

## Short-Circuited Trans Care, t4t, and Trans Scenes

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses short-circuited trans care by focusing on failures of t4t as an ethos both interpersonally and within particular trans scenes. The author begins by recounting an experience working at a bar/restaurant that appealed to its identity as a caring trans community space as part of its exploitation of trans workers. This dynamic inspires the main argument, that t4t can become an ethos of scenes and institutions beyond the interpersonal while short-circuiting practices of trans care. Short-circuited trans care is then traced to t4t by drawing from Hil Malatino’s work on trans care and t4t, Kai Cheng Thom’s work on community dynamics, and trans literature to argue that practices of t4t often include abuse, expulsion, and assumptive care. This short-circuited trans care is linked to trans scenes by discussing the ethos of t4t in the history of Topside Press and trans cultural production. The author does not condemn t4t and to this effect offers a critique of tethering trans cultural production to prestige instead of care. Rather, the goal of this essay is to openly discuss aspects of t4t and trans care that are often obscured through the projection of a highly questionable “we” or universalized “trans community.”

*Keywords* trans theory, trans literature, trans care, care ethics, feminist philosophy

Fuck t4t.

— Lexi, *Infect your Friends and Loved Ones* by Torrey Peters

## Trans Theory as Disgruntled Employee Theory

In late 2018 after I finished my dissertation defense, my advisor asked why I looked so drained rather than excited. Stripped of its glamour, my PhD was not a reward but a sign that I would no longer be eligible for academic employment at the university where I had taught for seven years. I was thus reset to the condition that drove me to accept going to graduate school in the first place: a productive college career that inevitably leads to a search for extreme underemployment to avoid unemployment.

Still living in a sprawling college pseudo-city and not yet able to move, I had few options for a job that would make the rent. Most trans women in the city worked at a call center that paid \$10–\$12 an hour part-time, but it was on a day-labor system that included frequent layoffs.

Through a mutual friend, my girlfriend and I were able to get jobs at a local gay bar—sorry, LGBTQIA+ venue—that had recently opened downtown.

Initially being a part of the space of the upstart “not just a gay bar” {This is a phrase they used to advertise the space!} felt like being part of something special for the community, especially as it was focused on trans community. The owner was nonbinary, the bathrooms were gender neutral, there were several trans employees who had difficulty getting hired elsewhere in the supposedly welcoming city, there were portraits of trans women on some of the walls, the bookshelf had several books of trans writing, and sometimes Anohni could be heard from the closet-sized kitchen. It was envisioned as just the beginning of a larger and much-needed nonprofit queer- and trans-focused community center with everything employee owned. The space was thus advertised as uniquely for trans people and by trans people while serving the broader community. We did not take the restaurant job to be utopian, since the nature of bar/restaurant/event work caused tensions and was frequently demanding, but we nonetheless held onto a unique trans-for-trans vision that we thought could improve our community.

The reality of the space despite its good intentions ended up even worse than working at a typical low-wage bar, restaurant, or event-planning job, including the interpersonal difficulties that often arise from such work. The rhetoric of creating an inclusive space turned into the usual capitalist idealization of the “self-made” small business without workers, with low wages, irregular or cut hours, and pressure to serve food or ingredients that were past date to patrons. The rhetoric of community also fed into the pressure to sacrifice for the space, to not speak up about sexual harassment, and to expel workers who did not fall in line or could not keep up. What I thought had been a trans-for-trans space was instead a nightmare under the capitalist conditions through which it emerged. At the same time, my partner and I were getting ghosted by

the local clinic that was advertised as an exceptional trans-friendly space because they refused to prescribe trans women adequate levels of estrogen, suggesting that it made trans women crazy.

It occurred to me while working in this supposedly for-us space, while nursing burns, standing out in the cold because my shift was wrongly scheduled, getting kissed by a superior on the face, refusing to serve old leftovers or spoiled cream cheese to patrons, watching my girlfriend get paid under the table to not speak up about sexual harassment, and having trans coworkers disappear to be told later they had been stealing or violent, that perhaps this was part of the fabric of t4t spaces rather than an aberration. When idealized and institutionalized, the otherwise quirky and negative elements of t4t became exacting and cruel. I began to grow weary of appeals such as “we’re a family,” “we’re a community,” “this is for us,” and “why are you trying to damage this space?”

