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Refusing Spectacle: Trans Latinx Counter-Security Media

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Visual Studies

by

Dan Bustillo

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Lucas Hilderbrand, Co-Chair
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2023

DEDICATION

To

those who make worlds out of resistance

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VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Refusing Spectacle: Trans Latinx Counter-Security Media

by

Dan Bustillo

Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Lucas Hilderbrand, Chair

Professor Bliss Cua Lim, Co-Chair

In a world that continues to be anti-trans, it remains urgent to compile and theorize transgender worldmaking projects and histories. “Refusing Spectacle: Trans Latinx Counter-Security Media” explores trans Latinx worldmaking through intentional mis/uses of digital and analog media. This project unpacks the deep entanglement between ethnoracialized gender and disciplinary structures through the works of trans activists who build community while resisting the structures that aim to isolate, criminalize, and stigmatize trans people of color. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that trans Latinx communities’ resistive mis/use of media, which I term “counter-security media,” turns resistive media praxis into a trans worldmaking tool.

This dissertation looks to examples of counter-security media that span a spectrum of analog and digital media: from letter-writing activism for incarcerated and detained trans communities, to social media campaigns that collect physical letters to reach detained trans Latina/x migrants, to the use of multiple platforms and tagging practices by trans Latinx micro-celebrities on social

media platforms, to the strategic use of visibility on social media for trans and queer migrant communities at the Mexico-US border.

While gender may typically be thought of as a personal expression at the individual level, it is also expressed at systemic levels—built into racist disciplinary practices in prisons and immigration detention centers, and into the way that trans expression online is policed. This project asks: how might gender nonconformity be expressed at the systemic level? How do trans activists and communities navigate the vulnerability that comes with trans visibility? This dissertation focuses on creative mis/uses of media as a means of expressing gender nonconformity and building trans Latinx community within some of the very institutions that remain so invested in maintaining gender norms.

INTRODUCTION

Pre-pandemic, I had a very specific vision for this dissertation. It was meant to take a spatial approach to what I hoped would be a decolonial trans Latinx study of power. I thought I would map trans Latinx resistive media praxis by way of my own everyday trajectories. I thought I would trace the security landscapes of the spaces I regularly moved through in Los Angeles, and slowly make my way south, across the border to Tijuana, orienting myself home, towards the Caribbean. This has meaning for me, as a transmasculine person of Caribbean descent. In my vision, the work would counter a range of borders—national, carceral, social—and end outside of the US. I wanted to counter the assumed South-North directionality of migration that so often characterizes Latinx migration studies. I wanted to think about the relationship between the US-Mexico border and the Caribbean as a horizontal flow or axis, not as one that always ports through the US.

In my initial vision, this flow outwards toward the Caribbean would start with where I was, in Los Angeles. Having relied on public transit as my main way to get around the city of Los Angeles for over a decade, I noticed many things about the city that are designed to be unnoticed. The train I would take to and from campus always enters and leaves Union station slowly. This slowness forced me to see the carceral nexus that the station is located within. Union Station sits between multiple carceral buildings: the Men’s Central Jail, the Metropolitan Detention Center, and the Twin Towers Correctional Facility. Mike Davis calls this “Fortress LA.” He refers to the way Los Angeles hides its carceral design by blending prisons in with other tall buildings of the downtown cityscape.¹ Jails and detention centers are not isolated carceral

¹ See Davis’s discussion of this particular area in Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, London and New York: Verso, 2006 (first published by Verso in 1990), 256, 257.

spaces. They are part of what Foucault has aptly referred to as a carceral continuum that extends disciplinary and carceral logics beyond the specific sites themselves and into everyday commuting and transit spaces, like Union Station.²

Frequently passing through the carceral nexus that is Union Station prompted me to think about the ways that everyday movements are securitized. Train stations are, of course, heavily surveilled, with security guards and police officers monitoring the platforms and trains. Post-9/11 and pre-pandemic, the walls of trains and train stations were covered with *iWatch* campaigns (See Something, Say Something), a nation-wide anti-terrorism campaign implemented in 2009 by the Department of Homeland Security that relies on citizen participation to render public space “safe.” I had also heard of a new partnership between LA Metro, the Transportation Security Administration, and the Sheriff’s Department for the use of Thruvision’s portable body scanners to screen metro riders at a distance. These new body scanners were touted as less biased than other security practices, because they used thermal technology and hence could not, according to the company’s promotional material, “see” ethnicity or gender.³ While thermal detection might be meant to detect weapons and not genitals, the scanners would most likely also flag body prosthetics ranging from chest binders, to breast implants, to packers—all of which are commonly affixed to the trans body (among other bodies).

But this post-gender, post-race/ethnicity body scanning software did not take over Union Station as the press had said it would. The global COVID-19 pandemic happened first, and

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995 (originally 1975), 297.

³ Thruvision self-pitches as “fast, safe, and respectful people security screening,” and in its explanatory video boasts how respectful it is by claiming, “It’s impossible to tell age, gender or ethnicity with Thruvision.” See their official website at <https://thruvision.com/#> and the explanation video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUfKtn-pqWg&feature=emb_title. Both sites accessed February 18, 2020.

Union Station quickly became a testing site instead. Union Station, once a bustling site of everyday foot traffic, was empty under quarantine. Given these shifts, it no longer made sense for me to write about the pitfalls of biased surveillance practices at Union Station and their impact on trans people, poor people, and people of color. However, writing during the pandemic also meant that a lot of spaces I intended to write about were increasingly mediated online—through Zoom, online communication apps, and social media. This changed the work I had set out to do. Attending to the media strategies of many trans-led activists working against carceral, national, and social borders taught me that trans Latinx activists integrate community-building into the media strategies they used to circumvent racist and transphobic exclusionary practices in the prison, immigration, and social media contexts. Shifting my focus from securitized spaces and toward media strategies used to navigate these spaces cemented my interest in worldmaking.

This dissertation maps trans Latinx resistive worldmaking through the strategic mis/use of analog and digital media. It demonstrates how analog and digital media can become tools for resistance to the deeply gendered and racialized security systems that structure our lives. This work learns from and highlights the creative media strategies that trans Latinx people use to build community in the contemporary moment, in spite of the criminalization and stigmatization of ethnoracialized gender nonconforming people. Because gendered binary ideology is built into so many social and civic structures, trans people are systematically and systemically excluded and isolated. We are excluded—sometimes officially, other times unofficially—from legal recognition, access to trans healthcare (as well as standard healthcare or treatment as a consequence), and social norms of belonging. State structures amplify these exclusions and further isolate trans people by relying on conflicting definitions of gender and sex to structure access to basic needs that range from social services to medical treatment to housing. Gender

norms are built into disciplinary practices in prisons and immigration detention centers, leading to an increase in anti-trans violence. Gender norms are also maintained in online spaces and reinforced through algorithmic practices of content moderation that misconstrue trans expression as unwanted and punishable discourse on social media platforms. In short, gender is not natural. It is both naturalized and heavily policed. As such, it is an ideology that is maintained and reified through multiple institutions and systems—from media to state policies and social practices.

Gender, race, and security are intrinsically linked. Gendered and racialized norms maintain a national identity of a cis, heteronormative, white or white adjacent, middle-class nation. These norms flag trans people of color as threats to that national identity. Yet those of us who are pushed to the margins of national belonging always find ways to find and support one another. A desire to celebrate trans Latinx resistance and creative survival is precisely what drives this project.

“Refusing Spectacle: Trans Latinx Counter-Security Media” asserts trans Latinx media activism as a form of worldmaking despite the anti-trans discriminatory impact of national borders, carceral institutions, and media platforms. This project holds that the trans and gender nonconforming ethnoracialized figure has presented a “problem” to administrative security policies to which identification, mobility, and correction are central.⁴ Trans subjects occupy a unique and difficult place within these systems, spaces, and logics. Our assumed bureaucratic, medical, and legal “impossibility” demands a critical rethinking of the binary-based logics that undergird US security and resources. Through interviews, autoethnography, and formal analysis of media with close readings of activist media, social media posts, and videos, this project argues

⁴ See José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020, 36, 37.

that trans Latinx worldmaking occurs through a strategic mis/use of media to circumvent the gendered and racialized policing of national, cultural, and lived borders of belonging.

Security logics depend so deeply on racialized identification procedures and the regulation of gender at every possible level—legal, medical, social—yet “securing” our genders means failing to see us as subjects or even as full humans. Applying a trans of color analytic (which includes a trans Latinx analytic in resonance with other racialized trans analytics) to security apparatuses reveals their fissures, underlying assumptions, and compounded fears. Just as security practices and technologies increasingly saturate the everydayness of our lives, so do our practices of resistances to it. Like media, resistance circulates. Wherever gender nonconformity is explicitly eliminated or rendered impossible, resistive media allows us to write our genders back into existence, to remain visible to one another, and to build communities of care. Some of the key questions this project asks are: how is ethnoracialized gender built into in media and disciplinary structures? What kinds of norms of belonging does this produce? How do trans Latinx communities form across and despite these regulated borders of belonging?

I came to this work out of surveillance studies. There is a great deal of scholarship about the ways in which gender norms are built into state surveillance projects and there has been increasing focus on the ways that these norms impact trans and gender nonconforming people.⁵

Yet, there is a paradoxical tension between the top-down approach of surveillance studies that

⁵ For a brief list of scholars who do this work, see Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019; see also Tara Mulqueen and Paisley Currah, “Securitizing Gender: Identity, Biometrics, and Transgender Bodies at the Airport,” *Social Research*, Vol. 78, No. 2, (2011): 557-582; *Feminist Surveillance Studies*, ed. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015; Mia Fischer, *Terrorizing Gender: Transgender Visibility and the Surveillance Practices of the U.S. Security State*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019; Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, & the Limits of Law*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.

isolates subjects of surveillance—either individually or into groups of people—and the lived knowledge of resistive praxis to surveillance. Trans people form survival networks in the absence of official ones. From mutual aid to networks of care, trans people build communities despite the structures that single us out.⁶ While the US security apparatus continues to pathologize, criminalize, and isolate trans people, people of color, disabled people, queer people, poor people, undocumented people, formerly incarcerated people, it is also true that resistive acts are both communal and worldmaking. Trans Latinx resistive media practices to racialized and gendered securitizing norms are not only symptomatic of repressive power—they are also blueprints for survival networks.

Refusing spectacle, in my work, means refusing to be made into a spectacle for a dominant white and non-trans imaginary. It means moving away from the spectacle of trans life and death and towards the joyful resistance of everyday trans Latinx life. Spectacle is a form of security media. It uses visibility to control and discipline racialized trans bodies. This dichotomous form of visibility that others racialized people by making them hypervisible in popular media is what Stuart Hall aptly calls “the spectacle of the other.”⁷ A great deal of scholarship in transgender studies and media studies has focused on transness through the spectacular—from extraordinary death to exaggerated visuals of gender incongruity— as a way of making sense of gender nonconformity. Much of this has been brilliantly theorized by Chris Straayer, whose early and highly foundational work on queerness and gender nonconformity in

⁶ Hill Malatino, *Trans Care*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. Also see Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, & the Limits of Law*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015. Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, London, New York: Verso, 2020.

⁷ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc; Open University Press, 1997, 225.

film shows how central the spectacular has been in making trans and gay life legible to non-trans and non-gay audiences. This is what he calls the “temporary transvestite film.” The temporary transvestite drives genre (feeds the comedy, for example) at the cost of transness.⁸ In other words, gender nonconformity is positioned in service of a genre that ultimately does not take gender variance seriously. The tradition of rendering transness visible solely as a consumable spectacle is at odds with the ordinary and the everyday, and with life as it is lived.⁹

As a transmasculine Latinx person, I take the importance of identity to be its provision of an analytic. Being gender and ethnically ambiguous has taught me a lot about the state’s—and subsequently even our own—need for fixed, clear, identifiable bodies. Mostly, ambiguity has taught me about defiance and about solidarity. *Trans* and *Latinx* function here as embodied ways of knowing that teach us to navigate identification and security otherwise. I think of *trans* as a mode of knowing that manifests in multiple ways throughout this dissertation. I borrow *transing* from Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore’s account of the active potential of trans—one that signals a direction of liberation.¹⁰

I use the term trans to include intersex, gender nonconforming, non-binary, and gender expansive community members. I also use the terms trans and gender nonconforming

⁸ See Chris Straayer’s discussion of specific films like *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933), *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982), *Yenti* (Barbra Streisand, 1983), *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), *La Cage Aux Folles* (Edouard Molinaro, 1978), *Tootsie* (Sidney Pollack, 1982), among others, in “Redressing the “Natural”: The Temporary Transvestite Film,” *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 42-78.

⁹ See Andre Cavalcante, *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life*, New York: New York University Press, 2018. Cavalcante’s formulation of the “queerly ordinary” trans media viewing practices as a form of resistance to transphobic representation is instrumental in my own use of the everyday, as a political refusal of the spectacular.

¹⁰ Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, Lisa Jean Moore, “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 3/4, Trans- (Fall/Winter, 2008): 11-22.

interchangeably.¹¹ This is not to conflate different ways in which gender nonconformity is expressed across gender and sexual identities. It is, however, a way to emphasize the overlap in experience among those of us whose gender expression falls outside cisgender binaristic norms. Trans as an analytic allows for a way to reflect back on the systems that impact trans communities. Here, I follow Dean Spade's "critical trans politics" which understands trans liberation to be inseparable from that of structural oppressions that also impact people of color, poor people, undocumented people, and system-impacted people. A critical trans politics stresses the necessity for coalition against intersecting systems of oppression.¹² This is important because some of the organizations I discuss include non-trans members and many of them serve both trans and non-trans communities. Yet a critical trans politics drives their commitment to larger systemic change that benefits trans people.

I draw from Francisco J. Galarte who defines trans, following Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, not as an in-between place of transition but rather as a broker of change. For Galarte, *trans* intervenes into Chicana/o Studies by bringing trans concerns and methodologies to

¹¹ Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms trans and gender nonconforming interchangeably. I do this to recognize the expansive spectrum of both transness and gender nonconformity without subsuming one under gender identity and expression under the other. Within trans and non-binary communities, there can be tension between both identities. On the one hand, trans is often assumed to be transnormative (even when this is often not the case) and non-binary is assumed to be in opposition to trans and hence rendered invisible by it (even though trans people can also be non-binary). In using trans and gender nonconforming interchangeable, I hope to move around these community disputes to reflect on the larger systems that attempt to gender us.

¹² With Morgan Bassichis and Alexander Lee, Dean Spade formulates a "queer and trans abolitionist politics" that reconfigures the paradox of gender nonconformity and turns the assumed impossibility of gender nonconformity into a politics of prison abolition. Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, Dean Spade, "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," in *Captive Genders, Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011, 40.

Chicana/o Studies.¹³ I also use Latinx with an emphasis on the X. Alan Pelaez Lopez brilliantly argues that the ‘X’ in Latinx is a wound. They view the X as a scar that reminds the Latin American diaspora of four specific foundational axes of violence: settlement, anti-Blackness, femicides, and the inarticulation of the Latin American experience.¹⁴ I invoke the X as a reminder that gender nonconformity within Latino/a cultures and studies is not merely a linguistic modifier used to signal inclusivity. Rather, I use it to speak through a body marked by the violent wounds of gender norms and machista cultures.

I use Latinx to refer to Latinx-identified people and communities. Not all the organizations I discuss in this dissertation are Latinx-identified. Yet, many of the people they serve are. Here, I follow Susana Peña’s approach to studying Transsexual Action Organization as a trans Latina project even though the organization was a multi-racial/ethnic trans advocacy group from the 1970s with many non-Latina members.¹⁵ Inspired by Peña, I find that the coalitional nature of trans communities, which includes and impacts trans Latinx people, does not take away from this work’s contribution to both trans studies and Latina/o studies. Hence,

¹³ Francisco J. Galarte, “Transgender Chican@ Poetics: Contesting, Interrogating, and Transforming Chicana/o Studies,” *Chicana/Latina Studies*, 13:2, (Spring 2014): 118-139, 121.

¹⁴ See Alan Pelaez Lopez, “The X in Latinx Is A Wound, Not A Trend,” *ColorBloq*, September 2018, <https://www.colorbloq.org/article/the-x-in-latinx-is-a-wound-not-a-trend>. For more on the ‘X’ in Latinx, see Claudia Milian, *LatinX*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019; Salvador Vidal-Ortiz & Juliana Martínez, “Latinx thoughts: Latinidad with an X,” *Latino Studies* (2018) 16: 384–395, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-018-0137-8>; Richard T. Rodríguez, “X marks the spot,” *Cultural Dynamics*, 2017, 29(3): 202–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374017727880>; Jennie Luna and Gabriel S. Estrada, “Trans* Lating the Genderqueer -X Through Caxcan, Nahua, and Xicanx Indígena Knowledge,” in *Decolonizing Latinx Masculinities*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama and Frederick Luis Aldama, The University of Arizona Press, 2020; Joshua Javier Guzmán, “Latino, the Word,” *English Language Notes*, 1 October 2018; 56 (2): 143–145, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-6960834>.

¹⁵ Susana Peña, “Gender and Sexuality in Latina/o Miami: Documenting Latina Transsexual Activists,” *Gender and History*, Vol. 22, No. 3, (November 2010): 755-772, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2010.01617.x>.

my theoretical frameworks bridge Latinx and trans studies while remaining simultaneously identitarian and non-identitarian. My theoretical frameworks follow the larger coalitional politics of many trans and Latinx communities and organizational work.

Ultimately, my approach to gender and ethnic identity is political, which is to say that I am committed to thinking through the violence of identity categories. Identity helps us understand the larger cultural, social, and historical conditions in which they emerge. In his provocative critique of identity categories, Kadji Amin makes a distinction between gender identity and gender politics. He argues that gender categories are first and foremost social categories, not individual ones. This is a necessary reminder to think beyond how we individually express gender and to think about the various systems—cultural and otherwise—that produce, reinforce, or challenge our gender expressions. I take his critique of gender identity categories to be an invitation to think about the violence of identity categories that are produced in relation to one another *and* to take seriously the coalitional possibilities for our responses and approaches to the study of gender.¹⁶

Throughout this dissertation, I offer the term “counter-security media” to describe the creative media strategies that trans Latinx people and communities use to circumvent racialized and gendered disciplinary structures while also building community in the process. Counter-security media is diagnostic of power. It reveals, by way of resistive media strategies, how ethnoracialized gender is built into disciplinary systems and media. In the process, it offers an alternative to the way that surveillance studies often follows the top-down approach to surveillance practices by centering strategies of resistance.

¹⁶ Kadji Amin, “We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents,” *Representations*, 158 (1) (2022): 106–119. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.158.11.106>.

I locate counter-security media in three distinct contexts: prisons, online platforms, and immigration. Geographically, this project is situated in the U.S. and Tijuana, Mexico. Historically, this project focuses on the contemporary moment, with an emphasis on projects and campaigns that are pre-pandemic and that continued into the pandemic era and that range from 2014 to the present moment. The examples of counter-security media that I highlight in this dissertation span a range of contexts and media forms. First, trans-led letter-writing activism in prisons and detention centers re-inscribe transness into sex-segregated carceral systems where gender norms are used as tools of punishment. Second, trans micro-celebrities' creative media praxes document and circumvent anti-trans discrimination on social media platforms. Lastly, transfeminist activists' media strategies modulate visibility for trans and queer migrants at the Mexico-US border.

Some of the big claims of this dissertation locate gender between individual and systemic expressions. I argue that gender is expressed at the systemic level, not just the individual level. At the systemic level, gender norms are maintained through systems like media, prisons, and immigration. Building gender norms into systems impacts trans and gender nonconforming people and communities. As Dean Spade argues, gender is administered through a host of interconnected sex-segregated institutions (from social services-based ones like shelters to carceral ones like prisons).¹⁷ Survival opportunities in an anti-trans world are shaped by the ways that gender is administered. The emphasis on gender in core civic structures harms trans people and produces what Debanuj DasGupta refers to as gendered trauma.¹⁸ Moving beyond the impact

¹⁷ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.

¹⁸ See Debanuj DasGupta, "The Politics of Transgender Asylum and Detention," *Human Geography*, 12(3), 2019, 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/194277861901200304>.

that gendered systems have, Toby Beauchamp argues that trans identity is in part produced by surveillance practices. More specifically, he argues that post-9/11 surveillance policies and practices shape how transgender as an identity category is reconfigured in the national imaginary. To say that gender is expressed at the individual and systemic level also means that resisting gender norms is not just a question of individual creative expression. Trans resistance can happen at the systemic level, through some of the very institutions that maintain gender norms. This dissertation focuses on creative mis/uses of media as a way to express gender nonconformity even within gendered structures that reinforce gender norms.

Keywords and Field Interventions

This dissertation is situated primarily between trans studies, Latino/a studies, and media studies. It also engages surveillance studies, critical prison studies, platform studies, digital media studies, queer studies, and queer migration studies. I approach media studies in a capacious way. My objects span a spectrum of analog and digital media: from letter-writing activism for incarcerated and detained trans communities, to social media campaigns that collect physical letters to reach detained trans migrants, to the multiple platforms and tagging practices used by trans Latinx micro-celebrities, to the strategic use of visibility on social media for trans and queer migrant communities at the Mexico-US border. I am interested in the ways that media objects mediate gender. I am also interested in the ways that trans communities retrieve agency through media mis/use to build transness into platforms and spaces made for binary gender experiences. Because many of my key concepts draw from intersecting fields, I articulate my key concepts and field definitions together in the following section.

Trans Latinx Studies

My dissertation's main intervention—or the one I hold closest to my own body—is my commitment to bridging the gap between trans studies and Latino/a studies. As trans Chicana scholar Francisco Galarte makes clear in his work, trans Latinx scholars are doubly marginalized, as is the field of trans Latinx studies itself.¹⁹ On the one hand, Latina/o studies has only more recently engaged transness; when gender has been engaged in the past, it has often remained through the lens of a cisgender binary. On the other hand, trans studies has been very white and has only more recently begun to engage race and ethnicity as central elements of transness. To do trans Latinx studies as a media scholar is to engage multiple, often disconnected audiences: non-Latinx readers and scholars in trans studies; non-trans readers and scholars in Latina/o studies; and a range of readers and scholars in media studies. This bridge is necessary and contributes to the growing subfield of trans Latinx studies.

Language, like gender, has always been changing. The use of the @, x, e, are all part of ongoing efforts to make our terms as gender expansive as the lived experiences of our community members. I try to be intentional with my own language. I use the x when trans thought or trans people are part of the conversation. Otherwise, I default to o/a. This is a deliberate move that makes space for trans and gender nonconforming Latinx voices to be centered in an otherwise gender normative space. It also avoids the performance of inclusion of trans people into scholarship and spaces that often discount our existence.

In many ways, a transgender analytic that locates xenophobic and racist surveillance policies and practices is indebted to women of color feminism; to trans scholars who think gender nonconformity in tandem with race and ethnicity; and to trans of color scholars who have

¹⁹ Francisco J. Galarte, “Transgender Chican@ Poetics: Contesting, Interrogating, and Transforming Chicana/o Studies,” *Chicana/Latina Studies* 13:2, (Spring 2014): 118-139.

intervened in both trans studies and in race/ethnic studies.²⁰ C. Riley Snorton’s work continues to shape my thinking. Snorton theorizes Blackness and transness together in relation to mobilities, transition, trans narratives, and histories, and argues that questions of passing and gender nonconformity must be theorized in relation to Blackness and to the *ungendering* of the Black body more specifically.²¹ In other words, the Black body has been historically *ungendered*—or always excluded from normative understandings of gender. Snorton’s analytic and historical intervention also reveals the contours of the fields he works within by bringing race into a

²⁰ To think systemically through identity—to use identity as an analytic—hails from feminist standpoint theory. Introduced by feminist scholars like Nancy Hartsock, Donna Haraway, and Patricia Hill Collins, standpoint epistemologies teach us not only the value in *what* we learn from the margins, but *how* we come to know the things we know from these margins. See Nancy, C. M. Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” In *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, Synthese Library, Vol 161, Springer, Dordrecht, 1983, https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-48017-4_15; Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, No. 3 (1988): 575–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>. Identity knowledges evidence the structures that pressure identities into formation and the unequal configurations of power they maintain. Simultaneously intervening in sociology and feminism, Patricia Hill Collins challenges the “political knowledge-validation” process that produces racial stereotypes and argues that a Black feminist concern with stereotypes has to do with the power of definition. For Hill Collins, learning from Black feminist knowledge means operating from a position of inside/outside, which generates a set of knowledges through self-definition. Standpoint knowledge, then, is a form of knowledge that is produced through location. See Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outside Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” (1991) in *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology*, Oxford University Press, 1999, 135-178, 155. From the margins, one is both inside and outside, which makes for a particular kind of knowledge of the space to which one’s access is regulated and/or constrained. I understand trans of color scholarship to be in conversation with a longer genealogy of situated and embodied knowledges. For a non-exhaustive list of trans of color scholarship, see C. Riley Snorton, Kai M. Green, Dora Silva Santana, Treva Ellison, micha cárdenas, Jian Neo Chen, Jules Gil-Peterson, Jin Haritaworn, Mel Y. Chen, Cole Rizki, Vox Jo Hsu, Kale Fajardo, Marquis Bey.

²¹ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

predominantly white field of trans studies and transness into an otherwise non-trans field of African American studies.

Using trans in a similar way, Galarte suggests *transgender* be taken up as a critical framework to process race, gender, and sexuality together. He intervenes in both trans studies, where trans of color and trans Chicanx authors and subjects are still few and far between, and in Chicana studies, which very often does not account for trans Chicana/o/x scholars or scholarship. He proposes to *trans Chicana/o Studies*. Building on Chicana lesbian feminist thought from the 1990s, he returns us to an ignored call from Gloria Anzaldúa to “listen to what your jotería is saying.”²² Galarte stresses the need for Chicana/o studies to listen to our jotería because it tells us how larger gender regulations and processes of exclusion operate. Galarte’s call to fold trans studies into Chicana/o studies both departs from and replays a similar (and ongoing) rift in Latino studies, where questions of gender and sexuality—and queerness more specifically—have often been ignored. Juana María Rodríguez positions queer Latino studies in the early 2000s as an emerging interdisciplinary field within Latino studies that draws from other fields like performance studies, with scholars like José Esteban Muñoz; popular culture, with scholars like José Quiroga; but that ultimately comes out of Chicana feminists like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Juanita Ramos, who as early as the 1980s, had begun the work of challenging disciplinary divides for those who occupy multiple identities.²³

In the interest of thinking trans and Latinx together, this project draws from Latino/a studies scholars, such as José Quiroga, Claudia Milian, and Juana María Rodríguez who each

²² Francisco J. Galarte, “Transgender Chican@ Poetics: Contesting, Interrogating, and Transforming Chicana/o Studies,” *Chicana/Latina Studies* 13:2, (Spring 2014): 118-139, 122.

²³ Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2003, 30.

explore the possibilities and limitations of *latinidad*—a heterogeneous and contested collective identity that is not defined solely by geographic location, race, national identity, or even language—in different yet equally generative ways. Quiroga thinks through *Latino* as an identity that is always defined through that which it is in relation to or distanced from. As a category, it is endlessly heterogeneous: in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, national affiliation, and geographic location. This also means that Latino/as—regardless of sexual or gender identity—always embody multiple identities. Quiroga’s approach to *Latino* as an identity category hails from Chela Sandoval, for whom embodying multiple identities was to be repurposed into a tool for destabilizing those same categories.²⁴ My interest here lies in following what this does for knowledge production. Hence, I turn to Claudia Milian and her use of *latining* as “a passing line of knowledge” that intersects with other lines of knowledges, namely race, gender, and sexuality. Placing African American and Latino studies in conversation, Milian challenges the assumed homogenous brownness of Latino/a studies and *latinidad* and instead turns to identities that unsettle national and normative ideologies.²⁵ Rodríguez presses upon the importance of working with this unruliness. She argues that when studying queer *latinidad*, we must move with and across the borders of discipline, language, and geographies.²⁶

Trans scholars have long been unsettling the presumed fixedness of identity. Though Milian, for instance, engages transness in her work, it is by way of its whiteness. Transness and *latining* meet through a scripted film character of a white transwoman, who is *latined* by circumstance, temporarily living in a working-class Latinx neighborhood while she saves up for

²⁴ José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2000, 200.

²⁵ Claudia Milian, *Latining America, Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies*, Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013, 30.

²⁶ Juana María Rodríguez, 30.

surgery.²⁷ Rather than relegate transness to whiteness and cisnormativity to Latinx-ness, trans Latinx studies theorizes from the place where these two (or more) forms of embodied knowledges meet.

Trans scholars thinking through, from, and across the Americas immensely inform how I use *trans**ing as a mode of knowledge production and resistance. Building off Stryker, Currah, and Moore, Dora Silva Santana thinks Blackness and transfemininity together across the Americas. Joining Caribbean and South American scholars from the African diaspora, she thinks trans beyond subjectivities, and applies it through the transatlantic, as a crossing, a “travessia,” a way of attending to the various entanglements that make up women of color feminisms and ancestral energies.²⁸ Grounding a trans analytic in South America, Cole Rizki marks an investment in *travesti*, in distinction from trans or transgender. Rizki draws from Lohana Berkins and Sacayan’s *travesti* activism and politics to frame *travesti* as a politics of refusal of racialized and classist gender norms.²⁹ *Travesti* has everything to do with class and race, Indigeneity, Blackness, and precarity. Importantly, Rizki points out that *travesti* is not a universal identification. It is class, race, and geography specific.³⁰ While most of my work focuses on the US context—with the exception of the last chapter situated in Tijuana—I turn to Galarte once

²⁷ See Milian discusses the white transwoman protagonist in *TransAmerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005). Claudia Milian, *Latining America, Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies*, Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013, 38. I’ve written about Milian’s specific use of *latined* in relation to transness in Dan Bustillo, “Trans*ed and Latined: Representation and the Possibilities of Excess,” in *TransNarratives: Scholarly and Creative Works on Transgender Experience*, ed. Kristi Carter, James Brunton, Ontario: Canadian Scholars, 2021.

²⁸ Dora Silva Santana, “Transitionings and Returnings: Experiments with the Poetics of Transatlantic Water,” *TSQ*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, (2017): 181-190, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3814973>, 183.

²⁹ Cole Rizki, “Latin/x American Trans Studies: Toward a Travesti-Trans Analytic,” *TSQ*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2019): 145-155, 148, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7348426>.

³⁰ Rizki, 152.

more who suggests we attend to the exchanges between Latin American and Latinx. Galarte introduces Latin/x America as a way of both disrupting the centrality of the Global North in trans studies and as a way of insisting on making trans legible even if by way of refusal—through the use of an ‘x’ where the gendered ending would be—in Latin American studies.³¹ These theoretical formations guide my interest in the use of identity to reflect back on the systems that pressure them into formation.

Surveillance

My intervention in security studies is methodological. Rather than compile a list of the ways in which we, as trans people, are securitized or singled out by the neat categorization systems that a “secure” state requires, my work instead turns to the media used to counter these systems. As an interdisciplinary field of study, surveillance studies follow the ways in which visibility operates as an instrument of power, discipline, and control.³² David Lyon defines surveillance, in its broadest sense, as a set of practices involving both privileged watchers in places of power and participation—intentional or not—and the lesser-privileged subjects who are

³¹ Francisco J. Galarte, “General Editor’s Introduction,” *TSQ*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2019): 141-144, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7348412>, 147.

³² A brief mapping of surveillance studies might start with Jeremy Bentham’s design of the Panopticon, and move to Michel Foucault’s updated version of panopticism that suggests the design itself is unnecessary since we have long internalized the disciplining power of the carceral continuum, to David Lyon’s larger thinking on dispersed modes of state surveillance in a “surveillance society,” to resistance to surveillance through Steve Mann’s notion of “sousveillance”—a way of looking back from below to those who watch or control us through the use of body cameras and wearable electronics that capture data, for example. See Steve Mann, ““Sousveillance:” Inverse Surveillance in Multimedia Imaging,” *Multimedia '04: Proceedings of the 12th annual ACM International Conference in Multimedia*, (October 2004): 620-627, 620. See Jeremy Bentham, “The Panopticon,” *Surveillance Studies: A Reader*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. See Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995 (originally published by Editions Gallimard in 1975).

being watched.³³ A large part of surveillance studies is invested in locating how surveillance operates, who is surveilled, and how our relationship to surveillance is shaped by technology.³⁴ Feminist surveillance studies grounds these inquiries within larger structures of power and visibility—who is visible to whom, how are these visibilities made possible, and how are they used—in connection to other vectors of power, like gender, sexuality, and race.³⁵ Though incredibly necessary work, a lot of surveillance studies nonetheless replicates the top-down approach of surveillance practices.

³³ David Lyon, “Surveillance Studies: An Overview,” in *Surveillance Studies: A Reader*, ed. Torin Monahan and David Murakami Wood, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

³⁴ Because of the emphasis on the ways in which surveillance and security logics are often visualized, some surveillance scholars also operate within visual studies and/or media and communication studies. Take for instance, Patricia Mellencamp’s work on the post-9/11 television and film’s production of anxieties and national image. See Patricia Mellencamp, “Fearful Thoughts: U.S. Television since 9/11 and the Wars in Iraq,” in *Rethinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the “War on Terror,”* ed. Andrew Martin and Patrice Petro, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006. Yvonne Tasker’s work on television crime drama and homeland security in a post-9/11 traces a move from procedural crime TV to “terror TV” that recycles pre-existing racialized anxieties around Latino and African American masculinities. See Yvonne Tasker, “Television Crime Drama and Homeland Security: From *Law & Order* to “Terror TV,”” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 51, (2012): 44-65. Marc Andrejevic is perhaps best known for working at the intersection between surveillance and film and media studies. Mapping surveillance studies to the larger field of film and media studies proves difficult because there is not much of an existing relationship between the two fields. That said, Andrejevic’s work, which focuses on the commercial models of surveillance in digital media, also engages the invisibility of surveillance technologies as they operate in mundane digital practices. Drawing from David Lyon, his work on “ubiquitous surveillance” connects digital practices of the everyday to larger surveillance practices. While digital technology opens up possibilities for connection and interactivity, it also relies on data collection for consumer monitoring and establishes a commercial model for advertising that makes digital media functional and integrated into everyday (digital) lives. See Mark Andrejevic, “Ubiquitous Surveillance,” *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, ed. Kristie Ball, Kevin D. Hagerty, David Lyon, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012.

³⁵ See *Feminist Surveillance Studies*, ed. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2015; Inderpal Grewal, *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First Century America*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017; Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and US Surveillance Practices*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019; Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.

Yet there are other approaches. Simone Browne positions “racializing surveillance” as a historical practice of monitoring, controlling, and capturing Black bodies during the trans-Atlantic slave trade that continues with contemporary technologies.³⁶ Browne deviates from the otherwise top-down approach to the study of surveillance. Joining the work of Steve Mann on sousveillance—the practice of looking back at those who watch us from a position of power—she traces a history of Black resistance to surveillance regimes, from tactics used in freedom flights from slavery to coded messages used along the Underground Railroad.³⁷ Browne’s intervention into surveillance studies highlights the importance of studying resistance strategies and offers a robust model for my own thinking through ethnoracialized gender subjugation.

Counter-security media: Counter-security media refers to the strategic mis/use of dominant media’s intended design. It is an instrument of worldmaking that counters the ways that ethnoracialized gender is built into media structures. Counter-security media is about reclaiming agency. It holds resonance with various creative strategies that emerge out of necessity. Michel De Certeau writes about the formal responses to power that emerge in “making do.” He argues that tactics of resistance respond (and resist) larger governing structures of power by operating within them.³⁸ Expanding on the concept of making do, Bliss Cua Lim writes that making do emerges in different ways across the Global South—various forms of creativity born out of impoverishment and necessity. Lim’s work on archival activist practices in the Philippines considers making do as a set of informal archival workarounds in the face of underfunding and

³⁶ Browne, 16.

³⁷ Browne, 22.

³⁸ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, Third Edition 2011 (first published in 1988), 30.

contextual precarity.³⁹ While counter-security media differs from Lim's use of making do, its inventiveness borrows from the same survival spirit that drives many of the practices Lim outlines in her work.

My thinking on counter-security media also draws on trans and queer of color scholarship that contends with having to operate in a world that simply isn't designed for us. In particular, I am reminded of Muñoz's work on disidentification, which is an alternative way of belonging that neither accepts assimilation nor operates solely outside of it. He is also very clear about the fact that disidentification is a performance strategy that comes out of queer of color survival.⁴⁰

Similarly, counter-security media is a strategic mis/use of media that turns the isolation produced by disciplinary media structures into communal resistive experiences. Counter-security media makes a hostile context livable by imagining different ways of being in relation to one another.

Mis/use: Strategic use is at the heart of counter-security media. There are many ways to refer to an intentional use, misuse, or creative use of something against its design. I invoke the forward slash in mis/use to conjure the bordered porousness of this term. The slash also marks the trans intention that drives strategic misuse. The slash is a scar across a trans chest. It is a border, a wound, and a gender expression. Finally, it is a testament to the agency we have over the media we use. How we use something is not solely defined by the features or affordances of a given media. I suggest, instead, that use is driven by intention and intention always holds the potential to undermine a presumed "correct" form of use.

