemblage account, gender dysphoria names the double-edged cutting of capacitation/debilitation operating *within* the individual subject. As we have seen, in multiple ways the capacitation of some depends on and enacts the debilitation of others – most obviously, perhaps, in its racializing mode, where "whiteness" exists *through* the demarcation and (literal) denigration of "non-whiteness"; but also in/as one of the technologies of whiteness is cisness, is gender as we know it. The capacitation of some as appropriately gendered subjects can only occur through the debilitation of others as *not* appropriately gendered subjects. Dysphoria is *when capacitation is (affectively) debilitating*: you might be capacitated as an appropriately gendered subject, but at the cost of your fundamental wellbeing. Dysphoria is when capacitation feels bad, feels wrong, feels too costly.

But dysphoria is also, I think, the call of the *ger* coming from inside the house. It is God-the-*sinthomo*sexual making Godself known in a profoundly embodied way. Why does the respected career and family "man" give it all up for the socially abject position of the trans woman? In answer to the call of God the *ger*. The nonrelation at the heart of relation is

dysphoria, a viscerally felt *wrongness* that impels you to risk everything. Transitioning involves

losing relationships. People lose friends, partners, families when they transition; but they do it

anyway, because there is a void of self at the heart of those relationships, and heeding the

nonrelation at the heart of relation opens you up to a more radical form of relationality.

This is not to say that transition *per se* makes you more relational – trans people are not

inherently any more or less relational than cis people – but it opens a space for it. To put it in

Barthian terms, it provides the divine Yes to which we are invited to also say yes. For Barth,

"The veil is thick," that is, "the self-presentation of God in his Word is not direct, nor is it

indirect in the way in which a man's face seen in a mirror can be called an indirect self-

presentation of this man"[12] – in my terms, God is imaged in creation neither directly nor as a

mirror image, but rather affectively. Instead of in the flat, visual realm of the mirror, I understand

God's image to be embodied in every instance in which part of creation (a meteor, an atom, a

breath of wind) affects and is affected by another part. For Barth, the speaking and hearing of

God's word is "an act of God in the reality which contradicts Him, which conceals Him, and in

which His revelation is not just His act but His miraculous act, the tearing of an untearably thick

veil, i.e., His mystery."[13] I would not use these terms (which are both too logocentric and too

ontotheological for my own commitments), but this is an expression of both the paradox I

identify as God's self-*sinthomo*sexualization and the further paradox of seeking God the

*sinthomo*sexual, of trying to have a relation with the constitutive nonrelation at the heart of

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[12] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley, G.T. Thomson, and Harold Knight (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 163.
[13] Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, 165.

relation. As Barth famously phrased it, "God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We do well to listen to [God] if [God] really does."[14] Barth's "us" may not extend beyond the human, while mine does, but we are united in our acknowledgment that relation with the divine – with the one whose occlusion from direct relation with us is the precondition of our existence – may be encountered in unforeseen ways, including through the nonhuman and the nonorganic. God's self-presentation – God's image – is indirect and paradoxical; it suffuses all creation, but can only be glimpsed fleetingly and oddly; it appears in the affective assembling of matter, but it appeals to us through yearning pain and dysphoria. From a transmasculine perspective, there is a particularly sweet poignancy to Barth's words: "In speaking to me God has chosen me, as the man I am, to be the man I am."[15]

Transition, like many human experiences, can certainly be a shutting down, a solipsism, a reterritorialization; but it can also be an opening up to the deterritorializations of radical relationality, if we seek to understand ourselves as cyborg prosthetic-assemblage. FAT may help us to do this: what do Braidotti's becoming-animal, becoming-earth, becoming-machine look like in this context?

