Cis Feminist Moves to Innocence

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Cis feminist theorists sometimes employ rhetorical moves to claim innocence while abdicating responsibility for engaging with trans scholarship and theory as well as structural transmisogyny. I suggest that it is helpful to understand this phenomenon using a conception of *cis feminist moves to innocence*. These rhetorical moves enable cisgender feminists to falsely position their failure to engage with both trans scholarship and structures of transmisogyny as epistemically virtuous.

As a case study, I consider Kate Manne's (2017) *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*.[1] My extensive critiques of the book's views and methodologies are documented in (Berenstain 2019). I focus on several short passages that embody the rhetorical device of moves to innocence and produce problematic tensions with the purported aims of the text. For instance, under the sub-heading "Regrets," Manne explicitly acknowledges that she does not discuss the phenomenon of transmisogyny. Nonetheless, her book not only purports to offer a unified account of misogyny but one that is both *ameliorative* and *intersectional* (Manne 2017, 31, 34, 60, 62, 129). In a society like this one, however, without a framework that recognizes the coloniality of gender and the origin of the current coercive gender binary in the settler colonial function of a forcibly imposed and biologically naturalized heteropatriarchy—and its targeting of trans women and transfeminine people—Manne's account can be neither.[2]

Nonetheless, without the primary tool necessary to tell a unified story of misogyny that has a chance of being ameliorative or intersectional, Manne forges ahead on said project. She contends that while the cases to which feminists apply the label of misogyny comprise a "messy ragbag of splashy, headline-making episodes," her picture provides a way of systematizing these cases according to the patriarchal norms that are being (or perceived as being) violated and enforced across them. She claims that her account of misogyny "offers a surprisingly simple way of unifying the phenomena, and produces a theory that makes good and concrete (and, importantly, falsifiable) predictions" (130). Further, Manne takes her description of "coercive enforcement mechanisms" for the social and behavioral norms of

[1] I outline my extensive critiques of the book's views and methodologies in (Berenstain 2019).

[2] Before turning to that analysis, consider the context in which Manne's book was written. At the time of writing, it must be emphasized that transmisogynistic violence was as pervasive as it had ever been. I'm speaking not only of the violence of intimate partner abuse, sexual violence, police terror, incarceration, and murder, which continue at epidemic levels against trans women of color, nor solely of the mundane yet death-promoting violence of being denied life-saving and life-affirming health care, access to safe housing or shelter, and protection from job discrimination. I am referring also to the everyday epistemic violence of having your very existence denied, your humanity de-legitimized, and your mere presence treated as a threat. Since the book was published, targeted administrative measured to produce transantagonistic and transmisogynistic violence have only increased.

patriarchy to form the "functional essence of misogyny" (47). She takes misogyny to metaphysically depend on patriarchy (67). She makes these sweeping claims about her account despite explicitly acknowledging that she chooses not to engage with the phenomenon of transmisogyny (25):

> "Given the prevalence of transphobic and transmisogynistic violence, harassment, and both individual and structural forms of discrimination, I regret not being able to speak to its nature. That being said, it seemed evident to me I didn't have the requisite authority to do so. Recent controversies in philosophy at the time of writing have highlighted the need for lived experience to speak on these matters."

Despite claiming to not have the authority to speak to the issue of transmisogyny, Manne still considers herself well-positioned to offer a unified account of misogyny. Given that she claims to offer a simple account of misogyny that unifies the diverse phenomena that fall under its umbrella, what reasons could she have for excluding of transmisogyny? I analyze the justifications she provides for this serious omission and argue that they do not hold water. The function of Manne's words of regret is not only to turn away from the reality of structural transmisogyny and settler transmisogynistic violence, but to make this turning away seem reasoned and respectful rather than careless and indifferent, to make it seem morally and epistemically *virtuous* rather than callous and unconcerned. [3] They are willfully ignorant at best. They are what I call *cis feminist moves to innocence*.

