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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Moments of shame in the figural history of trans suicide

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ABSTRACT

This is an article about trans suicide – a longstanding consequence of a necropolitical order that perpetuates the disposability of trans life as a strategy of social subjugation and institutional maintenance. Although having become a more widely publicized crisis in recent years, trans suicide is not a new problem. Evidence of trans suicide dates to the early twentieth century, verifying its status as a malady that victimizes both youth and adults, stretches beyond American borders, and populates a range of discourses since well before the popularization of more contemporary identity categories, such as ‘transsexual’ or ‘transgender.’ In this article, I trace the historical circulation of trans suicide, with a primary focus on its movement across U.S. public culture. I show how trans people have long shaped meanings of trans suicide using a variety of communication channels. I argue that recurrent public renderings of trans suicide accrue force as potent articulations of trans shame, which arise directly from embodied experiences of gender dysphoria and other often hidden intersecting systems of oppression that make trans lives less livable. Thus, the figural history of trans suicide is a multi-generational structure of feeling constituted by an ongoing series of moments of shame that have shifted in tandem with evolutions in media culture and changing norms of trans visibility. These moments of shame open possibilities for challenging transnormative logics of representation and dismantling the necropolitical foundations of anti-trans death worlds.

KEYWORDS Gender; necropolitics; structure of feeling; technology; transgender studies; transnormativity

This is an article about trans suicide – a longstanding consequence of a necropolitical order that perpetuates the disposability of trans life as a strategy of social subjugation and institutional maintenance. I write as a resident of Arkansas, where state legislators recently authorized HB-1570, or the ‘Arkansas Save Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act.’ The bill prevents medical providers from providing hormones and puberty blockers to adolescents, making Arkansas the first U.S. state to successfully ban gender

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affirmation procedures. At the time of its passage, Chase Strangio, a lawyer-activist employed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), called it the 'single most extreme anti-trans law to ever pass through a state legislature' (Yurcaba 2021). A week before the bill was scheduled to go into effect, a federal judge temporarily blocked its enforcement on the basis that the law violated the equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment. Currently, the ACLU, healthcare providers, and trans and trans-allied Arkansans are busy challenging the bill's constitutionality in courts.

The SAFE Act arrives at a time of unprecedented anti-trans policymaking. As of late, trans people have become a target of a moral panic driven by an apparent coalition between various factions of the global New Right and so-called trans-exclusionary feminists (or TERFs). The swelling tide of anti-trans political campaigns appear, in large part, to be backlash against an ongoing moment of heightened representation of trans bodies in public life and popular culture. Their prevalence brings into sharp relief the danger of what Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (2017, p. xv) refer to as 'the trap of the visual;' that is, the mirage-like deception that occurs when spectacular occasions of trans visibility distract from the reality of everyday anti-trans violence. Case in point, while emergent modalities of trans representation promise access to more livable trans lives, in the first half of 2021 alone, more than one hundred laws like the SAFE Act appeared in legislative bodies across the U.S. Alongside these legal attacks have come an influx in reports of suicidal ideation in trans teenagers, a population already plagued by uncommonly high death rates (Ring 2021).

A thin but growing database reveals that conditions of systemic anti-transness correlate to higher suicide rates within trans communities. Over half of the approximately 13,000 trans and nonbinary youth who participated in the Trevor Project's National Survey on LGBTQ Mental Health admitted to considering suicide in 2020 (Trevor Project 2021). The same report found that trans and nonbinary minors were less likely to experience suicidal ideation if their pronouns were respected by others and/or they were able to change legal documents. This statistical evidence supplements the findings of the National Center for Transgender Equality's (NCTE) U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS), a groundbreaking 2015 study that yielded 27,715 responses. The team of researchers who analyzed the poll reported alarming results: 'The USTS found that 40.4 percent of respondents had attempted suicide in their lifetimes ... 81.7 percent of respondents had seriously thought about killing themselves in their lifetimes, and 48.3 percent had done so in the past year; 7.3 percent had attempted suicide in the past year' (Herman *et al.* 2019, p. 5). They concluded that factors, such as age, race/ethnicity, assigned sex, gender identity, education, workforce participation, annual household income, relationship status, and sexual orientation, were important variables for determining the likelihood of suicidal ideation (pp. 10–11). From an

intersectional perspective, it is clear how existing interlocking vectors of oppression, particularly race, gender, and class-based disparities, heighten the risk of suicide for trans individuals.

The ongoing quantification of trans suicide provides a disturbing illustration of the statistical scale of suicidality within trans communities, but the numbers likely come as no surprise to anyone who has followed the rising wave of mainstream discourse about the precarious mental states of LGBTQ adolescents over the last decade. In the aftermath of the 2010 suicide of Tyler Clementi, a college student who leapt from the George Washington Bridge after discovering that he had been filmed by his roommate while engaged in a sex act with another man, the It Gets Better Project did much to raise awareness of the queer and trans suicide crisis by enlisting the voices of celebrities and ordinary people who shared hopeful tales of overcoming adversity online (West *et al.* 2013).¹ Then, there was Leelah Alcorn, a seventeen-year-old trans girl, who scheduled her suicide letter to automatically post to her public Tumblr account sometime before stepping in front of a semi-trailer near her home in Kings Mills, Ohio in late 2014. She wrote, 'People say "it gets better" but that isn't true in my case. It gets worse. Each day I get worse.' Almost immediately, Alcorn's final words went viral, moving beyond Tumblr and into news headlines worldwide. By April 2015, a whitehouse.gov petition inspired by Alcorn's story accumulated over 120,000 signatures, cueing President Barack Obama to endorse a still unrealized national ban on conversion therapies (Shear 2015).

Clementi and Alcorn are two of the most remembered casualties in a tragic procession of well-publicized queer and trans suicides throughout the 2010s, though they are certainly not the first of their kind. As Gayle Salamon (2018, pp. 99–100) rightfully points out, these suicides 'are more chilling not because they represent a new development, but exactly because they are the norm, exactly because they are perfectly in line with what we have known about LGBT suicide for decades.' In fact, Kate Bornstein's (2006) *Hello, Cruel World*, a book that included a list of one hundred and one alternatives to suicide inside a dust jacket promising 'It Gets Better,' debuted several years before the aforementioned project of the same name. Thirty years ago, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) set the agenda for a fledgling field of queer studies by warning of the positive correlation between youth suicide rates and increases in phobic rhetoric targeting expressions of non-normative gender and sexual identities.² Finally, preceding any contemporary conversations about queer or trans suicide by more than a century, Jennie June both documented and sought to prevent suicide in the gender variant hubs he frequented in New York City during the late 1800s and early 1900s (see June 1918, 1922).³

Indeed, trans suicide is not a new nor a hidden problem. Existing records verify trans suicide as a malady that victimizes both youth and

adults, stretches beyond American borders, and populates a range of discourses since before the popularization of more contemporary identity categories, such as 'transsexual' or 'transgender.' Because transphobic ideology has long organized American social and juridical spheres, suicide stains much of the available archive constituting the prevailing narrative of U.S. trans history. In this article, I recast familiar trans figures and plotlines through the prism of suicide to show how modern conceptions of trans subjectivity have remained haunted by specters of shame and self-killing since their emergence. The history I assemble here is anchored by a capacious definition of *trans* that owes a debt to trans scholars, namely Leslie Feinberg (1997), Susan Stryker (2017), C. Riley Snorton (2017), and Jules Gill-Peterson (2018), all of whom marshal the signifiers 'transgender' or 'trans' as analytic categories for genealogically linking otherwise disparate performances of gender variance across time and space. With *trans*, I reject false essentializing equivalencies between trans life and biomedical methods of transition; instead, the term functions as a heuristic for identifying recurrent cases of suicide that together make up an incriminating pattern of evidence.

I argue that the history of trans suicide is a dynamic structure of feeling engendered by technological evolutions in media culture, changing norms of trans visibility, and the necropolitical durability of trans shame. I direct attention toward how this multi-generational structure of feeling has metamorphosed amid the transition from print to digital media culture, as trans people have continually used available communication channels to produce and alter representations of trans suicide despite exercises of necropower enacted to sustain anti-trans social economies, or '*death-worlds ... [where] ... populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead*' (Mbembé 2003, p. 40, emphasis in original). Discursive constructions of trans suicide accrue force as potent articulations of trans shame arising directly from embodied experiences of gender dysphoria and struggles against systems that make trans lives less livable. By exposing the inner workings of an anti-trans necropolitical order, these moments of shame create spatiotemporal disruptions that viscerally puncture the quotidian flows of everyday life and make room for transformational possibilities.