Trans/crip becomings

Living under global regimes of neoliberal capitalism and biomedicalization, it is easy to fall into fatalism. When no individual can hope to dismantle unjust systems, what is to be done? Practices of trans/crip becoming are practices of assembling collectives, in order to open space

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[14] Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, 52.
[15] Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, 159.

for ways of living differently. If we cannot extricate ourselves from compulsory cisheteropatriarchal ableism, we must seek to sabotage these systems from within. This will involve established practices of queer solidarity and mutual aid – sharing hormones with our comrades, raising children collectively, practicing sex and intimacy in ways that do not prioritize or concede to cishet norms – but I propose that it must also involve imaginative practices of distributed embodiment. As individuals, or even as family units, we cannot divest from racial capitalism and its cishet ableism; but as affective assemblages we may be able to work its weaknesses and experiment with alternatives, collectively developing and exploring trans/crip becomings.

As discussed in chapter 4, becoming-animal is not reducible to a kind of humanistic anthropomorphism; equally, it is not an appeal to Nature, as in the case of certain queer and trans apologetics which invoke observed behaviors of nonhuman animals to justify queer and trans existence. Instead, becoming-animal involves attempting to rethink the agency of critters non-anthropocentrically and to be accountable to the marks left on bodies when we situate (and resituate) ourselves in relation to other animals. There will still be times when it is politically necessary to assert the humanity of those who are, on account of racialization and/or disability, deemed more animal and less human than other humans; however, this is an agential cut made under specific conditions for specific purposes, and we must be attentive to the consequences of this cut – and we must certainly reassemble under other conditions. Becoming-animal may involve taking a critically crip cyborg perspective on a relationship with a service animal, as

Margrit Shildrick suggests,[16] or even a pet: when my cat settles into my lap, he enacts a reconfiguration of us into a Max-cat assemblage. His purring resonates through my body, relaxing me in synchronization with the rhythms of his own body, creating a tactile circuit of trans-species, trans-subjective embodiment. I can no longer reach for my laptop to work or stand to complete a chore; for the duration of our assemblage, I am unplugged from the demands of productivity and labor, from relations of abstraction and signification, from gendered capacitation or debilitation. Our mutual animality *intercorporates* us – not incorporating us into a single body, but braiding us together in a material interrelation.

Of course, becoming-animal is not always quite so cozy. At every moment, my body is constituted as well by all the critters with whom I share the planet, from the microflora inhabiting my gut to the dairy herds on whose exploitation my diet depends. My attention may be drawn to these critters in times of misfit – times of disruption in the fit of body and environment.[17] In times of misfit, whether as momentary hiccups or as destabilization on a planetary scale, the animal makes itself known as animal: the contingency of human life, and its interdependence with others. A trans/crip biomedical meditation on planetary misfitting may be found in Torrey Peters' speculative novella "Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones," in which a global pandemic makes everybody trans – or at least dependent on synthetic hormones. In the story, a group of trans women decide to concretize their commitment to t4t – the ethos of "[t]rans girls loving trans girls, above all else"[18] – by synthesizing a contagion which causes "complete

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[16] Margrit Shildrick, "'Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?': Embodiment, Boundaries, and Somatechnics," *Hypatia* 30.1 (2015): 23.

[17] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26.3 (2011): 591-609.

[18] Torrey Peters, *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* (Middletown, DE: n.d.), 53.

cessation of the production of all sex hormones."[19] They unleash the virus in a spirit that combines vengeance against a transphobic society with a utopian desire "to live in a world where everyone has to choose their gender."[20] In the aftermath of the ensuing war and societal restructuring, the women reunite to form a commune harvesting estrogen from genetically modified pigs. Since the initial idea and technology for the infection are based on a vaccine used to chemically castrate pigs bred for food, pigs make possible both the pandemic and post-pandemic survival. Fittingly, the novella's paperback cover image depicts an unnerving pig with "t4t" tattooed on its forehead. The symbiosis of pigs and trans women in the novella is not a cute and cuddly one: feeding the pigs causes the narrator disgust and physical injury, as well as having to endure humiliating comments from the pig farmer; the pigs themselves are described as "ugly mutant[s]."[21] This relationship of animal interdependence is painful, complicated, and corporeal, raising uneasy questions of the ethics of survival and exploitation; but it is also a probingly honest portrayal of the transspecies entanglement of the trans/crip cyborg.