While working in the kitchen, my thoughts often turned to the intellectual traditions of the institutions I was now locked out of while serving their graduate student and professor clientele. In their essay “Contingent Foundations” Judith Butler (1995) defends the compatibility between democratic feminist politics and deconstructive critique by focusing on the continuous fragmentation within feminism that results from calling for a coherent feminist collective. Butler specifically focuses on the reference to a “we” within feminist politics, a feminist “we” that rhetorically seeks a feminist “unity” and “integrity,” uniting the subject of women for a collective struggle and collective liberation (48). Butler points out that this feminist “we” and the “common element” of the feminist subject has rightfully been challenged as racist, as colonialist, as essentializing, and as exclusionary (48–50), giving rise to a perpetual anxiety over the efficacy of feminism without a centralizing normative authority, as well as the continued challenge of deconstructive critique to the subject of feminism. Challenging a coherent referent subject and

“we” of feminism is not a call to scrap collectivity; instead, it acknowledges collectivity as a site of difference and contestation in which even the most well-meaning projection of an inclusive “we” can be constituted through exclusions and papered-over omissions.

There is something funny about starting off a trans theory essay in the 2020s with a citation of Judith Butler after trans theory has so long been tethered to discussions of queer theory and the work of Butler specifically, a citational move that could be cast as both naive and stale (cf. Namaste 2019). In part, I turn to Butler for a second sailing of critique, a hopeful revisiting of new affinities in light of concretized cynicism, and a gesture of openness prefacing a conversation that may be interpreted as at best divisive and at worst mean. Mainly, I turn to Butler as a reminder of the long-standing limitations of politics in the service of a projected cohesive body or community, which is all too easy to shed or soften through the hopefulness and positive sentiments of t4t and its related projects of cultural production.

Coincidentally, my personal reflection on t4t spaces and the communal “we” has already risked commitment to a category error. Was I even correct in thinking of the restaurant space as a t4t space, or is t4t necessarily interpersonal and not institutional? Furthermore, by receiving such cruel treatment in this t4t space, did it no longer constitute a t4t space, or had it never truly realized itself as t4t? In this essay I seek to clarify these ironies of t4t as an ethos. First, I link t4t with harm, abuse, and expulsion by referencing Hil Malatino’s work on trans care and t4t, then I link it with Kai Cheng Thom’s work on abuse and community. I point out the risks of covering over abuse and taking part in short-circuited assumptive care as part of the ethos of t4t rather than an aberration. Then, through a brief and careful discussion of the history of Topside Press, I argue that t4t can manifest in t4t spaces and institutions that are likewise susceptible to short-circuited care, abuse, and expulsion. I do not intend to present a final word against t4t but instead

suggest that t4t can go horribly wrong, and I want to emphasize that people who experience t4t going horribly wrong are not hostile and deluded. Trans people frequently, deeply hurt other trans people both interpersonally and through institutions in ways that challenge reconciliation and community.

## **Interpersonal t4t, Abuse, and Assumptive Care**

In his book *Trans Care*, Malatino (2020) places an emphasis on care among trans people as a necessary but fraught practice. Drawing from trans elder Rupert Raj's discussion of "voluntary" gender work and its connection with burnout, Malatino points out that trans care is usually unpaid, unsupported, difficult, and exhausting (21–23). Furthermore, Malatino emphasizes that practices of trans care go beyond the individualized and discrete scope constraining the concept of burnout, taking place instead within mutual communities that share negative affect and trauma even as they share the care necessary to sustain each other (23, 25). Understanding trans care thus requires a more diffuse, mutual, communal, and tempered framework of care as a practice, analyzing not only the worlds enabled through care but also the tensions and fragmentations caused by a profound lack of support.

Malatino's (2019) analysis of trans care as an unsupported and fraught practice carries over to his earlier essay on t4t, "Future Fatigue." Meditating on the complicated and affectively challenging temporalities of transition, Malatino turns to t4t specifically as a sustaining practice of love and care in the fraught "interregnum" of trans life (647). He discusses Thom's book *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* and Torrey Peters's novella *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* as examples of "speculative dystopia" that challenge the present while also refusing to project a pleasant, uncomplicated dream of the future (647–48). Malatino argues that the narrative of Thom's book, presented as a memoir while also thwarting the idealized narrative

expected of trans memoirs, focuses on “trans femmes living and loving alongside one another,” including mutual support, mutual conflict, and resistance (649–51).

