

## Transsexuality, the Curio, and the Transgender Tipping Point

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Or, you know. In my Sybil Vane.  
 I made great plans to be bratty all week  
 but at least a divorcée in a whatever  
 apartment where I have already let  
 the coffee burn for myself to clean  
 after a change of mask and costume,  
 a salon confessional, a CfP. There'd have been  
 gloves and buttons involved  
 piles of shirts to come on  
 spontaneous or world-historical underboob  
 no teaching and minimal committee work  
 I mean it like a flood alert.  
 A paragon, like  
*I'd fuck me.*

-“Self-portrait as a Karen” by Kay Gabriel, from *Elegy Department Spring*

### **Introduction: Curiosity and the Transgender Tipping Point**

Trans subjects, and I employ the term “subjects” with a purposeful bivalence to signify both “topics of concern” and “individuals of concern,” have received renewed attention and visibility during these tumultuous 2010s. At the level of mass cultural curiosity, the notion that trans people could be sympathetic or even to some extent respectable, already indicated by the move from media venues such as Jerry Springer to the less carnivalesque platform of Oprah in the 2000s, was solidified through the phenomenon of the “Transgender Tipping Point” via Time

Magazine in 2014 (Steinmetz) and the spectacle of Caitlyn Jenner's transition in 2015 (Bissinger).

Both media events were framed with a similar narrative: first, that "trans" was a phenomenon not receiving due attention until recently; second, that "trans" presented a set of up-and-coming social issues and possibilities for progress as a cutting-edge social movement; third, that visibility, media, and specific (nameable and photographable) voices are its vanguard; fourth, that this movement faces a threat from entrenched gender norms and institutions, including specific resistance from traditional or conservative views and policies, and perhaps a number of skeptical feminists. The general message relayed to the public by mass culture is that "trans" is located at the cutting-edge of concern across multiple fronts, finally arriving and coming into its own as a movement, and capable of great progress through renewed sympathetic public curiosity.

Public curiosity often frames visibility as a positive force, but visibility for trans people is frequently ambivalent. In Talia Bettcher's "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers," she emphasizes that visibility for trans people is accompanied by negations of gender/sex credibility or even heightened violence (Bettcher 50). Viviane Namaste also emphasizes that the production of trans visibility according to gender in the abstract can render the needs of specific populations of trans people invisible, including trans refugees, migrants, sex workers, drug users, poor trans people, and homeless trans people (Namaste *Sex Change, Social Change* 277-278). It is thus important not to ascribe public curiosity to any clear good for trans people, since structurally the visibility of trans populations may be accompanied by heavy politicization, exclusion, and violence,

frequently at the intersections of misogyny, racism, xenophobia, economic inequality, and the disenfranchisement of sex workers in society.

While a mass cultural awareness and curiosity about trans people has marked some institutional changes, such as a tenuous lifting of some restrictions for passport gender marker changes in the United States and increased institutional support for gender neutral bathrooms, violence (both physical and economic) continues to be directed towards vulnerable trans populations such as economically disenfranchised trans women of color, trans women sex workers, and trans people with precarious housing situations. For example, being careful to note the decontextualization and appropriation of violently murdered transfeminine people of color (Namaste “Undoing Theory”; Snorton and Haritaworn), the increased visibility and policy changes of the 2010s did not prevent the disproportionate levels of violence and murder against specific trans populations (mostly trans women and transfeminine people from South America and in the US black trans women) in 2017 (Astor).

Increased mass curiosity about trans people may thus address issues for specific populations of trans people, such as codifying proper name, pronoun, and terminology recognition as well as legal, more inclusive bathroom access in certain workspaces and public spaces, but this may only benefit trans people who have not already been shut out of them. The kind of trans activism that achieves attention and visibility risks disproportionately benefitting specific populations of white middle-class or affluent trans professionals and college students, or others who can match what Dan Irving calls “the mediation of transsexuality through capitalist productive relations” (Irving 16), as the hand of activism as visibility passes by populations of trans people considered outside the graces of economic and societal use. Though the current

moment of visibility, attention, and a seemingly more friendly curiosity may seem like progress, I approach this with healthy suspicion.