Becoming-earth, meanwhile, requires a turn from the biocentrism of animality to account for the role of nonorganic materiality in the trans/crip cyborg-assemblage: the planet, the soil, the rocks and trees. As with becoming-animal, this is not simply a question of "identifying with," but rather a deterritorialization of identity in favor of being in/as assemblage.

As Lucas Crawford makes clear in "Transgender Without Organs?", discussed in chapter 4, thinking the trans/crip cyborg-assemblage means attending to both physical and human

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[19] Peters, *Infect*, 28.
[20] Peters, *Infect*, 30.
[21] Peters, *Infect*, 10.

geographies, accounting for the role of topology and of geopolitics in constituting gendered selves. Eli Clare offers one way of portraying trans/crip becoming-earth in the structure of his book *Brilliant Imperfection*. Woven among its nine chapters of personal and philosophical reflections on disability, gender, class, and race, and their historical and present constitution throughout the US, are a series of poetic vignettes on specific trees, beaches, shells, and crabs of Clare's acquaintance. The effect is to embed Clare's meditations on the medical-industrial complex and the forcible sterilization of disabled people within and among his material engagement with the landscape. His "intimate, wordless relationship"[22] with the maple trees outside his window locates his writing in physical space, to the point that, on closing the book, the pebbled beach photographed in close-up on its cover seems almost tangible. Clare's constant attention to his political and physical locations serves to render his trans/crip body *in* and *of* material space, a becoming-earth that makes his thought and writing viscerally, almost palpably affecting.

A different approach to becoming-earth may be found in the work of transdisciplinary artist and self-described metahumanist polymath Jaime del Val. In "Neither Human Nor Cyborg: I Am a Bitch and a Molecular Swarm," del Val writes of the human body reconceived as a "movement field" and of the need for an "ethics of co-sensing (mutually sensing oneself, each other and the world, in emergent proprioceptive acts of perception)" enacted by "claiming a radically symbiotic affectivity that unfolds into a series of becomings."[23] In contrast to the top-

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[22] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 33.

[23] Jaime del Val, "Neither Human Nor Cyborg: I Am a Bitch and a Molecular Swarm. Proprioception, Body Intelligence and Microsexual Conviviality," *World Futures* 76.5-7 (2020): 315.

down imposition of reductive algorithmic technologies of artificial intelligence, through which

"we have created a seeming global connectivity at the expense of narrowing down our

experience," del Val "propose[s] to mobilize BI (body intelligence)" as the "bottom up swarming

power" of movement.[24] Instead of the logic of the visual, which I critiqued in chapter 3 and

which requires a strict separation of subject and object in order to impose the subject's control

over the object, del Val urges us to embrace a logic of ("reciprocal and emergent")

proprioception.[25] We know each other and the world through bodily feeling, through a

"distributed network of sensors and actuators" that perceive the ongoing fluctuations in the

movement field.[26] This occurs on cellular, organismic, and planetary scales: "We sense the

environment primarily through the proprio/alloceptive deformation of our tissues, which is also

our capacity to act and transform the environment itself and ourselves with it. The world is

ultimately made of multiple proprioceptive fields reciprocally composing or reattuning their

modes of fluctuation and oscillation: the world is made of entangled proprioceptions."[27] Del Val

attempts to cultivate what I am calling becoming-earth through a variety of "metabody

techniques" (aimed at inculcating "Bodyfulness, not mindfulness!"), from slow-motion

improvisational "micromovements" to "wearable architectures" and "microcameras on the

skin."[28] The body is now a movement field, a stretch of the earth's territory experienced *as* the

sensing body itself. This kind of becoming-earth is aimed at "enacting a radical sense of

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[24] del Val, "Bitch," 319.
[25] del Val, "Bitch," 320.
[26] del Val, "Bitch," 321.
[27] del Val, "Bitch," 322.
[28] del Val, "Bitch," 325-6.

symbiotic conviviality across molecular swarms of microsexual (post-queer), *mestiza*, neurodiverse and transpecies affects."[29]

