

Laughing at Trans Woman: A Theory of Transmisogyny

Amy Marvin

Author Preprint.

Cite as: Marvin, Amy. "Laughing at Trans Women: A Theory of Transmisogyny." In *Trans Philosophy: Meaning and Mattering*. Eds. Perry Zurn, Andrea Pitts, Talia Bettcher, and PJ DiPietro, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Forthcoming.

Introduction: A Laughable Trans Woman

In 2013, videographer Alli Coates recorded performance artist Signe Pierce walking around Myrtle Beach, South Carolina at night for their short film *American Reflexx*. Surrounded by crowds and neon lights, Pierce moves from place to place as the night progresses, occasionally stopping to strike a pose for the camera and nearby gawkers as the evening reaches a state of sensory overload. Pierce repeatedly stands out, wearing a reflective silver mask to obscure her face, a short blue dress, and lime green high heels. Standing out soon leads to insult and violence, as Pierce experiences derisive laughter, dehumanizing speech, sexual harassment, and a sudden shove that causes her to fall on the concrete sidewalk while jeered at by a curious mob. And yet, she is also able to harness the affects that coalesced around her that evening to dispel the crowd, picking up her heels and clacking them together as the crowd runs away. The concluding scene plays a slowed down and distorted clip of Robin Thicke's hit creeper anthem "Blurred Lines," panning up to show Pierce covered in bruises and bleeding cuts about an hour into her evening walk. Recounting her experience in a later interview, Pierce reflected, "People were hurling bottles at my head and throwing slurs left and right on the streets. It went beyond bullying, it was assault" (Pierce 2015a). Pierce's embodiment as curious spectacle for a crowd in public space thus fed a violent combination of attention and indifference.

Originally, Pierce and Coates planned the art piece to engage with hypersexuality, pornography, and femininity through the lens of cyborg feminism. In an interview Pierce explained,

In regards to the character, I'd been inspired by portraying the hyper-sexualized "ideal girls" you see on TV/online/in porn: blonde, sexy, and silent without any signified sense of purpose or identity, other than the inherent condition of being observed. I'm interested in what happens when you take that girl out of the screen and drop her into reality.

(Pierce 2015b).

Pierce expected this character to receive catcalling and curious attention, but did not anticipate the size of the mob and the violence they brought in practice (Pierce 2015b). She also did not anticipate the degree to which her character was read as trans and responded to through transphobia. Throughout the evening Pierce was frequently insulted and exposed as a trans woman, with members of the crowd yelling "It's a shim!" or suggesting that she was "really a man." Later Pierce reflected, "We expected there would be catcalling and general playfulness, but the violence was absolutely shocking and the questions about my gender were unexpected. My perceived gender ambiguity ended up becoming a major part of this piece" (Pierce 2019). Finding herself on the receiving end of transphobia was particularly surprising for Pierce because she is a cis woman, not a trans woman, and she had not intended for her art to engage with transphobia.

The context of a cis woman being read as a trans woman is interesting because it highlights the social meanings and reactions of transphobia beyond a naturalized matter of fact. How might a cis woman unintentionally become trans in public space and what does this mean about the combination of laughter and violence that she was met with? Rather than focus on the

empirical question of whether people tend to find trans women funny, I instead look at the philosophical meaning of transmisogyny as a way of encountering trans women in the world as laughable. To further pin down the conditions that socially mediate this laugh, I proceed by breaking down the dimensions of transphobia that construct trans women as laughable. As with transphobia, transmisogyny is a multidimensional process, and part of what I am up to in this essay is arguing for an approach that brings together work on transphobic ideology, institutions, and cultural emotions or affect. Specifically, I will argue that trans women are socially positioned as laughable through ideologies of transphobia, the gendered construction of public space, and the circulated emotion of disgust, thus empowering social isolation and subjugation through transmisogyny. I will conclude by drawing from these dynamics to argue that transmisogyny involves positioning trans women as abject givers rather than as human givers. In what follows, I begin by bringing together work on transphobia by Talia Bettcher and Viviane Namaste. I then link the politics of transphobic laughter with Sara Ahmed's analysis of cultural emotions in circulation, specifically disgust. Finally, I draw from Kate Manne's work to link transphobic laughter against trans women with misogyny, which reinforces both the expulsion and subjugation of trans women.