³⁹ Bliss Cua Lim, *The Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema*, forthcoming, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024.

⁴⁰ Muñoz writes, "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship." See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 4.

As a mis/use of media, counter-security media does not free us from an oppressor-oppressed deadlock; it is a tool to navigate hostile contexts humanely. We work our way around, against, and within power structures that sometimes impact us and implicate us. This dissertation is about creative strategies that don't necessarily overturn power dynamics or liberate us from restrictive systems. Here, I turn to María Lugones, who offers the term “tanteo” as a practice to sense possibilities, limits, and different locations for liberatory and resistance work.⁴¹ Forms of *tanteo* appear in this dissertation as counter-security media that do not offer a pathway out of oppressive systems, but instead imagine and establish ways to be in community even if we are still operating under and against an unlivable context.

Trans*border: I offer the term “trans*border” to refer to media and networks that move in ways that bodies cannot always. Trans*border moves intentionally across geographic borders and activates the liberatory and coalitional possibilities of transness in the context of border activism. Trans*border invokes *trans* as in transgender, transborder, translation, and transfeminist. My approach draws from trans studies because trans studies tells us about the unequal relationship between power and gender and because borders—as a militarized settler regime—are like gender in that neither are natural yet both are naturalized.

The trans in trans*border is a politics. In their iconic essay on the liberatory possibilities of trans terminology, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore ask, “what if we think instead of trans- along a vertical axis—one that moves between the concrete biomateriality of individual living bodies and the biopolitical realms of aggregate populations that serve as a

⁴¹ María Lugones, *Pilgrimages Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003, 1.

resource for sovereign power?”⁴² Stryker, Currah, and Moore offer a generative way to think about “trans-” as a space of connection, a mode of analysis that points to interconnected structures of power, of which gender is one vector among many. Trans, in this way, becomes a direction, a goal, a politics, and a move towards a liberation larger than one’s gender.

Trans*border is about translation. Though concepts like *trans* travel across geographic and cultural contexts, translation and untranslatability offer contextual knowledges and differences that we should listen to. Rizki prompts trans scholars to think about cultural translation as a “trans operation.”⁴³ As he succinctly puts it, “The geopolitics of disciplinary grammars suggest that if we are to translate concepts such as trans, brownness, and gender among others, we must attend to the material, political, and cultural frameworks that freight such concepts and with which they travel.”⁴⁴

I also use trans*border in the sense of *transfeminist*. The way I understand and use the term transfeminist follows the work of Emi Koyama, Finn Enke, Malú Machuca Rose, and Sayek Valencia. Transfeminism is a coalitional feminist practice that is trans-centered.⁴⁵ I have noted a more recent uptake in the use of the term by non-trans feminists, sometimes as shorthand

⁴² Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, Lisa Jean Moore, “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?” *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol 36, No. 3/4, Trans- (Fall-Winter, 2008): 11-22, 14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27649781>

⁴³ Cole Rizki, “Trans-, Translation, Transnational,” *TSQ*, Vol. 8, No. 4, (Nov. 2021): 532-536, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9311116>, 533.

⁴⁴ Rizki, “Trans-, Translation, Transnational,” 533.

⁴⁵ See Malú Machuca Rose, “Guiseppe Campuzano’s Afterlife: Toward a Travesti Methodology for Critique, Care, and Radical Resistance,” *TSQ*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2019): 239-253; Sayak Valencia, “Necropolitics, Postmortem/Transmortem Politics, and Transfeminisms in the Sexual Economies of Death,” *TSQ*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2019): 180-193. For longer definitions of transfeminism, see *Transfeminist Perspectives: In and Beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*, ed. Finn Enke, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012 and Emi Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” *Catching A Wave: Reclaiming Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Rory Dricker and Alison Piepmeier, Northeastern University Press, 2003.

for trans-inclusive. Yet, I first heard of the term transfeminist in the work of trans scholars. Emi Koyama's "The Transfeminist Manifesto," published in 2003 and first written in 2000, articulates a pro-trans rhetoric that addresses issues at the intersection between feminism and trans movements: reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, male privilege, gender-based violence, etc. She defines transfeminism as by and for trans people who understand their liberation as part of the movement of "women and beyond."⁴⁶

In many ways, Koyama's manifesto rearticulates Sandy Stone's central claim in her 1987 "Posttranssexual Manifesto," that cis women feminists have a lot in common with trans women. Like cis women, trans women's fight for bodily autonomy takes place against a patriarchal control over definitions of transfemininity and how these definitions determine access to trans healthcare.⁴⁷ In more recent scholarship, transfeminism has been taken up to address similar intersections. This is most notable in Sayak Valencia's work on the impact of femicides at the Mexico-US border for trans and cis women alike.⁴⁸ The trans in transfeminist moves us away from identitarian categories and towards coalition-based liberation. I approach transfeminism as a transmasculine scholar. This means that my understanding and use of trans is both specific and coalitional. I do not aim to collapse the very stark differences in the harms of gender socialization between trans people; nor do I want to erase the very material anti-trans harms that have historically occurred within larger feminist communities, impacting both transmasculine

⁴⁶ Emi Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," *Catching A Wave: Reclaiming Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Rory Dricker and Alison Piepmeier, Northeastern University Press, 2003.

⁴⁷ Sandy Stone, "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," 1987, <https://sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back.pdf>. Also published in *Camera Obscura*, 1 May 1992, 10 (2 (29): 150-176, [https://read.dukeupress.edu/camera-obscura/article-abstract/10/2%20\(29\)/150/31158/The-Empire-Strikes-Back-A-Posttranssexual?redirectedFrom=fulltext](https://read.dukeupress.edu/camera-obscura/article-abstract/10/2%20(29)/150/31158/The-Empire-Strikes-Back-A-Posttranssexual?redirectedFrom=fulltext).

⁴⁸ Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2018.

and transfeminine people. Instead, I take transfeminist to mean trans-coalitional. It refers to the kinds of dissent trans and non-trans gender impacted communities can activate when understanding, as the Combahee River Collective teaches us, that if our oppressions are interlocking, so too are our liberations.⁴⁹

Visibility: Visibility is a mediated form of control. Though always related to power, visibility can mean several things. It can be a form of scopic power that regulates how and when people are visible. This is how trans people might be invisible to legal or medical regimes, yet hypervisible in cultural mediations, such as television shows or films. Visibility might also refer to a desire to be seen in a public sphere by those of us who are typically excluded from it. Desire for visibility in media representation for underrepresented groups can be a form of mediated cultural belonging. However, as many scholars have pointed out, trans visibility does not necessarily mean social acceptance. Hence, the increase in trans visibility in media representation has been accompanied by an increase in trans violence and murders (mostly trans femicides).⁵⁰ As detailed by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton in their anthology, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, the false promise of “positive representation” yields the “trap of the visual.” It is the leveraged aspiration to a livable life by way of trans representation in national media that, in the end, only benefits some

⁴⁹ The Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” *How We Get Free*, Ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2017.

⁵⁰ See micha cárdenas, “Trans of Color Poetics: Stitching Bodies, Concepts, and Algorithms,” *S&F Online*, Issue, 13.3, 14.1, 2016, https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/traversing-technologies/micha-cardenas-trans-of-color-poetics-stitching-bodies-concepts-and-algorithms/#footnote_1_2641.

trans communities, while it nefariously impacts others—often low-income trans communities of color.⁵¹

Visibility can also be strategic. As Allen Feldman puts it, visibility is a technology of power. It makes itself known through a host of institutions like media, policing, and politics.⁵² This means that visibility can be used by those targeted by scopic regimes of power to navigate a system that positions those of us who are too trans, too queer, too brown, too Black, too poor, and too undocumented, as outsiders to citizenship as threats to national security.

My approach to visibility is guided by the entanglement between visibility and vulnerability, by the knowledge that visibility is directly connected to anti-trans violence. Eric Stanley beautifully reframes the paradox between visibility and vulnerability: “How can we be seen without being known, and how can we be known without being haunted.”⁵³ I locate answers to Stanley’s question in the work of activists whose counter-security media practices offer a diagnosis of power along with a model of resistive visibility. My intention is *not* to replicate the way the state sees but rather to think through the ways that those who are simultaneously regarded as vulnerable and threatening to national security understand their resistance to violent state practices. As the flip side to security media that spectacularizes racialized gender nonconforming bodies, counter-security media offers a subtle yet radical practice of resistance.

Emerging from the everyday, counter-security media is a practice of looking back. It is a practice of refusal, negotiation, and resistance. This dissertation attends to a number of ways in

⁵¹ *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2017, xv.

⁵² Allen Feldman, “On the Actuarial Gaze: From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib,” *Cultural Studies*, 19:2, (2006): 203-226, 206.

⁵³ Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring antagonism and the trans/queer ungovernable*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021, 87.

which visibility is used strategically. I look to the connection between visibility and trans legibility in sex-segregated prisons, to the ways that visibility is contested and navigated amid anti-trans policies and social practices on online platforms, and lastly to the way that it is staggered across institutional trans and queer activism to keep more vulnerable community members safe at the Mexico-US border.

Visibility functions as a nuanced register of power that operates along with other forms of power, across the lines of race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, and sexuality. Visibility might grant conditional benefits to some, but in often uneven and exclusionary ways. Sometimes scholarship might also replicate invisibilities. For instance, trans and queer migrants have often been rendered invisible within migration studies. Loosely founded around the works of Eithne Lubhéid and Lionel Cantú, queer migration studies is, for Lubhéid, an “unruly” field of study.⁵⁴ Lubhéid stresses the significance of thinking queerness and migration in tandem. For her, “queer migration” is a framework that intervenes in the excessive heterosexuality of migration studies.⁵⁵ I follow the unruliness of queer migration studies when learning from the activists whose media strategies I write about, particularly at the border.

Worldmaking: The kinds of worldmaking projects I detail in this dissertation are both identitarian and coalitional. They are political articulations of marginalized identities that think of identity not solely as an individual expression but as a communal one. I understand worldmaking to be a communal and coalitional investment in liberation that takes a marginalized identity as a starting point but aims to dismantle the interlocking systems that produce those identities. Trans Latinx worldmaking, in my application of it, is a form of community building

⁵⁴ Eithne Luibhéid, “Queer/Migration: An Unruly Body of Scholarship,” *GLQ*, Vol. 14, Issue 2-3 (2007): 169-190, 169.

⁵⁵ *idem*.

that occurs despite the anti-trans, racist, and xenophobic practices that aim to isolate, stigmatize, and criminalize trans Latinx people.

I turn to the literature on worldmaking that comes out of queer studies for points of overlap as well as disjuncture. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner importantly define queer worlds by way of their distinction from the identitarian affiliations that structure kinship, domestic space, property, or nation.⁵⁶ In other words, for Berlant and Warner, queer worlds are built on the outside of normative definitions and practices of belonging, whether social, civic, or national. I, too, take up the term worldmaking in a similar way: the types of kinship that we build from spaces and relations that are marginalized by dominant social, civic, and national structures. However, I make no distinction between world and community. Berlant and Warner argue that a queer world is not the same as community because a community, in their view, is defined by way of a shared identity, whereas a world brings together people across different identities.

Part of the reason I do not make this same distinction—in fact, I collapse the two—is that trans of color worldmaking cannot renounce *community* in the same way. Trans of color worlds straddle multiple identitarian communities. In predominantly non-Latinx trans communities, our gender expression might feel even more culturally specific. In non-trans Latino/a communities, our gender nonconformity might set us apart. Yet we exist between the two, often at the margins of both identity-based communities, with stakes in both. The lived experiences that make political commitments to uplifting non-trans, non-queer communities of color animate trans and queer of color worldmaking. Community and world are not at odds in the trans Latinx worldmaking projects I discuss. José Esteban Muñoz’s worldmaking is instructive here. For

⁵⁶ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Intimacy (Winter, 1998): 547-566, 558.

Muñoz, worldmaking is about offering a minoritarian view of the world that opens up space for a transformative politics.⁵⁷ Manalansan formulates a similar approach to queer of color worlds. In his work on the queer worlds of undocumented trans and queer immigrants who live together, he approaches queer worlds through the “queer mess” that structures their lives and against the dominant call for neat narratives, sexual, gender, and national identities.⁵⁸ Trans worldmaking, as I approach it here, is what happens when individual expressions that resist gendered and racialized norms become communal acts of resistance.

A note on method: from necropolitics to the joy of trans life

The state organizes life chances and structures of survival according to pre-existing inequities. This is well documented by scholars of critical race theory, postcolonial theory, feminist studies, and trans and queer studies. As Achille Mbembe argues, contemporary violence relies on disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical forms of power.⁵⁹ His work holds immediate relevance for the study of trans life and for trans studies in general.⁶⁰ How do we care for our dead or our wounded without rendering trans of color death abstract? Thinking with Mbembe’s “necropolitics,” C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn offer a careful analysis of the extractive relationship between trans of color death and life, and white transnormativity in the Global North. Their work also serves as a warning or cautionary invitation for scholars writing

⁵⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 195.

⁵⁸ Martin F. Manalansan IV, “The “Stuff” of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives,”” *Radical History Review*, Issue 120 (Fall 2014): 94-107, 99.

⁵⁹ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019 (first published Editions La Decouverte, 2016), 82. This was first published in 2003. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 1, 15 (1) (January 2003): 11–40. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

⁶⁰ Sayak Valencia’s work on necropolitics at the Mexico-US border and its relationship to feminicides, including transfemicides, is relevant here. See Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, Los Angeles: semiotet(e), 2018.

about trans of color death. They invite trans scholars to consider the implications of reproducing trans of color violence and of making scholarship or cultural production that symbolically reproduces that violence while gaining cultural capital from it.⁶¹

Nonetheless, writing about anti-trans violence is important. Stanley reminds us that dominant culture portrays anti-trans/queer violence and death as out of the ordinary.⁶² It is therefore necessary to challenge the assumed singularity of these events. Exceptionalizing anti-trans and anti-queer violences normalizes them by eclipsing the systemic and recurring systems that produce them. Like Stanley, Dean Spade directs us toward the limits of law under neoliberalism. He powerfully argues that shifting social wellbeing from a federal responsibility to a concern of the private sector manifests in anti-discrimination laws that mask systemic inequalities and violences that produce and maintain racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Such laws isolate “instances” of racial discrimination, gender and sexual discrimination, and attribute them to individual bias, rather than frame them as the product of interlocking systemic issues.⁶³ While this dissertation does not focus on the limits of law, it does focus on various systems that produce trans harm: prison systems, immigration systems, and social media systems. However, it does so by way of trans resistance. Though their work is primarily on anti-trans violence and law, Stanley also writes that existing in opposition to the law generates a “disruptive worlding.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ Mbembe calls “necropower” a structure of terror that manifests in late modern colonial violence Mbembe, 80. See 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*, ed. Susan Stryker, and Airen Aizura, 65–76. Routledge: New York, 2nd Edition, 2013.

⁶² Stanley, 17.

⁶³ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, & the Limits of Law*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015, 86, 87.

⁶⁴ Stanley, 7.

It is with the ongoing creative resistance of trans communities that my project begins. This dissertation counters the discourse of necropolitics and focuses instead on the joy of community building that takes shape, out of necessity, through resistance. Here, I think with the worldmaking work and knowledges that come with trans survival, trans life, and trans resistance. I follow Dora Silva Santana, who offers the term “mais viva” (more alive) to think about Black trans resistance and knowledge that formed in the afterlife of slavery in the Brazilian diaspora. *Mais viva* emphasizes Afro Brazilian trans life and the shared joy and knowledges that it brings.⁶⁵

I also want to acknowledge the ethics of this work. Compiling counter-security media runs the risk of making survival practices visible to those who are invested in keeping systems gender-secure.⁶⁶ In other words, a dissertation on trans Latinx counter-security media as a radical tool of worldmaking could also be interpreted as unintended literacy training for prison administrators who surveil prison or detention center mailrooms; for state agencies aiming to defund or push out trans and queer migrant activism; or even for those who write content moderation bylaws for social media platforms. Yet, the brilliance of a lot of the activist strategies I write about in this dissertation is that they use the most seemingly benign aspects of mainstream media or institutional forms—only, they do so against their intended use. Even if changes were to be made to those systems to make them even more difficult to bypass, trans Latinx creative mis/use would find other ways to form community. Counter-security media is all

⁶⁵ Dora Silva Santana, “Mais Viva!: Reassembling Transness, Blackness, and Feminism,” *TSQ*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2019): 210-222.

⁶⁶ See William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover’s Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.

about finding possibilities when it is assumed there are none. It is about finding ways to live and love together, even in unlivable conditions.

Chapter Breakdown

The first chapter theorizes three trans-led letter-writing activist projects (by Black & Pink, Trans Latin@ Coalition, and Trans Pride Initiative) as abolitionist community-building tools that also uplift incarcerated and detained trans people. This chapter draws from Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of the "wild tongue," a Chicana form of speech that refuses legitimate belonging to colonial systems of language, to theorize each organization's use of the epistolary genre. Using interviews and formal analysis of penpal systems and activist fliers, I argue that these three organizations apply a "wild tongue" to the exchange of letters as a way to make transness legible in sex-segregated prisons where transness is policed out of existence.⁶⁷ More specifically, I look at each organization's use of the "wild tongue" in the letter genre to strategically navigate institutional and social legibilities and build communal commitment to dismantling the carceral system. I first look to a penpal system that pairs trans people on the inside with trans people on the outside, run by Black & Pink, which is a national LGBTQIA and trans-led abolitionist organization. I consider the penpal system's strategic mis/use of institutional forms to circulate a wild tongue of trans and queer sociality across carceral divides. I then look to an ICE action and liberation campaign that takes the form of birthday letters, organized by Trans Latin@ Coalition, an organization centered on trans Latinx immigrant advocacy. Lastly, I look to a flier that makes mis/use of a Catholic prayer to advertise a national prison strike and that was sent to folx on the inside by activists from Trans Pride Initiative, a

⁶⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 25th anniversary 4th edition, Aunt Lute Books, 1987, 1999, 2012, 77.

trans advocacy group. As counter-security media, each of these mis/uses not only circumvents the intended isolation of racialized carceral systems and its heightened impact on trans people, but they build trans community across the borders of prisons and immigration detention centers.

The second chapter assesses the ways that trans Latinx users online are constructed as “problems” for social media platforms and argues that trans users *trans* the “problem” by exposing and critiquing the logics of trans exclusion. Using textual analysis of trans videos and a study of the legal framework of social media platforms, this chapter follows three trans Latinx micro-celebrities (Rose Montoya, Selyna Brillare, and Ezra Michel) as they maintain visibility despite the various forms of anti-trans discriminatory practices that push them off media platforms, ranging from platform policies and algorithmic processes to social discrimination. Through textual analysis of videos as digital *testimonios* and a study of the legal framework of social media platforms, this chapter builds with José Esteban Muñoz’s idea of the “problem” as an ethnoracialized social feeling, and with Francisco J. Galarte’s “brown trans figurations,” which is a reading of the way brown trans bodies are produced as “problems.”⁶⁸ I read each micro-celebrity’s trans pedagogical activism as a different way to *trans* the “problem”—documenting and archiving discriminatory policies of one platform on another, for example, or using comedic discourse or Spanglish to *trans* the norms of trans content on social media platforms and circumvent platform censorship.

Finally, the last chapter turns to trans and transnational activism at the Mexico-US border. Using site visits, interviews, textual analysis of social media strategies, and autoethnography, this chapter centers on a community run space in Tijuana, Mexico, called Casa

⁶⁸ See José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020, 36. See Francisco J. Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations: Rethinking Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Chicanx/Latinx Studies*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021, 9.

Arcoíris (Rainbow House). Casa Arcoíris is a non-profit shelter designed for queer and trans im/migrants, which offers them housing and access to legal, medical, and social resources. This chapter thinks with micha cárdenas's term "modulated visibility," which is a survival media strategy for transwomen of color that mitigates the dangers that come with being visible. Here, I argue that trans activism at the border engages media visibility strategically, using a combination of word of mouth and social media to render the shelter and its residents visible to the communities they care for, yet invisible to those who might harm them. Casa Arcoíris's media strategies enact what I call "undocumentary media visibility," by staggering media visibility with intentionality to its communities of trans and queer migrants at the border. Some of those strategies include using transnational hashtags and locations to boost institutional visibility, while using selective angles to leave residents' faces out of social media posts and center trans creative expression instead. Rather than use institutional visibility online to capture trans subjects as commodified data for institutional social media posts, trans residents express gender nonconformity in other ways. They make creative objects, fan their manicured nails out in a post, or hide their face behind protest banners. Casa Arcoíris's "undocumentary media visibility" allows for trans visibility to circulate among a community it builds. Together, these examples demonstrate that counter-security media is a powerful tool for organizing and building trans Latinx communities.

Though each chapter presents a different example of counter-security media, my overall project invites us to think about the different ways that transness is expressed at both the individual and systemic level. It also thinks through the ways that gender is mediated by different media forms (letters, institutional forms, prayers, streaming video, social media platforms). Ultimately, my goal is to show, by way of activists' examples, that all media is security media

for ethnoracialized trans people, but counter-security media, when mis/used strategically, is instrumental in forming community.

CHAPTER ONE: The “Wild Tongue” of Prison Letter Writing Activism

At the 1973 Christopher Street Gay Liberation Rally, trans Latina activist Sylvia Rivera got on stage to deliver what has now become her famous speech, “Ya’ll Better Quiet Down.” Rivera co-founded Street Action Transvestite Revolutionaries (STAR) along with Marsha P. Johnson in 1970 as a way to support and advocate for transwomen, drag queens, and transvestites, who dealt with street harassment, police brutality, imprisonment, poverty, homelessness, employment and administrative discrimination. STAR documented the arrests and mistreatment of imprisoned transwomen and stayed in touch with them via letters. In this speech, Rivera passionately reminds a booing crowd that the gay rights movement has forgotten about trans folx in jail, “You all better quiet down. I’ve been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail that write me every motherfucking week and ask for your help, and you all don’t do a goddamn thing for them.” She continues, “The women have tried to fight for their sex changes or to become women of the Women’s Liberation and they write STAR, not to the women’s groups, they do not write to men, they write STAR because we’re trying to do something for them.”⁶⁹ Rivera’s speech is as urgent a reminder in 2023 as it was in 1973 of the systemic issues that impact trans people, and trans women of color in particular. Her speech is often hailed as a powerful intervention into single-issue gay rights activism, that even in the early 70s was turning into what she called a “middle-class white club.”⁷⁰ At the very end of her speech, she gives

⁶⁹ Sylvia Rivera, “Y’all Better Quiet Down,” Christopher Street Gay Liberation Rally, New York, 1973. For documentation of her speech, see <https://vimeo.com/330627933>, in L.O.V.E. (Lesbians Organized for Video Experience), online archive.

⁷⁰ For powerful readings of Rivera’s speech, see Eric A. Stanley, *Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021. See Juana María Rodríguez, *Put a Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2023, 6. For more on Sylvia Rivera’s work, see Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, “The Life and Times of Trans Activist Sylvia Rivera,” in *Critical Dialogues in Latinx Studies: A*

information about STAR for folx at the rally to join in support. As much as her speech is an intervention into gay rights activism, it also introduces STAR's letter correspondence with imprisoned trans folx as a blueprint for trans worldmaking projects.

It's not difficult to imagine the power of those letters, letters that remind folx on the inside that there is community on the outside that has not forgotten about them. I imagine the power of trans-affirming letters, especially for trans women held in men's facilities where they face increased violence or trans men thrown into solitary because they are deemed too "aggressive" for the general population in womens' prisons. Writing allows for transness to become legible within a chosen community, even if it is actively rendered illegible at the social, legal, and medical registers of the worlds we inhabit.

Today, in a world with so many digital tools to communicate and build community with folx on the inside, physical letters—snail mail—remain relevant. Many digital media scholars have written on the role of digital media in shaping our sense of self and gender nonconformity, our "screen births" as trans digital media scholar Tobias Raun calls them.⁷¹ Yet, trans legibility is also very much connected to the non-digital, written form. Trans scholar Jay Prosser argues that we write transness into existence.⁷² I join him in thinking about how non-digital letters mediate gender against the cultural, legal, and medical scripts of fixed binary gender. I also think about the survival value of strategically navigating scripts that don't serve us. Here, I think with Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of the wild tongue as an assumed form of illegitimate Chicana speech that

Reader, ed. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas and Mérida M. Rúa, New York: New York University Press, 2021, 246.

⁷¹ Tobias Raun, "Screen-births: Exploring the transformative potential in trans video blogs on YouTube," *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, (December 2010): 113-130, 113.

⁷² Prosser, Jay, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 105.

strategically navigates two colonial languages (Spanish and English) but ultimately refuses to commit (or submit) to either one.⁷³ I return to Anzaldúa’s “wild tongue” because I think it remains a useful survival tool for those who navigate multiple institutional and social legibilities.⁷⁴ The wild tongue, in my application of it, is a minoritarian speech that is fluent in the official white tongue of gender—that is, the tongue of the white cis-hetero patriarchy—but does not conform to it. The wild tongue speaks between and against the white tongue of state documents that determines life chances according to assigned gender and proximity to whiteness and wealth.

In this chapter, I look for the wild tongue that writes transness back into existence in three letter-writing initiatives by three trans-led activist organizations. I first look to a penpal system run by Black & Pink (B&P), a national prison abolitionist organization that advocates for imprisoned LGBTQIA+ folx.⁷⁵ Then I turn to a birthday letter-writing campaign for detained trans Latina/xs run by TransLatin@ Coalition (TLC), a Los Angeles-based advocacy group for trans Latinx immigrants in the US that focuses on policy, legal aid, housing, re-entry and ESL programs.⁷⁶ Lastly, I consider a protest flier in the form of a prison prayer co-facilitated by Trans

⁷³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 25th anniversary 4th edition, Aunt Lute Books, 1987, 1999, 2012, 79.

⁷⁴ I choose to return to Anzaldúa’s work here knowing that my use of it deviates from the context she intended it to be used in. I do not use it in relation to a “mestiza consciousness.” I use it to think about the ways that trans people (brown and Black trans people in particular) navigate gender legibility. While I do not engage her very context for the “wild tongue” as something that is specific to Chicana knowledges and speech, I do think there are parallel ways of defiantly navigating systems that render trans people, and in particular trans people of color, “illegible.”

⁷⁵ Black & Pink, about, <https://www.blackandpink.org/about/>, Accessed April 3, 2023.

⁷⁶ TransLatin@ Coalition, about, <https://www.translatinacoalition.org/about-tlc>, Accessed April 3, 2023.

Pride Initiative (TPI), a Texas-based group that advocates for trans people's access to housing, healthcare, and education and advocacy work for imprisoned people.⁷⁷

Drawing from feminist security studies, media studies, trans studies, Latinx studies, and queer carceral theory, I consider each organization's use of the letter genre as media. Black & Pink's penpal system reinscribes transness into a sex-segregated space where transness is written out of existence. TransLatin@ Coalition's birthday card campaign is a gender-affirming liberation campaign to free detained trans Latinas. Trans Pride Initiative's activist flier makes use of a Catholic prayer to circulate a political trans and queer abolitionist sociality with imprisoned people. Each of these are different forms of a trans carceral epistolary that uses the genre of the document to strategically navigate institutional and social legibilities and build communal commitment to dismantling the carceral system. Though each organization's approach and goal are distinct, they must also coexist. As I see it, prison letter-writing activism is a form of counter-security media that circulates the wild tongue and forms community around genders that are considered too wild for the many institutions that write us out of existence. The wild tongue of these letter-writing campaigns does more than *express* gender nonconformity; it mediates gender contra the carceral imperatives of twinned regimes of gender and prison that attempt to regulate and eliminate it. Ultimately, this chapter argues that the wild tongue of trans prison letter writing builds community by re-scripting and mediating a trans legibility that counters the imposed erasure of transness in sex-segregated carceral spaces.

Method, Frameworks & Terms

I draw from interviews with activists from these organizations and formal analysis of their media systems that build trans kinship across carceral divides. I also draw from the

⁷⁷ Trans Pride Initiative, about, <https://www.tpride.org/about.php>, Accessed April 3, 2023.

knowledge of my penpals. I would have no argument if it were not for the letters that I write and receive from penpals on the inside, to whom I am deeply thankful. They have shaped my thoughts in this chapter. That said, while I lean on the knowledge they shared with me, I take care not to reveal information from individual letters that might render them vulnerable. We are connected as trans and gender nonconforming siblings, but the power imbalance between us is irreconcilable. I am in the free world with access to higher education and the many resources and life chances this affords me. I am mindful of the way that scholars on the outside extract intellectual labor from people on the inside in attempts to collaborate, something Dylan Rodríguez refers to as a “methodological failure.”⁷⁸ At the same time, trans kinship does circulate across carceral divides and I think it is important to make visible the labor that activists do to build those communities.

Issues of gender are simultaneously systemic and personal. Gender expression is surveilled and policed at the social and legal registers. As Marquis Bey puts it, gender “is a product and a producer of carceral logics.”⁷⁹ But gender can also be expressed at the systemic level. This chapter focuses on the ways that defiant gender expression—though often importantly celebrated and expressed at the individual level—also occurs at the systemic level.

My use of the term trans is expansive. It includes gender nonconforming, non-binary, and gender expansive community members. My use of the term trans follows Francisco J. Galarte’s invitation to think about the potential for change that *trans* brings.⁸⁰ Trans allows for a critique of

⁷⁸ Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 30.

⁷⁹ Marquis Bey, *Cis-tem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 137.

⁸⁰ For Galarte, *trans* is an approach and intervention into Chicana/o Studies. See Francisco J. Galarte, “Transgender Chican@ Poetics: Contesting, Interrogating, and Transforming Chicana/o Studies,” *Chicana/Latina Studies*, 13:2, Spring, (2014): 118-139, 121.

the various systems that produce gendered violences. Carceral systems impact many groups of marginalized people which has brought trans scholar and activist Dean Spade to call for a “critical trans politics” as a way to approach trans liberation through a necessary simultaneous commitment to dismantling other systems of oppression.⁸¹ The organizations I discuss in this chapter model a critical trans politics through their commitment to dismantling carceral systems and making conditions livable for both trans and non-trans system-impacted people. Similarly, non-trans people participate in some of the activist work and organizations I discuss. When I started this chapter, Black & Pink’s national director was Dominique Morgan, a formerly incarcerated Black trans woman, who has since stepped down from her position in 2021. I continue to refer to Black & Pink as trans-led even though Dominique Morgan is no longer the national director because her trans-centered politics and issues persist in the organization’s mission. There are also many trans and gender nonconforming people in the organization, such as the new executive director, Dr. Tatyana Moaton.

I use the term Latinx to refer to Latinx-identified people. Even though this dissertation is committed to trans Latinx counter-security, media I also discuss organizations that are not Latinx. Trans Pride Initiative, for instance, is not a Latinx organization. Nonetheless, because many Latinx people (trans and non-trans) are system-impacted, the anti-carceral work that Trans Pride Initiative does also benefits Latinx people.

PART I: BLACK & PINK’S TRANS CARCERAL EPISTOLARY ACTIVISM

⁸¹ With Morgan Bassichis and Alexander Lee, he formulates a “queer and trans abolitionist politics” that reconfigures the paradox of gender nonconformity and turns the assumed impossibility of gender nonconformity into a politics of prison abolition. Bassichis, Morgan, Lee, Alexander, Spade, Dean, “Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We’ve Got,” in *Captive Genders, Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011, 40.

My penpals have taught me a lot about the prison system and its relationship to gender. They taught me there is little difference in most cases between “safe keeping” touted as a promise of protection for particularly vulnerable trans and queer imprisoned folx, and solitary confinement. In both cases, they are often denied access to resources reserved for the general population. The so-called “problem” of where to place trans folx in sex-segregated prisons is part of a longer history of gender, prison, and race. As Dean Spade has shown, prisons are a primary cause of anti-trans violence and death.⁸² Trans folx are sometimes incarcerated because of the biased assumptions that lead to transwomen of color being profiled as criminalized sex workers; at other times, they are incarcerated because of limited life opportunities that lead to criminalized survival work. On the inside, trans folx are often denied access to hormones and trans health care, which can have fatal health consequences (from contributing to trans suicide to leading trans folx to be denied other forms of medications as well). More often than not, they are placed in facilities that do not match their gender identity but instead reinscribe their legal gender marker, which subjects them to increased violence and harassment by fellow imprisoned people and correction officers (CO). Transfemmes in men’s prisons, who are exposed to heightened amounts of rape and sexual violence by fellow prisoners and prison staff, are punished through gendered stereotypes of hypersexualization. The practice of “V-coding,” for example, uses the problematic stereotypes of transwomen as sex workers as punishment for their gender deviance.⁸³ Similarly, transmasculine people in women’s prisons are targeted for being “out of compliance,” which is a term used by prison administration to refer to masculine-expressed

⁸² Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, & the Limits of Law*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.

⁸³ Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women*, Oakland: PM Press, 2009, 203.

people who fail to present according to gender norms for women.⁸⁴ This is because gender nonconformity—expressed at both the individual, bodily level and the bureaucratic one—is targeted by what Jules Gill-Peterson refers to as the “cisgender state.”⁸⁵

Prison and ethnoracialized gender are entwined naturalized concepts with material impact. Many critical prison scholars refer to the Reagan era as the most significant prison boom.⁸⁶ There was, however, another prison boom that followed the development of the penitentiary system in the US in the 19th century. Though carceral systems have always been a racialized project, this boom was also gender specific.⁸⁷ Prior to the Civil War, incarceration rates of women were relatively low, which meant women were often housed with men. This increased the risk of rape, sexual violence, and unwanted pregnancies. On occasion, they were housed in separate areas, such as in the warden’s backhouse or in the prison’s attic.⁸⁸ Influenced by prison reform movements in England, a women’s prison reform movement launched in the

⁸⁴ Lori Girshick, “Out of Compliance: Masculine-Identified People in Women’s Prisons,” In *Captive Genders, Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011, 224.

⁸⁵ Jules Gill-Peterson, “The Cis State,” *Sad Brown Girl*, April 14, 2021, <https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/the-cis-state>.

⁸⁶ See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York: The New Press, 2012. See Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.

⁸⁷ See Estelle Freedman, *The Sisters’ Keepers: Women’s Prisons Reform in America, 1830-1930*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1984, 8-9. Freedman explains how, in the beginning of the 19th century in Europe and European colonies, capital punishment was used as a main response to anything from adultery to murder. Jails were mostly used to hold people until their corporal or capital punishment was issued. The penitentiary was introduced in the first wave of prison reform by Enlightenment thinkers who contested capital punishment and believed that criminals could be punished *and* reformed. By 1815, the US had its first penitentiary institutions based on different models of isolation. The Pennsylvania system held its prisoners in single and separate cells, in total isolation and silence with nothing other than a Bible. The Auburn plan, based on a prison in Auburn, NY, used a method of partial isolation. Prisoners were held in separate cells but worked together during the day in silence and under surveillance.

⁸⁸ Freedman, 15.

US to address prison conditions that impacted women. As Estelle Freedman's history of 19th-century women's prison movements reveals, one of its core contradictions was that it reinscribed traditional roles for women as a standard for reform. It was believed that the (white) fallen women could be reformed but only under gender-specific conditions, namely separate facilities run by women. Even early on, the expanded prison system disproportionately impacted poor women, unmarried women, women whose husbands were abusive, but also queer women, Black, and Indigenous women.⁸⁹ Reform reinscribed classed and racialized gender norms. Some institutions participated in a form of job placement system, where women were placed in a home to perform domestic labor to work off their sentence.

Gender was a tool for correction in these early reformatories, replete with sewing classes and job placement into domestic labor.⁹⁰ Assata Shakur astutely breaks down how naturalized the entanglement of gender and prison is. In her writing about Rikers Island from 1979, she describes how gender ideology was embedded into the architecture of the prison itself. The

⁸⁹ Freedman, 31. Also see Luana Ross, *Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native American Criminality*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. Gender segregation, prison reform, and the growth of the prison system, arc back to colonial settlement and per Luana Ross's work, to the development of the reservation itself which parallels both the implementation of the asylum and the penitentiary in 19th century settler society. Incarceration practices were fundamental to the very founding of nation, producing a way of determining national and civic belonging through prison practices. As Ross makes clear, the stakes of prison and the way criminality was read differed for African American and Native women who were tried by a white jury. Gender as a tool of rehabilitation was used well into the 20th century. Per her research on prisons in Montana in the late 1800s, few women were held in men's facilities and were often held in a separate and small building, the guards' quarters' basement, or even the warden's personal house garage, even into the 1960s. In the 1950s and onwards, they were tasked with gendered labor such as housekeeping for the warden or prison administrative work and made to wear skirts and blouses as uniform. When released, they were gifted a trip to the beauty salon so they could, as Ross puts it, re-enter society "cosmetically sound." Ross, 110. Also see See Dan Bustillo, "With and Beyond Los Angeles's Daddy Tank: Gender, Confinement, and Queer Desire," *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, 19:2-3, (2022): 182-198, DOI: 10.1080/14775700.2022.2138797.