How does she narrate her own failure to engage with the realities of transmisogyny? How does she situate her choice within feminist traditions? Manne begins her 'regrets' by ignoring the literature in which feminist philosophers have directly addressed the question: "is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike I or who are less privileged than I?" and noted the conditions under which getting "out of the way" for others to speak' is also a tactic of abandoning "political responsibility to speak out against oppression," avoiding accountability for one's speech or lack thereof, and feigning neutrality about one's retreat (Alcoff 1991, 119)

Alcoff writes, "What I call the "Retreat" response has been popular among some sections of the U.S. feminist movement. This response is simply to retreat from all practices of speaking for; it asserts that one can only know one's own narrow individual experience and one's "own truth" and thus that one can never make claims beyond this" (Alcoff 1991, 125). Among the many critiques of this move that Alcoff offers is that "the major problem with such a retreat is that it significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity." Not only does Manne's choice to retreat in the face of transmisogyny reduce the political effectivity of her account, it is employed inconsistently even by her own lights.

While Manne uses her claim of non-experience to justify excluding the topic of *transmisogyny* from her book, her position as a cis white woman does not prevent her from

[3] I do not claim to know Manne's specific intention behind her purposeful omission of transmisogyny from her account of misogyny. Rather, I am analyzing the impacts and functional effects of her omission.

being comfortable and confident enough to include various lengthy discussions of *misogynoir*.[4] Why does Manne have the requisite authority to speak about racialized misogynistic violence against Black women but not transmisogynistic violence? Though she makes sure to note that she is undertaking her discussion of misogynoir "with even more epistemic caution—and humility—than usual," there is clearly still a tension here. If Mannes considers herself to lack the relevant authority to speak on transmisogyny given her lived experience, then she should also take herself to lack the relevant authority to speak on misogynoir (Manne 2017, 25).

Manne aspires for her picture to be intersectional (2017, 62). Yet an application of one of intersectionality's insights, that multiple forms of oppression are often "inseparably intermeshed," yields the obvious conclusion that transmisogyny cannot be reductively disaggregated into transphobia + misogyny (Bettcher 2017). Had Manne chosen to consider some of the forms of misogyny and violence—both administrative and interpersonal—specifically directed at trans people, it would have yielded a different account.

On Manne's account, the primary function of misogynistic 'coercive enforcement mechanisms' is to enforce patriarchal social expectations on women and girls and punish those who fail to live up to the standard. These norms obligate women to provide men with "feminine-coded goods" such as domestic labor, nurturing, sex, affection, deference, obedience, and emotional availability. But, while living up to these patriarchal norms might sometimes protect cis (white) women from being targeted with misogynistic punishments, they do not similarly protect trans women. Trans bathroom bills do not make exceptions for stealth trans women who perfectly embody white heteropatriarchal expectations of what a woman should look and act like.[5] These violent ideologies portray all trans women as sexual predators (McKinnon 2018), despite the fact that trans women are far more likely to be victims of sexual violence than perpetrators. The material threats of such transmisogynistic propaganda are most dangerous to poor and working-class trans women of color. But the fact that all trans women are harmed by these transmisogynistic ideologies, regardless of how well their appearances, mannerisms, and behaviors align with the social ideals mandated by the white supremacist colonial gender binary, suggests that there must be significantly more to the 'unifying' story of misogyny than Manne suggests.[6]

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[4] This move, of course, elides the fact that some Black women are trans, which means addressing transmisogynoir is part of addressing misogynoir, just as addressing misogynoir is part of addressing misogyny.

[5] As Koyama (2003) emphasizes, it is a form of oppression that trans women are frequently coerced by medical professionals (and the medical-industrial complex) into having gender presentations that conform to societal expectations of womanhood and femininity as a prerequisite for accessing necessary health care.

[6] For instance, one of the aims of the right's political efforts to deny gender-affirming health care to trans youth and trans adults is to *prevent* access to the very interventions that would be the most effective at allowing trans women to align their gender presentation with the oppressive standards of cisheteropatriarchal femininity. The resources Manne's account offers to understand misogyny as a series of coercive enforcement mechanisms offers no way to understand the simultaneous *denial of access* to the very resources that allow trans women to live up to the standards toward which said coercive enforcement mechanisms are oriented.