Bettcher and the Revealing Laugh

In her essay "Evil Deceivers and Make Believers," Talia Bettcher focuses on the centrality of costumes, make believe, and suspicions of deception to operations of transphobia. She describes the double bind through which the gender presentation of trans women is constructed as mere appearance in contrast to the reality of genitalia as the sole determinant of identity, such that trans people get framed as a masquerader or a deceiver (50). Either position places trans people in a double bind since they are framed as living a lie, constructed as "both

fictitious and morally suspect” (50). Beyond the various personal and social consequences of having one’s identity cast as an immoral lie, Bettcher is primarily interested in the ways that this construction of trans people fuels and legitimizes violence against trans people, who under this framework of transphobia must be exposed or punished through violence (47).

Through her analysis of transphobia, Bettcher is also engaging in the philosophy of fashion and clothing, pointing to a specific irony enacted by clothing in contemporary ideologies of gender presentation. Though much of gender presentation is assigned the function through clothing and attire of concealing inappropriate exposure to sexed bodies through an essential link with genitals, Bettcher points out that such gendered presentations of clothing are taken to communicate the sexed bodies and genitalia so concealed. That is, by concealing an uncomplicatedly sexed body gendered clothing works to communicate and expose a truth within, such that under the ideology of the “natural attitude” gender presentation is assumed to correspond with a particular sexed, genital configuration. The gender presentation of trans people is in part so challenging to such “systematic symbolic genital disclosures” because the signs of gender presentation no longer align with an expected, unmediated, and self-evident truth (Bettcher 2007: 54-55). Trans people thus become forced into the role of “evil deceiver or make-believer” in part due to the simultaneous concealing and exposing function of clothing in gender presentation.

Bettcher’s analysis helps to explain how a cis woman performance artist unintentionally became a trans woman in public space. Pierce commented on her reflective mask,

There’s something scary because you see this robot woman who is commanding her own identity, but she’s in this sexy feminine form that we associate with hyper-sexualized woman all the time on TV, in porn. The cyborg has a certain strength to transcend

biology. People saw this porn star walking down the street, but she's wearing this cold austere shield. You can't read her expression, and this created a fear of the "other."

(Pierce 2019)

If Pierce is correct that her performance caused a stir through the combination of feminine hypersexualization, defiance, strength to transcend biology, and the "cold austere shield" of her facemask, then Bettcher's analysis adds another dimension to explain why her appearance unexpectedly also came to be interpreted as transfeminine.

First, Pierce performed specifically as hypersexualized and as feminine. This performance aligned with mass media assumptions that all trans people are trans women, and that trans women cultivate sexualized hyperfemininity as a costume or deception (cf. Serano 2007: 229). Second, Pierce's face-obscuring mirror mask signaled to the crowd that she was not only dressed up in a costume, but also potentially enacting a contrast between her gendered appearance and an assumed sexed reality. Pierce's character of a cyborg porn star thus unwittingly became a trans character. Her mode of being in public space is that of someone whose gender is seen to be masquerade or artifice, like a trans woman, and reactions to her presence in public space were caused by trans readings of her gendered style.

When Pierce's character became trans, she also became distinctly laughable, subject to ridicule, jeers, mockery, and harsh laughter that often coincided with pushing, bottle throwing, and shoving. Julia Serano points out several precedents to the laughability of trans women in media as concealed and exposed spectacle, linked back to the construction of trans women as either dangerously deceptive or laughably pathetic. On one side of the bind, films such as *A Mighty Wind* framed trans women as comically pathetic, highlighting their inability to successfully embody womanhood beyond its appearance (Serano 2007: 38). On the other side,

shows such as *Jerry Springer*, *There's Something About Miriam*, and the film *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* focus on trans women through a sensational moment of exposing their deception, eliciting laughter at the trans woman herself, at the unwitting man, and at the overall situation of exposure (37-39).