⁹⁰ Freedman, 56.

guards, per her account, constantly reminded the women at Rikers how lucky they were to be in what was, in their view, more of a country club than a prison, where cells were called rooms and had doors instead of bars.⁹¹ Shakur astutely points out this is precisely what makes prison—and by extension *the* prison system—seem like a natural solution to civil society’s problems. Even though we might not call it reform for the “fallen woman” today, gender norms continue to be used coercively and correctively.⁹²

By wanting to make prisons safer for women, the women’s prison reform movement expanded the prison system in the 19th century. Similarly, prison expansion continues under the guise of concern for the specific violence that gender nonconforming and queer people experience in prisons. “Safe keeping” units or separate trans and queer pods were implemented as a way to curb that violence but ultimately contribute to the overall growth of the PIC, which disproportionately impacts imprisoned trans people because of the prison’s foundational investment in gender norms as a tool of correction.

What’s in a letter?

There is a lot of scholarship that approaches prison letters as a literary genre. There is a long tradition of epistolary exchange in prison and a lot of it is well documented. From Oscar Wilde to Antonio Gramsci, Jean Genet, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Angela Davis, prison letters have been used to design revolutions, solidify movements, and form community. In my analysis, however, I consider prison letters as media. Letters mediate experiences of gender, against the gender norms that are built into carceral systems. Lisa Gitelman’s approach to the

⁹¹ Assata Shakur & Joanne Chesimard, “Women in Prison: How we are,” *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 9, No. 7, (1978): 8-15, 10.

⁹² See Dan Bustillo, “With and Beyond Los Angeles’s Daddy Tank: Gender, Confinement, and Queer Desire,” *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, 19:2-3, (2022): 182-198, DOI: 10.1080/14775700.2022.2138797.

document as a media genre is insightful here. She attends to documents because they reveal what she calls a “know-show” function. This is to say that the document as a media form tells us something about structures of power and control about power and control. They also tell us about how people live and think.⁹³ Letter media is no exception to the document genre.

Historically, letters have moved through and sometimes against circuits of power. The US’s history of empire is routed through the development of its postal system and the defiance of the imperial stamp.⁹⁴ Yet letters can mediate experiences of power against their intended use. Letters in of themselves are not counter-security media. However, they become counter-security media when used to circumvent systems of power. Sharon Luk demonstrates in her work on letter-writing practices in the context of immigration and incarceration in California from the late 19th century to the 1970s that the letter is always political. For Luk, letter writing is a form of self-making in which the paper material of the letter functions as a “poetics” or as an art of becoming that the letter mediates.⁹⁵ If I think with Luk’s use of “poetics,” I think about what trans carceral prison letter writing does when it mediates gender.

Letters can communicate so much. They tell us things about the larger context and conditions in which they are written. The three organizations I will discuss in this chapter each use the letter genre in different yet powerful ways. Black & Pink hosts a penpal system that forms community despite the carceral imperative to isolate and separate imprisoned people from non-imprisoned people. Black & Pink also runs a newsletter that folx on the inside and the on the

⁹³ Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014, 4.

⁹⁴ John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 20. Also see Sharon Luk, *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018.

⁹⁵ Luk, 4.

outside can read, with contributions from folx across prisons as well as folx on the outside. TransLatin@ Coalition’s letter-writing campaigns are part of larger liberation initiatives to free detained trans Latina/xs in immigration detention centers. They invite people to send letters to the group and they ensure their arrival to the person they are organizing around. Their letters also serve as a way of tracking detained people who are moved from center to center.⁹⁶ Trans Pride Initiative runs a Prison Support Committee that uses letter-writing to connect with and advocate for imprisoned people.⁹⁷ Letter-writing for TPI is also a way to collect evidence about the injustices that trans people face when dealing with police and prison systems in Texas.⁹⁸ They compile the information they receive into a repository of anti-trans discrimination which they hope will be useful for those who file for legal action against the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.⁹⁹

Prison letter-writing activism has a long history.¹⁰⁰ The organizations I discuss are among many that use letter writing to support imprisoned trans and queer folx as well as imprisoned women who survive violence, such as Survived & Punished, Flying Over Walls, Anarchist Black

⁹⁶ Interview with Yesica Gonzalez, October 6, 2020, via Zoom.

⁹⁷ Trans Pride Initiative, Action Team: Prison Support Committee, <https://tpride.org/committees.php#prison>, Accessed April 4, 2023.

⁹⁸ See Trans Pride Initiative, TPI Prison Data Explorer, https://tpride.org/projects_prisondata/index.php#violence

⁹⁹ Email correspondence with Nell Gaither, President of TPI, December 12, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Sabrina Vaught & Gabrielle Hernández trace a rich genealogy and literature review of prison epistolary traditions. They analyze the publics and counterpublics produced through the prison epistolary tradition: from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in which he produces public discourse and knowledge from jail, to George Jackson's politicization in prison through exchanges with Huey Newton and Angela Davis; to the use of Angela Davis's letters to George Jackson during her trial as “evidence” of her criminality, for being, as the authors put it, “a non-citizen, an emotional radical.” Sabrina Vaught & Gabrielle Hernández, “To Whom It May Concern: Epistolary political philosophies and the production of racial counterpublic knowledge in the United States,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 48, Issue 5, (2016): 459-483, 470.

Cross, California Coalition of Women Prisoners, to name a few.¹⁰¹ There are many digital forms that communicating with people on the inside can take, from emails to video chat with JPay or GettingOut mobile app, but the physicality of paper letters can do things that digital media can't always.

Letters are a tangible media. We hold them in our hands as we read them. They communicate something. Whether personal or impersonal; typed or handwritten; written in the form of a template or as an intimate narrative; addressed to a single person, to a community, or to an audience; there is a *feltness* to them.

Letters are asynchronous. They are not read at the same time in which they are written. They must be read with a delay and they can be re-read over time. There is a preciousness to their impermanence. They can be kept, remembered, lost, confiscated, or destroyed.

They are also read by many readers—both intended readers and unintended readers. My letters come in standard, commercial envelopes. Inside, is a small rectangular notification that reads in all caps and in faded red ink that looks kind of pink, “GENERAL INMATE CORRESPONDENCE • TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE- INSTITUTE INSTITUTIONAL DIVISION.” This tiny piece of paper accompanies each letter I receive. It tells me that this letter was not written then sealed and sent. This letter was written, inspected, approved, then mailed.

¹⁰¹ These organizations did not start their letter-writing programs at the same time, though their reasons for them are similar. For example, CCWP recently started their letter writing program now that in-person visitations are no longer feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, many of the organizations have increased their letter-writing events for similar reasons during the pandemic. Some, like ABC, have adapted the letters to be COVID-19-specific, launching informational zines that circulate on the inside.

The envelopes are addressed to me as Dani, which is a name my family calls me. I often extend this name to friends, colleagues, and students. I gave this name to my penpals because it felt more intimate. My penpal's legal name and department of correction's (DC) number are in the top left corner. The prefix 'Mx' prefigures the legal name, signaling an active and voiced agency over a legal name that doesn't define them. The prefix also tells me how to read their state name. It tells me there is a wild tongue in that name that dares to be visible but that also has to navigate the vulnerability that comes with visibility. The wild tongue tells me to read over their state name with the name they go by, a name only revealed in the letter itself.

"I can't break prison walls, but I can write letters"¹⁰²

I met my penpals through Black & Pink's digital penpal system. B&P was founded in 2005 and their penpal program launched in 2014. It was based on the idea that forging community for trans and queer folx on the inside could be first and foremost a form of harm reduction.¹⁰³ First, because it allows for someone to feel connected around their gender and sexuality in a space where being trans and/or queer makes them an explicit target for increased violence. Second, because even being called at mail call signals to everyone inside, including administrators and staff, that someone on the outside is looking out for them.

Working across multiple chapters in the US, B&P organizes letter-writing events for potential penpals on the outside, circulates questionnaires for potential penpals on the inside to

¹⁰² From Black & Pink's website, <https://www.blackandpink.org/penpal-newsletter/>

¹⁰³ Harm reduction has a long history in queer communities. During the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis, queer communities countered the dominant discourse of abstinence, stigmatization, government inaction with safe sex campaigns and strategies as a form of harm reduction. See Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Winter, 1987): 237-271, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397576>. Also see Juana María Rodríguez, "Activism and Identity in the Ruins of Representation," *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*, New York: New York University Press, 2003, 37-83.

fill out, and hosts an online pairing system on their website in the form of a database. They also publish a newsletter where folx on the inside and in different institutions can write to B&P and read one another's letters. In a 2019 issue of this newsletter, Ceani, imprisoned in Florida at the time of her writing, writes to readers across institutions, "Hey Black and Pink Family!! My name is Ceani, I'm an AfroRican translatina from North Philly [...] I been wanting to write and contribute to the cause as far as advocacy and information goes. [...] Words that'll encourage and breathe life into the spirit of the LGBTQ community. So, with that being said, I want to encourage the fam, anywhere you are, regardless of what state prison you reside, to stay rooted in love [...]."104

Ceani's letter makes plain the goal of letter writing: to use words to build community grounded in love. While Ceani's letter is to the Black & Pink community as a whole, B&P also facilitates one on one letter writing. Inside the newsletter is a paper form for potential penpals on the inside to fill out [fig. 1.1]. This information is then compiled into a database used to make matches. A database might seem like an odd choice for matching penpals because it is after all a system meant to classify, order, and store information. Classification systems have a long and fraught history for trans, queer, and communities of color.¹⁰⁵ From settler-colonial racial categories designed to maintain a white supremacist racial order, to the use of anthropometry to measure racial and sexual differences so as to quantify and identify "deviance" in the 19th century, to the insistence on "legal" gender markers as a way to gatekeep access to life resources,

¹⁰⁴ Ceani, "Hey Black and Pink Family!!," *Black and Pink News*, The Femme Issue, April, 2019, 46.

¹⁰⁵ Siobhain B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, 25, 28.

the storing and classification of people distributes life chances according to proximity to white cis heterosexuality.

Figure 1: Black & Pink’s paper form for prospective penpals on the inside.

In *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa De Lauretis aptly argues that when we check a gender box, that box marks us.¹⁰⁶ She says when a woman marks the ‘F’ box, she enters an official sex-gender system that “en-genders” her. I extend this to the way gender non-conforming are also marked by gender boxes.¹⁰⁷ For trans people in sex-segregated prison or detention, the ‘M’ or the

¹⁰⁶ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, 12.

¹⁰⁷ De Lauretis, 12.

‘F’ on a birth certificate determines which gendered facility one might be sent to, the kinds of gendered violences one might deal with on the inside, and the kinds of re-entry programs (if any) that one might have access to on the outside. If a transwoman is marked with an ‘M,’ she will, most likely, be forced to navigate the violence of a male facility.

B&P’s penpal system (which was re-designed in Fall 2020) navigates the legibilities of identification systems in seemingly ordinary but strategic ways. It allows for folx on the outside to find a specific ‘type’ of penpal, with options that range from activist, erotic, friend, romance, or based on other identity categories, such as ‘faith,’ sexual orientation, race, and language. The database might seem reminiscent of a census form with check boxes used to collect demographic data. The selection categories are listed and enclosed in a grey dialog box with large empty checkboxes under each category. I suggest it is because this form looks like an institutional form that it infiltrates a trans and queer sociality. It is explicitly designed to make “matches” according to various selections, (activist, erotic, friend, romance). There is no suggested or stylized difference between penpal types, whether “erotic” or “activist.” [fig. 1.2] For an organization so deeply committed to allowing communities to form across power (communities that might share one identity, like *trans*, but do not share state-imposed identities like *felon*), this seemingly unnoticeable design choice to make category options the same font and size is a way of symbolically countering—at least in this context—the violent hierarchies that many identities produce.

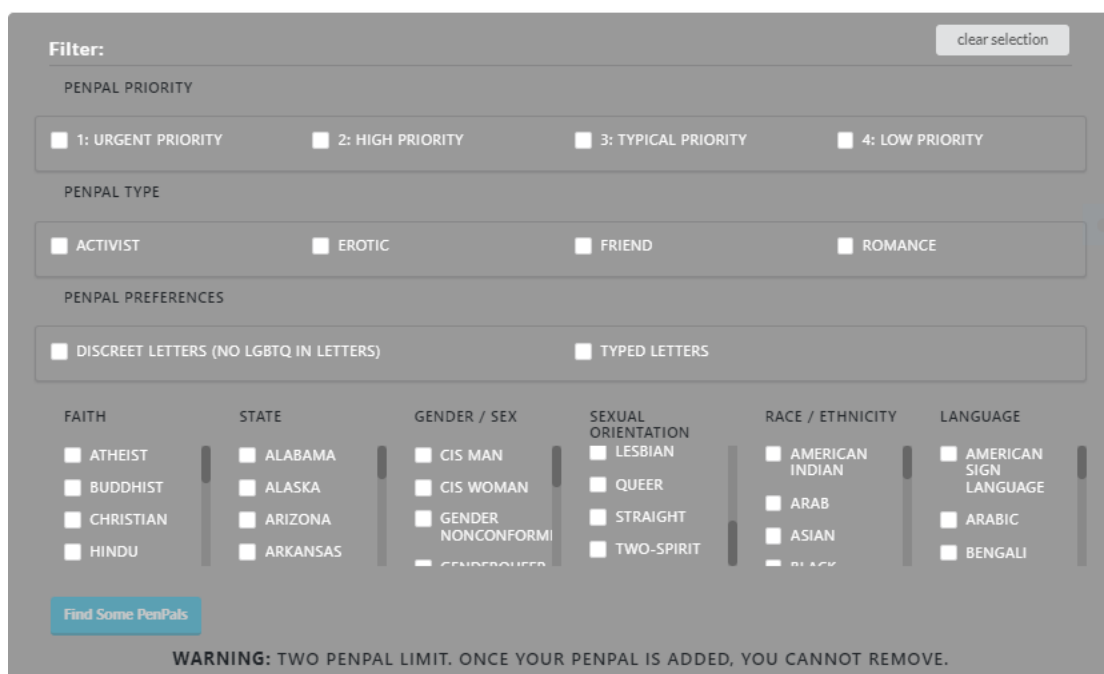


Figure 2: Black & Pink’s penpal pairing system on their website.¹⁰⁸

B&P’s penpal system is a worldmaking project that connects what Malú Machuca Rose terms “familia infecta” (infected family).¹⁰⁹ It is a matchmaking tool designed for various types of intimacies, which prison actively prohibits (from writing people up for “homosecting” to fears of communication among imprisoned people across different facilities). If the goal of the prison system is isolation—a goal that is doubly met for folx who are trans, isolated from the outside world but also isolated from the inside world—then facilitating a network that centers imprisoned trans and queer folx confronts the impact of carceral isolation. *Familia infecta* circulates across the intended isolation of the carceral divide and grows a community that speaks gender and sexuality in wild tongues.

¹⁰⁸ Black and Pink website, <https://www.blackandpink.org/penpal-newsletter/>.

¹⁰⁹ Malú Machuca Rose, “Guiseppe Campuzano’s Afterlife: Toward a Travesti Methodology for Critique, Care, and Radical Resistance,” *TSQ*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (May 2019): 239-253, 241.

By using a form for state classification or demographic collection, the wild tongue navigates several institutional legibilities at once: the institutional legibility of queerness and that of B&P as an organization. This institutional-looking form is deceptively boring, *papa sin sal* even (following trans Cuban archivist Librada Gonzalez Fernandez, I haven't provided translation for the Spanish-language slang¹¹⁰). This is by design. It needs to appear to speak the white tongue of classification systems, of neat identity categories, in order for the wild tongue to do its thing.

The wild tongue is bilingual: it speaks bureaucratically and imaginatively. The wild tongue of B&P's database uses the iconography of the bureaucratic form to speak imaginatively about the intimacy of worldmaking projects. Although care connects this *familia infecta* brought together via the penpal system, the uneven matching of penpals mirrors in many ways the hierarchies that separate trans and queer communities across the prison divide. B&P members who sign up on the outside via the website can select their penpal whereas folx on the inside do not get to select their penpal. The penpal system doesn't do away with the power imbalances built into the imprisoned/non-imprisoned binary but it does open space for a consent-based relationship, in which things like personal information or the types of relationship people choose to have is negotiated across the border of the free/unfree.

Prospective penpals on the inside can select the level of visibility that they feel comfortable with. Not everyone is 'out' for safety reasons. Some transwomen, in particular,

¹¹⁰ In a post on Facebook promoting an event at the Armory with Krudas Cubensi, Librada Gonzalez Fernandez wrote: "Dale que lo que vamos a armar en el Armory va a ser mucho con demasiado caballeree. No es por ná pero aquí lo que traemos es sabiduría, belleza, espiritualidad y sandunga [...] No translation for the Cuban slang above but come through to the Armory today!" See Archivo Cubanecuir, *Facebook*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/cubanecuir/>.

might only be out to their penpal. The form offers an option for what are called “discreet letters.” These are letters that do not have explicit LGBT-related content. Since letters are screened and read in the mailroom before reaching their recipient, if a penpal wants to address transness, they have to find “discreet” ways to do so, without jeopardizing or outing their penpal on the inside.

This also means a penpal on the outside is partially responsible for their penpal’s trans visibility on the inside. Foucault is famous for saying “visibility is a trap,”¹¹¹ but both late icons Mexican singer Juan Gabriel and Puerto Rican astrologer Walter Mercado said it just as clearly when constantly asked about their sexual orientation: “*lo que se ve no se pregunta*” (You don’t need to ask what you can see).¹¹² Writing discreet letters might call for what Eddy Francisco Álvarez Jr.’s refers to as “finding sequins in the rubble.” Thinking of the cultural specificity of sequins for queer Latinx communities as well as a form of trans Latina self-fashioning, he reminds us that rubble can sometimes be protective and that not all sequins want to be seen because being *visible* can mean being made *vulnerable* to anti-trans violence.

At the same time, sensitive information is also stored in these databases. Sharing information like a person in the free world’s home address, or an imprisoned person’s department of corrections number, a legal or even chosen name, gender identity and sexual orientation could have damaging effects on folx. To curb this, users are required to create a login

¹¹¹ Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 200.

¹¹² Translation my own. Juan Gabriel Interview with Fernando Del Rincon, *Primer Impacto*, 2002. See Susanne Ramírez de Arellano, “Netflix’s Walter Mercado documentary gives him the international star treatment he earned,” *nbc*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/netflix-s-walter-mercado-documentary-gives-him-international-star-treatment-ncna1233388>. Scholars call the “trap of visibility” the mismatch between trans visibility in mainstream media and the anti-trans conditions of life off-screen. See *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2017, xv.

in order to access the database, much like a dating app. The login partially protects the information that could be accessed via the database because it also keeps a roster of those who can access it. As with many activities that take place online, people accept certain risks as an affordance of convenience (as with online banking, for example) or connection (as with dating apps).

The paradox of organizational culture is that it uses state practices, often out of necessity, like data collection or data storage, in the aim of a larger payoff like queer or trans of color worldmaking. To what extent does the database also double as a form of dataveillance in which the monetization of data serves the institution's frequent need for funding? This line of questioning is in no way intended as an indictment of B&P. Rather, it is a larger question around the way data, even if counter-identificatory, might get swept up in surveillance capitalism that already disproportionately impacts those for whom checkboxes become an additional form of sentencing.

Critical Resistance scholars and activists have powerfully argued that once an organization becomes a non-profit organization, the power of their political agency is curbed.¹¹³ This happens either through complicity with data collection that on the one hand allows for the non-profit to be eligible for funding (which they rely on in order to serve the often-underserved communities they are committed to). On the other hand, this also means that organizations might participate (even if out of necessity) in surveillance practices to obtain data about the very communities they serve. Funding—and foundation funding in particular—also puts a severe limitation on what non-profits can or cannot do. As Dylan Rodríguez states in his critique of

¹¹³ For critiques of the professionalization of the non-profit sector, see *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE!, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017 (originally published by South End Press, 2007).

what activists have called “the non-profit industrial complex,” foundation funding exerts disciplinary control and state surveillance on radical movements.¹¹⁴ The central issue with state and private funding for activism is that activists’ reliance on funding often requires data and metrics about the impact of a group’s work. This produces what Ruth Gilmore calls a relationship of “dependency and accommodation” in which activists reproduce, even if unwillingly, some of the very dynamics they aim to counter.¹¹⁵ In her words, “forms create norms.”¹¹⁶

As trans communities are so often called upon to do self-advocacy, critiques of complicity with the non-profit industrial complex are increasingly urgent. As Christoph Hansmann puts it in the context of health research for trans and gender nonconforming communities, an organization’s work is made possible not because of the urgency of the service they provide but because of the funding they receive, which places them in a loop of cooptation.¹¹⁷ In their work on the proliferation of trans specific organizations in 2009, such as the National Center for Transgender Equality, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, the TGI Justice Project, and the Transgender Law Center, Ricke Manazala and Dean Spade trace the necessity through which trans activism emerged starting in the 1990s.¹¹⁸ As they note, trans activism

¹¹⁴ Dylan Rodríguez, “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE!, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007 (originally published by South End Press, MA, 2007 and re-published by Duke in 2017), 30.

¹¹⁵ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “in the shadow of the shadow state” in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE!, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017 (originally published by South End Press), 48.

¹¹⁶ Gilmore, 51.

¹¹⁷ Christoph Hansmann, “Counting Us In: Problems and Opportunities in Health Research on Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Communities,” *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*, Vol. 8, Issue 2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 541-577, 552.

¹¹⁸ Ricke Manazala, Dean Spade, “The Nonprofit Industrial Complex and Trans Resistance,” *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, Vol. 5, No 1 (March 2008): 53-71, 54.

emerged because trans issues were often sidelined in larger LGBT initiatives. In the neoliberal context, trans organizations have to navigate both the risk of cooptation and the political limitations that come with funding. Because of the way that funding works for non-profits, organizations have to either commit to political organizing or to direct service. Yet, the issue with this split is that it limits communication between the two types of non-profits and leads to a situation in which service-oriented organizations lack politicization and organizing initiatives don't provide services.¹¹⁹

Just because B&P is funded doesn't mean that they've lost their political commitment to both abolition and harm reduction. B&P's penpal system allows for letters to circulate across multiple readerships. Though designed for a one-on-one individual exchange, intimate letters also have the potential to perform as open letters. A letter might contain details about the state of the prison itself, injustices and violences that occur inside, or larger critiques of the prison system. This allows for the circulation of what Emily Thuma refers to as "outlaw knowledges."¹²⁰ In her work on feminist activist prison newsletters that circulated in womens' prisons, Thuma argues that newsletters function as forums for support and solidarity across the inside/outside divide. As a result of information shared in these newsletters, women showed up for one another on the inside as well as on the outside, by showing up to court hearings.¹²¹ A letter then connects a *familia infecta* and allows for a wild tongue to circulate across the inside/outside divide all the while holding potential for political organizing.

¹¹⁹ Mananzala and Spade, 57.

¹²⁰ Emily L. Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*, Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2019, 104, 107.

¹²¹ Thuma, 104-107.

Navigating systems that have been designed to fail so many of us is nothing new to under-served communities like trans communities, queer communities, imprisoned communities, communities of color, undocumented communities, disabled communities. Nonetheless, within this, there is a way in which navigating even a harmful system can still circulate a promise of radical connection. As Roland Tolentino puts it, the letter is all about promise, even in the context of extreme power imbalances, such as the ones between mostly white American men looking for mail-order brides and the Filipinas they correspond with.¹²² The promise that Tolentino identifies is not only one a matrimonial one, but a promise that means different things to both parties (perhaps financial stability to the Filipina wanting to go to the US; a companion for the American man). The promise of B&P's penpal system is multiple. It might promise romance, sex, companionship, friendship, or revolution. As a form of counter-security media, B&P's penpal system activates a wild tongue to connect a familia infecta across carceral divides. It makes trans kinship possible and it makes transness safely legible to the community it builds.

PART II: TRANSLATIN@ COALITION: RESCRIPTING GENDER AS ABOLITION WORK

Happy Birthday! Abolish ICE!¹²³

Like prisons, immigration detention centers are sex-segregated.¹²⁴ In response to violence that trans and queer detained people faced in these systems, some centers implemented trans

¹²² In his work on mail-order bride networks, Roland Tolentino argues that the commodification of Filipinas through postal systems and order catalogs function as technologies of "colonial nostalgia." See Roland B. Tolentino, "Bodies, Letters, Catalogs: Filipinas in Transnational Space," *Social Text* 48, Vol. 14, No. 3, (Fall 1996): 49-76, 51.

¹²³ From TransLatin@ Coalition's #Free Kelly campaign, Instagram, June 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB50woVgDC3/?hl=en>, Accessed April 10, 2023.

¹²⁴ DasGupta powerfully argues that the gender binary is baked into asylum law and detention centers. This produces gendered trauma. See Debanuj DasGupta, "The Politics of Transgender Asylum and Detention," *Human Geography*, Vol. 12, No. 3, (2019): 1-16.

“pods.” Separate units for trans people in detention mirror “safe keeping” units for trans and queer people in prison, which is, as my penpals have told me, no different from solitary confinement, where people are cut off from resources that are available to those in the general population. It is no coincidence that TransLatin@ Coalition (an organization founded in 2009 to advocate for trans Latinx immigrants in the US) began support for detained trans Latina/xs while the trans pod at Santa Ana was still open. The trans pod in Santa Ana, Orange County, California, has been used to house trans and queer folx since 2011 and was presented as a “humane” caging alternative for trans and queer folx, who are particularly vulnerable to violence in men’s facilities.¹²⁵ TLC began receiving letters from folx at the pod asking for money to survive. As a result, they started sending in commissary support. It was at this time that TLC began their letter writing work.¹²⁶ Shortly before the city of Santa Ana ended their contract with ICE, who paid to use their jail for trans and queer detainees in 2020, they began sending detained folx to various other sites in 2019.¹²⁷ TLC’s commissary work continued up until the trans pod at Santa Ana closed and most folx were sent to the trans pod in Cibola County Correctional Center, in New Mexico. TLC followed the letters to keep track of folx as they were transferred to different facilities, so they could continue supporting them. In this next section, I will discuss a birthday letter-writing campaign for detained trans Latinxs by TransLatin@ Coalition.

In October 2019, TLC launched a liberation campaign to #FreeKelly for Kelly Gonzalez Aguilar, a transwoman from Honduras, who was detained for almost three years at Cibola

¹²⁵ Adolfo Flores, “Only Detention Facility For Gay, Bi, And Trans Immigrants Faces Closure,” BuzzFeed, May 19, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adolfoflores/lgbt-dedicated-immigrant-detainee-center-may-close>.

¹²⁶ Interview with Yessica Gonzalez, October 6, 2020, via Zoom

¹²⁷ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adolfoflores/lgbt-dedicated-immigrant-detainee-center-may-close>.

(known for its lethal neglect of trans detainees, you might recall Roxsana Hernandez and Johana Medina Leon, both trans Latina women murdered by ICE). Kelly was then sent to an immigration detention center in Aurora, where she suffered medical neglect and spent most of her time in solitary. Before I move forward, I will start by saying that TLC's campaign was successful and Kelly was freed in 2020.

TLC's liberation campaign included a petition demanding her release from ICE detention, several weeks of action, and teach-ins.¹²⁸ It also included a twitter storm targeting ICE and a virtual petition delivered to ICE.¹²⁹ There were also non-digital elements to the campaigns. For instance, TLC held a rally and press conference in San Francisco and Denver to garner support to free Kelly and end trans detention.¹³⁰ As Kelly turned 24 in detention, TLC issued a call on their Instagram and website asking for folx to write a birthday card to Kelly as part of her liberation campaign. TLC ran a week of action that ranged from birthday cards, to phone calls to ICE's supervisory detention and deportation officer, to letter campaigns demanding her release. The digital flier was circulated on TLC's Instagram [fig. 1.3]. The call to action for her liberation campaign has a pink background with bright blue writing. In the top right corner of a dialog box,

¹²⁸ TransLatin@ Coalition, *Instagram*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB50woVgDC3/?hl=en>.

¹²⁹ TransLatin@ Coalition, *Instagram*, April 21, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_P7iGWg7d2/?hl=en.

¹³⁰ TransLatin@ Coalition, *Instagram*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B8crJGRAXQM/?hl=en>.

below an action bar with the title ‘#FREEKELLY’ are three balloons—two black and one pink—that have no strings, an important re-symbolizing of Kelly’s birthday as a liberation day.¹³¹



Figure 3: “Actions You Can Take,” TransLatin@ Coalition, #FREE KELLY.

Participants had the option of mailing cards directly to Kelly [fig. 1.4]. TLC posted Kelly’s full name as Kelly Gonzalez Aguilar along with the Aurora detention center address on their Instagram campaign.¹³² The campaign insists on the name she uses—regardless of whether she has legally changed it or not. Participants also had the option of emailing their letter to TLC, who would translate and send it. The second option allows TLC to screen the letters that Kelly will receive. However, this is a different kind of screening than the one that the letters will

¹³¹ TransLatin@ Coalition, Instagram, June 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB50woVgDC3/?hl=en>.

¹³² TransLatin@ Coalition, Instagram, June 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB50woVgDC3/?hl=en>.

undertake once they arrive at the center. While mailroom staff will screen the letters for “contraband” (which constitutes pretty much anything, including stickers or paper that is too thick or lined or with color, etc), TLC screens the letters to make sure they do not contain harmful messages for Kelly, who is already under duress.



Figure 4: “Send Her a Birthday Card,” TransLatin@ Coalition, #FREE KELLY.

Re-scripting

These birthday cards mediate and re-script the prison’s imposed gender norms such that transness is written back into existence. To re-script is to discreetly flip the script. It is to make strategic use of institutional legibilities with the ultimate goal of breaking down the structures that produce them. To re-script is to work within codes of gender while simultaneously working against them. Sandy Stone importantly referred to the clinic as a technology of inscription— as a

place where gender could be re-scripted, contra the cultural norms that codify gender. In her work on queer chat rooms online, Juana María Rodríguez offers the term “scripting gender” as a way of thinking through the various social codes that are used to identify gender online. She argues that online genders, like offline genders, are scripted so that they can be made legible but that those scripts are always culturally specific to a given time, place, and most of all, intention. In her work, the scripts for femininity for a mujer Latina might not translate in a non-Spanish speaking lesbian chat rooms.¹³³ Thinking with Stone, Rodríguez, Prosser, and Anzaldúa, I suggest that TLC’s use of scripts is a form of re-scripting that uses the wild tongue to navigate or write between the lines of activist scripts and institutional scripts. Scripts like protocols, infrastructures, templates, and guidelines are only necessary because they allow for the discreet yet powerful wild tongue that knows and can speak the white tongue but doesn’t conform to it.

We might think of birthdays as the celebration of a gendered script. A birthday is not just the day that marks being born. It is also the day a doctor, a person with medical authority, decided what gender that baby was. That seemingly arbitrary decision then marks trans people and determines our access to life chances. Birthdays, when celebrated in trans community, write over the pain of trans erasure and re-script the medical or legal scripts of normative gender. The emphasis on the birthday also makes use of what Feng-Mei Heberer has referred to in the context

¹³³ Rodríguez draws from C. Jacob Hale who suggests that gender is always culturally specific to a given time, place, and intention. She notices in her experience that her online erotic self differed from her offline erotic self. She recounts the policing of identity in the chats she visits that are specifically for lesbians, and how she got booted out of one for allegedly being a “man” when they were likely women only, and when she asked the channel operator (moderator) she was told she wrote like a man. She pressed the moderator on how she found her writing to be like that of a man until finally the operator called her Juan. At this point, she realized the mod had done a whois search and seen her name was Juana and interpreted it as “feminized fictional one.” See Juana María Rodríguez, “Scripting Autobiographical Subjectivity Online: Confessions of a Latina Cyber-Slut,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, (15:2) (2000): 223-247, 235.

of documentary film as “sentimental activism.” For Heberer, sentimental activism is a narrative structure that aims to humanize the migrant laborer’s experience. In Heberer’s analysis of *Lesbian Factory* (Susan Chen, 2010)—a documentary about lesbian Filipina migrant workers in Taiwan—she argues that sentimental activism is an aesthetic and political strategy used to humanize their experiences and articulate urgency around the conditions that impact them as both lesbian and migrant workers overseas.¹³⁴ This is a strategic retooling of affect that places queer migrant workers in a conversation around rights discourse (from which they are doubly excluded).¹³⁵ Just as portraying love and loss makes queer migrant subjects legible to a non-queer and non-migrant audience, so, too, does the emphasis on birthdays in the abolitionist context of TLC’s liberation campaign. A birthday card is a humanizing act that celebrates and affirms trans people in places where transness makes them a target for violence. It also calls out the conditions of criminalized migration.

It is also important to note that this is not without reinforcing to a certain extent the very ideologies that might also oppress these same communities. The use of birthday cards might, at least on the surface, seem to reinforce the institution of gender that assigns a gender to a child on the day of their birth, but it does so strategically. It redirects that celebration in two major ways. It celebrates trans birth, which is a backwards birth that starts the moment of one’s coming into transness and works its way backwards (in other words, transness is applied retroactively). It also demands liberation for those who are most harmed by the entanglements between medical, carceral, and gender institutions.

¹³⁴ Feng-Mei Heberer, “Sentimental Activism as Queer-Feminist Documentary Practice; or, How to Make Love in a Room Full of People,” *Camera Obscura* 101, Vol. 34, No. 2, (2019): 41-69, 52.

¹³⁵ Heberer, 60.

The disciplinary scripts that attempt to define gender are many. Here I think with Michel De Certeau who refers to the many modern western systems that produce an “official” legibility as a scriptural economy. The scriptural economy is a system of power, order, and control over those it writes into an existence it considers official, according to its own western standards of legibility.¹³⁶ Its tools of inscription are many: from handcuffs, to citizenship, to gender markers, official documents, and everything that makes a body legible to the state. Not to be rendered legible, according to those who design the scriptural economy, is not to exist. During Spanish conquest and territorial occupation, Philip II King of Spain defined official existence by way of official legibility, proclaiming: “*Quod non est in actis, non est in mundo.*” What is not in the documents is not in the world.¹³⁷ To be *illegible* is to be non-existent in the eyes of the state, which comes at a high cost since access to resources, support, or life chances is unevenly distributed across that spectrum of legibility.¹³⁸ This is especially true in the carceral context, where legal gender markers and medical understandings of gender deny trans existence through combined authoritative logics.¹³⁹ One way to write against the scriptural economy is to re-script gender and strategically mis/use legibilities designed for “orderly” gender.

¹³⁶ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven F. Rendall, University of California Press, 1984, 132-134.

¹³⁷ John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 20.

¹³⁸ From those who have to continually write themselves into official legibility for public resources, to whose relationship to the scriptural is effortless because it was written for them and whose existence is most legible to the state with all the resources spread before them, the opportunities dwindle in the writing out of existence of undocumented people, or the “civic death” of incarcerated people and those with criminal records.

¹³⁹ If the state reads a transwoman as male (if her official documents and gender marker is ‘M’), she will be sent to a men’s facility where it is well documented she is disproportionately likely to experience sexual and physical violence from fellow imprisoned folx as well as administrative staff. This is only one of the impacts of being illegible to the state as a trans person in a sex-segregated carceral context. The other has to do with the broader impact of incarceration that impacts trans and non-trans imprisoned folx alike. Michelle Alexander importantly argues that

Like a form letter, activists often use scripts to guide folx who are less familiar with legal processes and to increase the number of signatories for a petition, for example. Activist scripts are designed to suggest, not dictate. They are, as an organizer told attendees at a virtual Free Kelly webinar and letter-writing workshop in 2020, “reminders, not rules for letter writing.”¹⁴⁰ Scripts borrow just enough of the form genre to be politically efficient while still leaving room for the wild tongue to re-script as needed. According to TLC, the goals of these letter-writing campaigns are to directly counter the isolation of the carceral system, particularly for trans and queer folx in detention, and to reflect back to them a larger community and support network on the outside.¹⁴¹

These scripts are taught, whether through a campaign or in a workshop. There is a pedagogy to the use of scripts and it is rooted in worldmaking. Scripts and workshops on letter writing teach people how and what to write. They also teach people about the relationship between gender and prison. Ultimately, they teach people how to envision abolition.

During TLC’s #FREE KELLY campaign, folx participating in the action as well as folx encountering the campaign on TLC’s social media account were encouraged to make phone calls to ICE’s supervisory detention and deportation officer, Aaron B. Andrews, who denied Kelly’s

the prison system produces what she calls a “racial caste,” which is a stigmatized group of people impacted by incarceration before and after actual sentence time. Mass incarceration is a racialized project that produces an oppressed racial class through a system of control that impacts every aspect of life and that extends beyond the prison itself. Here, we see logics of the scriptural economy perhaps at their clearest in a racialized and gendered carceral context. This is significant because it turns stigma into official legibility for the carceral subject beyond the carceral system. In other words, a member of this racial caste is impacted by the stigma of prison even when not in prison.