Del Val's work may also be interpreted as a form of queer/crip becoming-machine. Becoming-machine turns our attention to the role of the technological in constituting the trans/crip cyborg-assemblage. There are some stellar works in trans studies that trace the role of synthetic hormones in the trans body, exploring their molecular actions on the body as well as their implication in global circuits of biomedicine, capitalism, surveillance, and the production of identities and desires. Michelle O'Brien's influential essay "Tracing This Body: Transsexuality, Pharmaceuticals, and Capitalism" cites Haraway's cyborg in the course of "trac[ing] how [her] body fits within structures of transnational capital, the pharmaceutical industries, and the state authority of the U.S. empire."[30] O'Brien situates the visceral practice of injecting her body with hormones in networks of production and regulation, seeking to "simultaneously recognize my participation and complicity, and trace the possibilities of resistance and liberation."[31] Paul Preciado expands this project of systemic analysis rooted in the trans body in his book *Testo Junkie*, which, as it subtitle states, explores "sex, drugs, and biopolitics in the pharmacopornographic era." Pharmacopornographic names "the processes of a biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) government of sexual subjectivity – of which 'the Pill' and *Playboy* are two paradigmatic offspring."[32] Adding to the Foucauldian disciplinary

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[29] del Val, "Bitch," 331.
[30] Michelle O'Brien, "Tracing This Body: Transsexuality, Pharmaceuticals, and Capitalism," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2016), 57.
[31] O'Brien, "Tracing This Body," 64.
[32] Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), 33-4.

society and the Deleuzian control society, Preciado suggests that "in the pharmacopornographic

society, the models for body control are microprosthetic: now, power acts through molecules that

incorporate themselves into our immune system," including hormones.[33] *Testo Junkie* is "a

somato-political fiction"[34] that recounts Preciado's becoming-machine as trans microprosthetic-

assemblage.

Hormones, however, are only the most obvious example of trans becoming-machine.

Another significant technology in the trans/crip cyborg assemblage, which merits attention in its

own right, is the internet. In 2018, researcher Lisa Littman published a study on "rapid onset

gender dysphoria" (ROGD), describing a perceived epidemic of transness among (particularly

AFAB) youth in the eyes of their skeptical parents.[35] While Littman's proposal was retracted by

the venue that published it, and has been definitively debunked,[36] ROGD is still popular among

anti-trans parents and researchers. Journalist Abigail Shrier relies on the ROGD framework in

her 2020 book *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, which

blames transgender influencers online for spreading the "contagion," the "epidemic," the

"plague" of "transgenderism."[37] Shrier argues that the technology of the internet enables trans

people, whether acting irresponsibly or maliciously, to prey on the natural insecurity, discomfort,

and internalized misogyny of adolescent girls and thus recruit them into a dangerous lifestyle

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[33] Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 78.

[34] Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 11.

[35] Lisa Littman, "Parent Reports of Adolescents and Young Adults Perceived to Show Signs of a Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria," *PloS One* 13.8 (2018), online.

[36] Florence Ashley, "A Critical Commentary on 'Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria,'" *The Sociological Review* 68.4 (2020): 779-799.

[37] Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Crazy Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Books, 2020).

they will come to regret (primarily, Shrier claims, when they find themselves unable to birth the grandchildren their own parents deserve). While Shrier's book is poorly argued, riddled with inconsistencies, and deeply reactionary, it is also potentially very dangerous to trans youth: it ends with a list of tips for parents who "want to inoculate their own daughters from the fast-spreading contagion of gender ideology," which amounts to a step-by-step guide for isolating and abusing children.[38] As such, the urgency of refuting the ROGD framework and the premises on which it rests is acute, particularly in my native UK, where a kindred transphobia is regnant in media, law, and politics.

With this caveat in place, I nonetheless would like to take the same risk Lee Edelman takes in *No Future*, of "listen[ing] to, and perhaps even be[ing] instructed by, the readings of queer sexualities produced by the forces of reaction."[39] What might happen if, with a cyborg sense of irony and blasphemy, we take (semi-)seriously the notion that transness is an internet virus that can jump the putative barrier between organic and non-organic? Is this not simply a making visible of a universal process – that all gender is, to some degree, a virus transmissible via bodily interface with information and communications technology? And is this universality not precisely why it is so threatening to those who wish to naturalize cisness, present their own genders as pristinely unmodified, and occlude the reality that we are all trans/crip cyborgs? I emphasize again that, politically and pragmatically, it may not always be wise to make this claim; but there are also times when something rather beautiful and strange and productive can

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[38] Shrier, *Irreversible Damage*.