The failure of Manne's account to make adequate sense of these kinds of misogyny shows that there is something much deeper and more complex going on here than misogyny enacted as punishment for trans women's perceived failure to live up to the social norms and expectations of patriarchy. It also shows how deeply mistaken it is for her to assume that she can create a "conceptual skeleton" of an account of misogyny and just slot in the intersectional aspects later (Manne 2017, 13).

Even if it is not obvious (to cis feminists) that Manne's account is made less effective by her purposeful omission of transmisogyny, it should be obvious that her foreclosure of the issue is premature. The question of whether a 'unified' account of misogyny can make sense of transmisogyny—and thus live up to its name—is not one that can be settled *a priori*. You can't decide that investigating transmisogyny won't make a difference to your account of misogyny without investigating whether transmisogyny makes a difference to your account of misogyny. Couching this selective omission in concern and regret is a cis feminist move to innocence.

I first encountered the notion of a 'move to innocence' in Tuck and Yang's (2012) "Decolonization is not a metaphor." The paper critiques how social justice movements have coopted the language of decolonization in a way that furthers the project of settler colonialism by failing to work toward the return of stolen lands to the Indigenous peoples from whom they were (and continue to be) coercively and often forcibly taken through displacement and genocide. Tuck and Yang's analysis identifies a number of *settler moves to innocence*, which settlers use to exonerate ourselves of the negative feelings that accompany attempts to reckon with the violence that was and is necessary to make our continued presence on stolen lands possible.

Tuck and Yang (2012) derived their notion of a move to innocence from Janet Mawhinney's (1998) Master's thesis. In her thesis, Mawhinney identifies what she calls *white moves to innocence*, a pattern she identifies in progressive white service organizations engaged in anti-racist efforts. These patterns were "operations of innocence as a force of resistance to the disruption of racist relations" (94). Mawhinney emphasizes that these moves to innocence are not exclusive to whiteness or racism, and that "moves to innocence can, and often do, occur anywhere that privilege exists" (101). She identifies two primary white moves to innocence: *rush to the margins* and *claims of non-experience*.

Rush to the margins is "distinguished by efforts to align oneself with one's position(s) of oppression while de-emphasizing privilege" (Mawhinney 1998, 100). The rush to the margins allows white women to obscure their complicity and culpability for racism by claiming innocence through their experience of other forms of victimhood and oppression. Audre Lorde identifies a similar pattern, noting that people who experience oppression along some dimension often focus solely on the single axis they experience, allowing it to obscure their complicity with other forms of oppression from which they benefit. She writes, "Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing" (Lorde 2007, 116). Rush to the margins is a move to innocence because it creates a barrier to accountability by precluding the recognition of one's own complicity in the forms of structural oppression from which one benefits.

The claim of non-experience, on the other hand, "does not rely upon claims of marginalization, but rather on a perceived absence of experience of oppressive power relations." Whites claiming non-experience with racism conflate their lack of experience as a *target* of racism with their lack of experience with racism altogether—as though they have never perpetrated racism or even benefitted from it. Mawhinney writes, 'Non-experience' posits the impossible, that is, the extrication of oneself from (oppressive) material social relations" (108). Claims of the impossible position of non-experience conjure a misleading picture of oppression as reducible to a collection of individual actions and impossibly situate the claimant as outside of relations of power.

The claim of non-experience is one of Manne's primary cis moves to innocence.[7] Manne conflates her lack of experience as a *target* of transmisogyny with a lack of *location* within the power structure of cis-supremacy, as though she has never benefitted from it. This assumption depends on an impossible dissociation of cis white women's privilege and power from trans women's and transfeminine people's oppression via transmisogyny as enforced by settler white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy. As Lugones (2007) and (Simpson 2017) have outlined, the contemporary gender binary that is responsible for the privileges of cis white womanhood is mutually constitutive with the processes and structures of colonialism that frame as deviant and target for elimination queer and trans lifeways of people of color and Indigenous two-spirit genders and sexualities that threaten settler colonial governance structures. The colonial processes that violently construct white cisgender heterosexuality as normative are inextricable from the forcible imposition of heteropatriarchy onto people of color and Indigenous peoples of the Americas that functions as a mechanism of land dispossession, a mode of racial capitalist wealth production, and a way to legally enshrine settler theft of Indigenous lands to allow for white settler flourishing, security, and futurity. As Cherokee scholar Qwo-Li Driskill writes, "No understanding of sexual and gender constructions on colonized and occupied land can take place without an understanding of the ways colonial projects continually police sexual and gender lines. Two-Spirit critiques, then, are necessary to an understanding of homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia in the Americas, just as an analysis of queerphobia and sexism is necessary to understand colonial projects." (Driskill 2010, 73)