Malatino also draws from Peters’s work as an uptake of “t4t,” as it was taken beyond its use for Craigslist personals to the more “politicized and erotic” yet contingent separatism it has been associated with in recent years. Malatino writes,

t4t emerges from a recognition that trans subjects, too, might benefit from a severing of ties to cissexist modes of interpellating trans bodies (as failures, fakes, inorganic, inauthentic), and, moreover, that such strategic separatism might be one of the most direct routes toward cultivating self-love, self-regard, and self-care, especially because it confronts and disrupts the assimilationist logics that structure the limiting forms of individuated futural aspiration already discussed. The hope is that, in community with one another, insulated—however temporarily—from cissexist modes of perception, some significant healing might be possible. (654) {t4t is not capitalized in the quote }

Malatino locates in t4t a frequently erotic and politicized dynamic of care among trans people, cobbled together in an uncertain present and galvanized toward an equally uncertain future. In addition to the contingent care and political spaces it offers, Malatino argues that Peters’s vision of t4t is “cynical, skeptical, . . . set up to fail” while embracing “ethical imperfection and complexity” (656). Furthermore, t4t may involve interpersonal difficulties among trans people, including “envy, annoyance, jealousy, and judgment,” shaped in the intersection between survival and scarcity. By referencing Thom’s and Peters’s work, Malatino strives to go beyond flattened pictures of “the trans community” that ignore differences among trans people, focusing on key practices of care and love while also refusing to gloss over tensions, aggressions, and bad feelings (656–57).

One of the strengths of Malatino's work, in addition to the breadth he considers and his philosophical attentiveness to contemporary trans conversations, is that he acknowledges the great difficulties of sustaining trans care and the many fractures that accompany a practice of t4t. In this essay, I want to focus specifically on the negative, ruptured side of t4t both interpersonally and in the realm of cultural production. While I agree with Malatino that trans care is necessary, difficult, and often fractured, I have found through experience that dynamics of t4t can also perpetuate abuse or false projections of community that go beyond his analysis. I want to sit with the ways that t4t as an ethos gets stretched to the point of shattering, when the care it offers short-circuits or is twisted to harm, and when its ideal gets defended over the actual people it may have connected. First, I focus specifically on abuse through Thom's work, and then I draw out elements of trans literature that express more of an ambivalence for projects of t4t and trans care than Malatino addresses.

Thom critically analyzes queer and trans community and the propensity for abuse, including abuse coverups in her book *I Hope We Choose Love*. Thom (2019: 53) opens her discussion of intra-community violence with a description of queer community as a sacred space called Queerlandia:

In this fabulous, fictional Queerlandia, we are free—free from the oppression of the often violent and neglectful families and communities where we were raised. In Queerlandia, we imagine, no one is exploited or beaten or raped. No one is excluded. No one is ignored. In Queerlandia, our politics are woke and our words are revolutionary. We are free to love ourselves, to love others—to be loved, most crucial of all.

Like Malatino, Thom points out that the reality of queer and trans spaces is instead a messy and complicated one, full of people who are not prepared to discuss “the reality of bad things

happening among us,” including how to talk openly and heal (53). Abuse among LGBT people is thus often understood as a matter of casting out individuals or simply not saying anything (53–55).

Despite frequent discussions of safety, accountability, and dynamics of abuse, Thom argues that abuse remains a part of the obscured fabric of real Queerlandia, with the removal of called-out abusers often resulting in an expulsion that does not prevent other ongoing abusive dynamics (57–59). Frequently, expulsions from queer and trans community happen along the axis of race, class, and gender, with more severe callouts having little impact and less severe callouts resulting in others getting banished from queer spaces according to relative intra-community marginalization (74). Even when Queerlandia is not taken as a utopia, its internal negativity requires dialogue and action beyond incorporating the inevitability of bad feelings in its ethos.

If grounded Queerlandia has issues of intra-community harm, abuse, and expulsion, then interpersonal t4t is at risk for these dynamics as well. *Infect* acknowledges this when the protagonist is stabbed by her ex against her will, is called an “abuser” by her ex behind her back as a means of ostracization, and has a date with a trans man who raises the specter of the oversensitive trans woman to rile her up so she can get dismissed (Peters 2016a: 19, 39, 41). After all, the cover of *Infect* features a dead pig carcass with “t4t” carved into its head. Peters’s earlier novella *The Masker* also depicts a fundamental break in bonds when a trans fem calls casino security guards to remove a trans woman at the behest of an abusive hook-up, the titular masker of the story (Peters 2016b: 66–67). Peters is thus at times critical and ambivalent about t4t, explaining in an interview, “The book [*Infect*] . . . is about how hard that project [of t4t] can



become, and what you gain and *what you lose* when you make a worldview that is entirely trans” (Peters: 2016c; emphasis mine).

In addition to t4t involving dynamics of abuse, silence, and expulsion, the identification with and for other trans people that it involves risks making incorrect assumptions that short-circuit practices of trans care. Imogen Binnie’s 2013 novel *Nevada* depicts such an assumption when the main character Maria tries to convince James H to transition. James H ultimately concludes that the trans woman protagonist does not care about him beyond treating him like a project and decides to steal half of her heroin (Binnie 2013b: 236, 241–42). In an interview, Binnie (2013a) explained, “The sad thing at the center of the story of Maria and James, for me, is that Maria—by trying to hurry James along on starting to transition—sets him back. Probably years . . . Maria shows up, makes everything all about herself, and kind of tells James to shut up when he brings up the things he needs to work through” Even if this character transitioned later, the care practiced by Maria toward James H short-circuits their interaction through its arrogance, acting as an imposition and prescription rather than making a better attempt to listen to James H on his own terms.