¹⁴⁰ “Free Kelly updates & Virtual Letter Writing Party,” Zoom webinar hosted by TransLatin@ Coalition, April 30, 2020. Also see guidelines they shared in the webinar on their Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBI7B74gbrm/?hl=en>.

¹⁴¹ “Free Kelly updates & Virtual Letter Writing Party,” Zoom webinar hosted by TransLatin@ Coalition, April 30, 2020. Also see guidelines they shared in the webinar on their Instagram.

parole request. The script they used for the phone bank to call ICE, was meant to help callers formulate a demand to release Kelly, who at that point, had spent a total of 1000 days locked up. The script read: “Hello, My name is _____ and I am calling from _____, to demand that you release Kelly Gonzalez immediately (her A# 206-674-703). Kelly has spent over 1000 days inside a detention and should be free with her loved ones and community. I urge you to take Kelly’s health and safety in consideration and release her immediately!”¹⁴² [fig. 1.5]

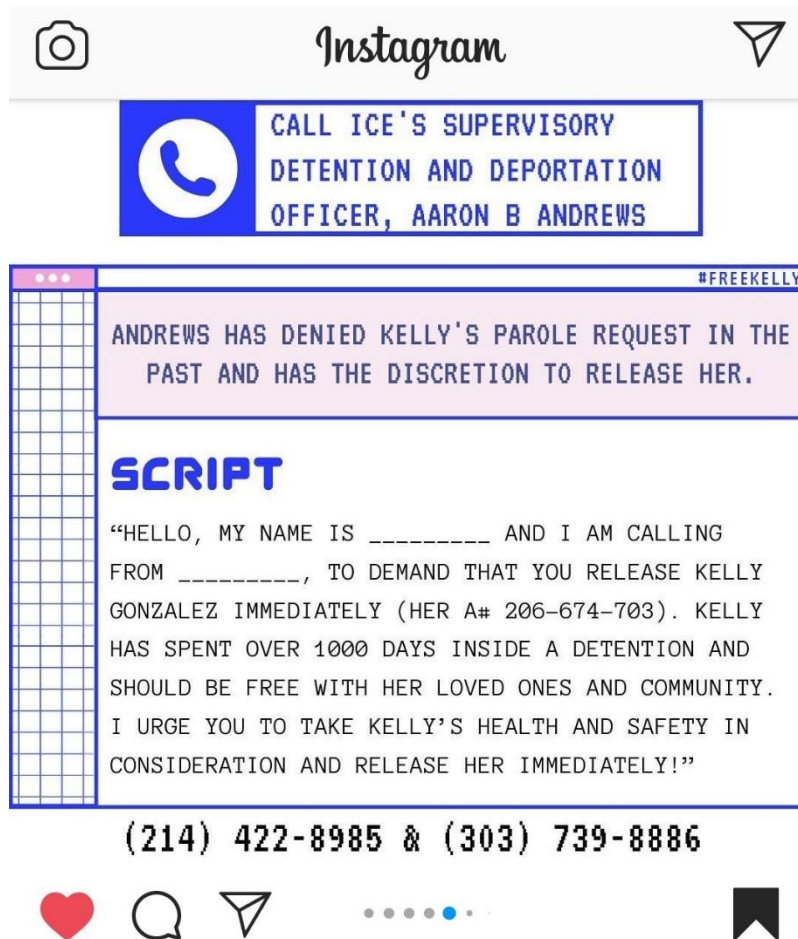


Figure 5: Script for Phone Banking, : TransLatin@ Coalition, #FREE KELLY.

¹⁴² TransLatin@ Coalition, *Instagram*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB50woVgDC3/?hl=en>.

TLC’s campaign also used a script for the birthday cards for Kelly. They suggested a four-line script: “Say hello, introduce yourself, stay strong, sign off.”¹⁴³ Using a short script for these birthday cards is strategic. Keeping to a smaller, recognizable format, particularly for something as inconspicuous as a birthday wish, allows for the wild tongue to speak between the lines of this script. In their guidelines to writers, TLC flags that all mail will be read by detention center staff. Sending in support for Kelly and affirming her trans identity in a space that insists on her isolation and detention lets her know there is community, a “familia infecta” on the outside working towards her liberation. It also lets the detention center staff—the unintended readers of this material—know that Kelly is not alone.

These scripts might seem rudimentary but that is because they need to make room for the wild tongue. As a member of TLC puts it, “the scripts ask us to imagine beyond the walls of incarceration and to question how we see those walls.”¹⁴⁴ Here, the wild tongue makes explicit the connection between gender and the PIC while the birthday card allows for gender to be re-scripted: transness is affirmed and celebrated in a space that actively uses it as reason for punishment but it also puts pressure on the system that makes that re-scripting necessary. The goal of re-scripting in the birthday card liberation campaign is not solely to wish Kelly a happy birthday or even to free her. It is to end detention as a whole. With the help of activist scripts, these cards might enter the facility with less scrutiny, but they circulate a wild tongue and they come with all these other demands—calls and letters—to take down the carceral institution. As counter-security media, these birthday cards directly counter the carceral imperative to isolate

¹⁴³ TransLatin@ Coalition, *Instagram*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB50woVgDC3/?hl=en>.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Yessica Gonazalez, via Zoom, Oct. 6, 2020.

and neglect trans people. They also work towards an abolitionist goal of ending trans detention, and by extension, immigration detention and the prison industrial complex.

PART III: TRANS PRIDE INITIATIVE’S TRANS TOUCH

“The Healing Power of Prayer to Change the World Around Us!”¹⁴⁵

As counter-security media, letters connect people that the carceral system aims to isolate while working towards dismantling those same carceral systems. In this next section, I discuss Trans Pride Initiative and the organizing power of the letter genre. Trans Pride Initiative formed in 2011 to advocate for trans housing and healthcare. They implemented letter-based advocacy in 2013 to communicate with imprisoned trans people and to gather proof of anti-trans discrimination in the TDCJ.¹⁴⁶ The letter-writing project I will discuss is a protest flier that makes strategic use of a Catholic prayer as a script to spread the news of a national prison strike.

In 2018, a national prison strike took place across seventeen states in response to the prison system’s neglectful response to a fight that took place inside the Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina that same year. The fight resulted in stabbings, major injuries, and several deaths, while prison administration refused to intervene or authorize medical assistance to those who had been injured. The strike called for immediate improvement of prison conditions and policies; an end to the exploitation of prison labor; an end to indeterminate sentencing; an end to the racialized and discriminatory use of “gang” laws and indeterminate sentencing that impact Black and brown folk; and increased investment in rehabilitation programs, among other demands.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ This title is from a flier used for political organizing against inhumane prison conditions.

¹⁴⁶ Email correspondence with Nell Gaither, President of TPI, December 12, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ For a complete list of demands, see <https://incarceratedworkers.org/campaigns/prison-strike-2018> and for more information on the strike, see <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/17/17664048/national-prison-strike-2018>.

In support of the strike, Trans Pride Initiative circulated fliers to imprisoned folx that listed information about the strike, including the demands of strikers and actions imprisoned folx could take to participate in the strike [fig. 1.6] The fliers, which were designed by a volunteer at TPI, make strategic use of a Catholic prayer as a script to spread news of the national prison strike.¹⁴⁸ The prayers demand improvements to prison conditions and policies; legal wages for prison labor; renewed access to prison grievances; universal access to parole and rehabilitation; the end of over-sentencing and over-charging of Black and brown people; a reinstatement of Pell grants; the recognition of voting rights for imprisoned and formerly imprisoned people.¹⁴⁹ Listed in numerical order, the first prayer reads, “Prayer 1. Immediate improvements to the conditions of prisons and prison policies that recognize the humanity of imprisoned people.”¹⁵⁰ Framed as prayers, these steps are calls to action, listed with no spacing between each prayer and in a smaller font than the title, which makes them less legible to someone sifting through incoming mail in the prison mailroom. The title of the flier, “Prison Prayer,” is written in one of the most commonly used serif fonts, Times New Roman. Used here, this font is brilliantly generic. Much like Black & Pink’s use of the bureaucratic form as “state drag,” the font is so generic, it becomes covert.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Email correspondence with Nell Gaither, President of TPI, April 7, 2023.

¹⁴⁹ This flier was shared with me, courtesy of TPI.

¹⁵⁰ See Fig. 5. Flier courtesy of TPI.

¹⁵¹ Media scholar Josef Nguyen used this term “state drag” in response to my reading of Black & Pink’s use of bureaucratic forms, Monday March 6, 2023.

Prison Prayer

All over the nation, prisoners are coming together to use the healing power of prayer to change the world around us! Here are 10 prayers we're sending out into the world!

Prayer 1. Immediate improvements to the conditions of prisons and prison policies that recognize the humanity of imprisoned people.

Prayer 2. An immediate end to prison slavery. All persons imprisoned in any place of detention under United States jurisdiction must be paid the prevailing wage in their state or territory for their labor.

Prayer 3: The Prison Litigation Reform Act must be recinded, allowing imprisoned humans a proper channel to address grievances and violations of their rights.

Prayer 4: The Truth and Sentencing Act and the Sentencing Reform Act must be recinded so that imprisoned humans have a possibility of rehabilitation and parole. No humans shall be sentenced to Death by Incarceration or serve any sentence without the possibility of parole.

Prayer 5: An immediate end to the racial overcharging, over-sentencing, and parole denials of Black and Brown humans. Black humans shall no longer be denied parole because the victim of the crime was white, which is a particular problem in southern states.

Prayer 6: An immediate end to racist gang enhancement laws targeting Black and Brown humans.

Prayer 7: No imprisoned human shall be denied access to rehabilitation programs at their place of detention because of their label as a violent offender.

Prayer 8: State prisons must be funding specifically to offer more rehabilitation services.

Prayer 9: Pell grants must be reinstated in all US states and territories.

Prayer 10: The voting rights of all confined citizens serving prison sentences, pretrial detainees, and so-called "ex-felons must be counted. Representation is demanded. All voices count!



Figure 6: Prison Prayer, courtesy of Trans Pride Initiative.

The prayer is meant to be read by prison administration but the protest isn't. The prayer is a script. It relies on general familiarity with its form so that the wild tongue can re-script community. The prayer calls for unification and transformation via prayer: "All over the nation, prisoners are coming together to use the healing power of prayer to change the world around us! Here are 10 prayers we're sending out into the world!" The protest calls for unification and

transformation via abolition. The prayer calls for a unity that is institutionally vetted whereas the protest calls for a unity that will transform those institutions.

“Coming together” via the Church is very different from coming together in a political and abolitionist movement. Prisons have always been invested in isolation because coming together is understood as a threat to the carceral institution. Historically, sociality in prisons has been surveilled. People are not allowed to communicate (even via letters) with one another across institutions. Policies and practices that police “gang” activity effectively criminalize sociality for mostly low-income Black and brown people. The federal definition of a “gang” considers a group of three or more people to be suspicious sociality.¹⁵² Gang policies reflect the biased assumptions that all communication and/or interaction among imprisoned folx is inherently criminal in nature.

The fear of rebel sociality is built into prison systems, turning architectural prison design into a tool of punishment. In the 19th century, it was thought that isolation would promote penitence by giving imprisoned folx time to reflect on their actions.¹⁵³ Fears of sex also drove the implementation of sex-segregated prison systems in the early 19th-century prison boom. But sex-segregation wasn’t enough and too much alone time was considered dangerous as well. Early penitentiaries in the US (like the Auburn model in New York and the Eastern State model in Pennsylvania) were designed around isolation because authorities were afraid of sexual activity within sex-segregated prison systems. At the same time, authorities were so deeply afraid of people using their private space to fall prey to the “vice of solitary confinement” (masturbation

¹⁵² See National Institute of Justice, <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/what-gang-definitions>.

¹⁵³ Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008 17, 18.

was considered a sin) that they redesigned prisons to include social spaces, like prison yards.¹⁵⁴ Regina Kunzel has extensively written about the kinds of queer sociality that spaces like prison yards have allowed for, turning them into sites where cruising and even weddings could take place.¹⁵⁵

“Coming together” is underwritten by a historic tension between acceptable and unacceptable forms of sociality. This allows for the wild tongue to re-script an abolitionist sociality within the prison prayer. The protest (not the prayer) calls for national unity across carceral divides to undermine the prison industrial complex and to humanize and empower imprisoned people.

The wild tongue calls for subversive sociality through Catholic iconography in the form of praying hands. In the flier, praying hands are positioned in the top right quadrant, reading as both a call to join a nation of praying prisoners, as well as visual evidence that this flier is what it says it is: a prayer. Though *touch* might not be so central to a read of praying hands in a non-carceral context, it is certainly potentially suspicious in the prison context. Yet this touch, unlike prison sociality, is institutionally backed. The religious history of praying hands lends the flier an institutional legibility via the Catholic church that authorizes its “safe” touch. The original “praying hands” dates to a pen and ink drawing from the early 16th century made by the Renaissance painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer and is thought to be a study for “Heller Altar,” a commissioned altarpiece by Jakob Heller.¹⁵⁶ These hands are recognizable and because

¹⁵⁴ Kunzel, 22, 73.

¹⁵⁵ Kunzel, 73. I’ve written about the relationship between sex-segregated prisons and queer desire. See Dan Bustillo, “With and Beyond Los Angeles’s Daddy Tank: Gender, Confinement, and Queer Desire,” *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, 19:2-3, (2022): 182-198, DOI: 10.1080/14775700.2022.2138797, 191.

¹⁵⁶ Anna Russell, “The Odd, Enduring Power of ‘Praying Hands:’ How a 16th-century sketch became an international symbol of piety—and an inspiration for kitsch,” *The Wall Street*

of this, they suggest a touch that prison officials would consider “safe.” The gap between the fingers makes the touch seem soft, barely noticeable, only grazing at the fingertips and tops of the palms. The light pressing of the hands makes this touch seem pious, non-sexual, devoid of the overt erotic charge that accompanies a more direct or fuller touch.

The wild tongue uses the presumed safety of the Catholic touch to suggest a different kind of touch. The wild tongue speaks a touch of protest. Not gently grazing fingertips but a clenched fist that inspires other clenched fists to resist the transphobic, homophobic, and racist practices of prisons and policing. This strategic design deters an unwanted yet known reader—prison administration—from reading the actual prayers (read: protest) on the flier. The protest hides in plain sight in the flier, with a wild tongue both expressing explicit support and calling for action. This flier borrows from the institutional legibility of the Catholic church, re-scripting it, into a call for a national prison strike against the prison industrial complex.

The wild tongue also speaks where there is no image. The negative space that surrounds the praying hands is also significant. It makes the hands additionally pious, chaste, or “pure” precisely because they are separate from other objects or even from the body it would presumably belong to since the hands appear bodiless, perhaps to suggest their distance from sexual, bodily sin. The detached hands also return the image to the initial idea of pious isolation that presumably leads to the kind of religious redemption that early US penitentiaries were so eager to implement and so deeply scared of at the same time. The negative space also brings attention to the hands themselves, committing the viewer’s attention to the top of the flier and to

Journal, March 21, 2013,
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324323904578370721797296696>.

the three most prominent and legible items of the flier: the title, the mission statement, and the icon.

As counter-security media, this flier uses a multi-layered legibility to call for an abolitionist “coming together” and a “touch” that the prison system fears most. This is where the wild tongue speaks. The wild tongue, here, calls for a coming together that protests and disbands the conditions of confinement. The wild tongue focuses on the systems that isolate and criminalize. Its call for systemic change is clear. The flier lists in a font larger than the individual prayers yet smaller than the title, “All over the nation, prisoners are coming together to use the healing power of prayer to change the world around us!” In other words, the call is to change the system that produces criminality, not to “reform” those who are labeled and charged as “criminals.” This seemingly discrete difference is powerful: it is a call for abolition. Though not explicitly designed for trans (or queer) liberation as with TLC’s birthday campaign or B&P’s penpal database, TPI’s activism is trans in its anti-systemic coalitional politics. Trans liberation also requires the dismantling of the PIC. Knowing that this is the labor of trans activists signals a commitment to Spade’s “critical trans politics.” Read from a trans lens, this flier also suggests that gender and carceral regimes can be abolished and re-imagined together.

The prayer lists four ways that people can participate in the strike in the form of “faith tests.” Each faith test offers a specific action, from work strikes, to sit-ins, to boycotts, to hunger strikes. This part of the flier [fig. 1.7] makes it clear why re-scripting is necessary. In order for the wild tongue of protest to reach people, it needs to be misread by those most invested in upholding the prison system. This is precisely what the wild tongue of prison letter writing does: it makes strategic mis/use of a dominant form to undermine and expose the inequities built into it.

FOUR WAYS YOU CAN SHOW YOUR FAITH

We all agree that the world would be a wonderful place if our prayers were answered! The prison strike will go from August 21 – September 9, 2018. People in prisons across the nation will strike in the following manner:

Faith Test 1. Work strikes: prisoners will not report to assigned jobs. Each place of detention will determine how long its strike will last. Some of these strikes may translate into a local list of demands designed to improve conditions and reduce harm within the prison.

Faith Test 2. Sit-ins: In certain prisons, people will engage in peaceful sit-in protests.

Faith Test 3. Botcotts: All spending should be halted. We ask those outside the walls to not make financial judgements for those on the inside. People on the inside will inform you if they are participating in this boycott.

Faith Test 4. Hunger Strikes: People shall refuse to eat.

Please spread the good word far and wide!
For more flyers or to tell us how your prayers are going write:



Figure 7: Four Ways You Can Show Your Faith, Prison Prayer, courtesy of Trans Pride Initiative (address redacted by author).

Since I started this chapter with Sylvia, I will end with her. To maintain anonymity and to circumvent additional mail security that was implemented at the time of the strike, the prayer letter was sent from a fictitious chapel, “Saint Sylvia Chapel for Justice.” “Sylvia” alludes to the President of TPI’s middle name as well as to Sylvia Rivera. STAR’s trans prison letter writing from the 70s is anything *but* forgotten. It lives on in the wild tongue of trans prison letter activism today.

Even though there are faster modes of communication, I've emphasized the significance of a more temporal, physical, tactile media that allows for the wild tongue to circulate, to re-script the carceral codes of gender, and write transness into existence. It might be because letters are a slower media that they produce what Lucas Hilderbrand calls "epistolary joy."¹⁵⁷ Circulating across power, trans carceral epistolary joy allows for a trans re-scripting of gender. It flips the script of trans necropolitics and shifts the discourse away from trans death and towards trans joy, even in unlivable conditions.

Counter-security media is all about finding a livable condition in an unlivable context. B&P's penpal matching system makes strategic use of the bureaucratic form to allow for humanizing and intimate community building across carceral divides. TLC re-scripts trans birthdays as trans liberation from the PIC and inserts the wild tongue into scripts to re-inscribe transness into existence against the codified carceral norms of gender. TPI re-scripts a Catholic prayer to advance a critical trans politics and call for prison abolition.

As demonstrated by the life affirming work of these three activist organizations, community building is a radical act in the face of the prison industrial complex. I end this chapter with deep thanks and gratitude to the work of Black & Pink, TransLatin@ Coalition, and Trans Pride Initiative, who have, along with my penpals, and the friendships of system-impacted community members, shaped my thinking in the most generative and radical way. It is urgent to look to the work of activist organizations who approach trans liberation through a commitment to

¹⁵⁷ Hilderbrand analyzes Joanie 4 Jackie video chainletters created by Miranda July in 1995 and suggests that feminist media circulations such as Joanie 4 Jackie chainletters produce an analog community network in the form of a peer-to-peer exchange. See Lucas Hilderbrand, "Joanie and Jackie and Everyone They Know: Video Chainletters as Feminist Community Work," *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009, 200, 197.

dismantling carceral systems because they offer a blueprint for worldmaking. They are designing the kind of world I also want to be in.

CHAPTER TWO: *Transing* the “Problem”: Trans Latinx Micro-Celebrity

Media Activism

In a TikTok video titled “me after top surgery,” trans Latinx artist, musician, and micro-celebrity Ezra Michel removes his white T-shirt to reveal top surgery scars tattooed on his chest. He lip-syncs to a popular audio track on TikTok, “I’m gonna find a way to make this my entire personality and also make it everyone else’s fucking problem.”¹⁵⁸ What does it mean to make something someone else’s problem? More precisely, what is the “problem” in this video? Though this particular TikTok trend was taken up by many people in plenty of different contexts (anime fandom, decorating an entire room in the color green, re-discovering reading, etc.), Ezra Michel’s video says something about trans bodies in public space, visibility, and media platforms. He exposes the way “problems” are produced, crafted, read. He also shows how they can be refused. Removing his shirt to show the tattoos of scars that overlay his actual top surgery scars, Michel *insists* on trans visibility: not only by removing his shirt to show his chest but also by having tattooed his scars so that they remain visible. Shirtless, he stares at the camera and lip-syncs his commitment to making his scarred and celebrated chest “everyone else’s fucking problem.” In doing so, he is *not* saying that transness is a problem. He is pointing to a world that considers us problems because we show up in the failure of its essentialist and binaristic design.

This chapter uses the transgender problem as a method to locate and challenge how a “problem” is imposed on the trans body. This chapter follows the trans pedagogical activism of three trans Latinx micro-celebrities, Ezra Michel (he/him, they/them), Selyna Brillare (she/her), and Rose Montoya (she/her, they/them), as they maintain visibility across social media platforms

¹⁵⁸ Ezra Michel, “me after top surgery,” *TikTok*, February 18, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@ezramichelmusic/video/6930513992624475398?sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=7006321862317704710&is_from_webapp=v1&is_copy_url=0.

despite discriminatory platform policies and social bias.¹⁵⁹ Though all three micro-celebrities are Latinx, there are crucial differences between them, in terms of race, gender identity, and content. Brillare is the only Black Latina among the three, which means she faces specific types of discrimination and platform disappearance that Michel and Montoya don't. They also have different gender identities and types of content. Ezra Michel is a transmasculine non-binary artist who makes promotional material for his musical career and funny skits about his trans experience and about being mixed (part white, part Mexican); Brillare is a transwoman who makes comedy skits about her experience as a transwoman, about Dominican culture in NY, as well as promotional material for her modeling career; Montoya is a non-binary transgender woman who makes trans educational content. I argue that they each "trans" the "problem" of anti-trans discrimination on platforms by exposing, teaching, and circumventing the norms that turn trans expression into a "problem" for online community. Montoya transes the problem by transing the platform itself. She strategically uses one platform to document the discriminatory policies and practices of other platforms. In this way, she transes the problem that platforms turn trans people into by critiquing the platform itself. Michel and Brillare incorporate comedic elements into their videos that critique larger social structures of anti-trans normativity, on and off the platform. In my read, their use of comedy alters the genres and norms of trans videos so that they retain agency and remain online, despite the discriminatory practices they experience and that Montoya diligently documents.

¹⁵⁹ Tobias Raun defines a micro-celebrity as both a person and brand. Raun astutely points out that part of the difficulty for trans micro-celebrities is having to navigate the monetization of a marginalized identity. A micro-celebrity, as he puts it, displays four subjectivities: that of an expert, an educator, a role model, and someone "just like you." See Tobias Raun, *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube*, Abington and New York: Routledge, 2016, 185, 186.

Transing the problem, as I propose here, is a strategic mis/use of a norm, a platform, a structure that attempts to turn trans expression into a “problem.” This chapter attends to a number of structures that are *transed*: the platform, genre conventions, and language. The strategic mis/use of multiple platforms, vlogging conventions, and use of comedic discourse, all point out the exclusionary impact of policies and social practices on social media platforms, while also resisting platform disappearance and remaining trans visible. In other words, they function as strategies to turn the “transgender problem” into “everyone else’s fucking problem.” In the first part of this chapter, I turn to Montoya’s use of what I term “platform transing” — which is the use of one platform to document the censorship of another—to delineate the “problem” space on TikTok and YouTube. Montoya’s platform transing teaches us that there is no stable platform for the trans body. This has significant implications for the ways that trans BIPOC micro-celebrities navigate online visibility. The second part of this chapter turns to Selyna Brillare’s and Ezra Michel’s use of comedic discourse as a tool of trans pedagogy and media activism.

It’s important to note that some of the videos and posts I analyze in this chapter have disappeared over the course of revisions and I suspect some might disappear in the future. Digital media is precarious to begin with and having to contend with anti-trans hostility on media platforms doesn’t help. All the material I’ve used was posted to public social media accounts. I’ve shared images only when I had permission from the creator to do so. In the absence of that, I’ve described the videos or posts at length and relied on screenshots and downloaded material to guide my readings.

Theoretical Framework

My approach isn't about "good vs. bad" trans representation but about the ways that trans visibility online must contend with various forms of inaccurate representation that occur through tools of the platform itself, such as tagging, flagging, violation codes, among others. While this work is about trans representation, I engage transness in a specific way. Transness, for me, is not a marker of queerness nor is it an "instance" of analysis.¹⁶⁰ It is an analytic that shows how transness is made to be a "problem" and which centers trans problems and issues.

I draw from José Esteban Muñoz's notion of a problem as an ethnoracialized social feeling, which is a feeling that is produced when we are pushed outside of a white straight space.¹⁶¹ Building on W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of feeling like a problem as a racialized affect for African Americans, Muñoz attends to the way feeling like a problem also imparts a brown affect. Like Du Bois, Muñoz sees a social belonging offered within this feeling.¹⁶² In other words, being made to *feel* like a problem tells us about social and cultural norms and the "problems" they produce. I also draw inspiration from Francisco Galarte, who builds with Muñoz to think through the production of a "brown trans figuration" in a Chicax trans context.¹⁶³ As a tool, "brown trans figurations" helps us locate the underlying assumptions and tropes that produce an

¹⁶⁰ Caél M. Keegan and Laura Horak, "Introduction," *JCMS, IN FOCUS*, 61, No. 2 (Winter 2022): 164-167, 166.

¹⁶¹ It is important to note that Muñoz made this framework in direct inspiration from DuBois's work on being made to feel like a problem. Muñoz's notion of brownness as a social feeling, feeling like a problem, a brown problem, comes out of a proximity to Blackness, which isn't to say that Brown people face the same issues as Black people; but that Muñoz wanted to think through a similar ethnoracialized feeling that folx who are not white and also not Black can be made to feel. See José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020, 36.

¹⁶² José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020, 36.

¹⁶³ Francisco J. Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations: Rethinking Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Chicax/Latinx Studies*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021, 9.

ethnoracialized and gendered “figure.”¹⁶⁴ Building with Muñoz and Galarte, I return to the “transgender problem.”

To think with the “trans problem” through a Latinx framework is to insist that we, as trans Latinx people, are not “problems” though gender as a disciplining institution crafts us as such. Being Latinx is an ethnoracialized “problem” to the colonial logics of racial categorization and geographic belonging—ni de aquí, ni de allá.¹⁶⁵ As a category that is not defined by race, nation, or geography, Latinx/a/o also holds many problems. Among many colonial inheritances comes the perpetuation of colorism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity, within Latin America and the diaspora.¹⁶⁶ As trans people, we are “problems” for our families, partners, teachers, or co-workers when we change our names or gender pronouns. We are “problems” for people who are confused by our pronouns, by which bathroom we use, by our gender presentation. We are

¹⁶⁴ Francisco Galarte’s “brown trans figuration” is a tool to locate the way ethnoracialized trans “figures” are produced. See Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations: Rethinking Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Chicana/Latinx Studies*, 14.

¹⁶⁵ This phrase translates to “neither from here, nor there.” I invoke it here, as it is often used in everyday and scholarly discourse for Latinx people in the diaspora to describe our in-betweenness and the impossibility or difficulty of belonging, at cultural, national, linguistic levels, to either a place of origin or one’s current place of residence.

¹⁶⁶ Playing right into the colonial *casta* system, many Latin American countries constructed national identities on narratives of mestizaje and mulataje that exclude Indigenous and Black people from the national and nationalist mestizo-supremacist imaginary. Put another way, anti-indigeneity and anti-Blackness are built into the creole and mestizo formation of Latin American settler nation states. See Tatiana Flores, ““Latinidad Is Canceled” Confronting an Anti-Black Construct,” *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2021): 58-79. See Paul Joseph López Oro, “Garifunizando Ambas Americas: Hemispheric Entanglements of Blackness/Indigeneity/AfroLatinidad,” *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 31 No. 1, 2020, doi:10.1353/pmc.2020.0025. See Claudia Milian, *Latining America, Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies*, Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013. See Tanya Kateri Hernandez, “Latino Anti-Black Bias and the Census Categorization of Latinos: Race, Ethnicity, or Other?” in *Critical Dialogues in Latinx Studies: A Reader*, ed. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas and Merida M. Rúa, New York University Press, 2021, 361-372. See Zaire Zenit Dinzey-Flores, Hilda Lloréns, Nancy López, and Martiza Quiñones, on behalf of Black Latinas Know Collective, “Black Latina Womanhood: From Latinx Fragility to Empowerment and Social Justice Praxis,” *WSQ*, Vol. 47, No. 3&4, (Fall/Winter 2019): 321-327.

problems for our employers when our documents don't line up. On social media platforms, it is no different: we are flagged as problems for the platform's "community" and sometimes disappeared, whether by algorithm or social bias.

Transing, in my use of it here, draws from a lineage of trans thought that invokes *trans* not as a fixed identity but as an active critique, methodology, analytic, source of knowledge, and politics.¹⁶⁷ While specific to transness (trans issues, trans embodiment, trans people), *transing*, as an action, shares a lineage with other uses of identity to address and unsettle the systems that produce them. Queering activates the potential of "queer" as a verb that moves from static identity to active agent of change or critique. So, too, does *latining* in Claudia Milian's formulation of it. She offers *latining* as a way of considering all of the conditions that produce and intersect with Latinx identity, such as race, class, sexuality, gender. Her thinking on latinxness approaches it as a condition, not a fixed identity.¹⁶⁸ This is useful in my thinking of transing: when thinking of trans as a condition, it opens up possibilities for a critique of the

¹⁶⁷ A lot of trans scholarship invokes this active potential of trans as an embodied knowledge, starting with Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore. "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, No. 3/4 (2008): 11–22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27649781>. I am also inspired in my thinking by trans scholars who use this active potential in relation to ethnoracialized subjects in Latin America. Dora Silva Santana takes trans- and thinks through the transatlantic, "a travessia," a crossing, building with M. Jacqui Alexander's terms of a crossing. For Alexander, it was not only a metaphor for Middle Passage but a way of thinking through the various entanglements that make up women of color feminisms and ancestral energies. Santana adds to this the way trans- becomes a place of simultaneity, where body is water and energy. See Dora Silva Santana, "Transitionings and Returnings: Experiments with the Poetics of Transatlantic Water," *TSQ*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, (2017): 181-190, 183. PJ DiPietro suggests a "decolonial transing methodology" that does not reinscribe European colonial logics of imitation and sustains instead a trans embodiment, following Argentinian travesti activist Lohana Berkins' use of travesti as a carnal tool of intersubjectivity. See PJ DiPietro, "Of Huachafería, Así, and M' e Mati: Decolonizing Transing Methodologies," *TSQ*, 2(4), (2016): 65-76, 69.

¹⁶⁸ Claudia Milian, *Latining America, Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies*, Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013.

conditions that produce identities. Identities, of course, can be useful, vital even. But we wouldn't need a "trans" category if gender was already understood to be expansive and not defined by a falsely presumed biological binary. Moving from identity to analytic, transing follows feminist of color and queer of color lineages from standpoint epistemology to queering as a verb, a critique of normativity, and a politics.¹⁶⁹ I am not interested in pitting transing against queering or latinizing. They all do slightly different versions of what I understand to be an attempt to move away from a fixed imposed identity to a reclaimed critique of the systems that produce identities. Transing, in my use of it, is ultimately about critiquing the conditions and violences that produce trans as a "problem." *Transing* destabilizes language, cultural codes of gender, social normativities, and corporate policy. Transing is a media tactic for trans visibility.

Transing the problem is a form of pedagogical trans activism that questions, critiques, and circumvents the systems that turn trans people into a "problem." Transing the problem can take many forms. It occurs in Rose Montoya's use of one platform to document the censorship and harassment of another. Transing the problem can also take a formal approach to unsettling trans genres, through comedic discourse, or through the use of Spanish and English. The use of

¹⁶⁹ For an understanding of feminist standpoint epistemology, see Nancy C. M. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, Synthese Library, Vol. 161, Springer, Dordrecht, 1983, https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-48017-4_15. Also see Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, No. 3 (1988): 575–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>. For queer of color critique, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. For an understanding of heteronormativity as a racialized concept (often overlooked in queer politics and theory that only focuses on sexuality), see Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ*, Vol. 3, (1997): 437-465.

comedy as a cultural form to remain trans visible online despite anti trans censorship is key to my analysis of Ezra Michel and Selyna Brillare’s work as pedagogical trans activism.

PART I: DELINEATING THE “PROBLEM” SPACE

Rose Montoya’s Platform *Transing*

Rose Montoya¹⁷⁰, a trans non-binary Latinx micro-celebrity who has been on YouTube since she was a teenager and before coming out as trans, created a TikTok account in 2019 to log her surgeries and provide trans educational content.¹⁷¹ After being flagged repeatedly on TikTok and having her videos removed, Montoya started documenting the censorship process, which she compiled into a series of YouTube videos on her channel called “TikTok Tea.” Montoya’s use of one platform to document the censorship of another is a form of “platform transing.” I offer the term “platform transing” to think through the countering of the “problem” of trans expression. It refers to an intentional move by a content producer from one media platform to another, to both avoid *and* document platform censorship. To move from platform to platform allows for a published critique of the platform’s exclusive community and normalizing guidelines. It also evades the full effect of platform marginalization, which regularly aims to disappear the trans “problem.” Instead of being a disappeared problem, the person who points out the problem problematizes the platform and brings attention to its biases and exclusionary logics and practices. Platform transing turns the “transgender problem” into “everyone else’s fucking problem” by circulating the ways in which “problems” are produced on platforms.

¹⁷⁰ Rose Montoya now has a checkmark next to her name on TikTok, which is a “verified” badge that means she is officially recognized by the platform as a public figure, with 79.7K followers at the time of this writing, May 28 2023. She also has 14.5K subscribers on YouTube.

¹⁷¹ Rose Montoya, “TikTok Deleted My Profile Because I’m A Latinx Trans Woman,” *YouTube*, December 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZbNSXmDkxM&list=PL9Z_Bqn0Ys77mu7OvXd41-dexdgF4Jqbt

Trans micro-celebrities are not the first to use one platform to talk about the discriminatory practices of another. When Facebook targeted breastfeeding content in 2007 until it changed its policy in 2014, a Facebook group called “Hey Facebook, Breastfeeding Is Not Obscene!” formed to document the censorship that occurred both on the platform and in physical spaces (restaurants, etc).¹⁷² In his discussion of this group’s work, Tarleton Gillespie highlights that they see their use of the platform as a form of “knowledge repository,” where they can share their experiences and make them visible.¹⁷³ While they are *made* to be a problem, they turn the tables to make censorship of their content Facebook’s problem. In Sarah Florini’s discussion of Black cultural production online, she shows how conversations are continued across platforms in what she calls, a “transplatform network.”¹⁷⁴ Though her use of “trans” here is specifically to mark a move across platforms and not necessarily trans people, it points to a strategic platform use for minoritarian discourse that is all too often policed by a hostile majority (read: Black cultural production in an otherwise non-Black, anti-Black, and appropriative media space). Sometimes the use of multiple platforms is to find and maintain a public. Jeff Berglund's analysis of Indigenous social media activist work and of the comedy troupe The 1491s' use of YouTube, suggests their multi-platform use keeps viewers up to date on their work and expands their audience.¹⁷⁵

Montoya’s YouTube video called “TikTok Deleted My Profile Because I’m a Latinx Trans Woman,” which is the first of her three-part series on “TikTok Tea,” opens vlog style with

¹⁷² See Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media*, New Haven: Yale, 2018, 154.

¹⁷³ Gillespie, 153.

¹⁷⁴ Sarah Florini, *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks*, New York: New York University Press, 2019, 69-70.