Beyond the tenuous causal link between attention, visibility, curiosity, and trans amelioration, let alone trans amelioration across differences, heightened attention and visibility can bring unwanted or even dangerous results. The ocular lens of the transgender tipping point may bring attention to trans people in ways that are reductive and exploitative, and already the increasing degree to which conservative platforms have explicitly listed policies against trans people marks backlashes against the media's call for attention and acceptance. The Kansas Republican party, for example, in February 2018 voted for an explicit platform to "oppose all efforts to validate transgender identity" at the state level (Shorman and Woodall).

In this essay I consider the grounds of my suspicion about post-transgender tipping point curiosity, especially when public interest in trans subjects seems to originate from an unprecedented place of acceptance. Specifically, I focus on a product I call "the curio" and a process of production I call curiotization. First, I unpack the curio as an object that is alienated from its context, history, and world, and through this removal becomes intensified as a site of curiosity. I then describe curiotization as the process through which people or groups of people become intensified subjects of curiosity. After tracing an implicit concern about curiosity in existing trans studies, I read the song "Walk on the Wild Side" beside Maria Lugones' discussion of world-travelling as an example of curiotizing. After this, I turn to contemporary examples of curiotization in mass media journalism about trans women breastfeeding and the framework of the transgender tipping point. I conclude that one way cultural production can attempt to avoid

curiotization is through more complex, particular, contextual, and historicized engagements with trans subjects.

### **The Curio**

Having grown up frequenting museums and spending much time with eclectic people in their homes, the first thing I think of when I hear the word “curio” is an object set before me to engage my attention or even fascination. A sapphire-encrusted beetle pinned behind a display cabinet, a grinning mask beset by daggers hanging on the wall, a circuited metal bird surrounded by a cube of glass, a human skull resting on a coffee table; each of these might draw me in as magnets of my curiosity, calling me to ask, inquire, converse, or give silent attention. Such curiosity may be open to surprise and wonder, and the manner of presentation does not necessarily bring me to controlled, disciplined academic consideration as in the case of what Zurn calls “serious curiosity.” Indeed, eclectic objects presented before me seem more likely to elicit the curiosity that Zurn refers to as “frivolous,” since I am likely to have no continuing stake in giving attention and discussion to the odd mummified rabbit paw or moose-antlered tiara gracing your study (Zurn 2). However, a carefully crafted conversation, story, or museum exhibit can more finely hone my curiosity about objects beyond a frivolous engagement by providing further narrative and context, and perhaps even carry over my curiosity to more sustained forms of interest. The curio is thus initially an object that elicits variable attention productive of multivalent curiosities, but tending towards a frivolous or at least non-committal mode.

It is also useful to note that, along with the potential for a frivolous curiosity, the curio itself is often presented through an alienation from living context, history, and world. One easy mistake might be to call any decoration that could lead to a conversation a curio, perhaps a book

placed on the coffee table featuring possums wearing various adorable hats, or a reference to more immediate mass culture, say, if I were to have a replica of Wonder Woman's shield hanging in my office. Another mistake might be to equate the curio with a form of kitsch or ironic or absurd decor, for example I currently have an obnoxious red painting of a rooster hanging in my living room that I purchased for 5 dollars at a yard sale just because people find it absurd or dreadful or amusing. The curio, on the other hand, is removed from its time and space and world but its dislocation is precisely that which elicits the onlookers' curiosity. It is also possible that what is not a curio for me, like the rooster painting, could very well be a curio for you, and vice versa.