Although nontrans people are frequently charged with paternalism against trans people, trans people are also at risk at making assumptions about the thoughts, feelings, and needs of other trans people, with an even deeper failure possible across power differences between differently situated trans people. Assumptive care among trans people may involve paternalism and an assertion of similarity that acknowledges difference but also goes too far in its imposition (see Marvin 2019). Taking up t4t as a larger ethos thus risks not only conflict but also moments when people project assumptions about care onto another, perhaps in the name of some overarching construct called “trans community” or “trans culture.” A necessary component of

discussing t4t is thus that trans people seriously hurt other trans people, sometimes despite or even because of good intentions.

## **t4t and Trans Cultural Production**

Alongside the rise in popularity of t4t in the early to mid-2010s was a drive to create something called transgender literature, presented as an emerging and connected movement that harnessed the vision of trans people writing their work with and for other trans people rather than for mainstream nontrans audiences. In 2012 a new trans press called Topside published their debut book titled *The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* featuring twenty-eight short stories by twenty-eight trans authors. The introduction to the book, written by editors Tom Léger and Riley MacLeod (2012: 1), lamented their limited space and inability to include more trans authors, but they took the high volume of talented submissions as a promising sign for a revision to the field of trans literature after it had stagnated under nontrans control. The editors focused on the ability of the stories in the volume to center trans people in their stories, with each character a “principal actor,” “agent of their own destiny,” and “protagonist” with “real lives.” Instead of serving as “comic relief,” the trans character of *The Collection* develops throughout the story, an agent instead of an afterthought, with emotions, imagination, and a dynamic interaction with their world (2). The editors concluded with the hope that centering trans characters would “take trans art to its new iteration” and inspire possibilities for new trans authors while asking the reader “what’s next?” for the future of trans literature (2–3).

In the very back of *The Collection*, past the author and editor biographies, Léger wrote an afterword titled “Know Thy Work,” which presented a prophetic vision of the world of trans lit emerging on the horizon of Topside Press. Léger (2012: 89–90) describes the collective “act of labor” and resulting “body of literature” contained in *The Collection* as an unprecedented

moment that has “never been seen or conceived of before,” produced through “the will to work” and “the literal struggle to know” while offering “the beginnings of an investigation into a new world of thought.” He contrasts this “new age” with stagnant “memoirs, political tracts, and . . . medical texts” that permit only objectifying, “positive,” or “sympathetic” trans representation (90–92). Previous discourses failed to center trans people as realized subjects, in contrast to the new trans literature.

Topside Press’s vision of a “new age” for trans lit was further developed in a 2013 zine advancing their focus from the centered trans agent-protagonist to a style of writing arising from interpersonal connections between trans writers and other trans people. Cowritten by Léger and MacLeod, *Is There a Transgender Text in This Class?* (2013: 2–7) broadly described trans lit as “products and artifacts of transgender culture” while advertising specifically to nontrans literature instructors. To contrast their publications with works focused on nontrans audiences, the authors shared a litmus test they call “The Topside Test,” drawing from Alison Bechdel:

- Does the book include more than one trans character?
- Do they know each other?
- Do they talk to each other about something besides a transition-related medical procedure? (5)

The Topside Press zine argued that trans lit distinctly includes the presence of trans people who know each other and have discussions beyond transition, an indication that the author is familiar with trans people beyond the orbit of limited and distorting nontrans curiosity and that they are willing to write about this. The vision for the “new world” of trans lit was shaping up to center not only trans subjects but also connection, with trans people occupying a lifeworld that includes and centers other trans people.

In a 2014 essay Katherine Cross contrasted the “renaissance of trans women’s literature” represented by Topside Press and Biyuti Publishing, which focused on writing by trans women of color, with the tradition of the trans memoir written for nontrans audiences. Rather than present the mid-2010s trans literature moment as a radical break, Cross (2014) linked it with histories of writing shared among trans people, arguing,

For decades, we chatted on AIM, networked on LiveJournal, met in bars, and lent ever more of our fire to the long-running insurgent medium of zines. We learned to write from other women who wrote in lightning, iron, and blood. Many of us cut our teeth in role-playing games and multi-user dungeons, while still others had writing collectives . . . , and too many others were alone but for the solace found on bookshelves and during late nights on the computer.

For Cross, trans literature was distinct because of the unprecedented opportunity for trans women to have their existing writing finally elevated beyond the consumption of a nontrans audience.