The 2003 reality TV show *There's Something About Miriam* in particular requires some direct attention to the laughter it elicited. The show was built as a longer setup for the classic *Jerry Springer* trans episode: producers pay a trans woman to reveal a secret, either staged or through an elaborate setup, that she had been keeping a secret from a cis man. The reveal moment is usually framed with language such as "I was born a man" or "I am a man," to which the unwitting cis man responds in shock, horror, disgust, or anger. *There's Something About Miriam* extends this formula by combining it with the reality TV dating show format where a group of suitors compete to be chosen in a series of romantic and physical challenges, popularized by 2000s shows such as *The Bachelor*. Model Miriam Rivera, who at the time was just 21 years old, reveals at the end that she is a trans woman, causing the winning man to become stunned and uncomfortable. Meanwhile the losing men are unable to contain the laughter which had been brewing in the background during the entire reveal moment, some exclaiming to the others with glee that they already knew "that's a man." In an individual interview, one of the losers alternates between giggling and growing visibly distressed while explaining, "You either laugh or cry, so I think I just laugh. You have to laugh didn't you." (*There's Something About Miriam* 2004).

The example of *There's Something About Miriam* brings up further intersections between gender and race, including the interplay between the sexualized framing of trans women as a deceptive danger and cultural scripts that frame Latina femininity as hypersexual, exotic, and

consumable (Rodríguez 2014: 170-171). Despite these complexities and the inclusion of an actual trans woman, the setup of the show shares an affinity with *American Reflexx*'s social experiment presentation. The camera that Coates brought to the scene magnified through the setup of an exploitative and sensationalist reality television apparatus, further encouraging Coates's audience to see her as a trans woman.

Referring back to Bettcher's work helps to unpack the response to Miriam's reveal beyond an unfortunate combination of sensationalism and interpersonal stereotypes by connecting such reactions to a broader social and political situation. Bettcher's link between transphobia, forced reveals, and sexual violence also helps to explain moments when the *There's Something About Miriam* contestants not only laugh to refrain from crying but also fixate on Miriam's body, mentioning getting a peek at what's underneath or making childish references to sausages and balls. Considering this aspect also indicates an affective dimension to their humor beyond mirth, inclusive of feelings such as shock and disgust. Similar affects are circulated in films such as *Ace Ventura* and allegedly funny television shows such as *Family Guy* when, in reference to *The Crying Game*, the exposure of a trans woman leads to a cascading effect of vomiting cis men for the amusement of the viewer (cf. *Family Guy* 2010).

Turning to Bettcher's account of transphobia explains why Pierce came to be constructed as a trans woman in public space and why this coincided with sexual attention and violence. In the next section I continue to analyze these relationships between transphobia, laughter, and violence by focusing on the relationship between these and the construction of public space itself through Namaste's account of transphobia as genderbashing.

Namaste and the Repelling Laugh

A longstanding fear and experience among trans people is getting laughed at while trying to access services or otherwise moving through public space. A 1995 essay by Taylor Priest in *Chrysalis Quarterly* described growing up with a fear of being made fun of for questioning gender. Priest wrote,

A child who does not feel secure will not venture out into the world, will not try new things, will be afraid to fail. To cope with the world the child learns to avoid things and people: "They can't laugh if they can't see me." This child learns not to invest too much effort: "If I never try, I never fail." (Priest 1995: 51)

In a 2002 issue of *Transgender Tapestry*, Nancy E. Wilson also reflected on the impact of the laughter and mockery directed by peers and popular television shows against "men who dressed as women" and "men in dresses," noting that she never understood why they were supposed to be funny. She continued,

I finally concluded it indeed wasn't inherently funny, and probably was never really intended to be so. What it is indeed is a twisted form of intimidation, usually a crude attempt at what some sort of "majority" considers "correct" behavior. The laughter isn't directed toward something that amuses, but toward a group of people in order to intimidate them, in hopes of changing their social behavior. (Wilson 2002: 46)

Both Priest and Wilson, writing almost a decade apart, acknowledge both the prevalence of derisive attitudes towards trans and gender nonconforming people while they were growing up and its regulatory effect on their navigation of public space.