The history of trans suicide contains remarkable moments of shame that also double as acts of self-determination and community building, which have left a particular impression, or queer figuration, in the U.S. public cultural imaginary. 'Queer figurations,' John Nguyet Erni (1998, p. 163) states, are the excessive, partly factual, but always distorted combinations of widely circulated media representations and the affective residue of bodies that evoke 'new, and sometimes alternative, ways of thinking about subjectivity and sociality.' Though positive in their ability to promote consciousness-raising

about matters of concern facing trans communities, I suggest dominant figurations of trans suicide in U.S. public culture also harbour a historical complicity with an entrenched anti-Black politics of respectability that sacrifices trans people of colour to 'the mechanisms of exclusion that too frequently hasten them toward death, either through interpersonal forms of transphobic violence or, more often, the accumulation of everyday forms of abandonment and neglect' (Padilla and Rodríguez-Madera 2021, p. S26). I insist that the figural history of trans suicide provides glimmers of insight into the trajectory of such a necropolitics, especially insofar as it reveals an enduring 'transnormative subject' of trans suicide whose legibility depends on its whiteness, femininity, and middle-to-upper class status (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, p. 67). The transnormative figuration of trans suicide is signified most obviously by the fact that most of the people who occupy this article's archive are white, femme, and middle-to-upper class. It is only recently, due to major technological updates wrought by the digital era, that the trans-normativity of trans suicide begun to be majorly challenged. All acts of cultural resistance against transnormativity remain crucial in a period marked by anti-trans scapegoating because they capacitate more moments of opportunity for finally dismantling the necropolitics that efface from public view the plights of trans people of colour – the very people whose bodies more likely to die by suicide and all other deadly instantiations of transphobia.

With a global moral panic launched against the very possibility of trans life now in full swing, it is imperative that cultural studies scholars unearth the conjunctural forces that enable the materiality and meanings of trans suicide without legitimating faulty pathological models that weaponize suicide as proof that trans lives should be further medicalized or totally eradicated. Accordingly, I denaturalize trans suicide as a repetitive effect of a racialized necropolitics rooted specifically in the cultural codification of trans shame, which I conceptualize as a dysphoric condition of possibility for insidious phobias that discriminate on the bases of gender and/or sexuality. I then proceed by charting the public circulation of trans suicide through a time period of more than one hundred years, leading me to the printed works of Magnus Hirschfeld, Jennie June, and Harry Benjamin published in the first half of the 1900s, followed by an examination of depictions by and about Ed Wood, Christine Jorgensen, and Charlotte McLeod in mid-twentieth century mass media culture, and ending with a rumination on post-2000s figures including Leelah Alcorn, Brynn Kelly, Hannah Baer, Nate Cannon, and Torrey Peters, among others. I focus on how they have induced moments of shame in the structure of feeling constellated by changing figurations of trans suicide, thereby suturing a historical network of relations through which trans suicide is sensed as an existential exigence and challenged as a transnormative construct.

Moments of trans shame and suicide, a structure of feeling

Shame has proven to be a popular topic in cultural studies of the queer variety. Queer theories of shame clarify how the process of queer identity-formation is intimately entangled with the experience and transmission of shameful affect.⁴ Queer shame materializes powerfully in situations where the body is disciplined by heteronormative mechanisms of power to feel its inadequacy against dominant standards of sexual embodiment. Some adapt to the routinization of queer shame by continually incorporating it into their performances of identity over the course of their lifespans, while others reject it altogether in favour of pride-based alternatives for defining the self. For the rest, the weight of queer shame is too great a burden to bear. Rob Cover (2016) explains that queer youth populations are particularly susceptible to choosing suicide as a method for removing their shame because they tend to lack the skills of resilience necessary for converting shame into a productive as opposed to a debilitating force.

Although queer shame is a useful concept for thinking through the social ignominy of non-normative sexual desires and expressions, it is insufficient for understanding the history of trans suicide. What is needed here is an analytic that can better expose the trenchant transphobia that undergirds and makes intelligible what has thus far been called 'queer shame.' After all, in cis-hetero-patriarchies, non-normative sexual desires are only intelligible because they indicate a transgression of hegemonic gender rules and racial classification systems. *Trans shame*, I call it, is the feeling of transphobia on bodies in moments when they withdraw from their regulation by an order of things buttressed by rigid gender and race categories. Trans shame is enabled by a paradigm of Eurocentric coloniality that Qwo-Li Driskill (2004, p. 54) says enforces 'the idea that sexuality and non-dichotomous genders are a sin, recreating sexuality as illicit, shocking, *shameful*, and removed from any positive spiritual context' (emphasis added). Trans shame is endemic to a necropolitical structure that degrades trans lives by conceiving them 'as a political wedge issue in order to consolidate horrifyingly ascendant forms of ethnonationalism and the ongoing violence of neoliberal austerity' (Malatino 2020, p. 5) As Hil Malatino laments, 'This produces forms of hyper-visibility that wear us out, that cultivate hyperalertness and anxiety that, for so many of us, make getting out of bed and getting through the day difficult.' In suffocating social atmospheres of trans shame, the logics of what Stanley (2011, p. 9) calls 'overkill,' a name for 'the technologies necessary to do away with that which is already gone,' become sensible, material, and habitual. In short, the ordinariness of trans shame generates ripe conditions for trans suicide to become a feature of everyday life in a death world.

Like shame in general, trans shame is difficult to capture in any one word, person, or event. For many trans people of all gender identities and racial/

ethnic backgrounds, shame is often associated with the sensation of dysphoria and its indication of a dissonance between their internal perception of their gender identity and their outward anatomical appearance. Gender dysphoria is a multi-faceted phenomenon that some but not all trans people report confronting at different points of their lives, often starting in the first years of adolescence. Despite efforts to pathologize dysphoria by those who participate in a broader regime to medicalize every aspect of trans experience, it would be a mistake to consolidate dysphoria as somehow a discretely trans-only phenomenon when the shame of dysphoria is something that *anyone* – even self-identified cisgender people – can experience at least once in their lives while steeped in mostly unattainable gender ideals.

Importantly, dysphoria, whether it is felt momentarily or for longer durations, does not always result in suicidal ideation or a suicide attempt. In her memoir, Janet Mock (2014, p. 99) shares her experiences with dysphoria, but attests that ‘suicidal thoughts were not part of my journey, though feelings of isolation and hopelessness followed me.’ Yet, in so many other autobiographical accounts of the trans self, dysphoria is described as a deeply painful and usually unbearable physical occurrence that could, like any other form of chronic pain, make one question whether living another day is worth suffering. In a diary entry from between the period of September 1970 and January 1975, the trailblazing trans historian Lou Sullivan connected his pre-transition bouts with dysphoria to his incapacity to pass as a man, referring to himself as a ‘gross pig’ to semantically capture his own self-loathing (Martin and Ozma 2019, p. 108). In her memoir, Toni Newman (2011, p. 62), a Black trans sex work activist, depicted her struggles with dysphoria before transition as akin to a ‘war inside me ... like two enemies in one body, fighting each other ... no peace, no ceasefire ... just a constant battle hymn within.’ Describing her own dysphoria and suicidal thoughts as a youth, Mia Violet (2018, p. 70) states that she and other trans children ‘have to witness their bodies morphing into something alien and sometimes repulsive. It really causes a special kind of panic and dread when you realise that the source of your sadness is that you’re going through the wrong puberty but you have no way to halt it or slow it down.’ Dominique Jackson (2014, p. 49) makes a comparable remark about her own childhood on the island of Tobago, noting that she contemplated suicide as a teenager but was unable to seek help for neither her dysphoria nor her depression because in Caribbean households, ‘children were not allowed to have feelings.’ As CN Lester (2017, pp. 96–97) writes based on their life story, dysphoria is an excruciating mental and physical burden, but it is not the same as other mental illnesses. Mental illness paired with dysphoria can exacerbate the effects of both dysphoric sensation and one’s other disabilities and potentially result in suicidal ideation.