A year later Casey Plett (2015) published “Rise of the Gender Novel” to critique the stagnant forms that trans people had been forced into in nontrans literature, which included the isolation of trans characters from other trans people. Plett wrote of cis-penned trans characters, “Each protagonist is a chosen one, a lone wolf plodding on against adversity. They do no wrong; they remain stoic and gentle in the face of difficulty.” Plett (2015) argued that such characters fail to reach the real lives of trans people, let alone consider trans people as readers. In an early 2016 conversation, T Clutch Fleischmann and Torrey Peters discussed the importance of a trans audience for literature that refuses cardboard cutout trans characters, drawing from critiques by Topside Press. Peters explained that rethinking the audience of trans literature as trans not only required going deeper into the complexities of trans life but also discussing “dirty laundry” and

ethical conflicts that would have otherwise been sanitized or simply not considered (Peters and Fleischmann 2016). Connection between trans people was thus a key theme for the current and emerging trans lit scene as a means of advancing past flattened nontrans writing.

The elevation of ongoing trans writing, the repositioning of trans people as the subject of stories, and the emphasis on writing about and for a populated trans lifeworld also fostered conversations about inspiring and nurturing trans writers. Discussing Topside Press in a 2014 interview, Ryka Aoki (2014: 14) mentioned that the trans lit scene and Topside Press specifically were beginning to recognize the need to “nurture artists.” The call for the inspiring “new age” would require a practice of nurturance and hence care for the emerging community of trans writers. Topside Press attempted to bring more writers under their wing in 2016 with the formation of the Trans Women’s Writing Workshop, inviting twenty-six trans women writers to workshop their writing at Brooklyn College with other trans women writers in the style of Lambda Literary Writer’s Retreats (cf. Valens 2016). The workshop was a key moment for Topside Press as it built its publishing scene. The press aimed to cultivate a new crop of trans writers and a new framework that would foster connections between these writers, ultimately fulfilling Topside Press’s call for a new wave of for-trans, by-trans publications.

The primary ethos of cultural production developed by Topside Press fits Malatino’s (2019: 653–54) description of t4t: a politicized, often eroticized, and contingent separatist space that offers care, love, and healing while resisting cissexist assimilation. Beyond an interpersonal framework, this ethos can be taken up in the mode of trans cultural production, offering a space where trans people make work for other trans people to raise consciousness and build institutions of production such as publishing houses or queer/trans venues beyond cissexist limitations. Rachel Anne Williams (2019: 238) explicitly brings t4t into this mode, writing, “T4t is about

solidarity. I want to make space to support trans lives, businesses, start-ups, relationships, artists, communes, spaces, political organizations, politicians, movements, and so on. t4t is by trans, for trans.” In Topside, t4t had expanded into the realm of publishing, but the cohesiveness of “by trans, for trans” was swiftly challenged for casting too wide a net before the press and its vision quietly receded.

## **The Eternal Irony of “Trans Community”**

Before continuing this essay, I offer a key aside about the caring practice of the critic, as Cameron Awkward-Rich’s (2020: 39–40) work directs us toward. In this critical essay I am not attempting to provide a complete and detailed account of trans literature writ large; rather, I wish to focus on a few specific moments. In what follows are parts of the story I am choosing to leave out either because they do not fit the focus of this essay or out of respect for privacy.

Additionally, I do not want to tether all of the people discussed with the fate and faults of Topside Press, which has been effectively defunct for several years. Finally, I want to acknowledge that Topside does not own t4t or trans-for-trans community spaces and publishing. We might consider, for example, the film *Gender Troublemakers* by Mirha-Soleil Ross and Xanthe Phillipa (1993), which was released far before Topside. Even t4t among trans people at the time of Topside Press was not fully captured by it. Instead, I am referring to Topside as an intensive scene of t4t as an ethos that resulted in short-circuited care vis-à-vis cultural production, even as we may still continue to respect work that emerged from and against its orbit.

Even prior to the Trans Women’s Writing Workshop in 2016, Peters’s novella projects acknowledged that trans women’s writing needed to be circulated beyond Topside Press. In summer 2016 before the workshop, Peters described her novella projects as part of a larger future

for trans novellas and self-publishing that could go beyond reliance on a press. These novellas were thus also “an elevator pitch” for boosting different trans voices through the quicker pace of self-publishing (Peters 2016d; see also Peters 2021). While discussing the novella *Infect with Thom* in 2017, Peters (2017) continued to laud self-publishing, emphasizing, “You don’t need a perfectly clean text, you don’t need an editor, you don’t need a press, all you really need is a will to write and an account with some self-publishing platform.” Beyond Topside and often entirely without it, trans publishing thus often included a trans-for-trans ethos, with considerations of how to break through the homogenizing effect of Topside as a rising publisher for trans work.