In addition to childhood fears and representations, derisive laughter has been a frequent factor when trans people attempt to access more formalized institutional spaces. A news article in *Renaissance* reported on an attempt by 100 transgendered people, their partners, and their

children in October 1995 to participate in the first annual Transgender Lobby Days at the U.S. capitol. <1> Alongside praise for the event's general success was a brief paragraph about less successful moments, including both ghosting and laughter as a form of refusal. The report mentioned, "In the office of an Oklahoma congressman, staffers laughed at the delegates and stated there are no transgendered people in Oklahoma" (*Renaissance* 2002: 6). Beyond the U.S. political apparatus, in 2000 Phyllis Frye wrote on discrimination against underemployed and homeless trans people in medical clinics, explaining,

The unemployed homeless or the underemployed transgenders get little help from public medical clinics. They are often ridiculed by staff in the waiting rooms and do not come back. I know of FTM's [trans men] who could not afford male hormones after being fired... They could not get help because they were laughed at or refused. (Frye 2000: 455)

Laughter thus combines with transphobia and economic precarity to discourage trans people from accessing public space and services, including necessary medical care. Dismissive and derisive treatments of trans people have also had a longstanding presence in media and journalism. While looking through archives C. Riley Snorton noted that much coverage of Black trans and gender nonconforming people "were framed as jokes, as indications of their supposedly essential disposability" (Snorton 2017: 145). Beyond Pierce's one night of unwittingly performing as trans, derisive laughter and mockery have had a longstanding impact on trans people's access to public space.

This combination of laughter and transphobia in public space can turn deadly. Both trans magazines and trans studies in the 90s and early 00s often discuss the death of Tyra Hunter as a shocking instance of transphobia in public space (see Juang 2006). On August 7, 1995 Hunter, a

24-year-old Black trans woman, was in the passenger seat of a car on her way to her hairdresser job when the car was involved in an accident. Instead of giving Hunter emergency medical care, after discovering that Hunter did not have the body expected of a cis woman, the responding fire fighter EMT technicians instead exchanged laughter and disparaging jokes about her trans body (Roberts 2007). When she was finally taken to the ER, a doctor refused to treat her and she died from her already neglected injuries. Afterwards Hunter's mother sued the city and won on the basis of neglect and malpractice (Fern 1998). Though it was responded to through community reporting and activism, Hunter's death remains one of the deadliest recorded instances of connections between laughter, transphobia, anti-Blackness, and violence as they meet in public space.

To better understand these intersections between transphobia, laughter, and violence, I find it helpful to turn to Viviane Namaste's discussion of genderbashing in *Invisible Lives*, as she focuses specifically on gender, policing, and violence in public (and private) space. Namaste builds upon discussions of queerbashing to argue that violence against sexual and gender minorities is often a matter of "policing gender presentation through private and public space" (Namaste 2000: 135-136). Namaste notes that because sexuality is frequently fused with and read off of gender presentation, situations of violence and harassment frequently are based on normative assumptions about gender expression, including the use of pejorative names and slurs that are used to justify an attack (140). Because public space is regulated based on gender norms and a compulsion to present as both properly gendered and heterosexual, Namaste asserts that trans people (and especially trans women) have a higher risk of being violently put in check for daring to enter public spaces (145). She links the exclusion of trans women from public space

with the specific spaces associated with trans people, usually visible at night for socialization and work by sex workers while also heavily policed (147).

Namaste's analysis is helpful for understanding both the violent reactions to Pierce's costumed presence in public space and its relationship with the collective laughter, mockery, and humor-making among the crowd. If Pierce is experiencing, as Namaste suggests, a reaction to her presence as someone perceived to be a trans woman in public space, then gender norms also bring Pierce into contact with violence and other forms of expulsion. Namaste focuses specifically on violence and genderbashing as a parallel to queerbashing, but this expulsion need not reach the level of the person who pushed Pierce onto the sidewalk and caused her leg to bleed. Instead, laughter and jeers serve as part of a spectrum of responding to a body marked as having an abnormal gender when daring to enter policed sites of gender normativity. Namaste's analysis thus usefully bridges with Bettcher's to explain how the communicative norms of gender can lead to both interpersonal transphobia and the organization of public space as it intersects with transphobic ideology and policing.

Returning to Hunter, her death was part of a larger situation of oppression in which people engage with trans lives through derision and ridicule as a common collective practice in public and private space. Humor is thus not just a matter of individuals causing harm, but also a larger network of people engaging in complicity with systematic norms that mark some lives as threatening and not worthy of care. Hunter was not merely laughed at due to isolated unethical actions of two EMTs, but instead because of culturally mediated reactions to bodies that do not fit transphobic, racist, and sexist norms.