While a significant impediment to living a full life, the shame of dysphoria is not the only cause of trans suicide. Dysphoria intersects with a range of other transphobic inequities that make living more difficult for trans people. As Julia Serano (2007/2016, p. 125) expresses, many trans suicides occur post-transition for reasons having less to do with an individual's experience of the body and more to do with the socio-material hardships that have always afflicted trans communities, including the increased likelihood of rejection from family members and friends, decreased opportunities for employment, higher rates of homelessness and incarceration, and an inflated risk of becoming the target of harassment and micro-aggressions. In her memoir, Kate Bornstein (2013, p. 240) discusses how she felt particularly suicidal after being refused contact by her daughter's mother for the final time. In a major sociological study of trans children, Travers (2018, p. 21) demonstrates that in the case of Dylan, a teenage trans boy who 'was living with his working poor family in a trailer park in a small community in the U.S.,' his dysphoria was compounded by his financial impoverishment and overall lack of acceptance by his rural hometown. In an interview with Rose, a Black trans woman over the age of fifty, Eve Lorane Brown (2019, p. 54, emphasis in original) shows how racism and ageism intertwine in the production of suicidal ideation; Rose remarks that only very few, '*mostly White transsexuals*,' are afforded the privilege of aging as trans people. From these accounts, the link between trans suicide a variety of other types of shame is startlingly discernable. Also, it is worth mentioning is that even for people who do not report experiencing dysphoria or other significant barriers to living as trans, the shame projected onto them by others can too easily manifest as brutality. This was true for Lady Chablis (1996, p. 55), a Black trans performer that dared to live out her transness in childhood during the 1960s and 70s, who remembers, for her parents, 'the shame factor of having a li'l girl with candy was too great to bear,' culminating in 'the fiercest lashings a person could possibly be capable of giving to another.' In its most extreme incarnations, the shame projected by others can give rise to outbursts of physical anti-trans violence and murder (see Cram 2012).⁵

In sum, the unregulated, everyday necropolitical pressures of trans shame informs many trans peoples' struggles with suicidal ideation. Remarkably, trans people have found ways to represent and re-channel this shame in a diverse set of ways, including through figurations of trans suicide – a rhetoric they have directed for over one hundred years in U.S. public culture. To study shame as an affect that animates and transforms in conjunction with changing representations and meanings of trans suicide, I take the path paved by Elspeth Probyn (2004, 2005), who has done much to highlight the associations among shame, the body, and everyday life in cultural studies. For Probyn (2004, p. 338), shame unsettles the ordinariness of bodily habitus

by individuating the bodies of shamed subjects while simultaneously revealing that, both cognitively and corporeally, 'the body is captured in and by the social.' Because shame marks a break from the subject's inherited social body, Probyn reconceptualizes shame as an immensely productive and potentially positive site from which to envision alternatives to the interests of the present. Sara Ahmed (2014, p. 104) agrees that shame can impel a transformative remaking of subjectivity, writing, 'In shame, the subject's movement back into itself is simultaneously a turning away from itself. In shame, the subject may have nowhere to turn.' Having no way to escape the potency of shame's incursion into the flesh, shamed people are left only with the choice to realize – and possibly rethink – the foundations of their social interdependency and the relations that constitute their everyday lives. From this perspective, moments of shame are quite literally 'moments,' or what Henri Lefebvre (1961/2002, pp. 340–358) theorizes as spontaneous but immeasurably fruitful spatiotemporal disturbances that make the otherwise impossible a possibility in everyday life. When they occur, moments of shame threaten to expose the oppressive mundanity of normative social configurations; in response, the quotidian tries to permanently expel the shamed subject at the centre of the moment. It is in this dialectical push-and-pull between the subject's undoing and the defensive sociality of everyday life that moments of shame catalyze cultural changes and make room for the emergence of new ways of knowing and being.

Methodologically, tracing the evolution of figurations of trans suicide through moments of shame requires a focus on trans shame as a structure of feeling, or the dynamic imbrication of thought, discourse, and affect. Per Raymond Williams' (1977, pp. 121–127) well-known musings on the subject, the structure of feeling demands a view of culture as a contingent complexity indexed by an ever-changing conglomerate of forms and co-existing temporal scales that he categorizes as 'emergent' – cultural elements that register as somewhat ineffably nascent or that betoken a future to come, 'dominant' – cultural elements that resonate as palpably here-and-now, and 'residual' – cultural elements that recall an unsettled past that persists and haunts the present.⁶ The emergent, dominant, and residual coincide in unequal distributions in particular slices of time and space. This temporal entanglement, signalled by the ebb and flow of cultural movement, is felt by the people who embody and contribute to the transformation of the context they inhabit. Because it is always in motion, culture is best conceptualized as a combustive process involving continuous, if not cyclical, moments of spatiotemporal breaches that affectively alter the subjective experience of being alive. Inasmuch as Williams was deeply invested in the co-constitutive relationship between formal and technological change throughout his scholarship, I am similarly convinced that schematizing the trajectory of a cultural form by locating the form's emergent, dominant, and residual impressions is

a worthwhile way of critically interpreting how the past enfolds into the present and future and thus provides some evidence of how seemingly spatiotemporally disconnected feelings and forms produce current cultural conditions. Ergo, I proceed by examining trans suicide's mutating figurations, beginning with its emergence in a cultural context typified by experimental medicine, print media, and a burgeoning vocabulary for describing modern trans experience.

Emergent figurations of trans suicide

The subject of suicide makes a small but memorable appearance in Magnus Hirschfeld's (1910/1991) *Die Transvestiten: Untersuchung Über den Erotischen Verkleidungstrieb* (later translated and published in English as *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*). Before he was exiled to France after the Nazi invasion of Berlin, Hirschfeld and other German sexologists involved in the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (the Institute for Sex Research) conducted extensive research on what many then perceived as physiological and/or psychological irregularities in human sexuality. An outspoken proponent of homosexual rights and a presumed gay man himself, Hirschfeld gained an international reputation as a forward-thinker during the first quarter of the twentieth century (see Mancini 2010, Dose 2014). He used the term 'transvestite' as medical label for classifying a group of people who expressed an inherent desire to crossdress, which was eventually followed by its reclamation as an identity marker by varied trans publics in Europe and other parts of the world. The seventeenth chapter of *Transvestites*, 'Suicide in the Clothing of the Other Sex,' includes several case studies the doctor viewed as indicative of a trend in which transvestites – the vast majority of the sample being 'men in women's clothing' – sank into a depressive state and killed themselves in apparel matching their internal senses of their identities (Hirschfeld 1910/1991, p. 315). Featured in the chapter is the story of P., a seventeen-year-old trans femme who cut the arteries in her left hand in her hotel room. Hotel staff discovered her injured body and a farewell letter from the dispirited person in which he [she] wrote that in the last few days of his [her] life he [she] had truly felt like a person and had enjoyed the beautiful side of his [her] being' (p. 316). Miraculously, P. survived the suicide attempt and Hirschfeld personally visited her in the hospital once she regained consciousness. P. told Hirschfeld of the 'great pleasure' she achieved from dressing in women's clothing, citing the awakening of a 'yearning ... which grew stronger and stronger' after witnessing a drag performance in Berlin (p. 317). She also mentioned the dysphoric sensation she felt when she became aware of the growth of her facial hair during puberty and her use of depilatories to remove it (pp. 317–318).

After dedicating some time to analyzing the legal and societal pressures leading to mental illness and self-harm within transvestite communities, Hirschfeld spent the rest of his life trying to legitimize what were then known as 'sex change' operations before his death in 1935.⁷ Around this time in the U.S., surgical approaches to reconstructing human sexual anatomy were mostly reserved as methods for modifying the organs of people who were once known to medical practitioners as 'hermaphrodites,' an outdated term for individuals who exhibited variations in their chromosomal, hormonal, genital, and/or glandular makeups but who would now best be described as intersex. That is, until 1917, when Alan Hart, a recent graduate of the medical school at the University of Oregon, became one of the first documented instances of a trans man to undergo a surgical transition in the U.S. with the support of his doctors. A psychiatrist diagnosed Hart with, as Hart later recalled, 'Complete, congenital and incurable homosexuality together with a marked modification of the physical organization from the feminine type' (cited Gill-Peterson 2018, p. 60). Hart claimed his life had 'become so unbearable that I felt myself confronted by only two alternative courses – either to kill myself or refuse to live longer in my misfit role of a woman.' Hart was able to choose the latter, living out the rest of his life as a successful radiologist and specialist in tuberculosis. However, in the U.S., except for very few cases like Hart's, medical authorities continued to refuse to operate on non-intersex trans people who wished to undergo voluntary sex reconstruction.