[39] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 16.

come of acknowledging the internet as a component of our becoming-machine. The trans internet

subcultures in which becoming-machine is enacted are much too diffuse, niche, and weird to be

accounted for here, so I will mention only one example, in the music of SOPHIE.

SOPHIE, whose tragic and untimely death occurred during the writing of this chapter in

late January 2021, was a visionary musician, producer, and trans woman whose sonic creations

reimagined what electronic pop music could do. As Leah F writes in her brilliant piece "A Sex

Close to Noise: An Essay about Transgender Women and Music," SOPHIE "speaks about both

transness and electronic music as a kind of process honesty, where integrity is less about fidelity

to source material (if any there be) than about simply not lying."[40] Or, as the lyrics of the song

"Faceshopping" put it:

> My face is the front of shop
> My face is the real shop front
> My shop is the face I front
> I'm real when I shop my face[41]

Playing on the double sense of shopping as buying and shopping as Photoshopping,

SOPHIE remixes her statements to explore the commodification and digital alteration to which

we are all subject: we are all always real and we are all always presenting a front, and there is no

meaningful difference between these things. In her lyrics, in her ventriloquism through the

vocalists who almost always sing her songs, and equally through the sound of her music, which

intensifies pop into noise and noise into pop, SOPHIE expresses the inherent transness of being a

millennial on the internet. Internet users of my and SOPHIE's generation are just too old to be

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[40] Leah F., "A Sex Close to Noise: An Essay about Transgender Women and Music," *Tricky Mother Nature*, http://www.trickymothernature.com/asexclosetonoise.html.
[41] SOPHIE, "Faceshopping," released February 16, 2018.

digital natives, but too young to be anything else – as if we were collectively assigned analog at birth, and have been force-digitized into a simulacrum more crudely literal than anything Baudrillard could ever have intended. We assemble and re-assemble the intra-active pieces of our cyborg dysphoria: smartphones, social media, the gig economy, all the orgiastic pleasures and nightmarish miseries of this cybercapitalist dystopia. In becoming-machine, we are all real when we shop our faces: our being-in-the-world is constituted in and through processes of using the internet (as it connects us, as it infects us, as it embeds pharmacopornographic surveillance and commodification technologies inside us) as bodily prosthetic. "Faceshopping" appears on SOPHIE's album titled *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides*, an image that deconstructs the division between inside and outside. To construe either gender transition or internet presence as making internal truth externally visible is to uphold a hopelessly outdated dichotomy – in truth, there is no inside or outside, only the performative assembling of a "self" that is constructed *as* it is expressed; a mobius strip of affective un-insides.

To Braidotti's becoming-animal, becoming-earth, and becoming-machine, all of which are embodied in an assortment of trans/crip cyborg performances, theories, and arts, I wish to add becoming-fictional. Becoming-fictional names not only literary practices such as Susan Stryker's adoption of the persona of Frankenstein's monster, but also strange and messy moments of cyborg playfulness: in certain contexts, it is not unusual for trans people to indicate a cryptid, a shiny rock, an abstract concept, or an internet meme with the comment, "that's my gender." Certainly, this is silly – a cathartic use of humor through intentional, intra-community flippancy about something that is so often so serious, something that can cause real dysphoric agony as well as being the target of deadly transphobic violence. But there is something else

going on in these creative expressions of affective gender affinities with the fictional: they also

enact a kind of radically weird relationality, attempting to make visible how gender far exceeds

the discursive, the human, and the individual, and to reroute that excess into modes of fucking

with the normate. I suggest that it is less productive to read werewolves, cyborgs, Frankenstein,

Miéville's Remade, and so on as metaphors for transness than *the other way around*: transness is

a metaphor for werewolves, cyborgs, etc. This can have the effect of unsticking analogy and

disemboweling metaphor: far from the "A is A" of analytic philosophy, this even scrambles the

"A is like B" of analogy in order to query the very separation of A and B in the first place. Just

as the fact that relation images God makes God the *sinthomo*sexual, who is not relation but is

also not *not* relation, so too this is an exponentializing of double negatives that do not cancel

each other out so much as intensify paradox beyond logic.