Continuing from the discussion in the previous section of reactions to the reveal moment of Miriam in *There's Something About Miriam*, Hunter's death at the hand of laughing EMTs

also implicates the emotional life of laughter and particularly disgust as it connects with oppression and violence. In the next section I will turn to these specifically emotional aspects of transphobia to draw out the attracting and repelling force of its laughter. <2>

Ahmed and the Disgusted Laugh

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed emphasizes that disgust is frequently mediated through cultural circulations of emotions that stick to some objects and people to signify them as dangerous, polluting, sickening, contaminating, and too close for comfort. This circulation then leads to reactions such as expulsion. Ahmed writes,

To name something as disgusting – typically, in the speech act, “That’s disgusting!” – is performative. It relies on previous norms and conventions of speech, and it generates the object that it names (the disgusting object/event). To name something as disgusting is not to make something out of nothing. But to say something is disgusting is still to ‘make something’; it generates a set of effects, which *then adhere as a disgusting object* [emphasis hers]. (Ahmed 2004: 93)

Ahmed emphasizes that although disgust does not attach to just any object or person, it arises from a fertile ground of norms to performatively name the object or person as disgusting. In this context, disgust relies on a “historicity of signification,” accrued through history and culture rather than naturally (92-93). People and bodies become threatening not in and of themselves, but through “an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs” (90). The circulation of emotions such as disgust and their stickiness to specific objects and people are thus a social relationship requiring political analysis rather than simply attributed to unmediated natural causes, habits, or dispositions.

Ahmed notes that in some instances, the object or person associated with disgust is experienced as too close, threatening, and beneath the disgusted. Ahmed writes,

...the bodies of others become the salient object; they are constructed as being hateful and sickening only insofar as they have got too close. They are constructed as non-human, as *beneath and below the bodies of the disgusted* [emphasis hers]. Indeed, through the disgust reaction, 'belowness' and 'beneathness' become properties of their bodies. They embody that which is lower than human or civil life. (97)

Mediated through disgust, people may be encountered as not only outside the bounds of human life and its politics but also as below these, framed through a threatening close contact that must be expelled. It is thus not a surprise that the circulation of disgust is also frequently a circulation of dehumanization, neglect, and violence.

The social and political circulation of disgust explains not only the sexualized disgust directed at Pierce and Rivera but also the laughing response used by the EMTs against Hunter. The realization that someone is a trans woman, whether mistaken or otherwise, carries with it not just shock but also the danger of having been attracted to her or having shared a world with her. This potential reaction of shock and danger also extends to people who may unexpectedly be required to provide intimate care to a trans woman, such as EMTs. Ahmed emphasizes that disgust not only involves a contact between the disgusted and the object or person circulated as disgusting, but also a reaction of pushing away. Ahmed writes,

Disgust is clearly dependent upon contact: it involves a relationship of touch and proximity between the surfaces of bodies and objects. That contact is felt as an unpleasant intensity: it is not that the object, apart from the body, has the quality of 'being offensive', but the proximity of the object to the body is felt as offensive. The

object must have got close enough to make us feel disgusted. As a result, while disgust *over takes* the body, it also *takes over* the object that apparently gives rise to it [emphasis hers]. (85)

In addition to this relationship of contact and closeness Ahmed emphasizes that disgust motivates a relationship of pushing away, following the work of Julia Kristeva on abjection. An encounter with a person who has been sedimented with disgust threatens the stable, walled-off self of the disgusted subject through a threatening permeability, and thus must be pushed away as abject (Ahmed 2004: 86). Returning to the EMTs, laughter serves the emotions of disgust by distorting a living Black trans woman in need of care into a figure of too-close-and-must-be-pushed-away. Transphobia thus short-circuits life-saving care due to the necessity of intimacy, proximity, touch, and skill directed towards a life considered unworthy or dangerously false.

When disgust mediates a situation where one party is constructed as threatening, too close, and outside the scope of care while simultaneously in need of care, laughter serves as a potentially powerful antidote to the abject encounter. The EMTs, in contact with a Black trans woman not experienced as a person but instead as a repelling presence, were able to change the terms of this contact through the collective response of laughter and its accompanying mirth and relief. In response to Pierce, Rivera, and Hunter, laughing at trans women becomes a license to shove away a mere sexualized costume, a refusal of love after a staged reveal, and a disintegration of necessary intimate care.