This is one reason why the phenomenon of the curio often participates in the exoticization and appropriation of colonialism and Orientalism (Said). A white person vacations in New Orleans and purchases a "voodoo doll" for their shelf, alienated from its cultural context but nonetheless eliciting curiosity from houseguests. A museum displays hieroglyphic tablets that have been stolen from non-Western cultures through colonialist excavation, beset by a neat stand with a placard. Placed adjacent to a mummified cat, once a living person's revered companion, both displays might be arranged to create a helpful walkway for museum visitors for the convenience of their curiosity. Trans poet and minister Elena Rose connected this form of exoticization via collection with trans dehumanization in her 2006 poem "On Cartography and Dissection," writing,

"And there it is: you're illuminated in a manuscript, a centaur, a Celestial, an Eskimo, a manticore, an autogynephiliac. You're made of stories, and your own voice is generally drowned out by them. You're a Monster, and it ain't your Here to Be in any more. You're

the one brown kid in someone else's town. You're the transsexual etherized upon the table. Monsters aren't in their own stories; they're in someone else's, some Center's, some subject's object" (Rose).

The curio, whether object or human, evokes its life, time, and place only through its extraction into the collectors' world.

Another important clarification is the curio does not need to be alienated from the past, but can also draw an onlooker's curiosity when pulled from a present or future world. Consider, for example, the Mütter museum in Philadelphia, which displays medical oddities in the form of surgical utensils, preserved body parts, bones, and entire remains. Exhibits include the "Soap Lady," an entire body preserved through body fat decomposing into a waxy substance, as well as cutting-edge medical devices used for spinal surgery. The Mütter museum is in this way not so different from traveling Body Worlds exhibits, which display human and non-human bodies preserved through the process of plastination (cf. Ruchti).

While the bodies housed in Mütter Museum or Body Worlds do call back to the past in the form of the history of medicine and the history of these particular bodies, their alienation from life also fascinates about human bodies and their many possible variations and transformations in the present. Despite evoking this fascination, however, they are not set up with much interest to the world of the person preserved. Relatedly, the creators of the Body Worlds exhibits, Angelina Whalley and Gunther von Hagens, state "Body Worlds exhibitions were conceived to educate the public about the inner workings of the human body and to show the effects of healthy and unhealthy lifestyles" (Body Worlds "Philosophy"). These exhibits may evoke what Zurn calls "morbid curiosity," which fetishizes pain and involves "an empty gaze,

intent on seeing yet without any interest in understanding” (Zurn 2). They may also admit to a more complex curiosity about human embodiment and health in the present, though it would be wise to inquire further into the meaning of “unhealthy lifestyles.”

In addition to curios pulled from the present, we might consider curios that call forth an as-yet unrealized future. One example is the futuristic curios housed at Epcot, or Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, in the Walt Disney World theme park. Walt Disney described Epcot as "a community of tomorrow that will never be completed but will always be introducing and testing and demonstrating new materials and systems" (qtd. in King). Accordingly, Epcot has a section called Future World, which focuses on these new technologies. One popular Disney tourism website advertises, “Through a combination of hands-on activities and fantastic attractions, you'll find exhibits that focus on ocean life, the land and our environment, imagination, health, energy, communication, space exploration and transportation” (DIS). With its futuristic aesthetic, the park is designed to showcase both current and future technology, often in the form of interactive displays for children. The objects hail from the future and often the cutting-edge of the present and sometimes an imagined future projected from our past. However, their removal from the context of their actual development and future possibilities mark them as curios, drawing attention to the future from which they are pulled only through their alienation into the theme park’s manicured present.

Though the curio is alienated from its living context, the remnants of its world and history imbues the object with its curious character. It is marked as out of place and out of time, and through this rupture draws curiosity into its orbit. This curiosity may tend towards the frivolous, but may also admit to serious consideration, inspire cultural production, or serve as a



curiosity that expands beyond the object towards broader horizons. Going beyond the curios of Future World, Disney captures and markets a more explicit transition from curio to broader curiosity in *The Little Mermaid*: “I’ve got gadgets and gizmos a-plenty / I’ve got whozits and whatzits galore / You want thingamabobs? I’ve got twenty! But who cares? No big deal, I want more...” (Menken and Ashman). The curiosity that the curio attracts may be multivalent and open to new horizons even as it continues to depend on an alienated and easily reduced object.