Since moves to innocence are characterized primarily in terms of their oppressive white supremacist and settler colonial *functions,* I organize my analysis by asking: What are the overall functions of Manne's cis feminist moves to innocence? Below, I outline three primary ones, though there may be more:

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[7] To be clear, there is nothing particularly special about Manne's use of cis feminist moves to innocence other than the fact that they are made from a platform with a broad reach that was both intended and predictable. My focus on Manne's work is because it represents a larger pattern in cis white feminist philosophy of abdicating responsibility to engage with structures of transmisogyny, white supremacy, ableism, and settler colonialism, and especially with cis white women's active and complicit perpetration of them and the benefits we receive as a result. Shelley Tremain has written extensively on the failures and complicities of mainstream white feminist philosophy when it comes to dismantling rather than reinforcing ableism. For further discussion, see (Tremain 2017, 2020).

The first function is to allow Manne to appear to stand in solidarity with trans women without taking on any of the obligations required to actively *be* in solidarity. Transmisogyny is one part of a larger structure of settler colonial white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy that produces inordinate benefits for white settler populations, but especially so for class-privileged whites who are both straight and cisgender, as Manne acknowledges she is. As a white cisgender woman born in Australia and now living in the United States, Manne benefits from structures that facilitate the occupation and dispossession of Indigenous land and oppress trans women and gender-diverse peoples through the enforcement of violent, binaristic colonial gender relations. As a member of the settler academy, this suggests that she has a certain level of responsibility to address the rampant transmisogyny and violent imposition of the colonial gender binary as it is enforced—especially from *within our discipline*—by those who are situated in very similar ways.[8] That such material and epistemic/interpretive benefits accrue to the populations that Manne finds herself in indicates that she cannot simply 'opt out' of her obligation to understand and dismantle transmisogyny and the settler colonial structures of white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy that produced and maintain it. Certainly, being in solidarity with people targeted by transmisogyny requires that she not opt out.

We might ask what purpose it serves for Manne to mention transmisogyny at all if she is not going to engage with it in her purportedly unified philosophical account of misogyny. Why not simply remain silent with regards to the issues faced by trans women? One function that it performs is to show that she is aware of transmisogyny rather than ignorant of its existence, which may serve as a buffer to the critique that her silence on transmisogyny is a form of complicity. Avoiding criticism is, as Alcoff points out, often one of the main motivations of the retreat response. She writes, "If I speak only for myself, it may appear that I am immune from criticism because I am not making any claims that describe others or prescribe actions for them. If I am speaking only for myself, I have no responsibility for being true to your experience or needs" (1991, 127).[9]

The second function of Manne's cis move to innocence is to reinforce epistemic burdens on trans women and transfeminine people via the structural production of epistemic exploitation. Epistemic exploitation occurs when marginalized people are compelled to

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[8] Transmisogynistic epistemic violence is at an all-time high *within academic feminist philosophy*. Transmisogynistic white cis women who identify as feminists use online spaces to perpetrate harassment and abuse of trans women and transfeminine people. They call for journals to retract the work of trans women philosophers for critiquing TERF ideology (McKinnon 2018), and they promote policies of gender discrimination grounded in dehumanizing and death-promoting ideologies about trans women (Berenstain 2020). At the time Manne's book was written, white cis feminist academic philosophers were already some of the most prominent producers of transmisogynistic propaganda used to justify administrative and interpersonal violence against trans women and transfeminine people.