This is not to argue that such laughter is the same across differences. As a white cis woman Pierce could have potentially opted out of the situation by removing her mask and appealing to the crowd with her normative status. This reflects Deirdre Davis's insight that street harassment against African American women has an intensified relationship with othering,

disenfranchisement, and frequent microaggressions (Davis 1994: 175-177). Laughter as street harassment thus plays into the differential effects of laughter as described by Ahmed, since racist and sexist laughter in public space can saturate a social space as a means of exclusion (Ahmed 2019: 175-176). It is notable that Pierce's experience with transphobic laughter led to interviews about her art, whereas laughter targeted at trans women of color is not typically responded to with broader care, social recognition, and material support.

The Laugh of Transmisogyny

So far, I have argued that trans women are frequently constructed as laughable. Through Bettcher, this laughableness is influenced by a gender ideology that associates trans people with costuming and inauthenticity, fueling intimate sexualized violence. Through Namaste, this laughter is also a means of pushing trans people out of public space. Through Ahmed, this laughter simultaneously works upon the push and pull of expulsion and attraction through disgust. Taken together, the ideology of gender combined with the circulation of emotions makes laughter a force of violence in many trans women's lives. To finalize the relationship between these dynamics and transmisogyny, I will now sketch the function of transmisogynistic laughter for this conclusion.

In *Down Girl*, Kate Manne sets out to define misogyny as distinct from sexism, objectification, and patriarchy. Specifically, Manne describes sexism as a branch of justification for the oppression of women, misogyny as a branch that enforces the oppression of women, and patriarchal ideology as the underlying systematic ideology of male dominance over women that utilizes both sexism and misogyny (Manne 2018: 20). Manne explains,

Misogyny...functions to enforce and police women's subordination and to uphold male dominance, against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and

vulnerability, dominance and disadvantage, as well as disparate material resources, enabling and constraining social structures, institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and so on (19).

Misogyny is thus the “law enforcement branch” responding to potential threats for the norms of patriarchy (63). In addition to including violence and threats, Manne associates with misogyny a long list of actions aiming to punish, deter, or warn, including “ridiculing, humiliating, [and] mocking,” indicating that practices related to laughter are used for misogyny (68). Furthermore, Manne envisions her account as compatible with understanding misogyny against trans women, also called transmisogyny, though she explicitly takes a step back from drawing out this connection further (24-25).

Continuing her analysis, Manne argues that a key aspect of the patriarchal dominance fueling misogyny is the differential norm of giving between (cis) men and (cis) women. Specifically, women are expected to be “human givers” and provide “moral goods and resources” to men as part of their moral and social role in society (175). Manne emphasizes, “...women are tasked not only with performing certain forms of emotional, social, domestic, sexual, and reproductive labor but are also supposed to so in a loving and caring manner or enthusiastic spirit...” (46). Additionally, gender norms also often impose expectations that men are entitled to and owed attention, favor, and care from women (117, 130). Manne provides an analogy between men and a restaurant customer “who expects to not only be treated deferentially - the customer is always right - but also to be served...attentively with a smile” (50). When not met with the deference and enthusiasm owed to his position, and even more so when expected to give non-sexual attention and service to women, Manne argues that men often behave like an angry customer who has not been given the service they expect from their server (50). Manne

thus emphasizes that when women do not fulfill their roles as “human giver,” men often react with overblown frustration, anger, or even heightened violence to reimpose the gendered norms of domination that supposedly entitle them to special services.

Looking at the collective sexualization, attention, disgust, and repulsion involved in laughing at trans women complicates this arrangement of intended givers in relation to intended receivers. If misogyny, as explained by Manne, frames women as human givers owing services to men, then transmisogyny also frames trans women in relation to their utility to men and to the larger situation of gender domination. However, through gender ideology, the arrangement of public space, and the emotional life of transphobia, trans women are either considered improper vessels for this arrangement or at the very best conditional, only suitable for relationships that are fleeting or secret. As Bettcher argues, this subordination occurs at the level of ideology with the “natural attitude” that either trivializes all bodies falling outside non-trans norms or casts them as inherently threatening or violent. As Namaste argues, the regulation of trans bodies is also institutionalized in the construction and policing of public space. As indicated by the prevalence with which they are consumed within pornography, pushed into sex work amidst mass culture marginalization, and denied material subsistence through expulsion from the labor force, the bodies of trans women are frequently tethered to this structure in which women are punished for not serving the desires of men as human givers. But due to their deviation from norms about women’s bodies and from expectations about the ideal role of women in relationships, trans women are also frequently not granted a culturally legitimized “human giver” role described by Manne as a key factor of misogyny. Rather, through the distortions highlighted by Bettcher that enact transphobia as a reductive trivialization and sexualization of the other, trans women can be appropriated into this role but also easily thrown away as mere refuse, capable of satisfying the