In 1918, Jennie June, an enigmatic character in the history of trans femme culture, was a graduate student at Columbia University in New York City, where he lived downtown as a 'fairie' and found a community of support through the Cercle of Hermaphrodites. In November of that year, June published an important early text illustrating the relationship between trans shame and suicide entitled, 'The Girl-Boy's Suicide,' in the *American Journal of Urology and Sexology*. The piece, like much of June's later work, appears to be a semi-autobiographical but largely fanciful account of a trans femme childhood in a small New England town. June begins by narrating an unnamed three-year-old femme's shame and wish to die after being spanked by his mother for sucking on a plum. June then flashes forward to the femme aged six-years and describes his horror at the thought of using a restroom designated for boys and the shame he felt after his classmates found out he urinated in his clothing. Over the course of a few pages, the femme is caught orally pleasuring another boy during class, struck by a teacher with a ruler in front of his peers as punishment, beaten by his father at home, bullied by boys, and rejected by girls. Later, the femme lies awake at night in dysphoric agony, bemoaning 'the fact that he had been born a boy' and making plans to die by suicide before his peers or family try to kill him first (p. 498). By the end, the femme is sexually assaulted by

a group of boys, and, with his 'head drooping in shame,' takes his own life at eleven-years-old (p. 499). June concludes the article by writing, 'Hitherto almost no one has been unable to feel any sympathy for the congenital sexual inverts ... Thousands of them are driven to suicide every generation, and yet the world is unmoored by their sorrows.' In January 1919, June republished some of this story verbatim in *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, a similarly sensational text on gender variant culture that was distributed in a limited quantity to a niche audience of medical professionals. The book was not reviewed at the time of its release and there is no known evidence of its immediate reception (Herring 2008). June followed up this monograph with a sequel in 1922, *The Female Impersonators*, in which the author explicitly dedicates the book to the mission of preventing trans suicide and murder. June advocates on behalf of law changes to decriminalize 'sexual lapses,' reducing police surveillance and harassment, and increasing public education on gender variance as 'harmless to society' (pp. viii–ix).

For the remainder of the first half of the twentieth century, trans bodies were increasingly subject to new regimes of medicalization and public cultural sensationalism. Emma Heaney (2017, p. 178) describes June's memoirs as 'the last significant published trans narrative before the transformations of the late 1920s and early 1930s ... the last in the Modernist period to present trans life as embedded in trans sociality.' In this blossoming context, trans people gained their first spike in public visibility, as popular press outlets regularly updated the American public on progresses in procedures designed for sex reconstruction. In 1949, Harry Benjamin, a German American mentee of Hirschfeld's practicing endocrinology in the U.S., was introduced to a trans woman named Val Barry by Alfred Kinsey. Having followed news reports of operations that feminized men in Europe, Barry expressed to Benjamin and Kinsey an intense 'desire to be changed surgically' (cited Meyerowitz 2004, p. 47). Barry was inspired by the 1933 book *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, the posthumously published autobiographical account of Lili Elbe. Initially supervised by Hirschfeld, Elbe underwent one of the first widely publicized sex reconstructions in Germany before dying after complications suffered from her labiaplasty in 1931. In the book's introduction, editor Norman Haire (1933, p. vi) states that Elbe expressed a desire to die by suicide if she could not within a year 'find a doctor who could help [her] to realize [her] desire to become a woman ...' Barry repeated this ultimatum, invoking the strict choice between surgery or suicide to every doctor she encountered (Schaefer and Wheeler 1995, pp. 78–79). Benjamin backed Barry's wish to physically transition, affirming her belief that she was indeed a woman and providing her with hormones before she received surgery in Sweden, in 1953.

Benjamin would rise to fame as the leading authority in transsexuality after his patient, Christine Jorgensen, became an instant celebrity in 1952 upon her

return to the U.S. after a successful series of reconstructive surgeries in Denmark. Joanne Meyerowitz (2004, p. 92) details how Jorgensen's status as an overnight 'mass media sensation' drew unprecedented large-scale visibility to transsexuality in the U.S. throughout the 1950s, shifting public discourse from salacious stories about 'transvestites' to informative news pieces concerning transsexuality as a psychological and biomedical health condition. More trans people could now harness the emerging rhetoric of transsexuality to put into words their own needs and experiences when visiting Benjamin at his offices in New York City and San Francisco. Though their backgrounds and stories varied, one common theme persisted: 'many conveyed a sense of angst that hinted of suicidal despair' (p. 134). In 1966, Harry Benjamin published the influential *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, which advanced his belief in the affirmative treatment of trans people. Benjamin (1966) also unequivocally renounced psychotherapy as a cure for transsexual patients, instead favouring 'great advances in endocrinology and surgical techniques' to help patients who would otherwise be confined to institutions, imprisoned, or destined to live their lives as 'miserable, unhappy members of the community, unless they *committed suicide*' (p. 14, emphasis added). Jorgensen (1967, p. 304), who frequently cited the expertise of Benjamin for the entirety of her life in public, repeated this claim in her autobiography, emphasizing that transsexuals are 'prone to mental breakdown and depression, *suicide*, and occasionally, self-mutilation' (emphasis added).

As more public discourses popularly circulated about 'sex changes' in the 1960s, trans people seeking such operations used the threat of their impending suicide to convince their doctors that their desire to transition was a true medical necessity. They understood that becoming approved for surgery was a rhetorical matter as much as it was a bio-psychosomatic one. As Meyerowitz (2004, p. 158) describes:

Patients tried to tell the doctors what they thought the doctors wanted to hear ... And they tried to convince doctors of their sense of urgency. "In order to get surgery," one MTF [male-to-female] claimed, "you have to tell the doctor that if you don't get it you will commit suicide."

Throughout the early-to-mid twentieth century, nascent figurations of trans suicide emerged directly out of a largely experimental medical culture. June was the first trans person to directly impact these constructions with her own testimony, offering an account of suicide that merged it directly with existing cultural figurations of childhood innocence while also framing it as a social ill perpetuated by the confluence of shame, law, and everyday anti-trans discrimination. While medical professionals disseminated their published work in this new field of healthcare, their communication through print cultural forms, including journal articles and books, gave

trans people a glimpse into a world of possibilities that they likely had been previously unable to imagine. For those whose social positions afforded them the privilege of being aware of this information, they utilized places such as Benjamin's offices as physical contact zones for building a social network and laying the foundations for a more intentionally articulated collective identity notwithstanding the lack of a widely accessible communication infrastructure. Of course, their efforts were in no small part complicated by the fact that they pre-dated any concerted demonstrations of trans visibility or any robust public discourse that did not automatically misrepresent trans bodies as problems needing to be fixed. During this period, any notion of a common trans identity whatsoever was still in its infancy; a widely shared trans culture was, in the words of Williams (1977, p. 126), pre-emergent, or 'active and pressing but not yet fully articulated.' Ted Striphas (2013, p. 326) notes that pre-emergent cultural phenomena are, to some extent, 'ineffable' because they exist in the interim prior to their encasement by discourse and just before exerting a 'noticeable bearing on human thought, conduct, and expression.' Sensing the pre-emergence of a figuration that made the trans body seem invariably suicidal, trans people cleverly wielded this developing figure as an inhabitable point of entry for acquiring proper medical care, ameliorate their shame, and become the versions of themselves that would best ensure their survival.

Within the moment of shame created by emergent figurations of trans suicide, trans people countered with strategic realizations of trans life, debunking clinical narratives that automatically placed their bodies on a fast-track toward death. Whereas the medical establishment generated largely shameful impressions of the trans body contoured by a seemingly inextricable association with suicide, trans people re-directed this shame as a means for alleviating symptoms of dysphoria and creating possibilities for intervening in the circulation of these emerging figurations of themselves. Invoking the threat of suicide enabled trans people to become both discursively and affectively legible in a context where certain codes of meaning had already begun to settle and constrain their capacity to act. The rhetorical force of suicide offered itself as a tactic for agency in what Isaac West (2013, p. 39) delineates as the 'performative repertoire' composed of 'embodied practices enabled by and negotiated through the logics of subjective recognition.' Like all modalities of agency articulated by trans subjects of the period, the threat of suicide was not a perfect or somehow pure method of resistance. This act re-perpetuated the very figural linkage between transness and death that pathologized trans people in the first place; however, at the same time, threatening suicide allowed trans people to disidentify with the general shame of suicide by deploying its affective punch to make room for themselves within a structure of feeling that would have otherwise continued to exclude their input. This incremental step toward change carved

a matter of time until my next arrest. This is the only way. Let my body rest in death forever in things I cannot wear in life.