[9] Alcoff goes on to emphasize that it is "both morally and politically objectionable to structure one's actions around the desire to avoid criticism, especially if this outweighs other questions of effectivity." She notes further that sometimes the motivation is not simply to aovid criticism but to avoid making errors, which comes "not from a desire to advance collective goals but a desire for personal mastery, to establish a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is a master of the situation" (127). Such a desire, she contends, must be resisted.

educate privileged people about the nature of their oppression (Berenstain 2016). There is a tight connection between claims of non-experience and epistemic exploitation because of the latter phenomenon's structural nature and the demands and expectations it generates.

Manne takes herself to not have the "requisite authority" to speak to the nature of transmisogyny. But if lived experience as a *target* of transmisogyny is the only thing that can provide such authority, then cis women are doomed to endlessly perpetuate the epistemic exploitation of trans women and transfeminine people by remaining locked in a cycle of unshakeable ignorance about their lives and experiences. Presumably, however, studying the testimony, scholarship, and intellectual productions of the trans women and transfeminine people who *do* experience transmisogyny can provide some amount of the requisite authority to acknowledge the basic features of transmisogyny.[10] Manne states that she can't speak to the phenomenon of transmisogyny before going on to list a number of readings by trans and intersex women on the phenomenon which she claims to have found "helpful and illuminating" (25). Her stance thus suggests that, despite having read the work of trans feminists who write on transmisogyny, she is not capable of gaining enough understanding to speak about these works simply because of her positionality as a cis woman. If cis allies *in principle* cannot learn from the enormous body of work that trans women and transfeminine people have produced and made public, this creates an enormous structural burden on those people who are consistently harmed and oppressed by transmisogyny to also be the only ones who can educate others about it and work to dismantle it. This leads to the intolerable result that the only people able to learn and educate others about the basic structures of transmisogyny are also those to whom the structure most efficiently denies resources, exploits, harms, and brutalizes. It is also worth noting that if you have enough authority to identify the fact that transmisogyny is a problem, as Manne does in the passage quoted, then you presumably have enough authority to say more than nothing at all about some of the features of the problem.[11]

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[10] As an aside, I am always fascinated by how frequently people, usually white academics, ask how they can avoid epistemic exploitation while also trying to learn about a form of oppression they benefit from—as though the structural situatedness of being a white settler scholar does not give one access to the enormous amount of work done by people of color *who have chosen to speak about* structural racism and white supremacy. These white academics sometimes seem to think they are setting a clever trap, as though they have found a deep and embarrassing contradiction between the obligation to educate oneself about oppression and the obligation to avoid committing epistemic exploitation, one that threatens the legitimacy of the entire social justice project.

[11] Manne goes on to misconstrue the lessons of feminist standpoint theory in her justification for leaving out any discussion of transmisogyny from her book. As noted above, following the statement of her "regrets," Manne justifies her omission with the claim that, "Recent controversies in philosophy at the time of writing have highlighted the need for lived experience to speak on these matters" (2017, 25). Manne cites the Tuvel/Hypatia debacle as one such recent controversy. But what Manne sees as the takeaway from this encounter was emphatically *not* the lesson of the Tuvel debacle. One of the most basic lessons to come out of it was that in order to write on issues that primarily affect Black women, trans women, and especially trans women of color, one must actually *engage the thought, work, and intellectual productions of Black women, trans women, and trans women of color.* One who does not have the relevant lived experience should do the actual research of reading the theoretical work and

Manne namechecks the trans and intersex scholars and writers from whom she has learned: Julia Serano, Emi Koyama, Talia Mae Bettcher, and Veronica Ivy. Her refusal to engage with their work is made especially odd by the fact that some of the pieces she cites explicitly frame trans feminist issues and transphobic oppression as central to feminism. In the introduction of "The Transfeminist Manifesto," for instance, Koyama (2003) writes, ""[Transfeminism] stands up for trans and non-trans women alike, and asks non-trans women to stand up for trans women in return." Koyama goes on to say, "Transfeminism embodies feminist coalition politics in which women from different backgrounds stand up for each other, because if we do not stand for each other, nobody will."

Instead of claiming an all-encompassing inability to speak on the matter, a more useful approach would be to—at the very least—*listen to the those who do have the relevant lived experience and have already spoken or are already speaking*. Not speaking *for* is thus to be importantly distinguished from not speaking *with* (Alcoff 1991). Doing philosophy in the spirit of feminist standpoint theory involves recognizing the importance of substantively engaging the work of those whose knowledge comes in part from lived experience, not feigning epistemic humility while engaging in a wholesale abdication of this responsibility.