needs of the individual man but also not considered an appropriate choice for the human giver role. Relegated to a status outside relationality and community through ideology and institutions, the bodies and lives of trans women are thus frequently used or expunged from civil society as is convenient for effecting and maintaining dominant gendered power relationships.

The encounter with Hunter's body by the EMTs is thus not merely shock, but also a reaction fueled through a specific imbalanced gendered economy that centers some gender roles (cis men) as receiving attention and care in relation to other gender roles (cis women) that are expected to serve as human givers (via Manne's analysis), with the bodies of trans women frequently recruited on an as-needed or as-wanted basis for more underground forms of cis men's desire. An unwanted trans woman, and especially an unexpected and unwanted trans women's body thus circulates through emotions such as disgust, through which any contact with a trans woman might be experienced as dangerously close such that she must be pushed away as a dangerous outlier to gendered norms. As Namaste emphasizes, this emotional encounter is often not solely about gender, as it may also circulate histories of disgust around Black people's bodies under racism, women's bodies under patriarchy, and sex worker's bodies under sexualized and racialized capitalism (Namaste 2009: 20, 23). Disgust thus frequently characterizes the cultural circulation of emotions around trans women's bodies, further distributed by productions of mass culture such as *The Jerry Springer Show* that frame the revelation of an unwanted or unknown trans woman as a scene of spectacle and disgust, revealed not to be a human giver but instead an abject fantasy-gender masked through deception. Hence the ritual of collective vomiting and the inevitable laugh is a means of turning away through cruel mirth. Intimacy with trans women is presented first as horror, then as comedy.

In conclusion, the construction of trans women as laughable in ideology, public space, and mass media cultural production is likely to influence what means for us to inhabit, comport ourselves within, and retreat from public space. Recall Priest and Wilson from the archives above, discussing the isolating effects of growing up in a world where gender variance is responded to primarily through jest. Trans risibility is political and the ethics of trans humor cannot be reduced to an interpersonal deployment of harmful stereotypes.

Trans laughter is not fully determined here. Given the many potential modalities of trans laughter, it would be incorrect to assume that the only laughter Hunter or Rivera knew while they were alive was a cruel laughter. Calling for an attentiveness to situation comedy over reductive seriousness, Jules Gill-Peterson writes,

I think trans people are really fucking funny, especially when we are being bimbos. Trans women are the best situation comedians I have ever met. Especially if they are supercharged with the frisson of other comedic traditions, like camp, being Jewish, or being brown. I loathe the intense sincerity of much trans political speech today and the moral frameworks used to enforce it (Gill-Peterson 2021).

Gill-Peterson calls attention to the importance of not treating studies of transphobia, transmisogyny, and violence as the end of trans studies, since this frequently reduces trans women of color to mere symbols of violence to be traded around for ungrounded theory or activism points. In this context, we might consider the common practice of making fun of the tendency of academics and non-profits to mention trans violence and then shallowly throw in the phrase “especially trans women of color” as a form of looking inclusive. Likewise, trans philosophy of humor cannot be reduced to a philosophy of transphobic humor. I thus hope to see further work on laughing *with* trans women as this project continues.

<1> I have kept the terms used in archives largely intact rather than alter them to fit conventional usage.