### **Trans Curiotization**

Now that I have discussed presentations of both objects and the preserved dead as curios I will focus on curiotization. Curiotization is the process of transfiguration into a curio that is focused on groups of people, and often living ones at that. Returning directly to the subject of curiosity about trans people, much of trans studies literature discusses the ways that trans people (and historically transsexuals) have been objectified by non-trans media and researchers. As a note of clarification before I launch into this discussion, I often focus on transsexuality due to the historical precision of the term in relation to the particular curiotizing processes I am discussing. However, I generally understand “trans” to be a messy pluralism of gender nonconformity, but also gender conformity, changes of sex, similar politicization of bodies, etc, and so forth, converging in complicated ways across time and space. First, I will emphasize that trans studies has been invested in the relationship between trans people and curiosity. Second, I will stress that considering curiotization is specifically useful for the post-“transgender tipping point” moment .

In her by-now probably classic book *Whipping Girl*, Julia Serano argues that media and academics have often focused on transsexual women’s bodies as an objectified means to an entertaining or theoretically useful end. Serano traces one aspect of this practice to media, which

objectifies transsexual women (and often transsexual men) by drawing out the audience's fascination with body transformation, surgery, and femininity (Serano 62). On the other side of this coin is what Serano calls "ungendering," through which academics cite transsexual bodies as theoretical devices for showcasing the subversion, deconstruction, and inconsistencies of gender and sex without taking into account the lived experience of transsexual people (195-196).

Serano is primarily concerned about the erasure of lived experience, writing, "By reducing us to the status of objects of inquiry, cissexuals free themselves of the inconvenience of having to consider us living, breathing beings..." (187). This concern also relates to the processes through which trans people are transformed into objects of curiosity. For example, one aspect of media portrayals that Serano discusses is the uneven attention given to medical transition as a dramatic and "artificial" transformation, in contrast to other medical procedures and changes in appearance (56-57). Additionally, when Serano discusses academic critiques of trans people she is interested in the ways critics approach the subject without due care. Serano cites Bernice Hausman as anti-trans academic curiosity *par excellence*, as Hausman in her 1995 book *Changing Sex* writes,

"No matter how much I applied myself to the task [of my Dissertation], most of my thoughts on the issue seemed uninspired, boring, even obvious....I inadvertently found texts that dealt with transsexualism. Now that was really fascinating. For about six months I read anything and everything I could find about crossdressing and sex change. I attended a national conference for transvestites and transsexuals....The possibilities for understanding the construction of 'gender' through an analysis of transsexualism seemed

enormous and there wasn't a lot of critical material out there." (Hausman vii, qtd. in Serano 208)

Though Serano is concerned about objectification and erasure of lived experience, this also involves an interest in the processes through which trans people are produced as a focus of the attention and visibility of curiosity, and the ways in which this mode of curiosity transforms transsexual subjects in media and academic knowledge production. Serano's concerns, along with Viviane Namaste's focus on the erasure of transsexual women's lives by doctors, academics, and institutions (cf. Namaste *Invisible Lives* 3), and Jamison Green's experience of being seen "as a frog" while answering questions on university panels about his life as a transsexual man (Green 500), strike me as concerns with becoming the subject of curiosity.

A focus on the process of curiotization, and the transfiguration of trans people into the curio, is useful because it highlights the effects of curiosity in shepherding the process of objectifying, ungendering, and annihilating lived experience that Serano and other writers discuss when reflecting on non-trans cultural production about trans people. While it is important to directly discuss this objectification and the erasure of lived experience, I find it interesting to also focus on the modes of curious attraction through which non-trans people are brought into our orbit, and I suggest that curiosity affects personal interactions and cultural production about us. One might be tempted to call trans people tools of the media or thesis puppets, signifying the purposeful reduction of trans people into a mere means for various entertainment or academic ends, but this frames non-trans people as too diabolically cognizant of the effects of their curiosity, attention, and fascination with trans people. Rather, I want to suggest that the frequent curio status of trans people often attracts non-trans people to us in ways they may not understand

even as the results of their curiosity are convenient for cultural production, careers, and/or pursuing their desires for us.