Back in the 2016 interview, Peters wondered how power and hegemony might act against the promising future of trans self-publishing movements (Peters 2016d). Yet the hegemony was coming from inside the scene, as trans writers were already acknowledging in the form of critique. After all, trans self-publishing, zines, and DIY preexisted Topside and self-published novellas, as Cross noted. In the 2016 interview, Peters mentioned essayist, poet, and critic Jamie Berrout’s work with self-publishing as “doing the same thing I’m doing,” at least with respect to both of them sharing their work with other trans women online. However, Berrout was directly critiquing the scene of Topside for its continued failure to publish trans women of color writers, with the supposedly all-encompassing t4t potential of the scene in fact constituting a limited t4t. In 2016 Berrout published *Incomplete Short Stories and Essays*, which included detailed criticisms of Topside’s absent or tokenizing attempts at inclusion while presenting a series of stories never finished, covering new ground while also standing as “a graveyard for trans stories that will never exist” (9–10). The assumption that trans work could start a new wave of trans literature was preventing an awareness that other trans writers could exist beyond its orbit—trans writers who live and write outside gentrified and gentrifying literary networks in Brooklyn, who

did not want to be incorporated into its primarily white trans scene. Assumptive care was thus a part of the envisioned new age of trans literature, with its projection of t4t trying to grasp and claim ownership over what it did not hold.

What happened at the Topside Press Women's Writing Workshop, which was followed by its current status of still selling some books but largely letting them go out of print beyond Creative Commons, has become something of a hushed mystery when gestured to by those in the know. During a recent interview with Peters for her novel *Detransition, Baby*, interviewer Lila Shapiro attempted to find out what happened to Topside Press through an unnamed source. Shapiro (2021) reported that "the press had shut down because of infighting, disorganization, and financial strain. Writers of color criticized it for mostly publishing white women," while also including Peters's suggestion that it had become a "resented gatekeeper." There are elements of truth in all these, but they still take the appearance of double refraction, hushed and mostly anonymous while reducing "writers of color" to an amalgamation of divisive critique.

The truth, gestured toward by the *Vulture* interview, was that the dynamics of interpersonal conflict and abuse, skewed inclusion, and expulsion of critics or people who spoke out intensified as part of the scene of Topside even while it was a vision of t4t. Additionally, the workshop had mostly white attendees, did not adequately accommodate attendees with disabilities, and separated the two group subdivisions based on decisions about class and prestige.<sup>1</sup> The projection of a visionary trans lit scene that would inspire a new, unprecedented

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<sup>1</sup> I was an attendee at the workshop who stayed with another attendee, and I have discussed the workshop with other attendees over the following years. Though this essay may at times come across with the tone of an insider, I traveled to the workshop as an outsider full of hope for t4t and related trans lit projects. Just before the workshop I taught a course titled Trans World-



generation of trans writers, along with the difficulties of running a press, cast the ethos of t4t beyond its limited sphere and particular scene. Acknowledging such limits may also give us pause to accept Sarah Schulman's assertion in the *Vulture* interview that "there would be no Torrey without Topside," since clearly Peters's projects go beyond and outlast Topside, while this sentiment obscures that Peters was an important artist and interlocutor at the time of the press's existence (Shapiro 2021).

We can discuss short-circuited scenes of t4t in ways that are critical, sensitive, and blunt, diffusing some of the mystery around bygone scenes while airing "dirty laundry." Short-circuited scenes of trans cultural production are not new phenomena that have never been addressed. In "Hot Allostatic Load," for example, Porpentine Charity Heartscape (2015) wrote about the common abuse and disposal dynamics of feminist and trans cultural production scenes in the service of false ideals about "community." Heartscape further emphasized that these idealized deployments of "community" can be used to heighten emotional abuse in the scene, as the dissonance between the held-up ideology of community and what is actually happening can become disorienting and lead to self-blame. Thom's argument that abuse is commonplace and mishandled in queer and trans community also carries over into trans scenes of cultural production, even when those communities project and internalize an ethos of care and love such as t4t.

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Making through Literature in celebration of the Topside scene, and much of this essay and its citations are a partial palinode for this syllabus in light of subsequently witnessing that scene fall apart, among other events. As a critic I am thus both retrospective and complicit in the aspirations of these scenes, even as my access was somewhat fragmented, much like the reconstruction I now present to the reader.

t4t as an idealized ethos risks making trans people feel crazy interpersonally and at the level of participation in cultural production. It risks producing a “we” that then gets imposed, glossing over the many wrongs trans people enact against each other. It risks covering over sexual harassment and assault, and it risks stifling dissent even as it claims to welcome dissent. It risks the irony of projecting care and community while disposing of trans people who are “divisive,” perhaps even under the guise of protecting that person. It risks presenting a standpoint of marginalization that erases intra-community marginalization and hierarchy. In so doing, t4t as cultural production produces the very dissent that it rejects while attempting to project an idealized, even if tumultuous, vision of community. Sitting with these risks laid bare is simply part of what it means to truly “know thy work.”