What insights into embodied being might be generated by trans/crip becoming-fictional?

What strangeness might be invited in, what responsive relation made possible, by exploring the

distribution of gender across the nonhuman, nonliving, nonorganic, *and* the nonreal? Against the

ruthlessness of capitalist realism, becoming-fictional embraces irrealism: "a slipstream between

the reality of the current moment and the subversive fantastic, using the dark and forgotten

corners as a portal between the two."[42] Like the other negatives I have invoked, irrealism is not a

negation of realism but a rendering incoherent of the very division between the real and the

nonreal. The "dark and forgotten corners" of the radically weird imagination, of trans/crip

becoming-fictional, can serve not just to unite putative opposites – real and nonreal, inside and

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[42] Alexander Billet, Holly Lewis, Mike Linaweaver, Tish Markley, and Adam Turl, "We Demand an End to Capitalist Realism," *Locust Review* 1 (2019).

outside, I and not-I, God and God's image – but to (re)assemble them in strange new ways. Heeding the cry of God the *sinthomo*sexual made manifest in the dysphoria of our prosthetic bodies, perhaps we may seek to welcome God the *ger*, imaged affectively in the unexpected relations found among all matter.

Trans/crip becoming-fictional can unite with becoming-animal, becoming-earth, and becoming-machine in practices of disidentification, bodyfulness, and materially distributed perception, through which we might seek to experience ourselves as affective assemblages, dynamically prosthetic in the tumbling whirl of creation's vibrant matter. Our flesh is shaped and reshaped nonconsensually, Remade by the disciplinary powers of racial capitalism and the violent interventions of pharmacopornographic control; but through loving solidarity with matter's affect, through becoming-trans/crip-cyborg, we might seek to honor the image of God in all creation, to be fReemade.

In this final chapter, I have attempted to sketch the beginnings of a trans/crip affective theological anthropology. By bringing together all the tools and discourse invoked in the previous chapters, I have tried to propose a constructive interpretation of the image of God that challenges the entwined logics of cisness and abledness, instead focusing on matter's affect. Like many queer, disability, and feminist theologians, I interpret the image of God not as a substance, essence, or possession, but relationally. I define relation in a way that seeks to avoid not only anthropocentrism, but also biocentrism: as the affecting and being affected of all matter. At the same time, I am driven by queer negativity to attend to limit and paradox in the nonrelation at the heart of relation. I find creation's *sinthomo*sexual – the one who bears the figural burden of this

structurally necessary nonrelation – in God the *ger*, who is paradoxically both the outside of relation and the one in whose image all relation is made. In the call of God the *ger*, which is experienced bodily in the trans/crip phenomenon of dysphoria, we are called both to recognize our solidarity with all creation and to strive for justice in our becomings. In trans/crip becoming-animal, becoming-earth, becoming-machine, and becoming-fictional, I explore some ways that we might try to feel ourselves, not as bounded individual human subjects, but as distributed and dynamic prosthetic-assemblages.

CONCLUSION

The seed of this project was planted by a footnote. The first time I read Alison Kafer's

Feminist, Queer, Crip, I followed a note on Kafer's discussion of crip time – "an awareness that

disabled people might need more time to accomplish something or to arrive somewhere"[1] – and

found a reference to Kate Bornstein: "[A] newly transgendered person … moves just a bit slower

than most people."[2] The connection struck me like a flint sparking. I went on to develop the

concept of trans/cription as a way of thinking trans time and crip time together, particularly in

relation to the liturgical time of phenomenological theology.[3] Trans time, crip time, and liturgical

time, I argued, share a position outside the structured time of capitalist efficiency and

productivity, opening a space of slowness and frustration which is also a space of possibility for

something radically other to break through.