The third function of Manne's cis move to innocence is to reduce the obligations of allies to affect rather than action. As Sara Ahmed (2017, 151) writes, "The histories of racism as well as sexism are littered with good intentions and bad feelings; they seem to bind together in a certain way, as if to say: by feeling bad, I mean well." In Manne's framework, the real work of the ally becomes purely emotive and affective, a matter of attitude rather than accompliceship. Hoping, wishing, and feeling bad become the real social justice work. Expressing anger and sadness are where allyship begins and ends on a such a view. Taking action against transmisogyny, such as working to dismantle the forcibly imposed colonial gender binary, undo misogynoir, end ableist and eugenicist policies and practices, return ancestral lands to Indigenous peoples, redistribute wealth, challenge white cis people's deployment of harmful images and ideologies, improve access to resources, and abolish structures of settler colonial white supremacy all become things that white cis women do not have the "requisite authority" to throw their weight behind. This is a way of protecting and upholding the status quo from which class-privileged, non-disabled cis white women benefit enormously—at significant cost to Indigenous peoples and queer and trans populations of color.

That Manne's view portrays allyship as primarily *affective* rather than *effective* is evinced by the following passage in her discussion of Daniel Holtzclaw's systematic perpetration of sexual violence against Black women in Oklahoma, many of whom had been previously criminalized for drug use and for engaging in the sex trade: Manne (214) writes,

> *"That he might easily have succeeded in this endeavor ought to be the basis for shameful self-reflection on the part of white women like me, certainly me included,*

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public writings of those who have had such experience. This of course would also go some way toward alleviating the structural burden of epistemic exploitation placed on people with these lived experiences to educate others about them.

> *regarding our complicity with misogynoir and contribution to black women's herasure—along with "lean down" exploitation and other such racist strands in (white) feminism."*

But what is the point of Manne's hand-wringing in the form of "shameful self-reflection," if it does not lead to action? This seems to be an instance of another trend that Mawhinney (67) identifies: "Emotional empathy is engaged as if it were simultaneous with, or a substitute for, political critique and change." It also must be emphasized that cis white women's shame and regret are often wielded as weapons. They function as both sword and shield—harming people of color, trans women, and trans women of color, and offering a protective defense against accusations of said harm.

The issue, of course, is not whether Manne engages in an appropriate amount of "shameful self-reflection" about cis white women's committed devotion to imperialist capitalist white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy. The issue is whether her shameful self-reflection *mobilizes* her into any sort of action against the interlocking structures of oppression forged under settler colonialism that benefit her as a white cisgender woman born in Australia and now living in the United States. The feelings of dominantly situated people often get in the way of change, function as a diversionary tactic, and are simply not the point. As Ahmed notes, "You can feel bad as a way of doing nothing, and we send out these letters because we want something to be done" (2017, 151).

The point of this engagement is not to make cis white feminists *feel bad*, but to make cis white feminists *do something*—other than rush to the margins every time a form of oppression that benefits us becomes a topic of conversation. If, in your own work, you want to focus on the forms of oppression that cis white women face, then, by all means, go ahead. But acknowledge what you're doing and don't pretend that your resulting analysis is going to be ameliorative for anyone else. When you marginalize forms of misogyny by excluding them from the account you claim is "unifying" you provide cover for the structures responsible for producing them. Feminist philosophy aims at dismantling structures of oppression that women and gender-diverse people face. Dismantling transmisogyny and the ongoing settler colonial forces that are responsible for violently imposing cisheteropatriarchy and its corresponding gender binary should be a core goal of feminism. If it isn't, feminism simply becomes what Elena Ruíz (2019) calls "just another lifeline of colonialism." Manne herself says, "As feminists we ought to be traitors if we can afford to be." Amen to that. And let us be sure that, as feminists who are also cis white women, we are traitors not just to the expectations of white femininity but to the project of settler colonial white supremacist capitalist ableist cisheteropatriarchy—and to all the benefits that come with it.

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