<2> There is a larger context of writing about violence that work in trans philosophy should address. As Jin Haritaworn and C. Riley Snorton argue in their now classic essay on trans necropolitics, there is a meta-politics of using examples of trans women of color as a means for making a philosophical argument about trans violence. Initially I had avoided referring to Tyra Hunter as an example in the version of this essay that landed in my dissertation because her death has been mobilized for various projects that are only tenuously connected with improving the lives of trans women of color (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013: 70-71). However, after further discussion, I am not convinced that it would be better to simply not discuss relevant examples of violent laughter as directed at trans women of color. It may be that another meta-critique is required: what kind of *value* is produced by trans scholarship and who (ex. publishers) are the ones that make a profit from these trans archive-graves? An intervention might require something more radical than intra-essay commentary, and hence seems to be beyond the scope of this practice. The conclusion of the essay is inspired by these considerations.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge.

---. *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use*. Durham: Duke University Press.

American Reflexx. 2013. Dir. Alli Coates, Perf. Signe Pierce. Video. Posted to YouTube by

- artists, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXn1xavynj8>
- Bettcher, Talia. 2007. "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion." *Hypatia* 22.3. 43-65.
- Davis, Deirdre. 1994. "The Harm That Has No Name: Street Harassment, Embodiment, and African American Women." *UCLA Women's Law Journal* 4.2. 133-178.
- Family Guy*. 2010. Season 8, Episode 18. "Quagmire's Dad." Originally aired May 9, 2010. 20th Century Fox Television.
- Fern, Maria Elena. 1998. "Death Suit Costs City \$2.9 Million." *Washington Post*. August 7. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1998/12/12/death-suit-costs-city-29-million/b8ab4d34-1907-463c-b5d5-64ec00dee2a1/>
- Frye, Phillis Randolph. 2000. "Facing Discrimination, Organizing for Freedom: The Transgender Community." In *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*. Eds. John D'Emilio, William B. Turner and Urvashi Vaid, New York: St. Martins Press. Archived by the Digital Transgender Archive. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/0k225b10t>
- Gill-Peterson, Jules 2021. "Paranoia as a Trans Style: The Situation Comedy of Trans Life." *Sad Brown Girl*. Substack. <https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/paranoia-as-a-trans-style>
- Juang, Richard. 2006. "Transgendering the Politics of Recognition." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge. 706-719.
- Manne, Kate. 2018. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Namaste, Viviane. 2000. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Viviane Namaste, "Undoing Theory: The 'Transgender Question' and the Epistemic Violence of

- Anglo-American Feminist Theory,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 20, 23.
- Pierce, Signe. 2015a. “Interview: American Reflexxx.” *Rhizome*. Interview conducted by Alexis Anais Avedisian. <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/aug/19/interview-american-reflexxx/>
- Pierce, Signe. 2015b. “‘We Didn’t Set Out to Make a Piece About Dehumanization, Mob Mentality, or Violence’: Alli Coates and Signe Pierce Talk ‘American Reflexxx.’” *Art News*. Interview with Alli Coates and Signe Pierce conducted by John Ciaverina. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/we-didnt-set-out-to-make-a-piece-about-dehumanization-mob-mentality-or-violence-alli-coates-and-signe-pierce-talk-american-reflexxx-4056/>
- Pierce, Signe. June 2019. “A Dangerous Walk: Interview with Signe Pierce.” *Musée Magazine*. <https://museemagazine.com/features/2019/4/24/a-dangerous-walk-interview-with-signe-pierce>
- Priest, Taylor. Summer 1995 *Chrysalis Quarterly* 2.2. Archived by the Digital Transgender Archive. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/q524jn79p>
- Renaissance News & Views*. November 1995. 9.11. 1, 6. Archived by the Digital Transgender Archive. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/r781wg03d>
- Rodríguez, Juana María. 2014. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. New York: New York University Press.
- Roberts, Monica. 2007. “Tyra Hunter Anniversary.” *TransGriot*. <https://transgriot.blogspot.com/2007/08/tyra-hunter-anniversary.html>.
- Serano, Julia. 2007. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Berkeley: Seal Press.
- Snorton, C. Riley. 2017. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis:

University of Minnesota Press.

Snorton, C. Riley and Jin Haritaworn. 2010. "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife. In *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. Eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura. New York: Routledge. 66-76.

There's Something About Miriam. 2004. Episode 6. Originally aired March 4, 2004. Brighter Pictures.

Wilson. Winter 2002. "Officially Transgendered." *Transgender Tapestry* 100. 45-46. Archived by the Digital Transgender Archive.

<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/8g84mm35j>