Another reason to focus on curiosity is because earlier critiques of dehumanization and objectification in trans studies may be limited when considering heightened interest in this post-tipping point moment if they do not foreground the ways in which different groups of trans people are subjected to curiosity in different ways over time. If the “transgender tipping point” does indeed mark a new moment for trans people, it may also bring a new form of curiotization based on new paradigms of acceptance and resulting contestations of trans lives.

A form of curiotization I find useful to highlight in the context of trans acceptance is an older one from trans history, but stands out as useful for understanding the complexities of trans people functioning as a curio. Consider the following lyrics:

“Holly came from Miami F L A / Hitchhiked her way across the U S A / Plucked her eyebrows on the way / Shaved her legs and then he was a she / She says "Hey babe, take a walk on the wild side," / Said "Hey honey, take a walk on the wild side." / Candy came from out on the Island / In the backroom she was just everybody's darling / But she never lost her head / Even when she was giving head / She says, hey baby, take a walk on the wild side / Said, hey babe, take a walk on the wild side” (Reed).

You may recognize these lyrics from Lou Reed’s 1972 song “Walk on the Wild Side.” This song is not dissimilar from others such as “Lola” by the Kinks in 1970 and the less redeemable “Dude Looks Like a Lady” released by Aerosmith in 1987. Lou Reed was, of course, a key member of the Velvet Underground, a band that like Andy Warhol is famous for inhabiting the “underground” of New York City. In this context, their cultural production was largely based on

using their experience seeking and hanging out with the dispossessed and outcasts of New York as a fount for their music. Defending the song from charges of transphobia, Reed's friend and backup singer Jenni Muldaur, asserted,

“Lou was open about his complete acceptance of all creatures of the night...That's what that song's about. Everyone doing their thing, taking a walk on the wild side. I can't imagine how anyone could conceive of that [being transphobia]. The album was called Transformer. What do they think it's about?” (qtd. in Helmore)

This defense of the song is also a clue towards its role in curiotization, and this specific mode of curiotization is helpful for understanding post-transgender tipping point curiosity.

To better understand curiotization in this context, I turn to Maria Lugones' essay “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception.” In her essay, Lugones defines a “world” as “inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people,” which is inclusive of the dead. “Worlds” are multiple, and some “worlds” may take the form of a “dominant culture's description and construction of life, including a construction of their relationships of production, of gender, race, etc.,” as well as non-dominant constructions (Lugones 9-10). Lugones is thus emphasizing that people can take differing and multiple situated perspectives, and also that people can be differently constructed and perceived across these “worlds” even as they might travel between them.

In this context, Lugones discusses arrogant perception and loving perception, building upon the work of Marilyn Frye. Lugones grounds her description of arrogant perception through a reflection on her relationship with her mother, writing, “...I could not identify with her, I could not see myself in her, I could not welcome her world” (6). In contrast, Lugones emphasizes that a

loving perception does not involve such an isolated, independent compartment towards another. Continuing her reflection, she writes, “Loving my mother also required that I see with my mother’s eyes, that I go into my mother’s world, that I see both of us as we are constructed in her world, that I witness her own sense of herself from within her world” (8). Arrogant perception in its independence cannot fathom the other’s world, while loving perception considers their world on its own terms, centering this not only this difference but also connections across difference.

I understand curiotization to be a failure of attempted world-travelling that is in some ways distinct from Marilyn Frye’s definition of arrogance that Lugones builds upon (Frye 73-75), but shares an inability to reach the other. With objects, I described their removal from time and place and world that generates curiosity. With people, I will hone in on the meaning and process of this removal in more detail.