¹⁷⁵ Jeff Berglund, ““Go Cry Over Someone Else's Tragedy’: The YouTube Activism of the 1491s,” *Australian Journal of Information Systems*, Vol. 21 (2017): 1-17, p. 2, 5.

her more or less center frame sitting on a bed in a bedroom with beige walls. In the background we glimpse the door and a wall light switch. On an adjacent wall, half cropped out of the frame, is a painting of a vase with a bouquet of yellow and white roses losing a few petals. The painting is a little somber and feels old, as does its frame, which seems heavier than the actual painting, ornate, and painted bronze. The bed frame is dark wood and the pillows are light brown. This same bedroom appears as a background in a number of her YouTube videos. It seems familiar as in a home setting (maybe even family home) and becomes familiar to the audience who can recognize it across videos. Creating a sense of intimacy through familiarity is very much in the style of what Patricia Lange calls “videos of affinity” that Tobias Raun locates in trans vlogs.¹⁷⁶ Montoya faces the camera wearing metal framed eyeglasses, a nose ring, a black beanie, minimal makeup, and a black shirt with a neck plunge. In a direct address to her viewers, some thirty hours after her TikTok account was permanently deleted, she coolly confirms the devastating

¹⁷⁶ Tobias Raun, *Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016, 179.

truth those who follow her on TikTok already know: “Hi everyone, it’s Rose. I’m so. Yes, it’s true. My TikTok account with more than 300,000 followers was deleted by TikTok.”¹⁷⁷ [fig. 2.1]

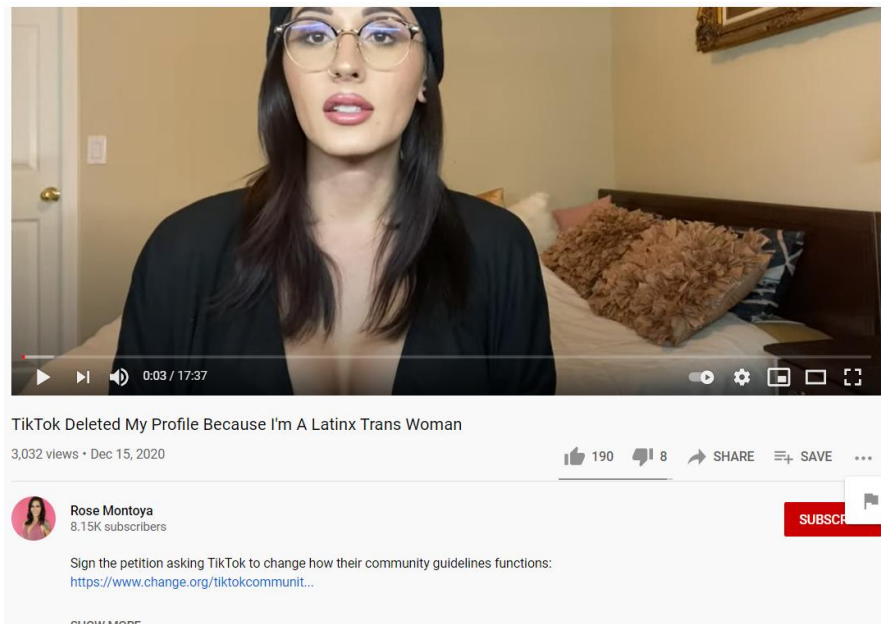


Figure 1: Rose Montoya documents platform disappearance.¹⁷⁸

Much in the style of *testimonios*, there is a pedagogical dimension to Montoya’s “TikTok Tea” videos. Like *testimonios*, her videos are a first-person account of her experience of platform discrimination that speaks to a larger trans experience online.¹⁷⁹ They are meant to teach viewers about the platform’s discriminatory practices so as to incite action. *Testimonios* can take many

¹⁷⁷ Rose Montoya, “TikTok Deleted My Profile Because I’m A Latinx Trans Woman,” *YouTube*, December 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZbNSXmDkxM&list=PL9Z_Bqn0Ys77mu7OvXd41-dexdgF4Jqbt.

¹⁷⁸ Rose Montoya, *YouTube*, December 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZbNSXmDkxM&list=PL9Z_Bqn0Ys77mu7OvXd41-dexdgF4Jqbt.

¹⁷⁹ A *testimonio* bears witness to an injustice or oppression. It is a way of countering erasure. See The Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, Duke, 2001, 2. It is a tool of accountability, witnessing, and expression for people of color in the US, from slave narratives to Black feminist standpoint epistemology to Latin American accounts against erasure and oppression, to Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x accounts in the diaspora. See Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez, “Testimonio: Origin, Terms, and Resources,” *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 45(3), (2012): 525-538, 525.

forms: musical, cinematic, a memoir, or, in this case, a vlog.¹⁸⁰ Regardless of its form, testimonios remain political in intent.¹⁸¹ Montoya's testimonio has a specific purpose, which is to acquire signatures for a change.org petition she created asking TikTok to restore her account and to change their algorithm, which does not protect marginalized creators from transphobic and white supremacist trolls who ultimately pushed her off the platform. Digital testimonios, like Montoya's, make use of the direct address that is possible with the medium, despite platform constraints. For Jillian Báez, this is where digital testimonios differ from traditional Latin American ones. There is no transcriber to mediate the *testimonio*.¹⁸² Montoya's digital testimonio is unique in that it addresses the discriminatory structure of the platform itself.

Montoya's video cuts to footage of her on a backup TikTok account talking against a screenshot of the message she received from TikTok announcing her account was "permanently banned." In this same video, Montoya details not only the numerous times her account was censored or banned but the reasons for them.¹⁸³ Many of the given reasons reanimate transphobic stereotypes rather than deal with the actual content of her videos or live conversations. In her

¹⁸⁰ Guadalupe Escobar, "Testimonio at 50," *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 237, Vol. 48, No. 2, (March 2021): 17-32, 19.

¹⁸¹ John Beverley's definition of *testimonio* is a novella-length first-person by a narrator that is printed in some format and bears witness to something by the narrator. See John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On "Testimonio" (Testimonial Narrative)," *Modern Fiction Studies*, Spring 1989, Vol. 35, No. 1 SPECIAL ISSUE: NARRATIVES OF COLONIAL RESISTANCE (Spring 1989): 11-28, p. 12. A *testimonio* is a call to action and is political. See Reyes and Rodriguez, 527. Also see Kimberly Nance, "Disarming Testimony: Speakers' Resistance to Readers' Defenses in Latin American "Testimonio,"" *Biography*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Summer 2001): 570-588, 570.

¹⁸² Jillian M. Báez, "Spreadable Citizenship: Undocumented Youth Activists and Social Media," in *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Media*, ed. Maria Elena Cepeda and Dolores Ines Casillas, New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, 422.

¹⁸³ Rose Montoya, "TikTok Deleted My Profile Because I'm A Latinx Trans Woman," *YouTube*, December 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZbNSXmDkxM&list=PL9Z_Bqn0Ys77mu7OvXd41-dexdgF4Jqbt.

YouTube compilation of the various TikTok bans, she shares that she first started to be banned on her Live when answering a question about hair growth by a fellow transfemme user. In response to the question about how to grow hair, Montoya shared her experience with Biotin—a vitamin B complex often taken to stimulate hair growth—and was banned from going live for violating community guidelines and showing “vulgar content.”

She was later banned again from going live for “vulgar content” while discussing music, not wanting a belly button, and her trans experience. Replaying a video as it was first uploaded to TikTok that addresses and critiques “vulgar content” as the reason for which she was flagged (which doesn’t constitute an actual category per TikTok’s most recently updated community guidelines) in the context of her YouTube video allows for a specific and intentional viewing of it.¹⁸⁴ It asks the viewer to look for the discrepancy between platforming a diverse community and the platform’s commitment to protecting the norms that determine who belongs in that “community.”

Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram use algorithms to “report,” “flag,” or censor people of color, trans, and queer content creators, either by deleting posts and accounts or by limiting visibility.¹⁸⁵ In 2020, TikTok shadowbanned hashtags or words that include “lesbian,” “gay,” or “transgender” making these hashtags unavailable through a public search and limits how many people it can reach without deleting it, allegedly responding to local law

¹⁸⁴ At the time of this writing, TikTok’s most recent community guidelines had been updated in February, 2022. See <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en>.

¹⁸⁵ The video-sharing app TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company, and was launched in 2016. Instagram is a US-owned photo and video-sharing app that was launched in 2010. See Sun Reporter, “TikTok Don’t Stop: Who owns TikTok?” *The U.S. Sun*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.the-sun.com/lifestyle/tech-old/3093732/tiktok-owner-zhang-yiming/>.

enforcement requests in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.¹⁸⁶ The policy has since been reversed, but a report found that they also shadow banned #acab (all cops are bastards) and #fuckthepolice. TikTok has also been known to delete material by Black and Native content creators.¹⁸⁷

As with YouTube’s policy, TikTok promises multiple things: to provide a space for public debate and to protect its users from harm. A month after public outrage and critique over the platform’s shadowbanning of LGBTQ+ hashtags, TikTok declared it would ban conversion therapy content. TikTok listened to critiques and feedback on their policies and concerns voiced by trans and queer users and LGBT advocacy groups such as GLAAD and UltraViolet who shared policy recommendations that serve and don’t harm the LGBTQ+ community. This has resulted in the platform’s official ban of content that promotes deadnaming,¹⁸⁸ misgendering, misogyny, and anti-LGBTQ+ content such as conversion therapy-related posts.¹⁸⁹

Like many media platforms, TikTok has actual incentive to be an inclusive space for “creators to celebrate what makes them unique” while also accounting for the different cultural

¹⁸⁶ James Factora, “TikTok Apologizes After Reportedly Censoring LGBTQ+ Users,” *them*. September 8, 2020, <https://www.them.us/story/lgbtq-users-reportedly-being-censored-by-tiktok>.

¹⁸⁷ Text Brit Dawson, “The video sharing app shadow banned words and phrases including ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ and ‘transgender,’” *Dazed*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/science-tech/article/50444/1/tiktok-admits-to-censoring-lgbtq-hashtags-gay-lesbian-transgender>.

¹⁸⁸ Deadnaming means to use a trans person’s legal or given name instead of a chosen or self-assigned name. For many trans people, this can harmfully out someone as trans, particularly when our deadname is gendered differently than the gender we identify with.

¹⁸⁹ James Factora, “Misgendering, and Conversion Therapy: Concerns remain about the platform’s ability to enforce these policies,” *them*, February 8, 2022, https://www.them.us/story/tik-tok-misgendering-deadnaming-conversion-therapy-ban?utm_campaign=likeshopme&client_service_id=31178&utm_social_type=owned&utm_brand=them&service_user_id=1.78e+16&utm_content=instagram-bio-link&utm_source=instagram&utm_medium=social&client_service_name=them.&supported_service_name=instagram_publishing.

norms that global platforms interface with. There is a legal component to this that is particularly strained for platforms that are “global” in one sense but also are beholden to the laws of the countries they operate in.¹⁹⁰ Hence, TikTok, as a Chinese-owned company, interfaces with different laws than the US does, but their content algorithms are calibrated to the country the user is in. This means that TikTok in the US will use a content algorithm that prioritizes US-based content.¹⁹¹ It also means that TikTok, as they make clear on their website, is amenable to US laws when it comes to content moderation and censorship.¹⁹²

In the US, concerns around content moderation have historically come with the platform: from BBS, usenet, flame wars, to present-day issues.¹⁹³ The anxieties and concerns that structure content moderation are both old (sex, obscenity, violence, sexual predation) and new (terrorism).¹⁹⁴ Legal concerns over what constitutes “obscenity” is not a new debate, whether taken on by an algorithmic process or a corporate legal team. The Communications Decency Act (CDA) was part of a 1996 bill that criminalized exposure or distribution of “obscene” material to

¹⁹⁰ Though my focus is on strategies to remain visible despite platform disappearance in the US, I learn from the scholarship on strategies to bypass censorship of queer media in China. Yumo Yan writes about the strategies used to keep danmei online and circulating despite censorship of queer content with the 2017 ban on homosexual content. Though this particular ban is explicit in its prohibition of homosexual content, danmei has always been subject to censorship and had to come up with creative ways to circumvent that censorship, such as using typos to evade keyword screening software, or hinting at queerness rather than making it explicitly legible. These strategies are used to keep danmei online despite online censorship of queer content. See Yumo Yan, “From Online Danmei Literature to Web Series: A Study of Chinese Internet-based Adaptations Under Censorship,” *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, (2019): 33-52.

¹⁹¹ Interview by author with employee at TikTok, November 5, 2021.

¹⁹² TikTok, “Statement on TikTok’s content moderation and data security practices,” October 24, 2019, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/statement-on-tiktoks-content-moderation-and-data-security-practices>.

¹⁹³ Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018, 28.

¹⁹⁴ Gillespie, 6.

people under the age of 18. Though it was overturned by the Supreme Court, it produced a messy and unique provision: Section 230, which grants “safe harbor” to US-based companies.¹⁹⁵ This means that US-based social media platforms are not legally responsible for the content on their platforms and do not have to moderate their content in the way that they do.¹⁹⁶ If they moderate the content on their platform, it is because they choose to.

The “Problem” of Community

Community guidelines are corporate policies and are often based on old obscenity laws that place liability before community and place wagers on who is or isn’t valuable to the *company*, not the *community*. Nonetheless, these guidelines have a significant impact on delineating a space of belonging on media platforms. They maintain a normativity that casts trans expression as a “problem” for the larger community. For Gillespie, community guidelines function as “discursive performances” that speak to different audiences. They tell users their free speech will be protected; they also tell advertisers they will reach a specific audience (since they allow for so many different types of expression); and they tell lawyers that they are attending to what is on their platform and moderating it to avoid legal issues.¹⁹⁷

Choosing to have community guidelines also produces a disciplinarian public discourse.¹⁹⁸ Violation of community guidelines is punished by removal, deletion of content, demonetization, and other disciplinary methods, and can sometimes be appealed to a review board, not unlike appealing before a court. Within this punitive logic, violation *does* something.

¹⁹⁵ Gillespie, 33.

¹⁹⁶ Implementing policies that control public discourse, then, isn’t actually about making it safer for users. It is about making it safe for ads. Gillespie, 42.

¹⁹⁷ Gillespie, 47.

¹⁹⁸ As Gillespie puts it, “Platforms don’t just mediate public discourse, they constitute it” Tarleton Gillespie, 22.

It makes the uneven moderation process visible.¹⁹⁹ It also proliferates a system within which transness, like categories such as “vulgar,” “obscene,” or “sexually explicit” are always up for debate and transphobic tropes can be recycled.

Perhaps most ironic and telling is TikTok’s removal of Montoya’s transition video for Trans Awareness Week. Like so many trans vloggers, Montoya made a video compilation of her transition, starting with footage of her as a child announcing herself as “Queen Rose,” as a teenager coming out as gay, then as trans, then as genderqueer, then as bi, followed by post-op images after breast augmentation and a tracheal shave. The video montage plays to Ritt Momney’s cover of Corinne Bailey Rae’s “Put Your Records on,” a song about Black girlhood and coming into self-love and acceptance, that was popular on TikTok at the time. Montoya’s video was removed for “Adult nudity and sexual activity” of which there was none. Ironically, its removal also coincided with trans awareness week, which was why she posted the video in the first place.

As Sara Ahmed says, “to expose a problem is to pose a problem.”²⁰⁰ Montoya later found that videos she had made were being screen recorded and coopted by trolls making transphobic videos with her content and account tagged. She screen-recorded and reported these transphobic videos in turn, only to find out that their content was not in violation of “community guidelines,” despite the clear harm to her person and account. Her account was eventually banned despite her numerous appeals because her videos had been flagged for too many community guideline

¹⁹⁹ Gillespie, 6. Also see the discussion on Twitter’s algorithm distributing visibility unfairly or unevenly by Jenna Burrell, Zoe Kahn, Anne Jonas, Daniel Griffin, “When Users Control the Algorithms: Values Expressed in Practices on the Twitter Platform,” *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, Vol. 3, No. CSCW, Article 138, (November 2019): 138-159, 140.

²⁰⁰ Sara Ahmed, “The Problem of Perception,” *feministkilljoys*, February 17, 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/02/17/the-problem-of-perception/> Also see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017, 37.

violations (likely flagged by the same trolls using her content to make transphobic content and tagging her for additional harmful impact). Yet when she was tagged in transphobic content, which she reported, she was told there was nothing wrong with the content she was tagged in.²⁰¹

Flags mark a problem space on media platforms. They are used to regulate content, but they also foreclose public discourse around their flagging, which grants users the authority to determine virtual belonging to a platform's public sphere (more specifically, to the users who flag the content). As Kate Crawford and Tarleton Gillespie put it, flags are not only a tool for reporting content deemed offensive; they also serve as justification for removing content without having to explain why it was flagged to begin with.²⁰²

Trans Tags as Flags

Tagging is the opposite of flagging. It is a way of finding trans community through what Avery Dame refers to as “tag-based architecture” for trans expression.²⁰³ In theory, there is a straightforward relationship to tagging: tags often reflect the content of the videos. A lot of theorizing around media content and the communities that produce or consume it claim to be straightforward. Yet, enter trans and we have a “problem.” Tobias Raun points out that YouTube’s “community” is actually fragmented.²⁰⁴ Because of the ways in which trans folx are

²⁰¹ Rose Montoya, “TikTok Deleted My Profile Because I’m A Latinx Trans Woman,” *YouTube*, December 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZbNSXmDkxM&list=PL9Z_Bqn0Ys77mu7OvXd41-dexdgF4Jqbt.

²⁰² Kate Crawford, Tarleton Gillespie, “What is a flag for? Social media reporting tools and the vocabulary of complaint,” *new media & society*, Vol. 18(3), (2016): 410-428, 411.

²⁰³ Avery Dame, “Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (2016): 23-27, 1.

²⁰⁴ Raun, *Out Online*, 174.

marginalized both offline and online, Raun thinks of trans YouTube vloggers as a subcommunity that forms *despite* the various constraints of the platform.²⁰⁵

Because visibility is scaled even within subcommunities, tagging is particularly important for trans of color YouTubers, where the default for trans video searches tends to be white, unless Black, Brown, Latinx, Asian, Native, or a specific ethnic or racial identification is included in the search parameters. As Raun and Horak point out, YouTube perpetuates whiteness as an unmarked default, that is countered through either ethnoracial specific search terms or tags.²⁰⁶ Tagging is crucial to online visibility and offline visibility for trans people, is as uplifting as it is dangerous. When trans visibility in media coincides with a rise in trans death, and particularly transfemicides of Black and Brown femmes, how we attend to trans of color visibility is key.²⁰⁷ The issue is not so much who is or isn't visible, but what are the conditions that make visibility desirable or dangerous.

Sometimes a platform's flagging practice culls from the very tags trans influencers or vloggers use to find one another. In 2019, eight plaintiffs from five YouTube channels with LGBTQ content filed a class-action lawsuit against YouTube and Google, its parent company, for censorship.²⁰⁸ They claim their channels were targeted for censorship because they tagged or

²⁰⁵ Raun, 176.

²⁰⁶ Raun, 200. Also see Laura Horak, "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality," *TSQ* 1(4) (2014): 572-585, 576.

²⁰⁷ micha cárdenas maps the parallel between trans visibility in mainstream media and a surge in transfemicides, particularly for transwomen of color. See micha cárdenas, "Trans of Color Poetics: Stitching Bodies, Concepts, and Algorithms," *S&F Online*, Issue. 13.3-14.1, (2016). Retrieved online <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/traversing-technologies/micha-cardenas-trans-of-color-poetics-stitching-bodies-concepts-and-algorithms/>.

²⁰⁸ The eight plaintiffs include Celso Dulay and Chris Knight from GlitterBombTV.com, Cameron Stiehl co-host of *GNews!*, Bria and Chriss, Lindsay Amer, Amp, Chase Ross. See Lauren Strapagiel, "LGBTQ Creators Are Suing YouTube For Discrimination," *BuzzFeed News* August 14, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/laurenstrapagiel/lgbtq-creators-youtube-lawsuit>.

titled their videos with words like “gay,” “lesbian,” “transgender,” or “bisexual.”²⁰⁹ In response to anti-LGBTQ discriminatory policies on its platform, YouTube deferred to the assumed neutrality of algorithms while also acknowledging the algorithms might incorrectly flag material that is not considered age appropriate.²¹⁰ A ruling judge on the lawsuit determined that there was no violation of free speech because tech companies are not considered “state actors” and as such are “not subject to judicial scrutiny under the First Amendment.”²¹¹ Thus, the charge of censorship was circumvented because the platform’s automated flagging system was used by individual users (whether in organized groups or not). YouTube eschewed the responsibility that comes with serving as a platform for public discourse despite the fact that the platform selects which discourses will be granted public visibility and which discourses will be excluded from view.²¹² One of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit is Chase Ross, a trans YouTuber with 169K subscribers who hosts a trans educational series called “Trans 101” on his YouTube channel “uppercaseCHASE1.” In a video called “my channel is going to be deleted...” with 172,423 views, Ross shares that he stumbled upon the realization that many of his older videos from 2012 had been demonetized after having already been approved for monetization. When he appealed and requested for them to be reviewed (which is the official appeal process), he noticed that all

²⁰⁹ Lauren Strapagiel, “LGBTQ Creators Are Suing YouTube For Discrimination,” *BuzzFeed News* August 14, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/laurenstrapagiel/lgbtq-creators-youtube-lawsuit>.

²¹⁰ Chris Stokel-Walker, “Why Has 'Transgender' Become a Trigger Word for YouTube?” *Daily Beast* January 2, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-has-transgender-become-a-trigger-word-for-youtube>.

²¹¹ Nico Lang, “This Lawsuit Alleging YouTube Discriminates Against LGBTQ+ Users Was Just Tossed Out,” *them*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.them.us/story/lawsuit-alleging-youtube-discriminates-against-lgbtq-users-tossed-out/amp>.

²¹² Kate Crawford, Tartleton Gillespie, “What is a flag for? Social media reporting tools and the vocabulary of complaint,” *new media & society*, Vol. 18(3), (2016): 410-428, 421.

of the videos that had been demonetized included the term “trans” in the title or in the tags.²¹³

Ross reveals the problem space ascribed to transness.

To be tagged or to be flagged in the context of trans expression speaks to the spectrum of visibility that trans folk online navigate. Visibility, in turn, results in a spectrum of possible outcomes. Being trans online is construed as a “problem,” whether it is visible before being made invisible, or conversely, initially concealed and only later rendered visible. As Joseph Fischel demonstrates in his study of legal codings of transgender rape cases, intents to protect minors online end up criminalizing non-disclosure of trans identity as a form of sexual predation that retroactively nullifies consent.²¹⁴ This is also the logic behind the justification of transfemicides and violence by cis men against transwomen and their use of legal discourse like the “trans panic” defense that dumps the blame on trans women’s non-disclosure for the transphobic violence they are subjugated to.²¹⁵

²¹³ upperchaseCHASE1, “YOUTUBE IS STILL DEMONETIZING ME LOLOLOL,” *YouTube*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OISHHfX92g>.

²¹⁴ Fundamentally, Fischel asks, “What do we consent to when we consent to sex?” He notes that current discourse around sex laws places sexual autonomy of young women at odds with the privacy of transgender men and butches. Under the principle of sexual autonomy, Fischel draws on Rubinfeld to highlight how deception undermines sexual autonomy and hence invalidates consent for transmasculine and butch lesbian sexual partners online. Deception, at first, was meant to protect women against men in authority (e.g., a doctor convincing a patient that sex is a necessary procedure). Ironically, its use was too often to protect women’s *virtue*, not their autonomy. For Fischel, the issue reveals more about the complainant’s “normative expectation” than about deceitful gender. However, legal coding places its stakes on sexual autonomy. If deception invalidates consent, then sex under false conditions are recoded as rape. See Joseph Fischel, “The Trouble Transgender “Rapists,”” in *Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.

²¹⁵ Trans panic defense is a legal strategy to defend people who kill or assault transwomen after having sexual relations with them and then “finding out” they are trans. See Cynthia Lee, and Peter Kwan, “The Trans Panic Defense: Masculinity, Heteronormativity, and the Murder of Transgender Women.” *Hastings Law Journal* 66, No. 1, (2014): 77–132. Elsewhere, Eric Stanley unpacks the way “trans-or-fay panic defense” gets used as a legal defense to justify the murder of trans people. This legal theory posits that the murderer loses rational thinking upon finding out the person's genitalia or sexuality and turns to extreme violence out of self-protection. Stanley

Flagging is a disciplinary practice that attempts to rationalize the criminalization of trans, brown, Black, rebel bodies (along with voices that are actually problematic). It names harmful those who are harmed by a system, shielding itself from any kind of responsibility, accountability, or bias. The issue with flagging transgender tagging practices as violations of “community guidelines” not only labels trans expression as outside the bounds of community belonging but it categorizes the deviant, “problem” body as part of its categories for exclusion. Flagging becomes part of an exclusionary and disciplinary practice that targets not only trans expression but any kind of rebel voice.

Many coders and scholars in critical algorithm studies have demonstrated the uneven distribution of algorithmic visibility and its marginalizing impact on users and content creators.²¹⁶ As a mathematical structure and a decision-making process, algorithms are intentionally opaque and consequently misunderstood. Tania Bucher names the social power of the algorithm the “algorithmic imaginary.”²¹⁷ Just as the algorithm shapes our understanding of what it can or can’t do, users shape it too. For instance, when users mention the limitations or biases of an “algorithm,” they bring to the platform’s attention its unequal distribution of

turns to a case in which J. Robles, a trans Latina woman, was stabbed over twenty times with a pair of scissors by a man after they had sexual relations. The man, Estanislao Martinez, was sentenced to four years with use of the trans-panic defense. See Eric Stanley, “Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture,” *Social Text* 107, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Summer 2011): 1-19, 9.

²¹⁶ Critical algorithm studies brings together scholarship from the humanities, computer science, and informatics. A lot of key work centers on algorithmic control over users and content creators’ visibility on platforms. Yiwei Wu, Pederson, and Salehi suggest unequal algorithmic visibility can be understood through what they term “algorithmic personae,” namely that of the “agent,” “gatekeeper,” and “drugdealer.” See Eva Yiwei Wu, Emily Pedersen, Niloufar Salehi, “Agent, Gatekeeper, Drug Dealer: How Content Creators Craft Algorithmic Personas,” *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, Vol. 3, No. CSCW, (November 2019): 219-246, 220.

²¹⁷ Taina Bucher, “The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms,” *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, (2017): 30-44, 31.

visibility.²¹⁸ Users also misuse it for many different purposes. Consider user-generated reports on the ways they were radicalized into white supremacist neo-Nazi groups by way of transphobic material.²¹⁹ Importantly, Bucher reminds us that algorithms are not just mathematical structures; they shape material realities.²²⁰ Safiya Noble’s work on what she calls “algorithms of oppression” shows how algorithmic bias—which is human produced—perpetuates historic oppressions against people of color and Black folx most notably.²²¹

Noble also points us to the tension this creates between a search engine’s provision of an educational public good and the social harm it creates. While making information accessible might constitute a public good, if the algorithms built into search engines yield sexist and racist results, then access to information clearly does more harm than good.²²² YouTube introduced a “restricted mode” with institutions like schools and libraries in mind so that they could control what students access in the name of education. But if videos are age-restricted because they have trans content, this severely limits the kind of trans specific educational content trans, non-binary, or gender questioning youth can access.²²³ Not only do many vloggers view their own content as

²¹⁸ Burrell, Kahn, Jonas, and Griffin discuss curation algorithms and the reverse impact users have on the algorithm, See Jenna Burrell, Zoe Kahn, Anne Jonas, Daniel Griffin, “When Users Control the Algorithms: Values Expressed in Practices on the Twitter Platform,” *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, Vol. 3, No. CSCW, (November 2019): 138-158.

²¹⁹ Olivia Little and Abbie Richards, “TikTok’s algorithm leads users from transphobic videos to far-right rabbit holes,” *Media Matters For America*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/tiktok/tiktoks-algorithm-leads-users-transphobic-videos-far-right-rabbit-holes>.

²²⁰ Bucher, 40.

²²¹ Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York: New York University Press, 2018.

²²² Safiya U. Noble, “Algorithms of Oppression,” *The Well Endowed Podcast*, ep. 39, February 8, 2019.

²²³ Brianna Sacks, “YouTube Says It Wrongly Blocked Some LGBT Videos In “Restricted Mode,”” *buzzfeed news*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/briannasacks/lgbt-stars-on-youtube-say-their-content-is-being-unfairly>.

educational, but for a lot of trans folx, access to information on trans health care, transition, prosthetics, or emotional and mental health, is hard to come by outside of already under-resourced nonprofit health organizations. As trans activist DeClan Lawson mentions in his open letter to YouTube on its trans censorship, platforms are crucial for trans communities and can be a lifeline, especially for folx who live in states with anti-trans bathroom bills and rely on information online to navigate bathrooms safely.²²⁴ In the absence of medical information and data on the effects of trans healthcare, from surgeries to hormones, having access to a trans person documenting their lived experience with transition is crucial. In this way, transition vlogs are much more than expressing or broadcasting oneself: they serve as unofficial yet crucial educational content for a community underserved by medical education.

If so much of the concern with trans educational work online is centered around protecting youth from potential obscenity (read: transness as obscenity), it behooves us to turn to the words of trans of color sex workers, who navigate those harmful assumptions on a daily basis, both online and offline. Advocating for the decriminalization of sex work, Valentia Mia puts it succinctly in her sex worker manifesto, “Transgender women, especially transgender women of color, are made into whores by our nation which, in turn, subjects us to inhumane conditions from which there exists no foreseeable escape.”²²⁵ Mia’s reflection makes clear that transwomen are not “problems.” Normative standards of belonging turn them into “problems.”

It matters that Montoya is both trans and Latinx. It matters that she *doesn’t* make pornographic content as a trans Latinx content creator. That her content is flagged reveals more

²²⁴ Declan Lawson, “An Open Letter To YouTube About Censoring Its Transgender Creators,” *Huffpost*, April 10, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/an-open-letter-to-youtube-about-censoring-its-transgender_b_58eba45ce4b0145a227cb6d7.

²²⁵ Valentia Mia, “The Failures of SESTA/FOSTA: A Sex Worker Manifesto,” *TSQ* Vol 7, No. 2, (May 2020): 237-239, 237.

about the stereotypes that govern what she is expected to make and not what she actually makes. After having recovered her TikTok account, Montoya did a livestream in a gray tank top with spaghetti straps. She was banned for “serious pornography.”²²⁶ Even in the absence of visual proof of these stereotypes (a gray tank top with spaghetti straps hardly qualifies as pornographic), flagging Montoya’s educational content as porn is one way to turn her into a “problem” for the platform. [fig. 2.2] By terf or by troll, “individual” views rely on the visual absence of these stereotypes to perpetuate them.

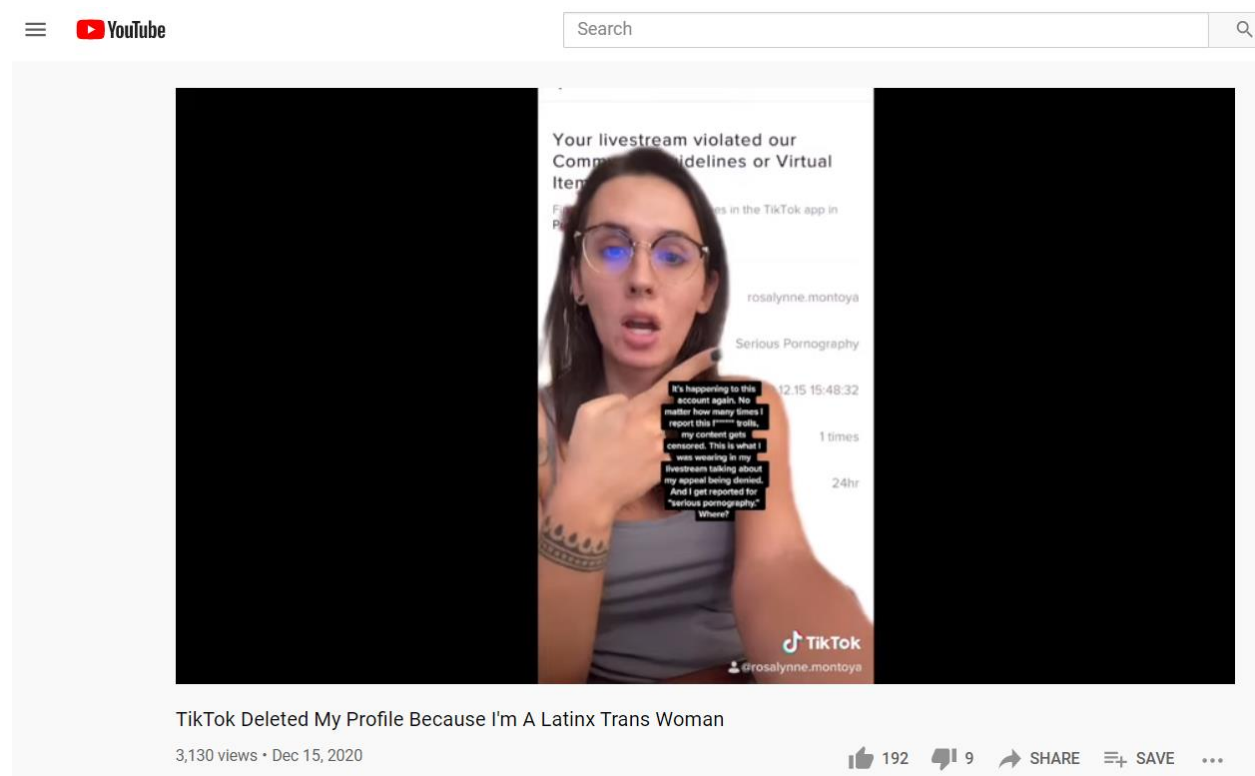


Figure 2: Rose Montoya documents community guideline violation reports.²²⁷

²²⁶ Rose Montoya, “TikTok Deleted My Profile Because I’m A Latinx Trans Woman,” *YouTube*, December 15, 2020,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZbNSXmDkxM&list=PL9Z_Bqn0Ys77mu7OvXd41-dexdgF4Jqbt.

²²⁷ Rose Montoya, “TikTok Deleted My Profile Because I’m A Latinx Trans Woman,” *YouTube*, December 15, 2020,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZbNSXmDkxM&list=PL9Z_Bqn0Ys77mu7OvXd41-dexdgF4Jqbt.

The connection between trans educational content on social media platforms and porn does not solely exist in the public non-trans imaginary. It is also hardcoded into the industrial history of platforms. Carolyn Bronstein traces the history of Tumblr’s 2018 ban on adult content to the platform’s purchase by Verizon, who in a move to expand their advertising reach, implemented the ban. Tumblr announced its commitment to flagging content with “real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, any content—including photos, videos, GIFs, and illustrations—that depicts sex acts.”²²⁸ As Bronstein makes clear, Tumblr’s ban on adult content was financially motivated (to make more space for advertisers) and came shortly after Congress passed SESTA/FOSTA which criminalizes any known assistance or support of sex trafficking on online platforms.²²⁹ The passage of SESTA/FOSTA challenges the safe harbor clause of Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, now making platforms liable for pornographic content.²³⁰ Tumblr’s flagging process made no distinction between education and porn and trans bloggers posting material about surgery were often caught up in the ban even when their material was educational.²³¹ As a result, the impact of its ban was wide-reaching: from sex workers to queer and trans youth sifting through the platform to find community or education.

Montoya’s work is flagged because it doesn’t deliver the stereotype expected of her, that of a hypersexualized transwoman of color, and instead is educational (which, of course isn’t to say that porn isn’t or can’t be educational). It’s what she doesn’t deliver that gets her flagged. Though meant for a larger platform community, Crawford and Gillespie point out that flagging is an individualized complaint system that relies on individual views, and often ones that are

²²⁸ Carolyn Bronstein, “Pornography, Trans Visibility, and the Demise of Tumblr,” *TSQ*, Vol 7, No. 2, (May 2020): 240-254, 240.

²²⁹ Bronstein, 241.

²³⁰ Bronstein, 247.

²³¹ Bronstein, 245.

produced and maintained by larger social institutions.²³² This is especially evident when it comes to “individual” views that are racist or transphobic. That these “individual” views align with common misperceptions that are floated in the mainstream media imaginary is significant. Because she doesn’t perform a “spicy Latina” transwoman in her trans educational video, my hunch is, she is flagged for it.

PART II: COMEDIC DISCOURSE AS TRANS PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVISM

Transing the problem can also occur through comedy. Comedy opens up discussions that the regulatory practices of social media platforms foreclose. James MacDonald, a trans man who is also a standup comedian, writes on the significance of comedy as a place where trans comedians can talk through transness, transphobia, and the different things that impact trans people. He writes, “Comedians are known to be verbal and political tricksters, but also truth-tellers, and this puts them in a unique position of agency and responsibility towards their subjects, the public at large, and structures of power.”²³³ In other words, comedy can help dispel transphobia and educate non-trans folx on how to identify transphobia.

In the digital age, comedy isn’t defined by the comedy club. Just as already established comedians took to social media platforms to expand their following through their socials, many influencers and micro-celebrities have developed their comedic personae online on their own channel.²³⁴ Because the digital stage is accessible in ways that the comedy club isn’t always,

²³² Crawford and Gillespie, 420.

²³³ James Lórien MacDonald, “Comic Trans: Presenting and Representing the Other in Stand-up Comedy,” Thesis, Theater Academy, Uniarts Helsinki, 2018, 38.

²³⁴ Rebecca Krefting and Rebecca Baruc note the different ways that famous comics use social media, mostly to maintain an already existing relationship with their fans (Mindy Kaling's use of Twitter, Maria Bamford's use of twitter as separate from her web series, John Leguizamo's use of Twitter to connect with his fans, etc). Krefting and Baruc are particularly interested in the communities that form around a shared experience on social media (sexuality for instance) and that comedy taps into. See Rebecca Krefting and Rebecca Baruc, “A New Economy of Jokes?:

comedic discourse is taken up in many different ways, and not solely by comedians who perform stand up. I follow Brandy Monk-Payton's analysis of Black queer "sass" and use of comedic discourse on Black twitter as a commitment to critical conversations on social media.²³⁵ Here, I turn to micro-celebrities Ezra Michel and Selyna Brillare. Though Michel and Brillare might not do stand-up comedy offline and though they might not identify as comedians, I consider their use of comedy as a modality of trans pedagogical activism and as a strategy to remain visible on media platforms despite unequal platform visibility.