A potential response, indicated by the discussion above, might be that t4t as an ethos already accommodates such fractures and failures, aware of its various bad feelings, hostilities, and tensions. I worry about the extent to which this absorption of negativity and difference can fuel dismissal, fatalism, or a blasé attitude toward situations of conflict or abuse that cannot be digested within a community. Furthermore, such an ethos of t4t may not explicitly attend to the ironic dynamics through which a projected community is used for assumptive care or exclusion. To explain some of these dynamics in more detail, I now move past the moment of Topside to discuss more recent ironies of professionalized trans literature scenes.

## **Trans Issues and the Prestige Economy**

“We” might wonder, despite the failures produced by t4t in some scenes of cultural production, if something remains lost when trans cultural production gets instead taken up by mainstream, non-trans-run presses. When asked if trans literature is “entering a renaissance” in 2021,

Schulman responded, “We might be leaving it” (Shapiro 2021). This is a curious use of “we,” like many others, but worth some tempered consideration.

Trans literature’s reaching more mainstream heights through incorporation into mainstream presses and established nontrans small presses does not end the problem of a distorted “we.” For example, Grace Lavery (2021) recently wrote a review of *Detransition, Baby*, introducing it as “the first great trans realist novel,” somewhat deflated by a question mark. Of course, works by other trans realist novel writers exist, including Aoki’s *He Mele a Hilo: A Hilo Song* in 2014, Thom’s *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* and Jia Qing Wilson-Yang’s *Small Beauty* in 2016, Casey Plett’s *Little Fish* in 2018, and Carter Sickels’s *Prettiest Star* in 2020.<sup>2</sup> Without considering other trans realisms, one worries that getting proclaimed the first great trans book of whatever is based on the proximity of a book to the present and its perceived overall prestige.

There is more at stake here than bitterness about an understandably enthusiastic review. I worry about the phenomenon of declaring every few years a trans literature renaissance that jettisons previous trans writing in a revolving door of prestige while failing to support trans writers who do not fit the current moment. *Heartscape* (2015) mentions a similar phenomenon in “Hot Allostatic Load,” writing,

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<sup>2</sup> One objection, raised by a reviewer, is that *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* does not qualify as a trans realist novel. These types of objections lead to questions about what counts as trans realism, whether or not trans magical realism is a form of trans realism, and to what extent these taxonomies are helpful or unhelpful for trans literature. Whether or not my list is correct, this is the type of rich discussion that gets overlooked by proclaiming a recent, popular book the first great trans such-and-such.

An entire industry of curation has sprung up to rigidly and sometimes violently police the hierarchy of who is allowed to express themselves as a trans or queer person. The LGBT and queer spheres find it upon themselves to create compilations of the “best” art by trans people, to define what a trans story is and to omit the rest. Endless projects to curate, list, own, publish, control, but so few to offer support and mentorship.

Due to a lack of support and the wider cultural framing of trans people’s lives as a consumable spectacle, trans cultural production risks relying upon endless disconnected trans art moments built upon a bottomless pit of discarded trans artists to exploit the demand for eternal trans novelty. People who cultivate an interest in trans art during any given “trans lit moment,” even if trans, thus risk creating questionable canonizations and narratives around those canonizations (cf. Page 2021).

The issue of prestige and the composition of a “we” persists in trans cultural production. One repeated irony is the appeal to a stand-out trans “we” of cultural production that claims to be for “the trans community” but instead acts in the service of exclusion. In 2018 there was a call for a special trans issue of *Poetry Magazine*, after a report highlighted the lack of gender-nonconforming poets published in the magazine. The special issue was explicitly advertised as a means to foster trans inclusivity, framed as meeting “the need for an intentional community space,” and planned for a release just before the Transgender Day of Remembrance (Soto 2017). Instead the project, which appointed a single curator of trans voices, effected a questionable exclusion. Rejections were sent out before the submission window for the issue officially closed, raising suspicions of a hasty or predetermined decision-making process, while the editor of the issue posted a comment on social media deriding several wide subjects of trans poetry as

pedestrian (*Beyond Special Issue* 2018). In response to criticism from concerned trans poets, the special issue was silently removed.