In this dissertation, I maintain my interest in the connections between the trans, the crip,

and the theological, but I shifted focus away from temporality and toward the biomedical

capacitation of gendered personhood in the image of God. Despite the lack of explicit focus on

temporality, this project has nonetheless taken shape in, against, and through trans/crip time:

seasons of nightmarishly dragging boredom, stutters of clarity and focus, hours of agonizing

frustration. Haunted by dysphoria, depression, and debility, these pages did not come easily.

While it is my fervent hope that I may have opened some small space for a glimpse of the

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[1] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 26.
[2] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 87; quoted in Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 185 n.8.
[3] Max Thornton, "Trans/Criptions: Gender, Disability, and Liturgical Experience," *TSQ* 6.3 (2019): 358-367.

otherwise, it seems only fitting to end with an accounting of my failures and limitations. After all, as Marika Rose reminds us: "Theology *is* failure; the task, then, is to fail better."[4]

At heart, this project attempted to address a very old question: what does it mean to be a person made in the *tselem Elohim*, the image of God? I tried to offer a constructive answer from the context of trans/crip biomedicalization, crossing with interdisciplinary promiscuity between queer and trans theory, disability and crip theory, critical intersex studies, Deleuzoguattarian assemblage theory, affect theory, feminist posthumanism, and new materialism. The admitted hubris of such an ambitious project makes missteps inevitable; here I will own some of the most flagrant.

Beginning with the question of how to interpret the *tselem Elohim*, I focused on disability, particularly profound intellectual disability as an instance that troubles many traditional interpretations. None but the most callously eugenicist would explicitly argue that profoundly intellectually disabled people are excluded *tout court* from bearing the image of God, but most definitions of image nonetheless exclude them – whether these are substantialist interpretations that locate the image of God in free will, reason, or some other trait; or even if they are relational interpretations, which tend to locate the image of God in kinds of relation from which profoundly intellectually disabled people are precluded (such as relations of symbol-use and mutual linguistic interchange). Profoundly intellectually disabled people are at best an afterthought in most accounts of image, and can only be counted as bearers of God's image

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[4] Marika Rose, *A Theology of Failure: Žižek against Christian Innocence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 181.

through unsatisfactory strategies that fundamentally rest on ableism: abstraction, that is, admitting that they bear God's image in ways we can neither perceive nor account for; or lapsarianism, which involves blaming sin and the Fall in some ill-defined way for disabled people's failure to exhibit the characteristics that have been defined as imaging God. Both moves are ableist insofar as they make disabled people, particularly profoundly intellectually disabled people, more distant from "true" humanity than nondisabled people. If I claim that you and I both bear the image of God, but only I do so in ways that can be perceived and defined, no amount of equivocating can obscure the brute fact that I am claiming to be more like God than you.

I followed Molly Haslam in arguing that an acceptable definition of the image of God must include profoundly intellectually disabled people, not as a footnote or a problem, but as full bearers of God's image, robustly accounted for. At the same time, I made the claim that any such definition of image will have no convincing grounds for excluding nonhuman animals, plant life, or even nonliving matter. While I hope that I made this claim carefully and sensitively, it remains difficult, perhaps even impossible, to make such an argument without contributing to a long and ugly legacy of dehumanizing disabled people. In her book *Beasts of Burden*, the disability activist and animal advocate Sunaura Taylor promotes "claiming animality" as "a way of challenging the violence of animalization and of speciesism – of recognizing that animal liberation is entangled with our own."[5] By emphasizing matter's affect, and exploring becoming-earth and becoming-machine as well as becoming-animal, I have tried to extend Taylor's

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[5] Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 110.

premise to creation at large, both organic and non-organic; but it is a risky move to attempt to

divest from "humanity" when so many people have still never been granted full access to its

privileges. My argument for highly specific and contextual materially grounded affective

assemblages attempts to make the benefits outweigh the risks; nonetheless, the fact remains that I

am a non-intellectually disabled person instrumentalizing intellectually disabled people for an

argument that risks their wellbeing more than it risks my own, and this troubles me.