There is a history of queer Latina/o performance artists who perform identity or disidentity and incorporate comedic elements to address topics like racism, xenophobia, or homophobia. José Esteban Muñoz has written at length about Carmelita Tropicana's performance of "cubana dyke camp" through *choteo* (or Cuban camp) as a cultural comedic form that uses comedy to get to the heavy shit.²³⁶ Similarly, Monica Palacios's use of stand-up both expresses her Chicana lesbian identity and calls out the different forms of racism and homophobia she experiences.²³⁷ The work I look at here, however, departs from these

#Socialmedia #Comedy," in *The Routledge Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Ian Wilkie, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020.

²³⁵ Rather than think about social media as a place where a fan base can be maintained, Brandy Monk-Payton attends to the way social media and Black twitter in particular, is a place for critical discourse that makes use of comedic discourse through Black feminist and Black queer uses of "sass" and "safe" as what she terms "affective strategies of social scrutiny" on Twitter. Drawing from Bambi Haggins who argues that Black comedic space is a "safe communal space," Monk-Payton's analysis shows how Black social media spaces and Black comedic spaces build with one another for critical discourse. See Brandy Monk-Payton, "#LaughingWhileBlack: Gender and the Comedy of Social Media Blackness," *Feminist Media Histories*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (2017): 15-35, 17.

²³⁶ See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 135 and 199.

²³⁷ Barbara Simerka writes about the liminality of Palacios's performances in her 1991 Latin Lezbo Comic. For Simerka, Palacios's work both articulates a liminality expressed through a multiply marginalized identity as well as the use of multiple genres (comedy, dramatic monologue, autobiography). See Barbara Simerka, "The Construction of the Liminal Subject:

performances of identity and disidentify in that they use the comedic to articulate and dispel the violences of transphobia, while also resisting the impact of platform disappearance.

Trans pedagogy can be funny and still be considered activist media. As Albert Laguna's discussion of Latino and Cuban American comedic personae makes clear, there is a somber affect that runs through Latinx studies that ascribes an exclusive seriousness to the discussion of migration or assimilation.²³⁸ There is a similar seriousness expected of testimonios—whether about Latinx or trans experiences. Yet, here, the comedic form only amplifies the activist dimension of Brillare and Michel's videos. Michel and Brillare's videos are also *testimonios*. They are performed and done in the first person. They speak to and with a larger trans and non-trans audience. The cathartic element of testimonios that holds for both the speaker/narrator and listener is carried out here through comedic discourse.²³⁹ In their videos, laughter is audience confirmation and acknowledgment of the stakes of being trans in an anti-trans world, both on and offline.

Ezra Michel uses comedic discourse to educate a non-trans audience on trans problems. In his TikTok video called “that’s he/him to you,” a shirtless Michel playfully sips a drink through a straw with his hat turned back as he casually tells the viewer his new favorite thing: “One of my favorite things lately is playfully misgendering myself, like ooh she’s feeling herself today and then like watching the cis people around me get uncomfy because they don’t know if

Monica Palacios's Latin Lezbo Comic as Dramatic Autobiography,” MELLUS, Vol 22, No. 1, (Spring 1997): 89-104, 89, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468081>.

²³⁸ Albert Sergio Laguna, “Guillermo Alvarez Guedes and the Politics of Play in Cuban America” in *Critical Dialogues in Latinx Studies: A Reader*, ed. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas and Merida M. Rúa, New York: New York University Press, 2021, 266.

²³⁹ Reyes and Rodríguez, 528.

they're allowed to joke like that as well." He pauses, takes a long sip from his drink, looks elsewhere, then returns his gaze to the camera and says, "Oh... you're not allowed to."²⁴⁰

Michel's long pause does something. It performs a refusal to immediately deliver content or give an answer. He poses a provocation: *can a cis person misgender a trans person "playfully"?* Yet his long pause refuses to answer it immediately, forcing viewers to sit with the affective tension between play and harm. As Gilberto Blasini highlights in his analysis of Eduardo Alegría's work, the use of play is crucial to queer performance's ability to destabilize norms and critique power structures that impact identity.²⁴¹

The permission he gives himself to play with his own pronouns is radical. Though not uncommon in many non-trans gay male circles, it means a host of different things for trans people. This is not to say that misgendering is an issue that can or should be laughed away, but because misgendering is *not* funny and produces so much anxiety, comedic discourse is the perfect way to dispel the anxiety it produces. As Bambi Haggins makes clear in her work on Black comedic personae, there are many reasons for laughter. Laughter can be many things. It can be nervous, complicit, or even patronizing. Importantly, laughter can also be a critical form of engagement.²⁴² Michel's use of the comedic might produce different types of laughter scaled to different types of audiences. It might elicit nervous laughter for a non-trans audience (or a trans one). It might elicit the kind of laughter that feels risqué or not permitted for trans

²⁴⁰ Ezra Michel, @ezramichelmusic, *TikTok*, October 13, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@ezramichelmusic/video/7018773368807689478?is_from_webapp=v1&lang=en.

²⁴¹ Gilberto Moises Blasini, "Bien Gorgeous! The Cultural Work of Eduardo Alegría," *Centro Journal*, vol. xix, No. 001, City of University of New York, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños New York, Latinoamericanistas, (2007): 250-273, 253.

²⁴² Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007, 2.

audiences. I've now seen this video dozens of times and I still feel a sort of thrill of transgression. I laugh because I feel like Michel is breaking a rule or saying something he isn't allowed to. Could this get him kicked out of the "community?" Is he violating some kind of guideline? Even if not explicitly about TikTok, I read his provocation and my own transgressive laughter in response to it as a critique of the norms that produce "community" and "guidelines." After all, misgendering *is* a serious community violation (and for good reason!) but the laughter it elicits is both cathartic (for me) and pedagogical for non-trans audiences.

In a blogpost on trans jokes, Jules Gill-Peterson makes clear the pedagogical dimension of trans humor as an antidote to the depressing reality of trans life *and* to the ethics of teaching that reality. She argues that trans paranoia defines the trans genre.²⁴³ Drawing from Sedgwick's paranoid reading, Gill-Peterson considers the trans-related paranoia in having to constantly navigate, imagine, anticipate, and compare, other peoples' readings of us, of our own readings of ourselves. Paranoia, as she puts it, is all about not having to be surprised by a truth. It is a tool to delay that surprise by anticipating it. Trans paranoia, as she puts it, is an "in-house genre" and as genre, it structures what we expect of a situation and in the process reveals the structures of that situation. Crucially, for Gill-Peterson, this is still a form of predictive control. While trans paranoia no doubt teaches us something about the conditions and codes that produce that paranoia, it still adheres to a certain dominant logic. Hence, she argues for a messier and more perverse laughter.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ For a historical understanding of trans as *genre* not as *gender*, see Stone, Sandy, "The "Empire" Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," *Camera Obscura*, 10 2(29), (May 1, 1992): 150-176. In Gill-Peterson's text, I read trans as genre to mean trans-related or trans-themed work.

²⁴⁴ Jules Gill-Peterson, "Paranoia as a Trans Style: The Situation Comedy of Trans Life," February 2, 2021, <https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/paranoia-as-a-trans-style>.

The laughter Michel’s video produces is also critical. It is critical of the norms that shape transness and that we, as trans people, sometimes find ourselves having to defend more than we’d want to, just to make space for trans expression and trans bodies. The permission Michel gives to himself to play with pronouns in a way that doesn’t actually misgender himself is a way of playing through the “transgender problem” while pointing out that it is actually a non-trans problem that is imposed onto trans people.

Trans issues are serious, but the way they are addressed does not only have to assume a serious tone. There is often something serious in the tone of trans 101 videos that are more prominent on YouTube, particularly trans 101 videos that are intended to be pedagogical. Yet, comedic engagements of these same issues can sometimes offer a more effective and far-reaching critique. In a TikTok video called “Airport Adventures,” Selyna Brillare greenscreened a TSA body scan scenario at the airport. Wearing a blue crop top and a short lavender skirt, she first tries to use her EBT card instead of her ID, and when she gets scanned to pass through security, the clothes hanger she uses as a prop for the scanner, beeps as it hovers over her genitals.²⁴⁵ This is a very real and humiliating situation for many trans people when going through airport security. Though I’ve researched and written about the different types of body scanners used at airports, and I have a sense of what might await me when I make it through one, I still get shakey when I pass through the scanner and I see there is too much red on the screen, flagging my gender “anomalies” that don’t fit the system’s two-gender system and will call for a

²⁴⁵ Selyna Brillare, @trapselyna, *Instagram*, March 17, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CMiAFQWhOUG/?utm_medium=share_sheet. At the time of writing this, the link was active. The video, however, has since been removed. It might have been removed against Brillare’s consent or because she herself chose to remove it. I’ve relied on the post as it was initially publicly posted to Instagram, as well as screenshots, and a downloaded copy before it was removed for my analysis. Since the post is no longer visible online, I’ve refrained from sharing screenshots.

pat down or a separate screening.²⁴⁶ Because the TSA agent is the one who decides which gender to scan a person as, and the system then maps the scan to either a cis- “female” or “male” body, many of us trigger its algorithm. If the TSA agent scans me—a transmasculine person—as “male,” wearing a packer or a binder is cause for their alarm. Conversely, if the TSA agent scans me as “female,” the same issue holds. If a TSA agent scans a transfeminine person as “female,” breasts, breast prosthetics, or a clit considered large by their cis anatomical standards will also trigger their algorithm.²⁴⁷ Often the agents get nervous because they don’t know what the gender of the person patting us down should be since protocol is that women pat down women and men pat down men. Here comes the “transgender problem” to disrupt normative protocols again.

Yet, when the scanner beeps on Brillare’s lower body, she slaps her leg and says, “Oh, that’s the WAP. It just be doing that. It’s a tsunami, mami. It’s a weapon of mass destruction. I can’t do nothing about that.” I laughed so hard the first time I saw this video because her response undoes and points to all the “problems” of gender. This is to say gender discipline is a “weapon of mass destruction,” not *her* gender. This makes the system that regulates and defines gender at the expense of transness “everyone else’s fucking problem.”²⁴⁸ That the scanner beeped in the first place might signal that her genitals don’t match what the TSA agent assumes a

²⁴⁶ “Anomaly” was the official term used by TSA to refer to things that triggered the algorithm. However, it has since been replaced with “alarm.” See Dawn Ennis, “Goodbye, ‘Anomaly’—TSA’s New Word for Trans Bodies Is Alarm,” *The Advocate*, December 23, 2015, last updated, December 24, 2015, <https://www.advocate.com/transgender/2015/12/23/goodbye-anomaly-tsas-new-word-trans-bodies-alarm>.

²⁴⁷ See Katie Rogers, “T.S.A. Defends Treatment of Transgender Air Traveler,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/23/us/shadi-petosky-tsa-transgender.html>.

²⁴⁸ Beauchamp argues that surveillance practices often produce, regulate, and contest the category of transgender in post-9/11 U.S. global war on terror practices. See Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019, 13.

woman-expressed person to have. Yet claiming her WAP (“wet ass pussy,” a reference to a song by Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion) she not only corrects the agent and tells him that she is, in fact, a woman, but she also tells him and the audience in the process, what kind of woman she is. She is saying she doesn’t have “genitals.” She has a WAP. If the model of normative femininity is what Christine Jorgensen or Caitlyn Jenner aspire to—white, affluent, conservative—then the “proper” gender is clean dry junk. Having a WAP exposes the production of the “problem” and refuses it. Invoking a Black and Latina feminist, unapologetically sex-positive and sex-affirming WAP, Brillare celebrates the woman she is by refusing the white, conservative, classist norms of transfemininity: “I can’t do nothing about that.”²⁴⁹

Her attempt to use an EBT card to pass airport security instead of a license is also telling. Gender markers and old photos on official IDs are difficult for trans people, especially when the photo on our official ID does not match our current gender presentation, or if the gender marker has not been changed and outs us as trans. She cleverly sidesteps the typical fears of traveling while trans or of showing identification while trans without dismissing those fears. In asking if she can fly with her EBT card, she points to class as another “problem” within “trans problems.” Not all trans people have the same “problems,” especially given the impact being trans can have on a person’s—particularly transwomen of colors’—livelihood. Being trans makes it hard to get a non-criminalized job, maintain a job, and feel safe in the workplace, especially when one is also subjected to racism.²⁵⁰ Within trans communities, transwomen of color experience far more

²⁴⁹ I use “Black and Latina” not to imply a distinction between the two identities, but to account for its overlap. The Black feminism I refer to here is voiced by Cardi B, who is both Black and Latina, and Megan Thee Stallion, who is Black American.

²⁵⁰ This is what Dean Spade refers to as “trans poverty.” See Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, & the Limits of Law*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2015, 83.

financial marginalization than many other community members. Brillare’s use of an EBT card in this TSA video points to the different kinds of problems that trans people face.

Transing the Transition Vlog Genre

In a video taken in a living room in her mom’s apartment, Brillare leans into the camera in a beige polo shirt that is rolled up into a high crop top and a pair of high waisted denim jeans. She shimmies her shoulders and introduces the point of the video: “Teta Update: So, I’m still flat but, like, they’re getting a little bounce, a little jiggle, a little something. They giving voluptuous, me and my orangutang titties. So we’re doing pretty good actually.”²⁵¹ Her casual use of the Spanish “teta” allows for an obfuscation from the algorithm of unbelonging that makes trans affirming and educational content primed to be flagged or removed.

Whereas many breast update transition vlogs are presented as serious, informative, edited, polished, likely longer in length if on YouTube, Brillare’s quick TikToks are goofy and not tagged as “breast update” videos. It’s hard to even know they are about breast growth until she gestures to her breasts or names them. Brillare shows up on screen with a silly line, “chimichanga orangatanga williwonga” and makes it seem like it is or will be a video of her goofing around. She riffs off a reference to “orangutang titties” which likely comes out of a scene in *Scary Movie 2* (Keenen Ivory Wayans, 2001) in which Shorty Meeks (Marlon Wayans) compares two women and contrasts the “perfect breasts” in the portrait of one woman against the “orangutang titties” of his friend sitting next to him. I read the “chimichanga” reference as both

²⁵¹ Selyna Brillare, *TikTok*, April 10, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@selyna.brillare/video/6949599101071789317?source=h5_m&_r=1&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1 The reference to “orangutang titties” likely comes from *Scary Movie 2* (dir. Keenen Ivory Wayans, 2001), in which Shorty Meeks (played by Marlon Wayans) compares two women and says that one has perfect breasts while the other has “orangutang titties.” <https://youtube.com/shorts/RfC4jR8Y7eQ?feature=share>.

ethnic and anatomical. It refers to a Tex-Mex deep-fried burrito. It might be used as a euphemistic phallic reference due to its shape. It could reference racist white bro slang for breasts. “Williwonga” or Willy Wonka, might reference her “candy.” Perhaps it invokes a presumed fantastic technological production of trans bodies. It might also just be there to rhyme. I am interested in the use of a seemingly nonsensical (though very much sense-making!) line to circumvent the flagging and censorship that comes with a more normative, straightforward, and hence hyperlegible introduction to a transition “breast update” video.

Brillare’s “teta” or “titty” updates do not share how she gets her *tetas*. Instead, they mostly focus on growth, sensitivity, etc. Though wrapped in comedic discourse, it is no less educational or vital to the trans community. This is a kind of *transing* of the transition vlog genre that probably allows for a larger non-trans audience, for folk who are usually on her page for comedy, to learn about trans issues in the process.

Brillare's toggling between Spanish and English contributes to her comedic discourse not because it doesn't make sense but because it disarms the seriousness and recognizability of a conventional transition vlog genre and affect. In the process, it also *transes* platform disappearance. Brillare’s use of Spanglish allows for a strategic visibility. If “breast” is too anatomical or too “obscene” for community guidelines or too easy for trolls to spot, then “teta” at least weeds out the monolingual trolls. This isn’t to say there aren’t Spanish-speaking trolls because there are plenty! Some cultural producers who do a lot of work online, like Dash Harris, spells Cuba “C*ba” to avoid anti-Black Cuban American trolls who might report her content or harass her or her followers for posting educational content dedicated to Black Latin American people and histories.

Brillare’s breast updates are often untitled and untagged (except with tags like #fyp, or for your page, to boost general visibility) and are sometimes referred to as “titty update,” “teta update,” or “yiddy update.” In another “yiddy update,” Brillare stands mid-frame in a white tank top doing her goofy intro “orangutonga williwonga” alternating a loose-flexing arm gesture. She then proceeds to do a “yiddie update” with screwball facial expressions: “So we see them. I can’t say too much because TikTok is gonna ban me. But y’all see what I’m seeing. All I got to say to that is: T girls don’t need to take estrogen to be [she puts her face in the camera lens to say this last part in a whisper] real women.”²⁵² Her reminder that hormones don’t make the woman transes the penchant for normativity that many transition vlogs can take.²⁵³

Brillare’s videos rarely address platform discrimination, but that isn’t because she doesn’t experience it. Engaging platform transing, Brillare posted a video to her Instagram about her experience of being pushed off of TikTok. She addressed the harassment, targeted flagging, mass reporting she faced, which led to the ultimate banning of her TikTok account.²⁵⁴ Many of her TikTok videos that I have based my analysis on are no longer available, likely because of the targeted platform disappearance she speaks of. Nonetheless, she remains trans visible. She transes the problem ascribed to trans expression when she uses comedic discourse, Spanish, Spanglish, and gestural comedy to circumvent a more straightforward legibility that will likely

²⁵² Selyna Brillare, *TikTok*, September 14, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@selyna.brillare/video/7007981545826946309?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

²⁵³ Erique Zhang argues that trans beauty vloggers for instance reinscribe conventional gender norms. See Erique Zhang, “Social Media Influencers,” *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*, ed. Abbie Goldberg and Genny Beemyn, (SAGE publications, 2021): 790-791. For a critique of trans normativity within trans vlogs, see C. Ray Borck, Lisa Jean Moore, “This is My Voice on T: Synthetic Testosterone, DIY Surveillance and Transnormative Masculinity,” *Surveillance & Society*, 17(5): 631-640.

²⁵⁴ Selyna Brillare, @trapselyna, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb3nG9lrix4/?utm_medium=copy_link.

get her work flagged and taken down. This is a way of pushing the “transgender problem” back onto those who made it.

I researched and wrote this during the global COVID 19 pandemic, and I am truthfully indebted to the joy that these videos, their playfulness and humor, have given me. Transing via comedic discourse engages the affective dimension of exclusion—feeling brown, feeling like a trans problem—by offering an alternative affect that re-routes brown trans affect through comedy, releasing us from feeling harmed by white binaristic norms, and letting us laugh instead at the absurdity of the conditions that turn trans of color bodies into “problems.”

Despite so many attempts to single out trans “problems,” trans micro-celebrities move across problem spaces, pointing out how problems are crafted by social or algorithmic attempts to render trans expression invisible or pushed off the platform. They make visible what a lot of trans content creators who are not micro-celebrities also experience: having content flagged or removed due to problematic violation codes that turn us into “problems” for the platform or the “community” and recycle transphobic stereotypes, offering up trans expression and trans existence for perpetual debate.

Trans micro-celebrities lean into the pedagogy that triggers algorithms and teach us about remaining visible, even when our presence is considered a threat to the larger “community.” Montoya, Brillare, and Michel show us *how* to remain trans visible despite these exclusions—by *transing* the “problem” itself. The platform, transition vlog conventions, and language, are all *transed* in their work. Transing the problem, especially for trans people of color, can be a radical tool of unbelonging that reveals the exclusionary infrastructure and politics of belonging while nonetheless staying visible, or at least long enough to point them out. That process takes the

“transgender problem” and puts it back on the platform that produces it or sustains its production, making it “everyone else’s fucking problem.”

CHAPTER THREE: Undocumentary Media Visibility at the US-Mexico

Border

Roxsana, ¡Presente! This chapter opens with an acknowledgment. I start by honoring and naming Roxsana Hernández, a thirty-three-year-old transwoman from Honduras who joined Pueblo Sin Fronteras' refugee caravan in March 2018 fleeing anti-trans violence. By denying her medical attention at Cibola Correctional Facility, ICE effectively took her life a few months later.²⁵⁵

There are many stories like hers, most of which do not circulate much beyond trans or queer publications, news, or social media posts. This is in part because media does not cover the deaths of migrants, particularly when those deaths are the result of state negligence. As is the case with many trans deaths in the US, official reports often use legal or dead names and legal gender markers (when these have not been changed) which means these deaths are not visible as trans deaths and are buried under a larger national apathy towards racialized death. Even in death, such trans migrants are violated and erased.

At the time that Roxsana and the Central American caravan she was part of crossed Mexico, temporary *albergues* (shelters) had been springing up all over Tijuana and other border regions. But shelters didn't always provide safety, especially for queer and trans migrants who experienced violence even within the often-religious general shelters. In response, at least a dozen queer and feminist-led shelters emerged to host queer and trans-identified migrants in Tijuana.²⁵⁶ These shelters give im/migrants places to stay, form a community, and access medical and legal resources while they wait to cross the Mexico-US border. This chapter focuses

²⁵⁵ John Brammer, "A Trans Woman's Death Emphasizes Why LGBTQ+ People Need to Fight Against ICE," *them*, May 31, 2018.

²⁵⁶ Interview by author via Zoom with Cristina Franco, then director of Casa Arcoíris, December 13, 2021.

on the media strategies used by one such shelter, a non-profit organization that launched officially in 2018 named Casa Arcoíris Albergue Temporal (Rainbow House; Casa Arcoíris or Casa hereafter).²⁵⁷

To be clear, this is not a chapter about trans necropolitics.²⁵⁸ Rather, it is about the kinds of transnational kinship that support trans and queer life and the media that trans-centered and trans-inclusive activists use to make transnational kinship possible. The work of worldmaking spaces, like Casa Arcoíris, is to insist on the presence of trans and queer *life*. This is a way of countering, as Diana Taylor puts it, the mandate to disappear through presence.²⁵⁹ Even if she has been taken from us, Roxsana lives on and this chapter is dedicated to her presence. Roxsana, ¡presente! In the neverending aftermaths of queer and trans of color death, micha cárdenas tasks us with finding and thinking about kinship. She tasks us with forming and thinking about kin in transnational alliances.²⁶⁰ I try to heed cárdenas's call in my writing about transnational kinship that defies the bordered conditions of anti-trans violence that takes away our trans, Indigenous,

²⁵⁷ Interview by author via Zoom with co-founder Andrea Gaspar, August 22, 2022.

²⁵⁸ The logic of necropolitical knowledge production has shaped trans studies as a field. This is evidenced by the amount of scholarship that has centered on media that narrates trans life through trans death (from Judith Butler to Jack Halberstam). The focus on trans death contributes to a particular kind of trans scholarship that is invested in and benefits from trans death. See C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura. London: Routledge, 2013. See Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, Semiotext(e), 2018. Also see Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021.

²⁵⁹ Diana Taylor, *¡Presente! The Politics of Presence*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020, 106.

²⁶⁰ micha cárdenas, "Monstrous Children of Pregnant Androids: Latinx Futures after Orlando," *Special Issue on Orlando Pulse Massacre. GLQ*, 24(1), (2018): 26-31, 29.

Black, Brown kin. I write about the forms of media that make transnational kin and trans life across borders possible, or at the very least, livable.²⁶¹

The conundrum of visibility is perhaps most obvious at the border: trans and queer migrants face increased violence when visible; yet shelters that serve them need to be visible to the communities they serve and to institutions that support them. I argue that Casa Arcoíris responds to this paradox by using undocumentary media visibility, via the combination of social media visibility and word-of-mouth communication. Undocumentary media visibility is a tool of worldmaking that allows for the circulation of trans*border solidarities, information, and resources among trans and queer migrants in Tijuana. Casa Arcoíris's use of undocumentary media visibility grants the shelter institutional visibility on social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook) while protecting the visibility of its residents by concealing the faces of their residents and the address of the shelter.

Drawing from auto-ethnography, borderlands theory, im/migration studies, digital media studies, trans studies, and ethnic studies, this chapter focuses on activists' responses to the different types of disciplinary visibility that impact trans and queer migrant life. Casa Arcoíris makes use of numerous social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter) though this chapter focuses specifically on their formal media strategies on Instagram and Facebook, such as the use of features like stickers, intentional angles that only partially document community activities, and hashtag practices. Casa's media strategies compellingly show how gender nonconformity can be communicated through creative expression rather than through static

²⁶¹ Judith Butler reminds us that we are always acting under and against conditions of precaritization that make life unlivable. She writes in particular about forms of popular protest that communicate and advocate for a livable life. See Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, London, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, 16.

capture of individual identity or individual disclosure. Their attention and care for agential visibility allows for Casa Arcoíris to form trans and queer migrant community without exposing or commodifying the individual identities of their residents.

Finding Casa

Casa Arcoíris officially emerged in 2019 when the *caravanas* (caravans) were making their way through Tijuana from Central America.²⁶² This was a historical moment when thousands of people arrived to Tijuana from what has become known as the “Northern Triangle” (a term that refers to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala) with many people from the Caribbean joining them. There were not enough shelters in Tijuana to receive the exodus at first. Many emergency shelters that popped up in that moment were religious, making it sometimes difficult for LGBT migrants. In the early days of the *caravanas*, when Casa Arcoíris emerged, there were twelve nonprofit spaces with boards of directors and directory structures.²⁶³ Many of these early spaces were feminist spaces.²⁶⁴ Enclave Caracol was one such space that set up makeshift welcome spaces for migrants with pro bono legal counsel, access to medical and legal resources, volunteer doctors and nurses, and donations of clothes and shoes.²⁶⁵ Like Enclave Caracol, Casa Arcoíris set out to provide temporary shelter to LGBTQ migrants in Tijuana, many of whom are en route to the US. It also provides access to medical, legal, educational, and

²⁶² The *caravanas* from Central America arrived in Tijuana on April 29, 2018. See Jennifer Mogannam and Leslie Quintanilla, “Borders Are Obsolete Part II: Reflections on Central American Caravans and Mediterranean Crossings,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, Issue 2, Vol. 6, September 02, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.5749/CES.0602.mogannam-quintanilla>.

²⁶³ Interview by author with Cristina Franco, then director of Casa Arcoíris, via Zoom December 13, 2021.

²⁶⁴ Interview by author with Cristina Franco, then director of Casa Arcoíris, via Zoom December 13, 2021.

²⁶⁵ Jennifer Mogannam and Leslie Quintanilla, “Borders Are Obsolete Part II: Reflections on Central American Caravans and Mediterranean Crossings,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, Issue 2, Vol. 6, September 02, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.5749/CES.0602.mogannam-quintanilla>.

recreational resources to its residents as they prepare their cases and journeys to cross the Mexico-US border.²⁶⁶

In contrast to previous chapters that focus on trans-led organizations, Casa Arcoíris is not solely trans-led in a strictly identitarian sense. Casa Arcoíris was founded by a number of people who identify in different ways: as non-binary, as gender nonconforming, as queer, and/or lesbians. Just as there is a range of gender and sexual identities of the founders, staff, and residents, the history of the space was not, as co-founder Andrea Gaspar put it, “a straight relationship.” Though some of the co-founders, such as Andrea Gaspar, Nicolasa Córdova, and Christopher Chambers, continue to run the shelter, the project was a large community and cross-organization effort that had started before the *caravanas*.²⁶⁷

Though they might not identify as an institution (this can be a political and sometimes polarizing identity for an organization), they are nonetheless institutionalized. The space existed on paper before it did as an operational space because one community member had done the paperwork for it to exist as a nonprofit organization. The shelter also emerged in response to exploitative US non-profits that relied on the unpaid labor of queer people—and lesbians primarily—who were based in Tijuana and doing the majority of the groundwork.²⁶⁸ Leslie Quintanilla attributes this exploitation to what she calls, “the parachute savior industrial

²⁶⁶ Interview by author with one of the co-founders, Andrea Gaspar, via Zoom on August 22, 2022.

²⁶⁷ Interview by author with one of the co-founders, Andrea Gaspar, via Zoom on August 22, 2022.

²⁶⁸ Interview by author with one of the co-founders, Andrea Gaspar, via Zoom on August 22, 2022. Also see Jennifer Mogannam and Leslie Quintanilla, “Borders Are Obsolete Part II: Reflections on Central American Caravans and Mediterranean Crossings,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, Issue 2, Vol. 6, September 02, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.5749/CES.0602.mogannam-quintanilla>.

complex.”²⁶⁹ She describes this as an entangled system of funding institutions, academics and their supporting institutions, artists, and activists who speak *for* the communities they aim to serve, making top-down decisions on monetary and material distributions without consulting the people who need or use them.²⁷⁰ Unlike non-profits in the parachute savior industrial complex, Casa’s ethical and political commitments structure their internal systems of governance. Casa has explored different structures, from more hierarchical to more horizontal ones. They make most of their decisions as a group.

Since their start in 2018, Casa has become a small yet powerful nonprofit with 10+ staff members, unified around a political commitment to queer and trans migrant activism.²⁷¹ Many critics of non-profit funding structures argue that state funding dampens radical missions. Central to the paradox of funding for activism is that state funding, in particular, is less likely to go towards projects that are actually going to enact systemic change.²⁷² Hence, state funding decreases radical vision and creates what Andrea Smith calls a “soft-control function.”²⁷³ Many critics of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) argue that funding should be local, as it was for many earlier movements like the American Indian Movement (AIM).²⁷⁴ However helpful

²⁶⁹ Quintanilla’s account of the “parachute savior industrial complex” in Tijuana in Jennifer Mogannam and Leslie Quintanilla, “Borders Are Obsolete Part II: Reflections on Central American Caravans and Mediterranean Crossings,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, Issue 2, Vol. 6, September 02, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.5749/CES.0602.mogannam-quintanilla>.

²⁷⁰ Quintanilla, in Jennifer Mogannam and Leslie Quintanilla, “Borders Are Obsolete Part II: Reflections on Central American Caravans and Mediterranean Crossings,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, Issue 2, Vol. 6, September 02, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.5749/CES.0602.mogannam-quintanilla>.

²⁷¹ Interview with Andrea Gaspar, co-founder, via Zoom on August 22, 2022.

²⁷² Andrea Smith, Preface, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE!, Duke, 2017 (originally published by South End Press, 2007), ix.

²⁷³ Andrea Smith, xvi.

²⁷⁴ The non-profit industrial complex is a term INCITE! identifies as coming out of organizing communities. NPIC is significant because it signals a matrix of relationships between the state and social justice movements and it is also linked to the AIC (Academic Industrial Complex),

many of these critiques are, they don't reflect the reality of more precarious organizations like Casa, who are struggling to stay afloat. Because they are primarily directed at bigger organizations who receive federal grants, they eclipse the labor and strategic survival modes of more precarious organizations, like Casa, who navigate the pressures that come with funding structures but also resist neocolonial structures of dependency.

Money comes from somewhere, even if not from the state. When writing about her fundraising for AIM (established in 1968) and the Women of All Red Nations (WARN, established in 1974), Madonna Thunder Hawk says the thought of getting paid for activism was not on organizers' minds.²⁷⁵ Both AIM and WARN relied mostly on donations and speaking tours for funding. Yet fundraising, as Stephanie Guilloud and William Cordery put it, is not a "dirty word." They argue that grassroots fundraising provides a powerful alternative to compromising an organization's mission by receiving state funding.²⁷⁶ That said, leveraging funding from non-state resources does not always mean there aren't any pressures that come with funding. Myrl Beam argues that money for a lot of LGBT nonprofits still comes from rich white donors and issues like racialized poverty don't have the same appeal to those funders as something like homophobia.²⁷⁷ Nonprofits' focus on community positions community as a "form

which is a product of a larger neoliberal context. See *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE!, Duke, 2017 (originally published by South End Press, 2007), xiiv.

²⁷⁵ Madonna Thunder Hawk, "Native Organizing Before the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE!, Duke, 2017 (originally published by South End Press), 102.

²⁷⁶ Stephanie Guilloud and William Cordery, Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide, "Fundraising is Not a Dirty Word: Community-Based Economic Strategies for the Long Haul," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE!, Duke, 2017 (originally published by South End Press, 2007), 107.

²⁷⁷ Myrl Beam, *Gay, Inc.: The Nonprofitization of Queer Politics*, London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 2 and 6.

of hybrid statecraft,” as Beam puts it. This means that “community” is subjected to the disciplinary logics of the state and becomes a tool to both affirm and police marginalized individuals.²⁷⁸

While most of Casa's funding comes from grants, they are also tapped into a transnational network of nonprofits, with funding from Planned Parenthood, seed money in Mexico, grants, fundraising, and GoFundMe initiatives.²⁷⁹ Transgender Law Center, a California-based national non-profit, has been their main funder for the past three years. Critiques of the political trade-offs that can occur when small, radical organizations are tied to larger institutions for funding notwithstanding, Casa’s transnational networks also allow for trans*border visibility. Their commitments are not confined to Mexico. They also work with a network of transwomen on the US side who help keep people out of detention. As one of the co-founders told me in an interview, they do not work alone.²⁸⁰ Casa’s extended political networks enabled my first encounter with them. I first became aware of Casa via social media posts from Los Angeles-based brown, trans, and queer communities, linking to various fundraising initiatives for trans and queer migrant activism in Tijuana.

A Lesson From Casa Arcoíris

My methodology is deeply inspired by the work that Casa Arcoíris does. Because the border is always in crisis, small organizations like Casa Arcoíris are mostly trying to stay afloat. As a small non-profit funded by larger, though marginalized, non-profits, Casa navigates several layers of precarity—from financial to administrative. This makes it challenging to conduct

²⁷⁸ Myrl Beam, *Gay, Inc.: The Nonprofitization of Queer Politics*, London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 11.

²⁷⁹ Interview with Cristina Franco, former director of Casa Arcoíris via Zoom December 13, 2021.

²⁸⁰ Interview with Andrea Gaspar, co-founder of Casa Arcoíris, via Zoom on August 22, 2022.

research visits and interviews. Over the course of a year and a half, I went through several interviews with members, directors, and interim directors. I tried, as diligently as possible, to share my intentions as a researcher at every stage of my interactions. Researching community activism requires a community-based methodology, which I learned from Casa Arcoiris. When I first began this work, I thought that I had a sense of Casa Arcoiris, their work, and their use of media because I followed their social media accounts. I even had a tentative argument mapped out in my mind about trans and queer migrant space-making. However, physically visiting their space taught me how much I had missed when I solely focused on their online presence.

Meeting, speaking with, and listening to the folx at Casa Arcoiris taught me how to discuss their approach to visibility. They showed me how to see their work and write about their use of media visibility. Initially, I set out to write about the space of Casa Arcoiris itself and interview residents. However, an extended exposure to the administrative precariousness of a small non-profit shelter allowed me to understand the stakes of visibility for activist groups. Trying to write about Casa Arcoiris's use of media taught me that I, too, am responsible for maintaining their intentional use of media and visibility.

Theoretical frameworks

Thinking about the different ways in which corporate media and non-corporate media create visibility, I introduce the term undocumentary media visibility to refer to the combination of informal networks and institutional ones that Casa Arcoiris uses to make itself visible as an institution without commodifying or compromising the visibility of its residents. Undocumentary media visibility allows for activist organizational visibility that does not exploit or commodify the individuals these organizations serve. Instead, undocumentary media visibility applies

different levels of visibility to members of its community. It is a tool for a media praxis that allows for intentional visibility.

I build this theoretical framework from a network of terms. I think with Amy Sara Carroll's term, "undocumentation," which is an aesthetic that cultural workers and artists use to respond to structures like market-driven resource extraction at the Mexico-US border.²⁸¹ Undocumentation makes evident that which conventional documentation disappears.²⁸² Carroll's term and my own application of it are undoubtedly linked to the material conditions of documentation that undocumented people are forced to navigate. As a media strategy, undocumentation contends with the structures of precaritization that visibility regimes produce. To be clear, I do not use this term to imply that the residents or community members at Casa are undocumented. I use it to think about media strategies that document careful worldmaking, not people.

I also build on what micha cárdenas refers to as "modulated visibility."²⁸³ Her term reveals the fluidity of visibility, demonstrating that no visibility is fixed: it can be modulated and performed in whatever way is necessary for survival. Though her use of the term is specifically for transwomen of color, I understand its applicability to trans of color people, trans masculine people included, and queer people of color whose sexuality challenges the cis-heterosexist norms of gender. To modulate visibility is to have agency over visibility, to choose when and how to be seen. A lot of this comes out of scholarship on trans and queer of color visibility. Importantly, C. Riley Snorton theorizes the "glass closet" as a way to think through the hypervisibility imposed

²⁸¹ Amy Sara Carroll, *Remex: Toward an Art History of the Nafta Era*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017, 220.

²⁸² Carroll, 225.