Immediately thereafter, the film cuts to a new scene in a psychiatrist's office. The lead investigator has come to request information regarding how one could have best prevented the suicide. For the rest of the film, viewers observe as the psychiatrist elucidates for the investigator – and by proxy, the film's audience – the then commonly circulated distinction between transsexuals as those who desire a 'sex change' and transvestites as those who may or may not desire anatomical changes but do find pleasure in outwardly performing as a member of another gender at home and/or in public.

In a manner much ahead of its time, the film avoids collapsing the distinctions among transsexuals, transvestites, and homosexuals. The portrays the character Glen/Glenda as a transvestite with heterosexual desires that, by the end of the film, discloses his crossdressing practice to a woman whose initial surprise at the news does not stop her from agreeing to be his romantic partner. During the film, the lead investigator of the suicide functions as a surrogate for the desirous inquisitions of an audience under the spell of peak 'sex change' sensationalism in U.S. public culture. Through the character, audiences learn new vocabularies for distinguishing between sexual and gender identities. However, the film is politically limited by its strategic denigration of non-heteronormative sexualities. Atop learned responses from the psychiatrist, audiences hear from an omniscient narrator who, in God-like fashion, juxtaposes the heterosexualized innocence of all gender variant people against the ominous threat of homosexuality. Unlike the film's figuration of the homosexual, neither the transvestism of the character Glen/Glenda nor the transsexuality of Alan/Anne equates to sexual perversity. Within this *mise en scène*, trans people do not exert any conceivable threat toward the operations of the gendered or sexualized social order.

The shame of suicide opens *Glen or Glenda*, tantalizing viewers to witness for themselves the usually concealed aftermath of anti-trans violence and its often intimate association with law enforcement. The private sensation of shame enters the public sphere and, in the process, converts into the collective sensationalism that drives dominant figurations. Ann Cvetkovich (1992, p. 24) observes that 'Sensational events often turn on the rendering visible of what remains hidden or mysterious, and their affecting power arises from the satisfaction or thrill of seeing.' Through dramatizations of shame, the film figures trans suicide as a thoroughly sensationalized act, which produces an unfortunately narrow lens of perception through which audiences encounter trans existence. From this vantage point, the private details of trans life and the public shame of suicide collapse into one another, bringing to pass a dominant figuration of trans suicide that is contagious in the ways it so easily spreads and gathers higher degrees of sensationalism over the

course of its circulation. Such a sensationalized figuration of trans suicide quickly spilled into other mass media cultural contexts, as evidenced by its resurfacing in national news headlines not very long after the release of Wood's film.

On May 13, 1954, just over a year after *Glen or Glenda's* premiere, readers of *The Boston Record* encountered the eye-catching headline 'Sex Change or Suicide Choice' (See Figure 2). Beneath the headline was a widely syndicated article composed by a member of the Associated Press that profiled an unknown woman from Dyersburg, Tennessee named Charlotte McLeod. The article began, 'A willowy brunette who left here as Charles and came back as Charlotte said she would have committed suicide if medical science hadn't converted her into a woman.' McLeod had just arrived home from Denmark, where she underwent an operation to physically confirm her inner sense of self as a woman. On her return, McLeod stated she was well-received by her family and friends. Her father reportedly said, "'I was happy to see her. I hope that this change will be better. I hope she'll be happy.'"

Like Jorgensen, McLeod insisted that medical procedures were merely corrective and should be readily available to anyone who needed a lasting remedy to the dysphoria accompanying the transsexual condition. Comparing her transsexuality to a disability, McLeod (1956, p. 56) unequivocally stated:

Sex Change or Suicide Choice

DYERSBURG, Tenn. (AP)—A willowy brunette who left here as Charles and came back as Charlotte said she would have committed suicide if medical science hadn't converted her into a woman.

Charlotte McLeod, 29, back in her hometown after a series of sex change operations in Denmark, said it was a "cringing shame" that American physicians frown on such surgery.

"I fit right in where I left off," she said. "It's wonderful to be back home. Friends don't feel any different toward me now than before. They've accepted the many changes."

The changes are many. One-time Charlie stands 5 feet 8½, weighs 118. Her dark hair was gathered in a cluster of curls at the nape of her neck. She was attractively clad in a white blouse, flared aqua skirt and high-heeled sandals.

She arrived Monday night and moved in with a friend, Mrs. Stuart Wilson. Her father, Charles McLeod Sr., said:

"I was happy to see her. I hope that this change will be better. I hope she'll be happy."



Charlotte McLeod, 29, operated on in Denmark to change her from Charles McLeod, talks things over with her father, in Dyersburg, Tenn. She said her friends don't feel any different toward her now than they did previously. (AP Wirephoto)

Figure 2. 'Sex Change or Suicide Choice' as printed in *The Boston Record* on May 13, 1954. Image courtesy of Transas City and the Digital Transgender Archive.

Sex change is not a new “fad” and sensation-seekers ought not to label it as that. It is a serious medical answer to a serious medical problem, that of the individual who is misplaced by condition contributing to his being labeled a social outcast. He cannot be rightly blamed for these conditions anymore than if he had been born with cerebral palsy.

Jorgensen’s and McLeod’s stories produced transsexuality as a middle state between one’s entry into either maleness or femaleness. Their narratives hardly challenged U.S. audiences to question existing divisions between the sexes, much less the prevailing sex/gender binary. The circulation of Jorgensen’s and McLeod’s images and words helped instantiate a popular, idealized transsexual figure in U.S. public culture during the 1950s. The transsexual figure was stamped into the cultural imaginary as MTF (male-to-female), white, middle-to-upper-class, and observant of traditional feminine beauty standards. In a spread in *Mr. Magazine* entitled ‘I Changed My Sex,’ McLeod (1956, p. 10) warned that only those already possessing youthful, feminine features like she did – with her naturally curly hair, soft hands, and high-pitched voice – would be suitable candidates for a successful physical transformation. McLeod stressed the capacity to pass convincingly as a woman was not guaranteed by science and medicine. Much the same as Jorgensen, McLeod considered homosexuality and gay lifestyles to be repugnant (Skidmore 2011, p. 270). Emily Skidmore names the figure represented by the likes of Jorgensen and McLeod the ‘good transsexual’ because it ‘conflated transsexuality with whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle-classness’ (p. 294), while further marginalizing trans women of colour of the same historical period by rendering them invisible to the point of being unintelligible to mainstream publics. Snorton (2017, p. 128) concurs, contending that with respect to Jorgensen – and assumedly figures like McLeod – the sensational figuration of transsexuality acted in metaphorical fashion as an ‘allegory for transnational body politics in the postwar, Cold War period,’ and though dominant transsexual figures symbolized a freedom espoused by proponents of U.S. national culture, they also ‘signified upon the various kinds of unfreedom that marked and continue to animate black and trans temporalities.’

During the first half of the 1950s, figurations of trans suicide were for the first time articulated by trans people themselves for broad audiences. Because *Glen or Glenda*, Jorgensen, and McLeod all so effortlessly aligned transness with a homophobic politics of respectability that perpetuated traditional performances of femininity, whiteness, and middle-to-upper class ideals as compulsory modes of embodiment, they effectively turned moments of shame into opportunities for advocating on behalf of the hetero-racial-normalization of transsexuality. To do so, they used characteristically mass media technologies, namely cinema and print news, in disseminating sensationalized figurations of trans suicide. Via their reproduction and circulation, these figurations worked to establish the intelligibility of trans

suicide as a social ill in service of an unapologetically transnormative agenda. When projected onto big screens in unlit rooms and printed as headlines for everyday reading publics, representations of trans suicide wielded a potentially powerful ideological influence over large swaths of the population who were only just beginning to wrap their minds around matters of sexual and gender variance. Said figures were at once pedagogical resources for possibly changing perceptions of trans people for the better, as well as objects ready to be voyeuristically consumed by hungry onlookers who could not differentiate trans suicide as anything more than a spectacle through which they could purge their own shame. Obviously, trans suicide figurations were not democratic inventions, but were the products of a few temporarily powerful trans individuals who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. Unfortunately, as they became dominant, there was little room in this period's mass media culture for others to resist their trans-normativity, and these constructions were left unchallenged for more than half a century. Not until the death of Leelah Alcorn in late 2014 would the shift toward a far more participatory media landscape enable trans of colour communities and their allies to begin to obstruct the unquestioned circulation of dominant trans suicide figurations and expose their enduring race, gender, and class-based biases.