I also used the so-called antisocial thesis in queer theory to make an argument for God

the *sinthomo*sexual, using queer negativity. This argument is complex both in what it tries to do

and in what it deliberately leaves out. It attempts to hold together several concepts without

clinging too dogmatically to any one of them. First and most obviously, I rely on Lee Edelman's

queer reading of Lacan. The Lacanian *sinthome*, as *"*the knot that holds the subject together,"[6]

gives us access to the realm of the symbolic and simultaneously limits our subjectivity. For

Edelman, queerness "occupies the place of the zero, the nothing, that invariably structures the

logic of being but remains at once intolerable to and inconceivable within it."[7] Edelman unites

queerness and the *sinthome* in the punning neologism *sinthomo*sexual, which names the figure

who is made abject through being forced to embody all that is disavowed from the social. At the

same time, I maintain the structural necessity of this "nonrelation that's internal to relation"[8]

even when I attempt to define relation nonsymbolically, as matter's affect. Perhaps this is a fatal

flaw in my argument: can a concept based in psychoanalysis really be extrapolated to the

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[6] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Disability Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2004), 35.
[7] Lee Edelman, "Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That's Out of Joint," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.2 (2011): 149.
[8] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 10.

nonhuman, nonliving, and nonorganic? Is it meaningful to talk of a structurally necessary

nonrelation internal to the relation of, say, a pebble and the dirt on which it lies? I see a

theologically meaningful relation in the ways that the pebble and the dirt affect each other, in

their touching, in their being touched by wind and passing insects, in their dynamic de- and re-

territorialization in affective assemblages; but without a *sinthome*, without access to the

symbolic, how does it make sense to claim a role for a *sinthomo*sexual? (And how can I bring

together both a psychoanalytic framework and an anti-oedipal Deleuzoguattarian one?)

My attempted resolution to these conundrums is, in a word, God. God's self-

*sinthomo*sexualization, as both condition of possibility for creation's existence and the act of

creation itself, inherently embeds all of creation in a matrix of relation, *as well as* a structure of

nonrelation. As discussed in chapter 1, God and God's image are not identical, so if God's image

is relation then God cannot be relation; but God and God's image are also not opposites, so God

is not *not* relation. The only possible way I can make sense of this is by holding God to be the

conditioning framework for all that is, the one whose self-inversion is the act that *makes*, the

spirit whose flesh is the cosmos. I hope this is not question-begging and handwaving; however, a

reliance on paradox always risks collapsing into nonsense.

The concept of God the *sinthomo*sexual is a theological claim about the nature of creation

and creation's relation to its creator. It makes no claims about God's will or God's action (those

these could arguably be extrapolated from it). At the same time, however, God the

*sinthomo*sexual is also God the *ger*, a term I use to emphasize the notion of God's justice. While

I have not defined God's justice nor provided any particular framework for discerning it, it can

be detected as a pervasive throughline of welcome, openness, refusal to foreclose on possibilities. God the *ger* is necessary to avoid an is-ought fallacy whereby existing in God's image means no improvement is necessary. Like trans/crip embodiment, creation bears the image of God in its affective materiality and at the same time cries out for justice to be enacted in multifarious becomings.

Attempts to explore paradox, maintain tension, and hold contradictions permeate this work. I may have doomed myself to failure from the start: I am using the format of the doctoral dissertation to argue for the importance of nonrepresentational and nonsymbolic relation; I am pleading to cis/abled institutions of neoliberal capitalism to recognize my claim that trans/crip being should not succumb to the demands of neoliberal capitalism; I am using queer nonrelation to expand relation. My proposed post-anthropological theological anthropology of trans/crip cyborg affective assemblages may, in the end, do little to advance either our understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God or our commitment to trans and crip liberation. Yet I hope that, if nothing else, this project conveys a passionate love for trans/crip matter and a prayer for this love to be shared. Kristien Justaert, invoking Deleuze and Guattari's invocation of Marx, posits *theology as constant revolt*,[9] and this too is my commitment and my hope. May our constant revolt make manifest the trans/crip cyborg revolution.

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[9] Kristien Justaert, *Theology After Deleuze* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 133.

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