²⁸³ micha cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 73, 77.

on Black bodies and the cultural and social implications of queer visibility.²⁸⁴ His theorization of the inherent paradox of visibility that conditions outness for trans and queer of color subjects is helpful here because it shows how visibility is deeply connected to violence. Undocumentary media visibility occurs when an organization or an individual uses different types of media to stagger visibility across a community.

In this chapter, I also offer the term trans*border. Trans*border refers to media and networks that move in ways that bodies cannot always. Trans*border designates intentional movements across geographic borders, and activates the liberatory and coalitional possibilities of transness in the context of border activism. Trans*border invokes *trans* as in transgender, transborder, and transfeminist. Trans*border also invokes *trans* as in translation. Translation also demands accountability. Here, I follow Bliss Cua Lim's approach to translation accountability, which she outlines in her research on film archives in the Philippines. Because of the ongoing threat of disappearance for many of the archivist communities she documents, tracking the people and places she consults brings visibility to their work and holds her accountable for her interpretations and translations. As a way to be held accountable for my own translations, I've provided the original versions of posts that I have translated from Spanish along with my own translation in the footnotes when the posts haven't been translated.²⁸⁵

On the internet, but not on the map

Getting to know an organization online is one thing but trying to find them in physical space is quite another. Though they might exist on the internet, they are not on the map. As I

²⁸⁴ See C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 23.

²⁸⁵ Bliss Cua Lim, *The Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, forthcoming, 21.

quickly learned, this is by design, and it is a key element to their media strategy. Even in the age of increasingly infinite digital mapping tools, there is still a way to keep information intentionally hidden, or at least partially. On Sunday, April 3, 2022, I set out to visit Casa Arcoíris. I took the train from Los Angeles Union Station to Santa Fe Depot in San Diego and switch to the trolley that dropped me off at the San Diego-Tijuana pedestrian border. Once I arrived at the San Ysidro pedestrian border, I passed a humanitarian drop-off booth for Ukrainian asylum seekers and followed a walkway lined with landscaped agave on the ground and multiple layers of barbed wire atop the entrance of the entry point. Armed men were stationed on both sides of the border. The US border agents greeted me with Glocks as I left the US and the Mexican agents greeted me with assault rifles strapped around their torsos when I entered Mexico. Prior to my arrival at Casa Arcoíris, I was asked to sign a waiver agreeing not to disclose the address of the shelter or take pictures that might reveal the identities of the residents. Once the waiver was signed, the coordinator at the shelter shared a pin on google maps with the address of the shelter. I got to the neighborhood where Casa was located early and walked around as I waited for my collaborator to join me. It was a dense residential neighborhood, full of community spaces, homes, and a few restaurants. When my collaborator, Tania Maldonado, joined me, we walked through the neighborhood looking for the right address, a little confused as to the shelter's exact location. Even the GPS on Google maps seemed disoriented.

Online, the shelter is a space with no physical location. Offline, the shelter blends into the neighborhood, somehow hiding in plain sight. There were no rainbow flags or banners on the outside, no markings of a trans or queer *casa*. I was later told that even prospective residents get lost when trying to find the shelter. Hiding in plain sight also has its perks. While many trans and

queer shelters in Tijuana have had to move locations in response to neighborhood hostility towards residents and activists, Casa has not had to move.²⁸⁶

A young person opened the gate for us as they quietly walked past us, with a plastic bag full of clothes or linen balanced on their shoulder. A shift manager came to greet us and walked us in. It felt very much like a home, with a living room and kitchen. As we walked through the living room and into the office to meet the coordinator of culture and education, I noticed a large piece of painted canvas on the living room wall. Black letters in the middle of the canvas in all caps spelled “MIGRANTES LGBT+.” Lining the canvas length-wise on both ends was a series of flags. At the top of the canvas were six flags with the names of the countries either below or beneath them. In order left to right, the flags at the top read: Belarus, Rusia, Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, and Colombia. Beneath the letters was another line of flags: Venezuela, Jamaica, Cuba, Ghana, El Salvador, and Iran. Even when the flags depicted countries that are not Hispanophone, they were nonetheless written in Spanish (‘Rusia’ is spelled with one ‘s’). Though the Mexican flag remained in the top center, I was struck by the fact that it was not the first flag represented. Belarus, Russia, and Guatemala came before it. Given the strong presence of migrants from Central America in Tijuana, particularly since the caravans, it made sense that all three countries from the “Northern Triangle” of Central America were represented (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador).

The letters in the middle of the canvas form what Anzaldúa once referred to as a “tortilla curtain.”²⁸⁷ The tortilla curtain turns the bordered space into a home. A tortilla made of *masa de*

²⁸⁶ Phone conversation with Tania Maldonado, my collaborator, on March 27, 2023. At the time of our visit, Tania did not yet work at Casa Arcoíris. After our visit, she began to work there as a cultural coordinator. At the time of our last phone call, she had just started working elsewhere.

²⁸⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 25th anniversary 4th edition, Aunt Lute Books, 1987, 1999, 2012, 24.

maíz (corn-based dough) tells us of the land and culture the border is on. A tortilla holds, contains, and brings food together. As I later learned, the canvas was painted by residents who have stayed at the shelter and added their country of origin to it.²⁸⁸ The flags make clear the range of nationalities of people at the shelter. They also make clear that the unifying experience at a transnational space is the LGBTQ+ migrant experience, and not a cultural, geographic, or even linguistic one. “MIGRANTES LGBTQ” took up more space than the flags themselves though the colors and countries represented drew in the most attention. The words MIGRANTES LGBTQ+ both separate the different stretches of flags and highlight what they have in common. The “border” in this canvas is visually reconfigured as something that joins the different national representations through various queer identities. As a border, a new meaning is imposed onto the tortilla curtain. Anzaldúa also speaks of the barbed wire of the border as her home.²⁸⁹ Put another way, home is not a place that is here or there. It is sometimes the wound that the border has produced.

The conundrum of visibility

On June 30, 2022, Casa Arcoíris posted an image to Instagram in both Spanish and English to celebrate Pride. A caption at the top of the post in English reads, “Casa Arcoíris has marched because trans women continue to be among the most affected by gender-based violence.” The shelter’s logo is placed next to the caption. Two people hold a banner that reads, “Trans Live Matter.” There are collages of trans women of color on the banner and borders that make up a rainbow flag and a trans flag. Across the banner are phrases like “Interseccionalidad” (Intersectionality), “Derechos” (Rights), “Transgresión” (Transgression), “Diversidad”

²⁸⁸ Interview with co-founder Andrea Gaspar, August 22, 2022, via Zoom.

²⁸⁹ Anzaldúa, 25.

(Diversity), and “Queer.”²⁹⁰ [fig. 3. 1] The two women holding the banner face the camera. Their faces are covered with rainbow stickers. Notably, a caption at the bottom of the post reads, “The privacy of the guests in the shelter is always respected and protected.” This post does more than document participation in a public event to celebrate and support trans and queer life. It also telegraphs Casa’s commitment to using visibility with care. In this section, I outline Casa Arcoíris’s creative strategies to counter the violent impact of visibility offline that online visibility can produce. In particular, I highlight Casa’s strategic use of corporate media visibility on Instagram and Facebook through the careful placement of rainbow stickers (as with this post), and selective angles to protect the identity of their residents. I also describe the strategic use of hashtags to evade identitarian fixity and to engage institutional and international audiences.



Figure 1: Stickers at Pride, Casa Arcoíris.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ Casa Arcoíris, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cfc6uLHLULq/?hl=en>, posted June 30, 2022.

²⁹¹ Casa Arcoíris, *Instagram*, posted June 30, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cfc6uLHLULq/?hl=en>.

Reflecting on trans and queer migrant communities' need to be partially visible, Tania brilliantly framed the conundrum of visibility this way: “¿Cómo se trabaja el orgullo en la casa y en la calle?”²⁹² In other words, how does Casa show their commitment to trans and queer liberation at the shelter and in public without compromising the privacy and safety of residents and staff?

The pandemic brought new stakes to the shelter's online visibility.²⁹³ With a heightened online presence and new limitations and conditions for in-person social interactions, especially early on during the pandemic, the shelter came up with creative strategies to achieve enough visibility to stay afloat, but without compromising the privacy of their residents. As a non-profit space that relies on institutional support, Casa Arcoíris interfaces with various levels of visibility. It must make itself visible to other institutions that might support it and to residents in need of its resources. At the same time, however, it must also protect the privacy and visibility of its residents, who are exposed to different levels of violence in Tijuana, such as xenophobia, racism, transphobia, and homophobia. How do you make a space visible to the people you want to offer protection to without jeopardizing their safety via that same visibility?

Visibility is a spectrum that does not impact all trans and queer people equally. More than a trap to avoid, as Foucault might have it, visibility is a conundrum many must navigate out of necessity.²⁹⁴ In spaces of ongoing crisis like the US-Mexico border, visibility can be lethal. At the border, trans and queer migrants navigate a web of potentially dangerous situations. This could be from the difficulty of crossing the border (regardless of *how*) or it could occur while

²⁹² Tania Maldonado, phone conversation on March 27, 2023.

²⁹³ Interview with Cristina Saucedo (Cris Sau), former head of media communications at Casa Arcoíris, via Zoom August 31, 2022.

²⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 200.

waiting for official asylum paperwork, which can be never-ending and can place migrants in deep financial precarity. Choosing to cross with a coyote places migrants' safety in the hands of those who claim to ensure their crossing and exposes them to the possibility of extortion, blackmail, theft, and rape. These dangers, however, are not limited to the border itself. Migrants face xenophobia and racism while in Tijuana. Queer and trans migrants are also exposed to homophobia and transphobia at migrant shelters as well as in public space in Tijuana. Being visible as a queer or trans migrant means being a target for anti-immigrant, anti-trans, or anti-queer violence and/or extortion. The conundrum of visibility is that being visible as a queer or trans migrant means being vulnerable to a spectrum of potential violence at the border.

Migrants in Tijuana are exposed to an increased risk of assault, in addition to human trafficking or kidnapping.²⁹⁵ Migrants from Central America and the Caribbean, and in particular women and queer and trans migrants, face heightened violence, classism, racism, and xenophobia, in addition to legal challenges as they prepare their case or crossing. As Sylvanna Falcón evidences in her work on violence against women at the US-Mexico border, rape is part of the larger militarization of the US-Mexico border (equipment, training) and military culture. Rape, as she puts it, is a military strategy that has long been an imperialist practice of colonization.²⁹⁶ Just as gendered ideologies and violent misogyny are built into policing practices at the border, sex-segregated detention centers rely on a binary understanding of gender that subjects transwomen in particular to heightened violence.

²⁹⁵ Drishti Pillai and Samantha Artiga, "Title 42 and its Impact on Migrant Families," *KFF*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/title-42-and-its-impact-on-migrant-families/>, Accessed March 31, 2023.

²⁹⁶ Sylvanna Falcon, "'National Security' and the Violation of Women: Militarized Border Rape at the US-Mexico Border," *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, ed. *INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence*, Duke University Press, 2016, 119, 120.

Visibility is integral to border security politics and policies. Patrolling and surveilling the border has always been tied to a white supremacist settler nation-state's understanding of land and belonging. Immigration law works in tandem with border patrol to constantly define and redefine the boundaries of US national belonging.²⁹⁷ D. Asher Ghertner, Hudson McFann, and Daniel M. Goldstein write that security is not just a disciplinary tool of governmentality. It has an aesthetics and an affect rooted in the need to protect against future threats.²⁹⁸ They identify three modalities of security aesthetics: defensive enclosure (walls, barbed wire, etc); screening threats (surveillance systems); and the calibration of vulnerabilities (placing experiences and people into hierarchies as a tool of regulation).²⁹⁹ At the US-Mexico/Mexico-US border, all three of these modalities are present. But they don't begin and end at the border. The border itself is a wound, as many Chicana/x feminists tell us. It is also a militarized settler structure that divides and occupies Kumeyaay territory. Macarena Gómez-Barris calls the US-Mexico border "an archetypal space of colonial and militarized violence in the hemisphere" because its impact exceeds geographic and national borders. The violence of the US-Mexico border spirals outward to the US Southwest, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ Even the CBP's official government website traces the history of Border Patrol to "mounted guards" or "mounted watchmen" and later dispatched by Congress as "mounted inspectors." Mounted Inspectors mostly rode on horseback and had designated inspection stations. They also had support from Military troops who assisted border patrol when Mounted Inspectors remained at their stations. They surveilled the border and intervened in crossings in 1904 from El Paso, Texas to California, mostly "trying to restrict the flow of illegal Chinese immigration." See Border Patrol History, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, <https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/history>, Accessed March 31, 2023.

²⁹⁸ D. Asher Ghertner, Hudson McFann, Daniel M. Goldstein, "Introduction: Security Aesthetics of and beyond the Biopolitical," in *Futureproof: Security Aesthetics and the Management of Life*, ed. D. Asher Ghertner, Hudson McFann, Daniel M. Goldstein, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020, 4.

²⁹⁹ Ghertner, McFann, Goldstein, 5.

³⁰⁰ Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Beyond the Pink Tide: Art and Political Undercurrents in the Americas*, Oakland: University of California, 2018, 68.

Casa Arcoíris's trans*border worldmaking project intervenes into the violence of the border. This chapter does not approach the border via what Leo Chavez calls the "Latino threat," or how Latinos (mostly Mexicans) are perceived as a threat taking over Anglo-American national identity and retrieving their land.³⁰¹ The discourse around the border with Mexico has shifted. The increased visibility in immigration from Central America and the Caribbean has been accompanied by the disproportionately punitive treatment of asylum seekers at the border, undergirded by xenophobia, anti-Black racism, and anti-Haitian sentiment, in Mexico and the US. While I make note of this shift in migratory patterns, this chapter does not trace this shift nor does it intervene into the hegemonic narratives within academia and in the popular imaginary about migration (for instance, the idea that the majority of migrants crossing the Mexico-US border are Mexican or that all Cubans and Haitians come by raft or boat, when in fact many come by land).

While the US portrays the "threat" of invasion flowing South to North, xenophobic security logics flow the opposite way. The US pours its resources into securing its southern border. Yet, a lot happens south of that border that replicates US logics of security. Within the growing field of study on caravan migration, Eduardo Torre Cantalapiedra's work on the caravans in Mexico makes clear that Mexico—as a transit place towards the US—also became part of a border continuum, which he calls a "frontera vertical mexicana"³⁰² (a vertical Mexican border). In Cantalapiedra's formulation of the "frontera vertical Mexicana," Mexican migration policy functions as an extension of US anti-immigrant policy and sentiment. What la *frontera*

³⁰¹ See Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

³⁰² Eduardo Torre Cantalapiedra, *Caravanas: Sus protagonistas ante las Políticas Migratorias*, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2021, 81.

vertical mexicana makes clear is the flow of power, not migration perse. In other words, xenophobic security logics flow, in part, along a vertical axis coming from the US. This isn't to say that the US is solely responsible for Mexican xenophobia against non-Mexican migrants in Mexico. As Harsha Walia underscores in her work on borders, positioning the US as a blueprint for other countries' border xenophobia problematically extends a form of US exceptionalism and absolves other countries of accountability.³⁰³ It is also important to acknowledge that the border is a settler construct that separates two settler nation-states, the US and Mexico. Elizabeth Ellis reminds us that prior to Anglo or Mexican rule, what we now refer to as the "borderlands" was and continues to be Native land. The Southwest has been the homelands to Apaches, Caddos, Comanches, among other peoples.³⁰⁴

Undocumentary Media Visibility

Casa Arcoíris uses social media knowingly. They use corporate platforms for corporate or institutional visibility, without exploiting the visibility of vulnerable residents. Instead, they stagger visibility for their residents and staff through a creative engagement with undocumentary media visibility by allowing for different tiers of visibility. Some might be fully visible (via face

³⁰³ Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021, 2.

³⁰⁴ See Elizabeth Ellis, "The Border(s) Crossed Us Too: Intersections of Native American and Immigrant Fights for Justice," *Hemispheric Institute*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 2018, <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-14-1-expulsion/14-1-essays/the-border-s-crossed-us-too-the-intersections-of-native-american-and-immigrant-fights-for-justice-2.html>. Similarly, Juliana Barr reminds us that referring to places like Texas as the "Spanish borderlands" maintains a settler understanding of space. Barr writes, "Missionary maps often ignored native geography, detailing instead atomized cities, villages, and dwellings as locations where they might find potential converts. Such itinerary, or wayfinding, maps thus reduced sovereign Indian realms to singular sites and the routes by which to reach them. Yet Indian domains they remained." See Juilana Barr, "Geographies of Power: Mapping Indian Borders in the "Borderlands" of the Early Southwest," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1, (January 2011): 5-46, 18.

and name, for example) while other folk might only show their hands and not their faces. Casa Arcoíris makes use of social media to arouse the interest of potential financiers (whether institutions, grants, or individuals via GoFundMe campaigns). They do this while maintaining a degree of *invisibility* for residents. To protect its residents, Casa Arcoíris adopts several rules. Residents are not allowed to disclose the address of the shelter to anyone who isn't a resident or potential future resident.³⁰⁵ They are also not allowed to post pictures of the residents or the shelter on social media.³⁰⁶ Their workshops, however, which range in focus from legal resources to beauty pageants, are publicly visible on Casa Arcoíris's official social media pages and accounts. Thus, Casa Arcoíris's strategic use of media both exposes and makes use of a "paradox" activist media scholars so often write about. As Chris Robé makes plain, activists' use of digital media boosts a social movement's identity and participation, but it also exposes marginalized communities to corporate social media platforms' data mining practices.³⁰⁷ Hence, rendering marginalized communities *visible* also renders them *vulnerable* to the state or hateful individuals.

Undocumentary media visibility shares similarities with small media, though the visibility that undocumentary media creates is a result of how it is used, and not a result of the infrastructure it employs. Small media is typically associated with alternative media that operate outside of corporate and state structures and that use participatory channels and networks to

³⁰⁵ Interview with former director Cristina Franco via Zoom, December 13, 2021.

³⁰⁶ *Idem*.

³⁰⁷ Chris Robé, "Small media activism: Dossier on connective and collective practices—small media activism in the twenty-first century," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 60, (Spring 2021): 1-17, p. 10, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc60.2021/Robe-DossierActivism/3.html>.

organize against a dominant political system.³⁰⁸ Examples of small media might be Cuban revolutionaries' use of independent radio station in the 1950s, or the Zapatista's use of the internet in the 1990s.³⁰⁹ What makes media small is the way it is used.³¹⁰ Yet a lot of activist media today makes strategic use of corporate media structures (consider copwatch activists who use smartphones to document police brutality and upload their videos to archives hosted by platforms such as YouTube). Unlike small media, undocumentary media visibility is not defined by technological features but by the intent of its message: to foster counter-hegemonic discourse. As Michael Chanan reminds us, small media interfaces with big media.³¹¹ Using big media, even if in small ways, produces a different kind of visibility—one that is intentionally negotiated in community.

Sasha Constanza-Chock's work on LA immigrant rights activism from 2006 to 2013 is instructive here. Their work shows the centrality of participatory media making alongside the use

³⁰⁸ Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi Ali Mohammadi, *Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, xx.

³⁰⁹ Michael Chanan, "Video Activism, and the Art of Small Media," *Transnational Cinemas*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2011): 217-226, 218.

³¹⁰ Media does not have to be innovative to be revolutionary. As Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi write on the use of media in the Iranian Revolution: "small media can make revolution." See Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi Ali Mohammadi, *Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, xix. The making of revolution via small media has more to do with the way media is used than with which media, platform, or technology is used. Though Zapatismo is often cited as one of Latin America's earliest examples of internet activism, Thea Pitman argues that it wasn't that the Zapatistas were particularly tech-savvy; rather, they had sympathizers all over the world who were. Their sympathizers would circulate Zapatista content on their listservs, newsgroups, and websites. Pitman argues that the Zapatistas embraced the way people circulated their material online and the common associations people made between their movement and high-tech guerrilla activism. See Thea Pitman, "Latin American Cyberprotest: Before and After the Zapatistas," *Latin American Cyberculture and Cyberliterature*, ed. Claire Taylor and Thea Pitman, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007, 90, 91.

³¹¹ Chanan, 217.

of multiple—often corporate—platforms to expand the reach of an activist movement.³¹² In my analysis, Casa Arcoíris’s use of a corporate platform for institutional visibility is strategically combined with a way of sharing information that is less trackable by corporate and government entities: word of mouth. While Casa Arcoíris uses social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram to make itself visible to potential institutional funders, it also uses word of mouth to promote visibility to prospective residents. Casa Arcoíris’s use of undocumentary media visibility renders the shelter and its residents visible to the communities they care for and who support them, yet invisible to those who might harm them.

Casa Arcoiris creates undocumentary media visibility, which is a form of counter-security media. Undocumentary media visibility invokes “small” uses of big media to stagger different levels of visibility to community members. In her writing on minor lesbian cinema, Patricia White writes that “minor” cinema is not in opposition to a dominant form of cinema; rather it “inflects rather than opposes the dominant.”³¹³ Similarly, undocumentary media visibility inflects “big” or corporate media with an alternative use. Each platform reaches a different audience. Casa’s website, Instagram, and Facebook accounts all display their phone number so that prospective residents or people from the queer migrant community can contact them. Most of their communication with prospective residents is via messages on Facebook or

³¹² As I understand it, transmedia organizing is one of many ways to use corporate media strategically. For Constanza-Chock, this allows for movements to circulate widely and gain more participants with different ways of identifying with the movement. See Sasha Constanza-Chock, *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets! Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrants Rights Movement*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. London: England: The MIT Press, 2014, 4.

³¹³ Patricia White, “Lesbian minor cinema,” *Screen* 49:4, (Winter 2008): 410-425, 411.

by phone. The folk who contact them on Instagram tend to want to collaborate, help, or propose a workshop.³¹⁴

A website for staggered institutional visibility

A website is a legitimizing tool for a non-profit organization. It establishes the organization's mission, story, and accomplishments. It's also standard practice for many 501(3)c's to have public websites. Casa Arcoíris has an official website in both English and Spanish where they offer their story, mission, services, and contact information. A bilingual website undoubtedly reaches different audiences: transnational funders in the US might have easier access to the English version while potential residents might access the Spanish one. In addition to listing services like housing, legal aid, healthcare, and various events and workshops, Casa's website also offers a directory of resources for migrants in Tijuana, with contact information for shelters for trans and queer communities including Centro de Rehabilitación, Jardín de las Mariposas, A.C.; shelters for youth and families, such as YMCA de Desarrollo Comunitario y Asistencia Social, A.C. and Espacio Migrante; shelters for women, like Instituto Madre Asunta; and shelters for single men, such as Casa del Migrante. They also host links for legal aid in Tijuana and contact information for transnational organizations like Border Butterflies, Al Otro Lado, and USCRI Mexico. Links to other organizations, including other shelters, communicate Casa's goal as a collaborative transnational institution that is committed to the well-being and political freedom of all migrants, regardless of where they can seek shelter.

Making sure that each staff member chooses the kind of visibility they want while rendering the shelter visible as an establishment is a use of undocumentary media visibility.

³¹⁴ Interview with head of media communications, Cristina Saucedo (Cris Sau) at Casa Arcoíris, via Zoom, August 31, 2022.

While they list their phone number and email address, their website does not reveal their address. Even on their resource directory, where they list their own shelter, in lieu of an address, they say “Address details not public.”³¹⁵ In addition to protecting the physical location of the shelter, they do not post any images or information that reveals the identity of their residents. Undocumentary media visibility is extended to staff, who interface with lesbophobia, queerphobia, transphobia, and the ongoing threat of femicides that impact women—trans and cis—and femme-presenting people, particularly at the Mexico-US border.³¹⁶ Some staff members opt for partial visibility on the shelter’s official website. Some staff display their name and photo but leave out personal information other than their name and title. In place of a biography, they provide a statement instead that reads, “Undisclosed Information. For Casa Arcoiris it is very important to respect and preserve the trust and right to privacy of our team members. Personal information is always treated in confidentiality and in accordance with the laws, regulations, and principles applicable to the protection of personal data.”³¹⁷ Others include a more personal bio (with educational history and interests) but opt for a picture that only shows part of their face. Some include a more conventional headshot, name, and biography. The implication is clear: not every member of the organization has to be equally visible in order for the group to be visible as a whole.

Undocumentary media visibility on Instagram

Casa Arcoiris uses Facebook and Instagram to post about events held at the shelter and about local news and binational policies that impact residents and the trans and queer and

³¹⁵ Directory, Casa Arcoiris, Accessed March 31, 2023, <https://casaarcoiris.org/en/directory/>.

³¹⁶ See Sayak Valencia, “Necropolitics, Postmortem/Transmortem Politics, and Transfeminisms in the Sexual Economies of Death,” *TSQ*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2019): 180-193.

³¹⁷ Casa Arcoiris website <https://casaarcoiris.org/en/our-team/> Accessed Aug 31, 2022.

migrant communities to which they belong.³¹⁸ The events they host include visits with other non-governmental organizations that provide legal or medical services for asylum-seeking migrants. Events also include workshops that span English lessons, psychology courses, photo transfer, or ceramics workshops. Though their social media accounts are set to public, the workshops themselves are private events for the residents. Protecting residents' identities with stickers or camera angles that keep their faces out of view on promotional posts that aim to boost institutional visibility is a use of undocumentary media visibility. Residents are often featured in promotional material, but strategic camera angles and heart-shaped rainbow stickers obscure their faces.

Casa's use of Instagram posts counters the more standard use of Instagram, which is commonly associated with selfie culture's emphasis on exposing, sharing, or performing identity.³¹⁹ Selfie culture is a form of self-expression—one of the many ways that online platforms shape identity. It is a way of crafting a version of oneself online. Beyond thinking of the selfie as a form of self-expression, Nicole Erin Morse argues that when transfemme users post selfies online, selfies become a participatory form of becoming, through which the viewer participates.³²⁰ Like the broader issue of visibility for trans and queer people, the process of

³¹⁸ Though the majority of their posts are promotional, some are explicitly political. In an interview with co-founder Andrea Gaspar via Zoom on August 22, 2022, I learned that the group wants to do more political work on social media.

³¹⁹ See Elisa Serafinelli, *Digital Life on Instagram: New Social Communication of Photography*, Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019, 151. Also see Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1st edition, 2020, 65.

³²⁰ Nicole Erin Morse, *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 18.

public becoming is fraught with risk. As Morse puts it, selfies make trans users *more* vulnerable by exposing them online.³²¹

Morse's concern for the social context for selfie vulnerability may also be extended to economic vulnerability. Instagram is part of the Facebook empire, now known as "Meta." This empire includes WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram.³²² To post anything at all on Instagram is to participate in Meta's political economy of media.³²³ Posts provide information about users. User information in posts are mined as consumer behavior, which is of value to Instagram because Instagram is an ad-based platform.³²⁴ Users' consumer behavior is profitable data to potential ad companies. As Leaver and Highfield put it, Instagram is not just a social media platform, it is "a space where communication and commerce have overlapped."³²⁵ To use Instagram is to agree to its terms of use, which state that creating an account or even just using the app means consenting to their terms of service. Their terms of service explicitly acknowledge their relationship with law enforcement as well as third-party partners who use that data for sponsored content and ads.³²⁶ Data acquired on the app is stored, shared across other Meta Companies, and transferred globally. The data they collect includes names, email addresses,

³²¹ Morse specifically traces this to the danger of the "gender reveal," 58.

³²² Facebook was rebranded as Meta in 2021, after the Cambridge Analytica data leak in 2018 and subsequent Facebook boycotts in 2020.

³²³ See Elisa Serafinelli, *Digital Life on Instagram: New Social Communication of Photography*, Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019, 103.

³²⁴ Serafinelli, 106.

³²⁵ Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1st edition, 2020, 1.

³²⁶ Instagram, Terms of Service as of July 26, 2022, <https://help.instagram.com/581066165581870>.

phone numbers, posts, comments, audio, camera content, voice features, metadata about content, the types of content that people interact with, other apps uses, purchases, and hashtags.³²⁷

Significantly, they also collect information about friends, followers, groups, accounts, and “other users and communities you’re connected to and interact with.”³²⁸ This means that revealing the faces of Casa’s residents turns them into data scrapes their networks for more data. However, in Casa’s posts, faces are neither exposed nor commodified. The use of strategic angles and stickers diverts attention away from the identities of the individual residents or members of the organization. While stickers are features of the app and hence might be placed after an image has been uploaded to Meta’s empire, the use of stickers, like strategic angles, nonetheless signals a refusal to be seen, even if data is coercively collected. However, in most of the images that Casa uses in their social media posts, the stickers are added offline, before they are uploaded to social media apps.³²⁹ Stickers modulate visibility of those featured in their documentation to create undocumentary media visibility.

A face is just as central to selfie culture as it is to mobility at the border. Recognizing a person's face poses a danger for migrants. The state relies on facial recognition to corroborate the identity of asylum seekers at the border. With the more recent reliance on biometric technologies and the use of phone-based apps to process asylum requests, US Customs and Border Protections recently started vetting asylum seekers at the border with a phone app called CBP One. As Camilla Fojas notes, CBP One impacts gender nonconforming and trans asylum seekers because

³²⁷ “Meta Privacy Policy: How Meta Collects and Uses User Data,” *Instagram*, January 1, 2023, <https://privacycenter.instagram.com/policy/>, Accessed March 31, 2023.

³²⁸ “Meta Privacy Policy: How Meta Collects and Uses User Data,” *Instagram*, January 1, 2023, <https://privacycenter.instagram.com/policy/?subpage=1.subpage.2-FriendsFollowersAndOther>, Accessed March 31, 2023.

³²⁹ Personal communication with Cristina Saucedo (Cris Sau), March 30, 2023.

their application might be denied if their picture does not match their gender expression. Applicants need to submit their data to the app in order to make an appointment.³³⁰ The US CBP's official instructions on how to use the CBP One app, per their YouTube videos, make clear that applicants need to scan their passports and take a photo before submitting their application. The photo needs to be taken at the moment of submitting the application. This means that if the person's gender expression has changed since their passport picture, their application might be at greater risk of being denied.³³¹

Angling visibility to express gender fabulosity, not gender identity

Unlike selfies, which are all about showing and framing the face, Casa's posts purposefully hide residents' faces. Taking pictures from specific angles so that peoples' faces are never exposed reflects conscious decisions that were made when the event was documented. In a post about a series of ceramics workshops held at Casa Arcoiris, participants engaged in an activity with their backs to the camera.³³² The workshop appears to be held in an outdoor space with a Casa Arcoiris Albergue Temporal banner on the wall and a rainbow color inflatable ceiling drop. The post description reads, "¡Continuamos con las clases de cerámica en Casa Arcoiris! [sun emoji] En cada clase aprendemos nuevas técnicas y descubrimos nuevas habilidades en comunidad. Practicamos estar presentes a través de la artesanía y materializamos

³³⁰ For more, see Camilla Fojas, Seminar presentation at the Latinx Digital Media Virtual Seminar Series, March 09, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9QejSZGTV0>. The CBP One app is part of what Fojas calls "borderveillance," a form of social control that uses optic technologies to surveil, control, and sort migrant mobility at the border. See Camilla Fojas, *Border Optics: Surveillance Cultures on the US-Mexico Frontier*, New York: New York University Press, 2021, 3.

³³¹ "CBP's Official Step-by-Step Instructions to Submit an Advance Travel Authorization in CP One," *YouTube*, March 01, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcYU2oRGi88>, Accessed March 31, 2023.

³³² Casa Arcoiris, *Instagram*, June 26, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChLAQsWvh3w/>.

partes de nuestras personalidades en la arcilla. Gracias @lustre.estudio y @ centro32fbt [star emoji]” (We continue our ceramics classes in Casa Arcoíris [sun emoji]. In each class, we learn new techniques and we discover new skills in community. We practice being present through craft and we materialize parts of our personalities through clay. Thank you @lustre.estudio and @centro32fbt [star emoji].)³³³ [fig. 3.2] The post contains eight images that document one of the ceramic workshops held with Centro 32 FBT, a Mexican organization dedicated to immigrant and migrant advocacy, and Lustre Estudio, a ceramics studio in Tijuana.



Figure 2: Angles at Ceramic Workshop, Casa Arcoíris.³³⁴

³³³ This translation is my own. See Casa Arcoíris, *Instagram*, September 02, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChLAQsWvh3w/>.

³³⁴ Casa Arcoíris, *Instagram*, posted August 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChLAQsWvh3w/>.

Following the first image of the group are closer shots of individuals working on their ceramics pieces. Most of the images are over-the-shoulder shots that show the back of residents' heads rather than frame their faces. We see the sculptures they are working on and parts of their hands or arms. [fig. 3.3] Though we do not see the artist's face, we see the face of the sculpture they've made. One image shows a person holding a paintbrush in one hand, fingers fanned out towards the bust of a person with breasts and a headband. She appears to be showing her completed sculpture along with her immaculate nails. This faceless frame humanizes the residents without exploiting their visibility.



Figure 3: Fabulosity, Ceramics Workshop, Casa Arcoiris.³³⁵

This particular image is striking. The person's fanned-out fingers are covered in clay and seem to celebrate both the accomplishment of the sculpture and their immaculate long red nails with a playboy bunny icon on their pink ring fingernails. Their nails are so detailed they seem to

³³⁵ Idem, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChLAQsWvh3w/>.

compete with the sculpture or “object” of the workshop. How does one maintain these perfect nails while working with ceramics? This image does not disclose the resident’s identity but it still manages to communicate a subject position. These nails convey a sense of gender so fabulous it exceeds the kind of identity that can be captured. Here, I think with Manalansan’s use of fabulosity as an aspirational way of acquiring “stuff” in undocumented trans and queer immigrant households.³³⁶ I also think with Jillian Hernández’s theorization of the aesthetics of excess, which she uses to discuss racialized working-class Latina women and girls’ self-styling.³³⁷ These legendary nails express a gender that exceeds a capturable identity. That is the point of this image. It telegraphs queer gender without outing or exposing an individual identity. In the process, it also documents the reasons why strategic visibility is important.

While strategic angling does not fully protect gender nonconforming community members from data extraction on social media, nor social or state violence at the border, it does communicate a commitment to protect their identities. It signals to prospective and current residents that this is a shelter where visibility is negotiated in community. This is important because folx under the LGBT umbrella are not all visible or vulnerable in the same way. There is

³³⁶ In the footnotes to Manalansan’s article “The “Stuff” of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives,” he uses the term “fabulous,” but he indicates that “fabulosity” is the term for his larger ethnographic project. He introduces the term “fabulosity” in his keynote lecture at the 2013 Feminist Theory Workshop at Duke University. See 2013 Feminist Theory Workshop Keynote Speaker Martin F. Manalansan IV, *YouTube*, April 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdMUBO3ZvLc>, Accessed March 31, 2023. Also see Martin F. Manalansan IV, “The “Stuff” of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives,” *Radical History Review*, Issue 120 (Fall 2014): 94-107.

³³⁷ Hernández theorizes aesthetics of excess as a framework to understand how racialized working-class women and girls of color self-style to express their identity contra the white assimilationist politics of beauty norms. See Jillian Hernández, *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020, 17, 18. Juana María Rodríguez also writes about the ways that excess marks both the queer and Latinx body. See Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, New York: New York University Press, 2014.

an increased visibility of protections geared towards trans immigrants—and trans women of color in particular—within human rights-based organizations. This dates to a 2012 Obama-era memo called “US Leadership to Advance Equality for LGBT People Abroad” that outlined various initiatives to assist international LGBT communities, including expedited asylum cases for “vulnerable” LGBT applicants. As a “vulnerable identity,” “transgender” was not always included in the US’s asylum system for sexual minorities.³³⁸ These policies have led to different strategies used by human rights-based organizations—ones that often center trans subjects as exceptionally vulnerable.³³⁹ Aren Aizura describes this as an “administrative visibility” that positions trans and gender-expansive immigrants as “vulnerable” and in need of rescue via governmental intervention. However, trans immigrants are only seen as valuable because their “rescue” makes the state’s immigration policy seem less lethal, more compassionate, more forgiving and more progressive. Once stateside, however, those same trans subjects will not be seen as worthy of access to housing, income, health care, etc.³⁴⁰ It’s also true, as Aizura makes plain, that the conditional visibility allotted to transwomen in many human rights campaigns is merely an administrative strategy that, ironically, reifies US national power and xenophobic and transphobic internal policies.

Undocumenting events with stickers for partial visibility

³³⁸ Chávez analyzes space and gender performativity theory through a case study of Victoria Arellano, a transwoman who died in a men’s ICE detention facility in 2007. At the time of Arellano’s death, “transgender” was not included in US’s touted “progressive” asylum system for sexual minorities. See Karma R. Chávez, “Spatializing gender performativity: Ecstasy and possibilities for livable life in the tragic case of Victoria Arellano,” *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 2010, Vol. 33, (Issue 1): 1-15, 7.

³³⁹ Aren Z. Aizura, “Affective Vulnerability and Transgender Exceptionalism: Norma Ureiro in *Transgression*,” *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities*, ed. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Sarah Tobías, Rutgers, 2016, 122.