Residual figurations of trans suicide

Alcorn ends her suicide letter with a justificatory testimonial and plea that might, by now, feel sickeningly familiar. She wrote:

I have decided I've had enough. I'm never going to transition successfully, even when I move out. I'm never going to be happy with the way I look or sound ... I'm never going to find a man who loves me ... Either I live the rest of my life as a lonely man who wishes he were a woman or I live my life as a lonelier woman who hates herself ... That's the gist of it, that's why I feel like killing myself ... My death needs to mean something. My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year. I want someone to look at that number and say "that's fucked up" and fix it. Fix society. Please.

Evidently, Alcorn is not the first dysphoric, white, femme, middle-class subject to synecdochally represent the crisis of trans suicide for sensationalized public audiences far and wide. Though the stark differences separating Alcorn from someone like McLeod would seem to preclude any homological comparison between the two, when placed next to one another, their undeniable similarities induce an unshakeable uncanniness, signalling continuity between historical contexts that are connected by an underlying structure of feeling that has transformed along with the circulation of trans suicide figurations. To be sure, their similitude in race, gender, and class positions undermines the notion that Alcorn somehow constitutes something altogether new. In

truth, Alcorn just so happened to effortlessly embody the identity-based features of dominant trans suicide figurations that have lasted since the mid-twentieth century. Perhaps that is why Alcorn's death so immediately registered as a sympathetic character to a large audience that has inherited hegemonic constructions of race, gender, and class and whose collective habitus has been long trained to recognize the intelligibility of these figurations. Regardless of the reason, twenty-first century shifts in media culture and trans visibility politics joined forces to create ripe conditions for marginalized publics to intervene in this longstanding structure of feeling, opening a new moment of shame from which to resist residual forms of trans suicide and clear space for less oppressive possibilities to emerge.

Alcorn's death coincided with a period of renewed trans visibility in U.S. public culture. Six months before Alcorn's suicide made headlines, a now famous cover of *TIME* magazine featured an image of actress Laverne Cox and an optimistic declaration of the period as the 'transgender tipping point.' In the accompanying article, journalist Katy Steinmetz (2014) notes that 'another civil rights movement is poised to challenge long-held cultural norms and beliefs.' Steinmetz then goes on to describe how the introduction of 'new policies' were the effect of the 'new transparency' of trans people who were 'emerging from the margins to fight for an equal place in society.' But as Jian Neo Chen (2019, p. 3) points out, the glossy *TIME* magazine cover obfuscates the larger history of intersectional trans social movements that made any news of a transgender tipping point possible in the first place, which moves trans struggles into the context of a 'nation-state that supposedly has transcended the "frontiers" of racism, sexism, and more recently homophobia (with the then-imminent federal legalization of same-sex marriage) and is now ready to conquer the new frontier of transphobia.' In a post-It Gets Better culture, Alcorn's death served as a convenient and almost contrived social ritual for mainstream audiences to finally realize and quickly resolve their own shameful complicity in transphobic violence through ultimately self-serving acts, such as sharing a post about her via their digital social media platform of choice. Parallel to Chen's damning evaluation of *TIME*'s whitewashed tipping point rhetoric, nearly immediately after Alcorn's suicide, cultural critics exposed how her celebrity status supports the persistent erasure of the many trans people of colour who die regularly and violently at disproportionate rates in the U.S (Molloy 2015). Sadly, but predictably, their criticisms proved to be all too shrewd.

In the ten month timespan following Alcorn's death, at least thirteen more trans teenagers died by suicide across the U.S., including Melonie Rose (nineteen-years-old, died February 11, 2015), Zander Mahaffey (fifteen-years-old, died February 15, 2015), Ash Haffner (sixteen-years-old, died February 26, 2015), Sage David (age unconfirmed, March 2, 2015), Taylor Wells (eighteen-years-old, died March 15, 2015), Blake Brockington (eighteen-years-

old, died March 23, 2015), Ezra Page (fifteen-years-old, died March 28, 2015), Taylor Alesana (sixteen-years-old, died April 2, 2015), Sam Taub (fifteen-years-old, died April 9, 2015), Cameron Langrell (fifteen-years-old, died May 1, 2015), Kyler Prescott (fourteen-years-old, died May 18, 2015), Skylar Marcus Lee (sixteen-years-old, died September 28, 2015), and Emmett Castle (fourteen-years-old, died October 7, 2015).⁸ The press coverage and online discussion of Alcorn's suicide eclipsed the deaths of the aforementioned individuals in spite of the many circumstantial similarities between their suicides and Alcorn's. For instance, Zander Mahaffey also scheduled a final letter to post to his public Tumblr account after his suicide. Similarly, Blake Brockington expressed his discontent on Tumblr before walking into incoming traffic. Taylor Wells, too, was an avid Tumblr user. And identical to Alcorn's family, Melonie Rose's relatives chose to remember her at her funeral with the name they assigned to her at birth, as well as bury her in masculine attire. What is striking about this cohort is that, aside from Alcorn, only one presented as white, femme, and middle-to-upper-class. The rest were Black, Brown, and/or transmasculine people.

By the time Alcorn's suicide abruptly surfaced, new digital media technologies had usurped many of the mass media technologies of the 1950s, allowing for highly interactive networks of resistance to organize and launch visible attacks against the exclusions sustained by the circulation of dominant figurations of trans suicide. Their efforts sought to directly impede the residual meanings and sensations attached to Alcorn's body by cutting out a pocket of shame for audiences to recognize and address the harms they were actively reinforcing by adding to uncritical public outpourings of sympathy for Alcorn. Toward this goal, Asam Ahmad (2015) lamented,

... at a time when Black and racialized trans women are most at risk of dying from transphobic violence in America, turning a young white trans woman into the face of trans death in this country is a particularly insidious form of "unintentional" racism if it means ignoring and continuing to erase the violence that trans women of color face.

Eli Erlick (2018, p. 79) observes that as Alcorn became increasingly martyred by the mainstream U.S. press, 'trans youth of color swiftly shifted the discourse online, speaking out regarding the disproportionate numbers of Black trans people who have experienced violence or attempted suicide.' Evan Mitchell Schares (2019, p. 16) conceptualizes these tactics as types of queer of colour critique meant to 'unhinge whiteness and its prevailing logics of grievability' that served to support Alcorn's stature as a figure worthy of white performances of mourning and remembrance.

In early-to-mid 2015 especially, a set of counter-hashtags interrupted the steady stream of hashtags, including those like #leelah alcorn or #rip leelah, spread through Tumblr and other popular websites in memory of Alcorn.⁹

Hashtags #his name was zander, #his name was damien, and #her name was melonie did so by appropriating the form of the #SayHerName hashtag, a largely digitally-mediated social movement created around this same time to build awareness of police brutality targeting Black women in the U.S. Moreover, posts tagged #blake brockington, #melonie rose, #transgender lives matter, and #trans women of colour were similarly referential of and sensitive to the specific experiences of Black trans people. These hashtags, of course, materialized not too long after the first wave of #BlackLivesMatter posts in 2013, coinciding as well with the wake of the #FreeCeCe campaign, an organized effort to demand the release of an imprisoned trans woman of colour unjustly charged with the murder of an attacker she killed in self-defense. On the topic of #FreeCeCe, Mia Fischer (2019, p. 148) shows that, over the last decade, trans activists and allies have begun to utilize the participatory affordances of digital social media culture to destabilize the constant centering of whiteness, helping usher in a 'critical juncture where historically excluded and marginalized voices may generate unprecedented movement building by demanding truly intersectional social justice approaches and engagements with the visibility politics produced by mainstream and social media.' Change, however, is frustratingly slow, and it is often difficult to measure success when it comes to online activism. Admittedly, I have until now presented an almost too optimistic argument regarding the degree to which counter-hashtags in the context of Alcorn's viral death have acted as important instruments for destabilizing transnormativity in the figural history of trans suicide. I would be remiss not to clarify that these efforts were still quite marginal in number compared to the massive digital memorial constructed on Alcorn's behalf. In late 2018, I used a webscraping tool to extract, preserve, and study the remainder of the Alcorn archive on Tumblr. I found that of the over 13,000 posts Tumblr users spread using the hashtag #leelah alcorn, fewer than 900 (less than 7 percent) also contained a hashtag that in some way made salient dynamics of race, gender, and/or class (Hatfield 2022).