Reflecting on the special issue, Yanyi (2018) linked its failure to a practice of care warped by the interplay of scarcity and commodification that shapes cultural production and poetry specifically. He wrote,

Care, in a country where survival is tied to commerce, can be hijacked by commerce. The will to survive can disguise a will to profit. . . . Appointing a special-issues writer who speaks and edits for many means that there can be very few who rise to prominence, very few who reap the benefits beneath the institution's gleaming awnings, and very few contesting, discussing, and variegating the field of trans poetics with visibility.

As Yanyi argues, the special issue's call for trans inclusion in the name of community instead twisted care into commodification and exclusion under the mechanisms of professionalization and prestige.

In addition to curation, appeals to a questionable "we" can become a source for questionable critiques of trans art in the name of trans community. For example, in January 2020 Isabel Fall published a savvy speculative fiction story initially titled "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter," which flipped transphobic mockery on its head to critique the military industrial complex and the commodification of trans identity (Fall 2020). In addition to suspicions that the piece had been secretly penned by reactionaries, several trans people involved in science fiction literature scenes claimed that the story caused harm and invoked trauma against trans people to the extent that it should not have been published. These critiques were picked up by many nontrans authors involved in science fiction, several of them prestigious, to boost trans voices against the condemned trans story (Clark 2020). Ultimately the story was pulled by the

author (Clarke 2020). Ironically, the appeal to a harmed trans “we” of trans science fiction, regardless of its accuracy or consensus, served to pulverize an emerging voice in trans science fiction. Care was a demand placed upon the Fall but not one reciprocated by her critics, who constructed a cohesive “we” as a means to exclude and expel.

As much as “we” might hope for a collective trans “we” and a worldmaking that can stand up to the profound lack of material support and hateful ideologies that stand against many trans lives, this hope must be tempered with some suspicion without reducing trans art to moments of disconnected prestige or genius, or to a tranquil refuge from challenge and bad feelings (see Billingsley 2015). *TSQ* itself, connected with an academy that presents trans scholars and their essays with the badge of their institutional affiliation, shares in these issues, even as it creates its own corridors to hold its critics (*TSQ\*Now* 2020).

Trans people writing for other trans people is not over, regardless of the status of Topside or the incorporation of trans literature into mainstream literature. Though largely tethered to various prestige economies, unsupported, erased, or co-opted into the self-narratives of other scenes without support, trans writing persists in different modes. In addition to continuing her writing against the institutions of publishing, Berrout started a monthly booklet series publishing and paying trans women writers of color, which has now been passed on to the River Furnace collective (Wei Ling 2019; River Furnace n.d.). The continued life of trans publishing is thus not reducible to its “former” t4t scenes or contemporary successes of prestige in the publishing world or the academy (Berrout n.d.).

## **Conclusion: The T That Is a We and the T That Is an I**

It is difficult to come back to even a tempered understanding of “community” after getting burned by interpersonal t4t or, as I have, t4t as it works its way into cultural production and even

trans-queerbar-coffeeshop-restaurant-eventspace-gourmetbakery-communitycenters. I worry that the preceding essay is both too mean and too kind. I open my copy of *The Masker* and see a sketch by Sybil Lamb of me, her, and Casey Plett hanging out in the city Plett eventually left, and that I now have left. I remember the Trans World-Making through Literature course I taught just before the workshop and its celebration of trans literature. I recall Thom's title of *I Hope We Choose Love*.

The vision of caring, contingent trans separatism offered by the ethos of t4t is not a complete lie, but it risks missing the ways that transphobia, misogyny, racism, and the effects of material scarcity carry over into these supposedly separatist spaces. Even a fully realized t4t sphere and its conflict would not be a horizontal field, since trans people can be so different from each other not only due to experience but also social status, exploitation, and access to institutions. Trans care thus seems to require some hesitation and caution against overreach, no longer fully separable from the many ways that care can become short-circuited between trans and cis people. There is much wisdom in t4t simply meaning sex, romance, and/or dating between trans people.

And yet there are several things that remain admirable to me in some of the intentions of t4t as ethos if not its realization: loving, connecting, discussing experiences that resonate, creating collaborative art, and sharing resources. I still enjoy when a friend expresses excitement about a particular t4t relationship or comes across trans art that speaks to them in ways they did not think were possible. I do not refuse to talk to people who continue to depend on the restaurant I worked at for social contact after I was laid off. I have almost finished reading *Detransition, Baby* and look forward to reading Jeanne Thornton's *Summer Fun*, Aoki's *Light from Uncommon Stars*, and Jackie Ess's finished version of *Darryl* later this year. t4t is thus

exposed not as a totally false concept by this analysis but as one that often goes too far or can be used against the care it claims to foster. I hope this finds a way into the conversation about t4t and trans cultural production beyond getting dismissed as hostile or divisive.

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