³⁴⁰ Aizura, 124.

Casa also uses stickers to hide residents' faces. For example, in an Instagram post about a workshop on the asylum process, all attendees have their backs to the camera and have rainbow stickers over their heads. A person who appears to be leading the event does not have a sticker on their face. However, even their face is not "revealed" as it does not directly face the camera. This post documents an event held by Border Butterflies, a transnational migrant advocacy organization, for the residents at Casa Arcoíris on asylum applications. The title of the post reads: "Border Butterflies Da Accesoría Sobre Asilo a Residentes en Casa Arcoíris." (*Border Butterflies Gives Advice on Asylum to Residents in Casa Arcoíris*) A longer description of the event floats above the image described above. It reads, "Border Butterflies da Accesoría Sobre Asilo a Residentes en Casa Arcoíris. Border Butterflies sostuvo conversaciones con residentes LGBTI+ en Casa Arcoiris, se realizaron y se llevaron formularios para solicitudes de asilo." (*Border Butterflies held conversations with LGBTQI+ residents in Casa Arcoíris, conducted interviews, gave advice, and filled out forms for asylum petitions.*)³⁴¹ [fig. 3.4]

³⁴¹ Most of their posts are posted twice, once in English and once in Spanish. This post, however, was only in Spanish. The above translation is my own. See Casa Arcoíris, *Instagram*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeE9tdZLKR8/> Accessed March 31, 2023.



Figure 4: Stickers at Asylum Workshop, Casa Arcoiris.³⁴²

This post shows that a trans*border community can be visible without exposing or exploiting the visibility/vulnerability of its members. While many nonprofit organizations and non-governmental organizations might use social media to express a collective or group identity (and not an individual one, as would be expected of selfie culture), Casa’s posts show that a community expression withholds rather than exposes individual identities. Part of how Casa does this is through its use of stickers to hide the identities of its residents. Stickers are not solely decorative. Stickers are a feature of the app.³⁴³ Typically used to supplement images or text,

³⁴² Casa Arcoiris, *Instagram*, posted May 27, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeE9tdZLKR8/>.

³⁴³ Using stickers on Instagram is not new. Instagram started as a location-based photo communication app by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010. In its early stages, Instagram was mostly known for its relationship to photography, hence its initial icon was a polaroid. Because Instagram was an app that was associated with turning an amateur into an *instant* photographer through the use of digital filters, it rapidly became associated with selfie culture. Basic filters were made available on Instagram as early as 2010 and stickers followed suit some years later in 2016. Stickers became a staple feature of Instagram when *Stories* were implemented in 2016. See Søren Vigild Poulsen, “Becoming a semiotic technology—a historical

stickers are also used to cover nipples or genitalia to avoid a picture from being removed. However, Casa doesn't use the app's stickers. Instead, they use design software, like Canva, to place stickers on images prior to uploading them. Adding stickers to the images they post inflects a minoritarian use of corporate media. Stickers achieve undocumentary media visibility while still functioning within the graphic language of the platform.

This post is not a typical form of documentation. If documenting an event involves capturing as much of the event as possible, choosing to hide the participants' faces creates undocumentary media visibility to protect individual identities while documenting the event the residents were part of. Undocumentation, in this case, emphasizes political identity over individual identity. This isn't to say that individual identity isn't important (because it is, especially when violence is a result of gender or sexual identities). Rather, it's to say that the identity that Casa documents builds with individual experiences to express a political orientation toward migrant advocacy. A post about a workshop on asylum support made in collaboration with a transnational migrant advocacy organization signals the kind of space that Casa is and the kind of migrant politics and activism to which they are committed.

Casa staggers visibility to express their political commitments to migrant advocacy in the street. Take for example, their 2019 post that *undocumented* a protest in Tijuana calling for the end of violent immigration practices. This photo emphasizes political identity over individual queer capture. Faces of residents at the protest are hidden with stickers, as if penciled out with rainbow colors. One person carries a rainbow flag. Another two hold the MIGRANTES banner from Casa's living room as they march. At the front of the march, two people hold a banner with

study of Instagram's tools for making and sharing photos and videos," *Internet Histories: Digital Technology, Culture and Society*, 2:1-2, (2018): 121-139, pp. 127, 129, 131, 134.

a slogan in all caps that reads, “¡Defender el Asilo!” (Defend Asylum!) [fig. 3.5].³⁴⁴ By bringing the banner from the house and marching with it in the street, Casa is working a trans and queer migrant politics or “orgullo” (pride) as Tania put it, in the street, without revealing their faces on social media. While they are visible as trans and queer migrants and individually identifiable in public, their online identity is protected or at least mitigated by the use of stickers on participants’ faces.



Figure 5: Stickers and Protest Banner, Casa Arocoiris.³⁴⁵

Their banners also call for the end of title 42 (which has only just been rescinded by the Biden administration). Many migrants have been stranded in Tijuana, particularly during the

³⁴⁴ Casa Arcoiris, *Instagram*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cd67Nxwp9gL/?hl=en>.

³⁴⁵ Casa Arocoiris, *Instagram*, posted May 23, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cd67Nxwp9gL/?hl=en>.

pandemic and under the implementation of Title 42, a Public Health Services Act implemented by the Trump administration in March 2020 that suspended all entry to the US except for unaccompanied minors, under the auspice of protecting public (American) health. Official reports from the CDC pair Mexican authorities' presumed unresponsiveness to the COVID 19 pandemic with the high rates of migration into the US as a way to cast Mexico (and anyone trying to cross into the US through Mexico) as a threat to US national health.³⁴⁶ Many asylum seekers have been waiting to be screened for asylum pre-Title 42 and continue to wait in encampments and shelters for the end of Title 42.³⁴⁷ Calling for an end to Title 42 conveys an orientation to trans and queer migrant life and a political commitment to ending the policies and practices that limit trans and queer migrant life at the border.

Hashtags for institutional visibility, not identitarian fixity

A post does not only consist of an image. Even though Instagram is known as a photo app and most known for its relationship with photographic images, hashtags frame images in ways that change their meaning. The content of Casa's posts use undocumentary media visibility to protect individual identity in promotional posts that are meant to be hypervisible. The hashtags used for the posts perform a similar function. In a promotional post in Spanish about an outing to a dance performance by La Muestra Internacional de Danza Cuerpos en Tránsito at the Centro Cultural of Tijuana, residents pose with presumably a person from the dance company. The person from the dance company smiles for the camera, while the residents pose with rainbow

³⁴⁶ See US Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Order Under Sections 362 & 365 of the Public Health Service Act, https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/pdf/CDC-Order-Prohibiting-Introduction-of-Persons_Final_3-20-20_3-p.pdf.

³⁴⁷ Drishti Pillai and Samantha Artiga, "Title 42 and its Impact on Migrant Families," *KFF*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/title-42-and-its-impact-on-migrant-families/>.

heart stickers to cover their faces.³⁴⁸ The hashtags used in this particular post (and this is true for many others) are #lgbtcommunity #lesbiana #border #ca #usa #hombresgay #gaymexico #humanrights #poc #bisexuales #bisexualpride #trans #transexuales #transgender #transgénero #intersex #california #intersexo #derechoshumanos #feministas #sandiego #mexico #la #migrante #migrar #migracion #asilo #teatro #danza #cecut. [fig. 3.6] These tags do more than caption the image. They allow for the image to circulate within a network mapped out by other tags. Tags make sense of the image and connect it to larger communities made up of potential residents as well as potential funders.



Figure 6: Hashtags, Casa Arcoiris.³⁴⁹

Using institutional identities as hashtags allows for organizational and community visibility that makes sense to potential funders and other institutions. The hashtags they use are

³⁴⁸ Casa Arcoiris, *Instagram*, May 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdUMdt8Jenl/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY=>, Accessed March 31, 2023.

³⁴⁹ Casa Arcoiris, *Instagram*, posted May 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdUMdt8Jenl/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY=>.

all institutionalized identities, states, or nations. Hashtags are chosen based on how common their use and impact are.³⁵⁰ The shelter's promotional posts on Instagram make use of numerous hashtags that often exceed the word count of the post description. Hashtags like #lesbian #lesbiana #gay #bisexual #Transgender #California #USA #Tijuana #Mexico #asylum boost the visibility of their posts and promotional content. I understand the use of hashtags like #LGBT, or even spelling out the #Lesbian, #Gay, #Bisexual, and #Transgender to be a strategic use of institutionalized nomenclature. Tagging the shelter's workshops is a way of attracting potential funders and institutional visibility, regardless of how folx in the shelter identify on the spectrum of non-normative gender and sexuality.

These hashtags reach audiences who are institutionally affiliated (such as funders or other organizations). The visibility that comes with these hashtags helps keep the space open and operational—in short, funded. Pressures that come with funding might also place identities into hierarchies. Funding drives a split in an organization's public image. Appealing to funders might require using a particular narrative, even if that narrative is not actually representative of the complex reality of the communities that the organization serves. Myrl Beam argues that citing homophobia as the main reason for queer homelessness eclipses the role of racialized poverty in queer youth homelessness (which is key, especially when most queer homeless youth are people of color). Yet this narrative appeals to rich white funders in a way that racialized poverty doesn't (since it implicates them).³⁵¹ The neoliberal state's co-option of identity politics confers value onto vulnerable identities presumed to matter the most to funders or to the state. Though nonprofits do not occupy the same position as larger institutions within professional managerial

³⁵⁰ Interview with Cristina Saucedo (Cris Sau), former head of media communication for Casa Arcoíris, via Zoom, August 31, 2022.

³⁵¹ Myrl Beam, 2.

complex, they navigate their structures nonetheless. If, as Beam puts it, nonprofits are often understood as “good” because they work for civil society while operating outside of the state, then the use of identity categories as hashtags for institutional legibility is a media strategy to reach other “good” organizations.³⁵²

However, undocumentary media visibility can also be a tool to navigate institutional hierarchies. Strategically using transnational hashtags to attract binational institutional visibility and material support for the shelter *while* obscuring the location and identities of the residents enacts a form of protective trans*border worldmaking through undocumentary media visibility. Keeping the space alive allows for those who live there or access resources through it to grow into identities that may not necessarily be legible within institutional nomenclatures, like LGBT. Identity categories, when institutionalized, are legible in ways that the people they serve aren’t always. As David Valentine’s ethnography of the heterogeneous category of “transgender” and its institutional use brilliantly elucidates, marginalized communities navigate different registers of identity legibility, including their own.³⁵³ Through Valentine’s engagement with community members at the Gender Identity Project at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, GenderPAC, three different drag ball communities, and sex workers at the Meat Market, he shows the ways that the category of transgender holds an institutional legibility that can sometimes serve the broad trans community but other times can also reproduce class and racial inequalities within community. While it is not within the scope of this chapter to do an

³⁵² Myrl Beam, 86.

³⁵³ David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2.

³⁵³ Interview with Andrea Gaspar, co-founder, via Zoom on August 22, 2022.

³⁵³ Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Out of the Shadows, Into the Streets! Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrants Rights Movement*, Cambridge, Massachusetts. London: England: The MIT Press, 2014, 47.

ethnography of the different ways that the residents identify, the majority of the residents are young and many of them are still figuring out their identities.³⁵⁴ In addition, many folx might not use these terms to describe their gender or sexuality. This is particularly true for folx who are Indigenous and might prefer a term that has more cultural resonance.³⁵⁵

Using hashtags that are institutionalized categories of various queer and gender-nonconforming identities makes sense within an institutional register and does not *have* to reflect the specific identities of the residents. This sidesteps identitarian fixity and what Gossett, Stanley, and Burton call “the trap of the visual,” which is the idea that trans representation leads to a liveable life as a trans person.³⁵⁶ The point of institutional identities, when taken up as hashtags, is not to provide accurate representation of peoples’ identities, though this can certainly happen. It is more about garnering institutional visibility without using individual identities—especially individual identities that are not represented by institutional identities—as tender for that visibility.

Multilingual and transnational hashtags

Not only do the hashtags in Casa’s posts describe different sexual, gender, and political identities in both languages, they also name specific geographic locations. The post about a dance outing is tagged with different locations across the Mexico-US border (#ca #usa #california #sandiego #mexico #la), cultural locations in Tijuana (#cecut which stands for Centro Cultural Tijuana), cultural forms (#teatro #danza), and border-related phenomena (#border

³⁵⁴ Interview with Andrea Gaspar, co-founder, via Zoom on August 22, 2022.

³⁵⁵ Interview with Andrea Gaspar, co-founder, via Zoom on August 22, 2022.

³⁵⁶ Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, “Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, co-published with The New Museum, New York, 2017, xvi.

#migrante #migrar #migracion #asilo). The numerous iterations of similar words boost visibility and circulation on both sides of the border. It is meant to draw the attention of related networks, spaces, allies, and funders who do work for and with the #lgbtcommunity in Mexico and in the US.

Like most media, hashtags can circulate in places where certain bodies cannot. Institutional legibility makes these terms and identities legible across the border. It helps that these hashtags are often bilingual, even when the post itself is only in Spanish. As Arcelia Gutiérrez points out in her work on Latinx Twitter, conversations and counter-discourses often organize around hashtags or events in Spanish, English, or Spanglish. The use of bilingualism or different languages speaks to the irreconcilable broadness of *latinidad*—a panethnic grouping that unifies Latinxs on the one hand but simultaneously erases significant differences like language, culture, race, class, religion, citizenship status, and geographic location.³⁵⁷ The use of bilingual and transnational hashtags that refer to sexual and gender identities makes queerness legible across borders even if it does so by using institutional language. From #Tijuana to #California, #lesbian #lesbiana, and #transgender #transgénero, identities are translated linguistically and geographically. Hashtags are bilingual in more ways than one. They are also bilingual in that they speak both to institutions (potential funders) and communities.

Instagram has always been linked to location. The app started as a location-based photo communication app by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010. The duo had initially envisioned an app called Burbn, that would allow users to “check in” to different bourbon drinking places. They opted for a photo-based messaging and check-in app instead.³⁵⁸ In its early

³⁵⁷ Arcelia Gutiérrez, “Situating Representation as a Form of Erasure: #OscarsSoWhite, Black Twitter, and Latinx Twitter,” *Television & New Media* (2022), Vol. 23(1): 100-118, 106.

³⁵⁸ Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, Crystal Abidin, 9.

stages, Instagram was mostly known for its relationship to photography. Its initial icon was a polaroid. Though it was first mostly known for its easy and powerful filters that could turn any amateur into an instant photographer, it has since come to be associated with selfie culture.

While most scholarship about Instagram tends to focus on its relationship to photography, in my analysis hashtags are just as important to *how* and *where* an image circulates.³⁵⁹ Meryem Kamil's work on Palestinian activist groups' use of new media to counter Israeli settler colonialism is relevant here. Kamil argues that Palestinian activists' use of digital mapping tools reimagines Palestinian geographies and sovereignty outside of Israeli authority. Technology, as she puts it, is not just a medium used for representation but an interface that changes the conditions of that representation.³⁶⁰

Casa Arcoíris's use of transnational hashtags makes strategic use of the platform's investment in location. Instagram is meant to connect users as they capture different places and moments and share them with other users in different places and moments.³⁶¹ Instagram makes use of locative data. If users turn on Location Services, then GPS location and device signals are collected, along with IP addresses to estimate a general location.³⁶² Location is also a search feature. As Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin point out, location is a way to find posts about a

³⁵⁹ For an overview of the platform's relationship to photography, see Leaver, Highfield, Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*, Polity, 1st edition, 2020. Also see Søren Vigild Poulsen, "Becoming a semiotic technology—a historical study of Instagram's tools for making and sharing photos and videos," *Internet Histories: Digital Technology, Culture and Society*, 2:1-2, (2018): 121-139. Media analysis of hashtags has often centered more on the use of hashtags outside of their relationship to a given platform. See Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, *#Hashtag Activism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*, MIT, 2020.

³⁶⁰ Meryem Kamil, "Postspatial, Postcolonial: Accessing Palestine in the Digital," *Social Text* 144, Vol. 38, No. 3, (September 2020): 55-82, 61.

³⁶¹ Leaver, Highfield, Abidin, 85.

³⁶² See Instagram's terms of service as of July 26, 2022, <https://privacycenter.instagram.com/policy/?subpage=2.subpage.6-HowWeUseLocation>.

certain place by searching for the name of that place, but this search function is only as accurate as the tags people use.³⁶³ A location can be a city, a neighborhood, a landmark, or a business.³⁶⁴ When Casa Arcoíris tags its workshop images with #ca #usa #california #sandiego #mexico #la, for example, it is strategically exploiting the locative search function of the app by boosting its visibility across borders, while also naming both the existence of the border (#border) and expressing a political commitment to trans*border activism (#migrante #migrar #migracion #asilo).

Location means something very specific when it comes to the safety of trans and queer migrants. The cost of visibility is not lost on Casa Arcoíris. Instagram was purchased by Facebook in 2012, adding it to the “Facebook empire” of data collection.³⁶⁵ This means that visibility in the form of locative data places the lives of trans and queer migrants directly within the state’s radar. In this case, that “state” could be on either side of the border. A lot of users, influencers, content creators, and celebrities tag their posts with multiple locations to boost visibility. There is nothing particularly novel about how Casa uses hashtags and that is precisely the point. Wendy Chun brilliantly writes, “our media matter most when they seem not to matter at all.”³⁶⁶ She is interested in tracking how media moves from the initial thrill of its newness to a more boring experience of it as habitual. For Chun, that move is significant because it is how digital media use becomes naturalized and unquestioned. Chun argues that rather than return to the same utopian and dystopian cyclical debates over digital media use, we should accept that

³⁶³ Leaver, Highfield, Abidin, 85.

³⁶⁴ Leaver, Highfield, Abidin, 86.

³⁶⁵ Leaver, Highfield, Abidin, 13.

³⁶⁶ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2016, 1.

digital media means different things to different people, and it can do that because it is just as much a tool for connection as it is for surveillance. She says it is both banal and revolutionary.³⁶⁷

The boringness of social media platforms allows for multiple uses. Casa's use of corporate media operationalizes visibility across multiple registers. Casa's use of media is multiple: it is promotional (to potential residents and to potential funders) and it is political (with activist material). Casa's use of media avoids getting stuck in the circular logic of how to use a corporate platform for state surveillance without turning the communities it aims to protect into data because it uses social media for institutional visibility. Casa makes strategic use of the affordance of corporate media to be visible as an organization.

Though perhaps not the typical use of hashtag activism, I read Casa's hashtags as a form of hashtag activism, nonetheless. As Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles explain, hashtag activism comes out of journalism and news coverage of online activism from the Arab Spring onwards.³⁶⁸ They argue that hashtag activism has material effects offline. It produces what they refer to as a "networked activity" that incites political action and can contribute to systemic change offline.³⁶⁹ Similarly, Stephen Whittle notes the offline impact of online trans activism and worldmaking, through a process he calls "street-net-street activism."³⁷⁰ The use of transnational hashtags and institutionally legible terms for various queer identities

³⁶⁷ Chun, ix.

³⁶⁸ Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles place hashtag activism within a history that goes back to the 2011 Arab Spring, Occupy, etc. Interestingly, they point out the relationship between hashtag activism and journalism. The use of the pound sign started by Chris Messina on Twitter in 2007 who suggested it as a way to designate specific groups of people even though it is used to connect people across political spectrums and positions, or to recruit solidarities. See Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, *#Hashtag Activism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020, xxvii.

³⁶⁹ Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, xxxv.

³⁷⁰ Stephen Whittle, "The Trans-Cyberian Mail Way." *Social and Legal Studies*, 7, No. 3, (1998): 389-408, 394.

imparts a “networked activity” without compromising the location of the shelter or the identities of the residents.

Using specific hashtags is also a common way to shape the algorithms that curate the content people access. Scholars of critical algorithm studies refer to this as “gaming the algorithm.” Gaming the algorithm doesn’t change the underlying decision-making process that distributes visibility across a given platform.³⁷¹ It exploits it for the very thing it was designed for: distributing visibility and the audiences that come with that.³⁷² That doesn’t mean that gaming the algorithm doesn’t have an end goal. Gaming the algorithm with transnational hashtags creates undocumentary media visibility. The goal, however, does not end with visibility. Undocumentary media visibility makes mobility possible, or at least, imaginable. This is true for funding initiatives, partnerships, and political allies. Boosting the account’s general visibility might also make the shelter “locatable” for potential residents.

Just as Casa uses location as a media strategy to boost institutional visibility without revealing an actual location, Casa also evades temporal surveillance online. Casa’s posts are about events that have already passed. As such, their promotional posts function as a repository of the shelter’s activities and as documentation of the kind of support and events they host. The date that appears on Instagram next to their posts marks the date the post was uploaded, not

³⁷¹ Jenna Burrell, Zoe Kahn, Anne Jonas, Daniel Griffin, “When Users Control the Algorithms: Values Expressed in Practices on the Twitter Platform,” *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, Vol. 3, No. CSCW, Article 138, Nov. 2019, 141. For an example of gaming the algorithm, see Tarleton Gillespie, “Algorithmically recognizable: Santorum’s Google problem, and Google’s Santorum problem,” *Information, Communication & Society*, (2017): 20:1, 63-80, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2016.1199721.

³⁷² Gillespie puts it this way: “Visibility generates audiences.” See Tarleton Gillespie, “Algorithmically recognizable: Santorum’s Google problem, and Google’s Santorum problem,” *Information, Communication & Society*, 20:1, (2017): 63-80, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2016.1199721, 76.

necessarily the date of the workshop the post documents. Hence, multiple posts might be marked for July 12 for example, even if they happened on different days. Posting events that have already passed forecloses the possibility of uninvited guests or even people other than residents attending. It also means that real promotion happens word of mouth and is distributed *en confianza* (in confidence) to people in their physical community, not their digital one.

Using a combination of word of mouth and digital media creates undocumented media visibility, which makes it possible for trans and queer trans*border communities to be imaginable, without risking the safety of that community. Posts of past events create a trans*temporality that counters what promotional material typically does, which is to boost visibility to increase attendance. Promotional material needs to be circulated *before* the event actually happens. However, trans*temporality counters that structure. This makes sense if the goal of these posts is to have a digital archive for affiliated groups, current, or potential funders, or people interested in proposing a workshop. This isn't all it does. Trans*temporality makes past events visible while resisting capture. Posts of past events introduce a temporality of evasive presence. It makes the events and community visible through a politics of presence, without making that presence capturable or vulnerable.

Facebook and the digital divide

In addition to Instagram, Casa Arcoíris uses Facebook to post about events held at the shelter or about local news that impacts residents and the queer and migrant communities they are part of. The point of hosting similar content across different platforms is to increase their visibility and reach as an organization because of the digital divide and the different platforms that people use.

Like Instagram, Facebook has its own audience. Class, race, citizenship, and other degrees of privilege are likely factors in determining which of Casa Arcoirs's platforms are used and by whom. While funders and folx in the US, like myself, are more likely to encounter Casa's material on Instagram than over Facebook, the same might not be true for residents and communities in the Global South.

There is a digital divide across the North-South. Whereas in the US, Facebook is primarily used by older generations or as a secondary website, it is an active platform for many young people in the Global South. The Facebook outage of October 4, 2021, proved that people use Facebook in different ways across the globe. In addition to disparate uses of Facebook, the outage also impacted other apps owned by Facebook (now Meta) such as WhatsApp, which many people in the Global South rely on.³⁷³ In the Spanish-speaking diaspora, WhatsApp is sometimes used as a verb. The digital divide, however, is not just North-South. As Taylor and Pitman remind us, there is also a digital divide within Latin America. The cost of hardware, inequity in infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, and class make access to digital tools and digital literacy an uneven playing field even within Latin America.³⁷⁴ The digital divide within the Global South is heightened at the border. While word of mouth allows for folx to find reliable sources for crossing, social networks allow for many migrants to stay in touch with family and friends back home and access information about shelters where they could stay. But

³⁷³ Alizeh Kohari, "Americans Had It Easy During the Facebook Outage," *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.alizehkohari.com/whatsapp-in-the-global-south>.

³⁷⁴ Claire Taylor and Thea Pitman, "Introduction," in *Latin American Cyberculture and Cyberliterature*, ed. Claire Taylor and Thea Pitman, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007, 5. Also see Summer Harlow and Lei Guo, "Will the Revolution be Tweeted or Facebooked? Using Digital Communication Tools in Immigrant Activism," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19 (2014): 463-478, 466.

those same social networks can also make migrants preparing to cross vulnerable to exploitation, extortion, or blackmail from *coyotes*.³⁷⁵

In addition to physical vulnerabilities, Facebook users are mined for data considered useful for ads. Facebook users are placed into categories for ads that span location (state, zip code, even congressional district), demographics, age, gender, languages spoken, relationship status, education level, work status, place of employment, income, “ethnic affinity,” generation, life events, politics, FB connections, etc.³⁷⁶ Nonetheless, Facebook has been central to a lot of activism, such as during the Arab Spring. Sometimes Facebook’s location and data mining are assets for activists. During the Dakota Pipeline protests, NoDAPL actions involved “checking in” on Facebook to the physical site of protest to minimize the surveillance of the activists who were physically present at the actions.³⁷⁷

Casa’s use of undocumentary media visibility applies across the different platforms they use. Posts on Facebook also use strategic angles to only partially show residents’ engagement in activities. Other times, residents’ faces are blurred, or craftily hidden behind an object. There are multiple posts about their ceramics workshop series on both platforms. One ceramics workshop post on Facebook from August 26, 2022 details an event at Casa Arcoíris, in which they touched up ceramics pieces they had made during a workshop via Lustre Estudio and Centro 32 FBT. The post is tagged #lgbtpride #lgbtqia #lgbtqpride #lgbtq #lgbtqcommunity #lgbtcommunity

³⁷⁵ Bryce Clayton Newell, Ricardo Gomez, and Verónica E. Guajardo, “Information seeking, technology use, and vulnerability among migrants at the United States-Mexico border,” *The Information Society*, Vol. 32, No. 3, (2016): 176-191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2016.1153013>, 188.

³⁷⁶ Daniel Kreiss & Shannon C. McGregor, “The Arbiters of What Our Voters See: Facebook and Google’s Struggle with Policy, Process, and Enforcement around Political Advertising,” *Political Communication*, 36:4, (2019): 499-522 DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2019.1619639, 504.

³⁷⁷ Dhiraj Murthy, “Introduction to Social Media, Activism, and Organizations,” *Social Media + Society*, (January-March 2018): 1-4, 2.

#ceramics #migracion #migraciones #Migraciones #asilopolitico # asylum #asylumseekers
#tijuana #Tijuana #mexico.³⁷⁸

This post closely mirrors the Instagram versions of the same event. Of interest here are the comments. One user posted in Spanish, “I would like to go to the ceramics studio. best.” Casa responded, “Hello, these workshops are for the residents of the shelter, but we recommend that you contact Lustre Estudio for information on their workshops.” Casa followed up by saying, “Send us a direct message to send you the information.”³⁷⁹ As their response in the comments makes clear, their space is for residents.

Facebook comments reveal a lot about different types of platforms use. Though comments are not closed on their Instagram account, public exchanges like this one are not common on their Instagram account. While the difference in platform audience demographics is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will end by highlighting Casa’s consistent attention to protecting their residents. Their intentional care for their community and their deep understanding of how vulnerability is intrinsically linked to visibility is precisely what drew me to their media praxis.

Visibility is undoubtedly always going to pose a conundrum for marginalized communities. Hence media studies has much to learn from activists’ formal strategies to navigate the twinned poles of visibility and vulnerability. Casa’s strategic use of corporate platforms for

³⁷⁸ Casa Arcoiris, *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/CasaArcoirisAC/photos/pcb.1191096318288937/1191096161622286/>, Posted August 26, 2022.

³⁷⁹ The translation of these comments is my own. The Spanish version is: “Me gustaría asistir al taller de cerámica saludos.” “saludos, estos talleres son para residentes del albergue pero te recomendamos contactar a Lustre Estudio para información sobre talleres.” “gracias.” “claro! Mándanos mensaje directo para enviarte la información.” See <https://www.facebook.com/CasaArcoirisAC/>, August 26, 2022.

institutional visibility, stickers, angles, and word-of-mouth communication to disclose the shelter's location, keeps the residents' identities invisible to communities who might want to harm them, or institutions who might want to exploit their identities. Using transnational hashtags or institutionalized identities allows for folx to grow into their identities and disidentify as they feel they need to with national, gender, or sexual identities, without compromising the survival of the shelter itself.

I learn from Casa how undocumentary media visibility can become an important tool for organizing and trans*border worldmaking that makes trans and queer migrant communities imaginable without exposing or commodifying the visibility of the individuals that make up these communities. From communicating fabulous genders without disclosing gender identity, to signaling an intentional approach to trans and queer migrant visibility, Casa Arcoíris makes a trans*border space that challenges the borders of nation, gender, and restricted access to resources. Their media strategies are a necessary reminder that visibility can always be intentional and that we can build visibility in community.

CONCLUSION: Lessons on Counter-Security Media as a Worldmaking

Project

In this dissertation, I provided a number of examples of counter-security media. I analyzed the mis/use of the letter form as a tool for abolition that makes transness strategically legible in sex-segregated prisons and immigration detention centers while simultaneously aiming to dismantle the prison industrial complex. I looked to micro-celebrities' creative strategies to *trans* the assumed problem of trans expression on social media platforms, that critique and resist the ways that anti-transness is activated online. Finally, I traced the use of intentional visibility on social media platforms to build trans and queer migrant community at the US-Mexico border without exposing and commodifying community members' identities. Though I organized different concepts into specific chapters, there are throughlines across them. I introduced social media in the second chapter, but many of the letter writing projects I discussed in chapter one are facilitated by social media platforms. Each chapter also focuses on a specific aspect of my overarching argument: counter-security media is a trans worldmaking tool. Gender is mediated in different ways in each chapter. Chapter one highlights gender as a systemic expression. Chapter two details media mis/use as a way to counter the policing of trans expression. Chapter three reveals the worldmaking possibilities that come with intentional visibility.

I have tried to highlight the ways in which counter-security media is not just a tool to work against the systems that use ethnoracialized gender to cast trans people outside of the norms of belonging. Counter-security media is also a life-making tool. It makes life livable by building community, friendships, and accomplices, by sharing resources and making space for trans and queer community, and by modeling strategies of trans visibility. What follows is a list

of lessons I've learned while researching and writing about the worldmaking that trans Latinx counter-security media makes possible.

Lesson # 1: Writing is a communal practice

When I first started applying to PhD programs, an acquaintance told me she could never write a dissertation because it would be too lonely a process. I immediately pictured myself alone in a dimly lit room (there might even have been a candle in there), glued to a desk for days, frantically sifting through pages of an endless manuscript. I didn't know anyone in a PhD program so I had no way of confirming her fear. But what she said stayed with me.

I've learned a lot since then. As it turns out, in my experience, this process was anything *but* lonely. It was packed with people, voices, thoughts, exchanges, and inspirations. From feedback and conversations with dissertation committee members, co-chairs, faculty, peers, colleagues, activists, mentors, mentees, friends, and lovers, to the theorists I engage in the work itself, I have been blessed with so many generous interlocutors and thinking partners. Every single aspect of this process is, in fact, communal and worldmaking.

Driving this work is my commitment to make visible the trans labor that creates communal spaces and networks in a world that is so deeply anti-trans, especially for trans of color communities. Writing about trans Latinx counter-security media has brought me into proximity with the work that organizations and individuals do to make transness strategically visible and to bring trans communities together.

This writing has also been a way to place organizations and people in conversation with one another and establish continuity across community commitments. I've attempted to spend time with the many creative strategies that trans communities use to find one another. In the process, I hope I have shown that trans Latinx community building is possible despite the

imposed isolation of the racialized prison system, anti-trans discrimination algorithms and social practices on social media platforms, and immigration regimes. Though worldmaking happens in different contexts, trans Latinx communities form across a continuity of trans Latinx resistance.

Lesson # 2: Writing *to* the activists I write *about* is an expanded epistolary act

Even though a lot of this writing involved interviews with activists and organization members, I was still writing *about* their work. At times, I felt uncomfortable or anxious with my own writing, no matter how convinced and committed I am to the significance of making their work visible. Outside of individual interviews, all the material I've relied on was "public," which means I don't need approval for my interpretation of it. However, as a trans person, I understand the stakes of visibility and the importance of self-representation and I want that approval (when I can in fact obtain it). Since I was writing about the strategic forms of trans visibility and legibility, it felt important to make sure that the activists I wrote about were comfortable with how I rendered them and their work visible.

I reached out to everyone I wrote about. With the exception of Ezra Michel and Selyna Brillare, everyone responded and received a draft in turn for review. The enthusiasm reflected back to me from Black & Pink, Trans Pride Initiative, Casa Arcoíris, Bamby Salcedo, and Rose Montoya was life-giving. But even when I did not receive a response, the mere act of writing to folx, restating my argument and approach to them changed how I approached my own writing. My emails to them helped keep me accountable to the work I was doing. Knowing I would share the work with them meant that I wrote the chapters themselves with the activists and public figures in mind. Writing felt like an expanded letter-writing practice: I was not only writing *about* them. I was writing *to* them.

Lesson # 3: Visibility is strategic and relational

Visibility is so central to trans and trans of color life. Writing about trans Latinx creative media strategies of visibility has taught me that visibility is a community strategy. Being trans visible is often about being visible in a non-trans world. Because a non-trans world makes trans visibility a condition of trans vulnerability, trans visibility fluctuates out of necessity. It sits on a spectrum. From “discreet” letter options in Black & Pink’s penpal system to the careful undocumentation of trans migrant life that flexes fabulous nails instead of an identifiable face at Casa Arcoíris, this dissertation has described a number of creative strategies that make trans visibility safe for trans people even when the world makes it so unsafe for us.

Trans visibility is also never just about individuals being visible in a non-trans world. It is about being visible to one another, as trans people. Strategic and relational visibility is also a way in which trans community forms. We don’t just navigate the imposed visibility of a transphobic world. We also make worlds with one another, around the ways in which we want to be seen.

Lesson # 4: The power of trans of color joy

Because trans life is built around resistance to the ongoing imperative to erase us, tracing trans life also means constantly confronting anti-trans structures. While researching for the chapter on anti-trans discrimination on social media platforms, I went down many online rabbit holes. Some of those rabbit holes took me to insightful and brilliant trans content. Others took me to transphobic videos, made by TERFs or anti-trans institutions. The more research I did on trans YouTubers and social media celebrities, the more I interfaced with anti-trans content. At one point, a transphobic book that claimed transmasculine YouTubers were preying on young girls, making them trans, and encouraging them to “mutilate” their bodies, started to show up on

my YouTube feed while I viewed material by some of the trans YouTubers whom the author demonized in her book.³⁸⁰

Writing about anti-trans discrimination also kept me positioned in response to a world in which trans people are not meant to exist. After a while, viewing this material takes its toll and the research ceases to feel good. It becomes something I, too, am surviving. Trans scholar shawndeez asks that we think beyond survival and towards joy in a series of generative questions. They ask, “Am I supposed to want a life where I’m only surviving? Am I supposed to want a life where I’m simply not dying? Am I supposed to want nothing more than to blend into the system and be grateful I’m not dead?”³⁸¹ Having to sift through so much anti-trans content, from videos to ads and comments wore me thin on some days.

Nevertheless, those same rabbit holes also led me to the joyous relief of trans comedy and comedic discourse online. I spent time with the works of Ezra Michel, Selyna Brillare, and trans content creators who used comedic discourse to offset the seriousness of having to deal with the ways in which trans people are dehumanized and erased. Their work taught me the power of trans humor: it forges trans connections that allows us to be more than the sum of our survival stories. Dora Santana writes about the daily resistance of Black Brazilian trans women through her concept of “mais viva” (more alive). Mais viva is a way of moving beyond survival and

³⁸⁰ I am reluctant to even bring visibility to this book because of the harm it perpetuates. Nonetheless, it is important to track and name those harms so I will name it here. Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2020

³⁸¹ shawndeez, “Trans Joy: An Invitation to Dream,” *Medium*, March 2022, <https://betterhumans.pub/trans-joy-an-invitation-to-dream-e5cde82bfc68>.

towards the joy of exceeding survival.³⁸² Because even when we are surviving, we are always doing *more* than that.

The micro-celebrities I wrote about in this dissertation changed me. They changed my approach to the chapter and their work emboldened me to do mine. From Rose Montoya's commitment to documenting anti-transness on social media platforms, to the cathartic laughter that Ezra and Selyna's videos produce while they call out the absurdity of a world so fixated on naturalizing a gender binary, the trans joy of resistance and comedy has been worldmaking for me. It has allowed for another way of doing this work.

Each chapter in this dissertation taught me a lesson (sometimes several lessons). As a whole, this project taught me how to let myself be changed by the work I do and the people I write about. Writing became a way to make worlds within the ones I wrote about. I hope that the sense of care and aliveness that has accompanied me throughout this process is communicated in this project. Thank you to those who continue to make worlds out of resistance.

³⁸² Dora Silva Santana, "Mais Viva!: Reassembling Transness, Blackness, and Feminism," *TSQ*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2019): 210-222, 215.

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