Not to mention, digital platforms are ephemeral archival infrastructures. After multiple scandals, financial hits, and legal disputes, Tumblr is simply not the 'trans technology' it once was, and its popularity amongst queer and trans users has dwindled substantially since 2015 (Haimson *et al.* 2019). A large portion of the Alcorn archive and the crucial resistances to its perpetuation of transnormative logics is currently supported by the remnants of hashtags circulated by accounts that have not yet deactivated. The future of this network is precarious, to say the very least. So is, I might add, the possibility of a large-scale public rearticulation of trans suicide that fully divorces it from its historically transnormative figurations. But, while the question of whether critiques of Alcorn's memory have effectively denaturalized transnormative figurations of trans suicide remains open, there is no

denying that these acts of resistance – small or incremental as they may be – have cracked apart an irreversible moment of shame that has brought to light the prejudices lodged into this longstanding structure of feeling. This moment calls into question the operations of whiteness as an animating condition underlying the legibility of trans suicide figurations; it also marks a critical occasion to actively question contemporary conceptions of identity in relation to an inherited history of representations that have long figured trans suicide in an uncritically transnormative tenor.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of Alcorn's death, new and residual media technologies have aided in opening new moments of shame from which to redirect the course of the figural history of trans suicide toward a more accurate representation of who is impacted by the transphobia of a death world. Consider the events surrounding the 2016 suicide of Bryn Kelly, a white, HIV-positive trans activist who had gained recognition as an artist before her untimely death by suicide. At Kelly's funeral, Sarah Schulman delivered a eulogy in the style of a 'political funeral' like the ones she remembered as a former member of ACT UP (Page and Schulman 2017, p. 71). During the public address, Schulman criticized suicide as an ultimately useless political mode and reframed Kelly's death as an institutional failure eventuated by equal parts transphobia and classism. Schulman said:

Please stop this idealized fantasy that suicide will satisfy any need, when all it does is cause more pain. We must stop killing ourselves, it is an act of violence, helping to create a violent future ... I now believe that Bryn Kelly died of poverty, of lack of services. That had she been able to be sure of secure housing, had she been able to enter an immersive, individuated full-service environment that recognized and valued her, as we here all recognize and value her, perhaps her life could have been saved. But without it, she could not get to a place where the frustration provoked by normative difficulty, did not become an emblem of all the grotesque institutional oppression and erasure and burden that she had been asked to bear. (pp. 78–79)

Schulman helps clarify that suicidal ideation is not merely a symptom of an impaired psychological state but an outcome of a necropolitical system that differentially harms poor trans people through the unfettered perpetuation of classist shame. Schulman's rhetorical approach is uncensored and biting. Her delivery is stylistically emblematic of her history as an activist invested in the politics of direct action. Because she does not treat trans suicide as an issue that must be hidden or somehow communicated about differently than any other form of institutionalized violence, Schulman's remarks collide against racialized norms of sentimentalism and respectability, which, at the time of their utterance, caused a relatively large number of

people to take to Schulman's Facebook page and express that they found her eulogy to be inappropriate. Whether one agrees with Schulman's rhetorical choices at the funeral is less important, however, than the fact that Schulman created a moment through which to draw out the class politics of trans suicide and recognize the manufactured shame thereof.

In addition to moving through digital social media ecologies, more recently, trans suicide has turned up as a key subject in memoirs and fiction written by trans people, confirming the continued persistence of print as a relevant infrastructure undergirding this structure of feeling. In Nate Cannon's (2019) autobiography *Dying to Hang with the Boys*, the author recounts lifelong struggles with dysphoria, suicidal ideation, drug abuse, financial insecurity, and the neurological disorder dystonia. Cannon's book repeats common patterns in trans suicide narratives, including that of the intersection between dysphoria and shame. When looking at the seemingly permanent shape of his waist and hips as a young adult, Cannon recalls, 'Shame slapped me' (p. 20). Marking a departure from the dominant figural history of trans suicide, Cannon's life narrative contextualizes suicide as a phenomenon that financially insecure trans men face, as well something that can converge with other disabilities. Cannon's memoir helps illuminate how suicide affects populations other than able-bodied femmes and adds nuance to existing figurations of trans suicide.

Race continues to haunt figurations of trans suicide in contemporary print culture as well. In the experimental memoir *trans girl suicide museum*, Hannah Baer (2019, p. 50) utilizes the metaphor of the 'suicide museum' to describe the often ketamine-induced liminality she experiences in the space between dysphoria and euphoria while transitioning. In the cognitive-environmental confines of the suicide museum, Baer actively tries *not* to kill herself. There, instead, she obsesses over her transness. She is acutely aware that her need to think and talk about being trans is a compulsion to which those who are not trans simply cannot relate; further, her felt entrapment within the museum, she understands, is not 'from trans people being crazy' but 'a constructed mental illness that comes from transphobia' (Byron 2021). While Baer resists the pathologization of her condition, in *trans girl suicide museum*, she repeatedly grapples with her whiteness and her upper-class status. Baer (2019, p. 68) acknowledges her shame about her 'racism' and hopes to 'have more attention to work in it when I'm done not killing myself in 2020.' For Baer, transitioning is a difficult process that ultimately distracts her from focusing on living an anti-racist life, which, in its brutal honesty, raises questions about the complicity of more privileged suicidal trans people in perpetuating the suicides of less advantaged trans people of colour. In its willingness to be uncomfortably candid, Baer's memoir lays bare the structural impossibilities of a unified trans community.

In Torrey Peters' (2021) novel, *Detransition, Baby*, the author places her white trans characters in quasi-ironic scenes of suicide that reference the racial disparities of the trans suicide crisis. Though a work of fiction, Peters' book is rooted in the reality of trans existence. The seventh chapter begins with one of the main trans protagonists, Reese, attending a funeral of a trans woman who died by suicide. The chapter contains only a barely veiled allusion to Schulman's eulogy and blunt commentary on the whiteness of trans suicide within Reese's community:

If you are a trans girl who knows many other trans girls, you go to church a lot, because church is where they hold the funerals ... Who knows what people will say at a trans funeral? Will some queer make a political speech instead of a eulogy, so that for weeks afterward other queers will post outraged screeds about it on social media? ... Which nice white cis person will remind the assembled mourners—a high percentage of whom are trans themselves—that everyone must do more to save trans women of color, who are being murdered (*murdered!*), although this particular highly attended funeral is, of course, a suicide, because that's how the white girls die prematurely. (p. 209, emphasis in original)

Tonally, Peters' book is striking in its unwillingness to over-emotionalize trans suicide, mirroring the anti-sentimental *ethos* of Schulman's rhetoric. Reese, for her part, admits that she only still attends suicide funerals for selfish reasons because they offer her a chance to socialize, an opportunity to remind herself not to kill herself, and a moment to confirm for herself that she is not a psychopath, since her reaction to hearing about yet another suicide is usually an exasperated '*Oh goddammit, not again*' rather than an automatic release of despair (p. 210, emphasis in original). In this chapter, Peters' goes as far as to infuse humour into the book's figuration of trans suicide, as one character, another trans woman, tells Reese she thought up a joke during the service: 'What do you call a remake of a nineties romantic comedy where you cast trans women in all the roles? ... Four Funerals and a Funeral' (p. 212).

In *Detransition, Baby*, suicide is a mundane feature of the everyday lives of trans people. Toward the end of the novel, readers find Reese spiraling into a moment of shame after receiving bad news. To cope, she engages the Wim Hof method of re-associating her mind and body by submerging herself in freezing ocean waters. Peters interjects ambivalence regarding whether Reese was truly trying to find some measure of stress relief or if she was considering ending her own life by self-drowning. As she is swept into higher waters, Reese is eventually rescued as a crowd of onlookers visually consume the spectacle. After Reese attempts to explain the situation, paramedics tell her that she must voluntarily agree to a wellness check by a doctor to confirm she is not yet another white trans woman seeking to die by suicide in a most dramatic, attention-seeking manner. What is interesting here is how Peters narrates the immediate medicalization of the white trans

body in front of a curious audience, revealing how trans suicide is so mundanely figured through a sensationalized and transnormative frame. The novel spotlights the absurdity of the processes through which trans subjects are pathologized as suicidal and offered as a spectacular object of consumption to the gaze of a crowd who is likely never to question dynamics of race, gender, class in the scene unfolding before them. By continually pulling readers' focus back to elements of transnormativity in contexts of trans suicide, Peters unlocks a moment of shame for reevaluating the possibly oppressive meanings and feelings attached to dominant figurations of trans suicide in the broader cultural imagination.