Let’s return to “Walk on the Wild Side.” The song provides a framed snapshot of gay and trans life in New York City during the early 1970s, and in this way marks a time and place. The phrase “Walk on the Wild Side,” too, evokes an attention and fascination for the characters within the song, drawing in curiosity about their “underground” status as “creatures of the night,” in Muldaur’s words. In this way, we might even interpret the song as an attempt at loving perception, and indeed Lou Reed, like David Bowie, was one of very few men even to this day who will admit to loving and being loved by trans women. But in presenting the characters as sources of fascination, the song also strips away their living context. We are pulled in to wonder about their world, but as listeners not actually to see ourselves from the vantage points of that world, or really understand it in careful particular and historical complexity. “Walk on the Wild Side,” like the “futureworld” instruments at Epcot center, presents its characters as beacons of

interest in their little “underworld” but never adds texture to this world. In this way, curiotization represents the transformation of a person or group of people into subjects of curiosity, but at the risk of dissolving their living context and history. The curiotizing subjects flirts with loving perception while peering through a fascinated but walled-off looking glass similar to arrogant perception.

The reason why I find this process of curiotizing through cultural production interesting to look at in addition to earlier critiques of objectification and erasure such as found in Serano and many others, is that the current and post-”transgender tipping point” moment constructs itself as extending sympathy, understanding, and respectfulness towards trans people in a way that is likely to change the modes of curiosity directed towards trans subjects. In this context, I find it useful to consider how the combination of increased attention and visibility along with curious goodwill may lead to failed understandings through the alienation from living context, history, and world represented by the curio.

### **Curiotization and Tipping Points**

The fact that “Walk on the Wild Side” is a song and thus necessarily curtailed may lead to some sympathy for the limitations of its medium. Considering more recent moments of curiotization in the post-tipping point era is thus useful for elaborating contemporary nuances. To do this I will take up an example of mass media journalism curiotizing trans women breastfeeding, then move to the larger mass culture curiotization produced by the transgender tipping point.

In the post-tipping point moment, journalists often portray “trans” as a cutting-edge topic. Though anti-trans journalism persists during “trans moments,” often in a dialectic with assertions

of progress, many journalists in the 2010s aim for more sympathetic coverage. Despite increasing neutral or positive coverage of trans issues, non-trans journalists still frequently cover trans subjects through curiotization. For example, in February 2018, news broke internationally about a trans woman who breastfed her baby under clinical supervision. The news was based on a report published in the journal *Transgender Health* a month before by Tamar Reisman and Zil Goldstein, who wrote of a clinic treatment, “We believe that this is the first formal report in the medical literature of induced lactation in a transgender woman” (Reisman and Goldstein 25). While this was by far not the first instance of trans women breastfeeding (including with medical supervision), let alone lactating in general, the authors made sure to clarify this was the first published formal report.

Newspaper articles, however, took the notion of a “first formal report” and distorted it beyond reality to assert that this was the first time that a trans woman had ever breastfed, some cases even going so far as to suggest that trans women had never lactated prior to this moment. The UK’s Daily Mail was one of the first newspapers to report the story, with the headline “Transgender Woman Becomes First in the World to Breastfeed for Six Weeks After DIY Hormone Therapy and Breast Pumping” (De Graaf). Other newspapers followed suit with similarly distorted titles: “Transgender Woman Becomes First in World to Breastfeed Baby” from London’s Evening Standard (Grafton-Green), “In First, Transgender Woman Able to Breastfeed” from India’s English-language Deccan Chronicle (Deccan Chronicle), and in the New York Post with “Transgender Woman Becomes First to Breastfeed Baby” (Tousignant).

First, it is important to note that most news articles on the subject were presented in a neutral or even positive light, centering the (unidentified) 30-year old trans woman as a woman,



referring to her with correct pronouns, and describing her experience as that of a mother wanting to care for her child. Thus, it might be tempting to critique the news headlines and stories on the grounds of bad journalism in the mode of inaccuracy rather than transphobia. However, several elements conspire in this context to produce curiotization, even as they frame a trans woman breastfeeding as an advancement or progress.