Within this media landscape, where trans suicide retains a close tie to print even in an increasingly digital cultural milieu, trans cultural producers of colour have sought to incrementally disrupt the entrenched historical relationship between trans suicide and whiteness using emergent figurations and both dominant and residual technologies. Visual performance artist and author Vivek Shraya released the short film 'I want to kill myself' online in 2017. The video features images of scenes from Shraya's life and audio of Shraya's voice telling viewers about the many times throughout her life when she wanted to die by suicide. Shraya contextualizes past suicidal ideation as a response to personal battles with dysphoria, shame, and generational trauma. Shraya's work figurizes suicide in partnership with the lived experience of South Asian trans people, reminding audiences that the binary between Black and white does not adequately encapsulate the racial and ethnic diversity of trans communities.

Still, there is a dire need to remember and more vigorously address suicide as it occurs within Black trans communities. The recently released *Black Trans Prayer Book*, 'an interfaith and beyond faith collection of poems, spells, incantations, theological narrative and visual offerings by Black Trans Non-Binary, & Intersex people,' deals with the linkages of dysphoria, shame, and suicide from the perspective of Black trans people (Mase and Edidi 2020). The volume contains the poem 'I am from Red lipstick and Blistex,' in which author Audria LB (2021, p. 56) writes, 'I am from red lipstick and blistex / suicide attempts and panic attacks / bibles and nintendo 64 / I came all the way from who I was meant to be / closer every day towards who I am turning out to be.' In this poem and throughout the broader book, the authors acknowledge their experiences with trans shame and, on occasion, reference its association with suicide. Through trans-affirmative theology and divination, they make shame a shared instead of isolating feeling. In some respects, the book can be read as a sort of shame management technology that tries to prevent shame from manifesting so severely that it causes suicidal ideations. As it circulates, works like this one help re-route the structure of feeling of trans suicide toward racial figurations that do not *a priori* assume whiteness as a criterion for inclusion.

The future history of trans suicide remains unwritten. Ideally, there would be no more trans suicide because the necropolitical effects of trans shame would no longer exist. Unfortunately, reality is crueler. In the year since I first submitted this article for review, a new surge of anti-trans laws have infiltrated legislative bodies across the U.S. throughout the first quarter of 2022. In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott directed state authorities to investigate gender-affirmative medical care for trans youth a form of child abuse. The move occurred in coordination with the removal of a link to the Trevor Project website, the only LGBTQ-focused organization included on a list of suicide prevention resources posted to the Texas Department of Health and Human Services webpage (Yurcaba 2022). A district judge recently blocked Abbott's order, but the state's Attorney General promises to challenge the ruling until the dispute reaches the federal U.S. Supreme Court. A cursory glance at the figural history of trans suicide proves just how devastatingly consequential laws targeting trans people can be, which is why it is critical that cultural studies scholars continue to probe the conditions that give rise to anti-trans politics in the present conjuncture.

I would like to conclude here by acknowledging that, as with any historical genealogy, the one assembled here is partial and fragmented. Students of trans history might be unsatisfied with its unbelievably obvious or downright unforgivable omissions. I already feel some modicum of shame about my choice not to discuss the harrowing tale of Kirk Murphy, who died by suicide in 2011 after battling for many years with the trauma of being victimized in a conversion therapy led by George A. Rekers at the University of California, Los Angeles in the 1970s. And who can forget Chelsea Manning's suicide attempts while in solitary confinement during her stay in federal prison for leaking classified information to WikiLeaks? Alas, that I could go on with lists of examples of possible inclusions to this article further clarifies the devastating extent to which transness, shame, and suicide have intersected within a relatively short time span. Of course, those who will always be unknown haunt me. They linger in the gaps between the words that I write and whatever effects this history should have in the future. I can only hope that the hauntological force of absence will motivate new works that fill the holes that I leave so eerily uncovered.

Throughout this article, I have refrained from treating trans suicide as evidence of a pathology unique to trans people or, relatedly, indulging in a necropolitics that marshals institutionalized transphobia and shame as mechanisms for managing the lives and deaths of trans communities. Rather, I have chosen to focus on the inventive and truly extraordinary ways trans people have always embedded themselves within figurations of trans suicide by using their bodies as leverage to directly participate in this discursive formation and ensure their collective survival against stacked odds. Based on the investigation I have performed into the clinical, sensationalized, and

diversified figurations of trans suicide in U.S. public culture, it is clear to me that our present trans suicide crisis is mediated by a pre-existing structure of feeling composed of competing meanings, identity-based prejudices, and changing technological infrastructures.

Evolving figurations of trans suicide have been made possible by constant bodily encounters with available media technologies, resulting in the production of a shared, multi-generational reservoir of affect sustained by indeterminate flows of trans shame. Shame, a prototypically 'bad affect,' need not be repressed because it is also the basis upon which worlds are built, networks connected, and futures habilitated. In line with cultural studies' commitment to the politics of care (see Striphas 2019), I suggest finding new strategies to harness trans shame as a defense against the transphobic structures that incentivize suicide and make trans lives more difficult to live. Cultural studies practitioners should begin by embracing an anti-transnormative ethics of 'aftercare,' a concept developed by Malatino (2020, p. 3) to describe what queer and trans carewebs do when their focus moves beyond the jolting trauma of violence and death. Aftercare 'is what needs to be provided in the wake of massive upheaval and transformation, and it is what facilitates and supports emergence into a radically recalibrated experience of body-mind and the world it encounters' (Malatino 2020, p. 3). For guidance regarding how aftercare should manifest, we would do well to follow the lead of trans of colour authors, artists, and activists, who have generatively repurposed trans shame to critique the racial necropolitics of existing structures of feeling in the pursuit of some semblance justice for the countless trans lives of colour lost due to suicide. Only then can we conceive and implement the major changes necessary for rendering trans shame and suicide obsolete.

Notes

1. It is important to note that the It Gets Better Project was not without controversy, as some queer thinkers derided it as a flagrant display of white urban gay ignorance, rather than a positive example of queer worldmaking (see Nyong'o 2010).
2. Gill-Peterson provides an important re-reading of Sedgwick's 'How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay,' noting that Sedgwick fails to specifically mention the large swath of children who were able to receive diagnoses as '*transsexual*,' in addition to support from medical professionals who helped facilitate their transitions during childhood, at the time in which she was writing (p. 147). Indeed, one should question just how many of the 'effeminate boys' Sedgwick invokes were mis-identified trans girls who may or may not have eventually died by suicide.
3. June referred to himself in his writings using 'he/him' pronouns.
4. Queer theorists have ruminated on the traumatic bond tying shame to queer experience for quite some time now (see Warner 1999, Sedgwick 2003, Stockton 2006, Love 2009, Halperin and Traub 2010, Munt 2019a, 2019b). Their

work has done much to emphasize shame as a primal, unpredictable, relational, differentially felt, and political affect that shapes queer worlds in both quotidian and extraordinary ways, despite the continued elevation of pride, shame's supposed opposite.

5. E. Cram (2012) considers how anti-trans shame and disgust resulted in the murder of Angie Zapata in 2009. Zapata is not the only notable trans murder victim whose life was ended by the shame of others. Also consider Brandon Teena, Gwen Araujo, and the numerous nameless others, many of whom trans people of colour, who have died too soon due to the transphobic shame imposed onto them by other people.
6. For this reading of Williams' work, I must acknowledge my debt to Ted Striphas' lectures on structures of feeling during a seminar on Cultural Studies that transpired during the Spring 2017 semester in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado Boulder. Specifically, I am drawing from notes I took in this course on the afternoon of February 23, 2017.
7. In this sentence and for the rest of this article, I bracket 'sex change' in quotation marks to acknowledge the anachronism of the phrase. Presently, procedures designed to facilitate the physical transitions of trans people are best referred to as gender affirmative treatments or surgeries.
8. These thirteen teenagers represent those *accounted for* trans youth who died suicide during the period of February 11, 2015 – October 7, 2015. Because trans suicide rates, particularly the rate of suicide for trans youth, cannot be accurately verified in the U.S. due to a number of reasons, including possible concealment of trans identities by family members and others, there is no way of knowing exactly how many trans people died by suicide after Alcorn. To gather even an approximate sense of these numbers, one must turn to non-official sources, such as those organized and disseminated by journalists and activists. I obtained this information from an article published by a source for trans news across the globe, *Planet Transgender* (see Dennison 2015).
9. Tumblr hashtags frequently include a space between words.

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