First, the headlines present the preservative care of a trans woman breastfeeding as if it emerged *ex nihilo* through some novel development in medical technologies. While the New York Times featured the more nuanced headline “Transgender Woman Breast-Feeds Baby After Hospital Induces Lactation,” it still frames this as a novel or futuristic moment, arguing, “...[I]f confirmed in wider studies, the regimen could represent a next major stage in transgender parenthood” (Yeginsu). The articles largely do not include conversations or comments from trans women beyond the published essay, which has a trans woman co-author but does not discuss trans women beyond the specific case.

If journalists had spoken with more trans women, they may have learned that trans women have already breastfed with and without the supervision of doctors, and that lactation in trans women, while not always common, is certainly not an unprecedented or even novel event. By sensationalizing the publication about trans women breastfeeding as its first novel occurrence, as if it were a sudden feat of future tech, the authors displace trans women’s bodies and their capabilities from trans women as an embodied community of knowers. While this distortion may rouse the curiosity of non-trans readers who do not know any better, the journals are using their narrative frame of trans progress to court public curiosity by paving over

knowledge and experiences shared among trans women that has not yet entered mass media print.

The journalist narrative of a trans woman breastfeeding as a novel medical development also curiotizes trans women's bodies as a product of futuristic science. In an article on breastfeeding as a trans woman written for Seattle's *The Stranger* in June 2017, Dana Fried commented on the framing of trans women's breasts as unreal or artifice, writing,

“There's a weird but surprisingly common notion that trans women's breasts aren't “real.” When I told people about my plan to breastfeed, the most common reaction from both laypeople and medical professionals was "Wait, you can do that?" But had I not mammary glands? If you filled me with prolactin, would I not leak?” (Fried)

Fried rightly points out that in addition to the objectification of trans women's bodies discussed by Serano, our bodies are also often reduced to hypermedicalized and artificialized curios. Instead of acknowledging the continuum of hormones shared across men's, women's, and nonbinary bodies, as well as the shared hormonal situation across cis and trans bodies, the journalists choose to instead alienate trans women's bodies as especially constructed and futuristic. Like the constructed binary between men and women, “cis” and “trans” exists as more of a continuum than any barriered split, but this actuality is occluded through contemporary mass media curiotization. This is the displacement through which public curiosity about trans women breastfeeding is produced.

The displacement of trans experience in the name of curiotization is also carried out in mass culture through the specularization of history encouraged by the “transgender tipping point” narrative. The declaration of the mid-2010s as a transgender tipping point fixates the

consideration of trans history upon the present as a moment of progress while equating trans progress with mass cultural visibility. This framework also dismisses other moments in trans history, including earlier moments of trans visibility in mass culture, as a mere stage along the path to the present.

If we consider other moments of mass culture trans curiotization, including the cultural moment that gave rise to “Walk on the Wild Side” in the 70s and the attention given to Christine Jorgensen as a famous transsexual in the 50s, it is important to consider how these moments of visibility phase in and out.. As Riley Snorton argues, these moments and their history are also specularized based on whiteness, with black trans people forced into the underside of representation to concretize white trans figures such as Jorgensen (Snorton 174-174). Given these moments of attention, one might worry that the “tipping” implied in the transgender tipping point is but a seesaw, arcing between erasure and skewed mass cultural visibility, while distorting prior histories for the sake of fascination and a sense of curious forward movement. Given the continued failure of schools to educate students about trans lives and trans history, it thus may be unsurprising if mass cultural trans awareness turns out to involve a goldfish memory optics in which trans subjects are intensified, distorted, and forgotten according to non-trans whims.

Considering the politics of curiosity also helps explain why anti-curiotizing yet curious people who write on trans subjects may benefit greatly from having particular trans friends who they care about (albeit not in a reductive or creepy way), as well as having a more nuanced and informed sense of trans histories and cultures. This can make it easier for trans subjects to escape from glass cabinets and exist in living, breathing worlds.

### **A ‘World-Historical’ Epilogue**

To further specify what I mean by this, I am interested in not only the expansion of “trans” in media and scholarship to include a lived and historical sense, but also an acknowledgment of “trans” as ‘world-historical.’ In one sense I do very much want to evoke Hegel here, but only in a slightly cheeky, non-committal and non-grandiose way. The historical contingency and complex history of “trans” across invertedness, transvestism, transsexuality, transgenderism, and now transness has often been evoked to critique or trivialize trans identity and throw into suspicion its mark upon the world (see again Hausman). However, I want to suggest that this history also signals the concrete impact “trans” has had on world history, including contemporary history.

In “Tracing this Body: Transsexuality, Pharmaceuticals, and Capitalism” Michelle O’Brien situates the ability of trans people to access medicine within larger contexts of historical transnational capitalism including pharmaceutical companies, trade agreements, and the U.S. global War on Drugs. Whereas Hausman might have used these conditions to emphasize the contingency or problematic constructedness of transsexuality, O’Brien instead takes a cyborg material feminist turn linking her complicity with biomedicine and transnational capitalism to the potential for resisting these systems. O’Brien writes,

“We are all in the midst of structures of tremendous violence, oppression, and exploitation. There is no easy escape or pure distance from them. Our ability to resist, in this world, at this time, is deeply inseparable from our ongoing connection to these very systems. But resist we do. Every day, in so many ways, we are struggling towards a new world of liberation, healing, and respect.” (O’Brien 64)

O'Brien thus takes up the cyborg's mantle of subversion through impure enmeshment within world material flows.

While I am sympathetic to O'Brien's material reclamation of transsexuality as potential subversion within problematic world/historical material flows, which of course harkens back to 90s trans studies and the influence of not only Donna Haraway but also Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandy Stone, and Susan Stryker upon its theoretical architecture, I also want to reverse engineer O'Brien's empowering lament into a wider enmeshment of "trans" with world history.

Contrary to what I referred to as the goldfish memory optics offered by the transgender tipping point, wherein "trans" has suddenly achieved its moment seemingly *ex nihilo*, and trans people spring up like mushrooms without engagement with each other, I think the complicated material pathways emphasized by O'Brien points towards a larger investment of material history within "trans," as well as a larger investment of "trans" within material history. Like it or not, "trans" has made its mark, working in tension (or dare I say a historical dialectic) with other endocrinological developments and changes in sex such as the pharmaceutical development of hormone supplements and birth control as well as shifts in the landscape of culture and production including the ongoing impact of feminist movements. If the curiotization of transsexuality and other trans identities consists of removing "trans" from its history and place, then a key move towards de-curiotizing might be to restore the place of "trans" and its rich and varied lived experiences within the histories of worlds.

Take, again, "Walk on the Wild Side." While the optics of the curio might turn its trans characters into decontextualized objects of fascination, the song references people like Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn who had rich inner and outer lives, as well as places within history

(although I wish to caution that their worlds are not reducible to a mere “transness”). Many listeners may remain within a curiotizing orbit with Reed’s song, but the lives and histories “Walk on the Wild Side” points to may also lead more diligent listeners to their own de-curiotizing process by inspiring an interest in context and connection. This not only adds a richer topography to the song, but also helps expose broader curiotizing moves such as the transgender tipping point’s insistence upon the sudden “arrival” of “trans.”

What I am suggesting here is not a haphazard ahistorical imposition of “trans” across different histories and cultures à la Leslie Feinberg’s 1997 *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, but instead a more grounded reading of the plural, idiosyncratic, and changing identities that we may (rightly or wrongly) subsume under “trans” into specific historical pathways. This, combined with the other core modest point found in much of trans studies that a focus on lived experience is crucial, strikes me as a useful start towards curiosity beyond the curio.

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