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# Waiting for History: Interest Convergence as Applied to the Transgender Question

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Course Design: Critical Analyses

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Assimilation, legal equality, equal rights, full citizenship, whatever the name used, these civic ideals have always had a more nuanced meaning to the oppressed. On its face, full legal equality sounds like the end goal of any of the contemporary movements for civil rights but as the last sixty years have proven, getting rid of most explicitly legal discrimination does not end the social hostility and violence that led to such legislation in the first place. One of the most studied and perhaps clearest example of this is discrimination against Black Americans and the end of legal segregation and its replacement with a defacto form of segregation supplemented with the constantly expanding military-police-state apparatus. Observing the clear contradiction between the supposed “end of racism” and its clear lasting presence legally and socially led theorists such as Derrick Bell and other scholars within Critical Race Theory to conclude that the decrease in the *explicit* violence of the system is not due to the moral fiber of white people who had a change of heart about *that whole racism thing* or even necessarily because of the masses of people who fought against it. Instead, the end of explicit legal segregation that occurred following the Civil Rights Movement was largely due to the converging interests of Northern capital and white elites who could expand their profits and markets by allowing the formation of a Black bourgeoisie, thus allowing most of Black America to ideologically participate in the idealistic American Dream of upward mobility for the first time. In the process, this legal first step towards equality stopped a lot of the costly rebellion (including

boycotts, rioting, the revolutionary Black Power movement, and the costs of civil instability generally) that was expanding throughout the 1950s and 1960s and beginning to threaten the system of American capitalism and global hegemony as a whole. Much like how a driving factor in the Northern rejection of slavery before the Civil War was simply that it was no longer meaningfully profitable under an industrial and factory system, segregation lost a lot of its economic value under the emerging neoliberal, post-industrial, and globalized economic order that relied on a degree of cooperation with African and Asian countries as opposed to the sheer force that dominated the relations between the Global North and South before. To accommodate the neoliberal, globalized, and emerging multi-polar world order, social liberalism is by-and-large the standard of the day. This is compounded by how multi-party democracies tend to conglomerate interests: American Klansmen vote for the mainstream Republicans and British imperialist-nostalgists and Apartheid-reminiscers vote for the Torys, despite both parties officially holding lines that claim to be (more or less) non-racist, pro-immigrant, and pro-LGBTQ.

While looking at how socially liberal and color-blind ideals came to dominate mainstream politics in America and allows injustice to continue, it is striking how trans rights, instead of reaching a similar phase, appear to be actively moving backward extremely fast in many states and nations while the liberal establishment does little to combat it (often encouraging it, even). We will return to this question later, but looking at the current attack on trans people; is it a last violent gasp of legal oppression against trans people similar to the expansion of rightwing violence that formed in response to the succeeding Civil Rights Movement before colorblindness took the political mainstream, or is it more similar to the establishment of Jim Crow in the first place? To simplify my point of concern: considering past examples of interest convergence, are trans people looking at potentially many more decades of brutal and legal oppression or are we approaching a point of liberal integration into capitalism (that is nonetheless still extremely exploitative)?

The converging interests that helped make Black America economically and politically influential enough to end segregation are simply not there for trans people. This is not to say that it is a more

dire situation than were posed by Jim Crow laws, but that the situation is fundamentally different enough that the avenues of interest convergence that ended Jim Crow do not appear open to trans people. Similarly to Black America, transgender people tend to be disproportionately very poor and very often must turn to sex work to survive. Compounding this, trans people are more likely to be young and BIPOC than the general population. Both groups have a very negative reputation to much of white America and are seen by a substantial portion of the population as exceptionally likely to commit crime (notably pedophilia in the case of trans people, thanks to recent groomer rhetoric taking off in right-wing media). Even those that are sympathetic to the group (white liberals) only express support in a characteristically cautionary and politically expedient sense, usually unwilling to take hard stands to defend the group. To a greater extent than Black America, trans people are extremely geographically diverse, only making up around 1% of the general population, with places like Missouri having only 0.3% of the population identifying as trans.

Taking all these factors into consideration, trans people do not make up a substantial economic power block outside of a few select neighborhoods across the country. Therefore, the oppression of trans people is not rooted in economic control to the main perpetrators of it; on the contrary, it is a battle of the culture war in which making money seems secondary to purely inflicting pain against perceived ontological enemies. To the political right, trans people represent all that is wrong with modern society and are simultaneously the symptom and cause of modern decadence, capitalist excess, and economic decline. Trans people become the physical embodiment of what must be fought and suppressed, should you desire to *secure the existence of our people and a future for white children*. What exactly this will mean in the long term is unclear, but I cannot help but be reminded of the situation of European Jews before WWII. Calls for the erasure and destruction of “cultural Marxism,” “Judeo-Bolshevism,” Critical Race Theory, and “gender ideology” all run parallel. I am not insinuating that industrial-scale genocide against any group is imminent as I do not believe it is; rather that a geographically dispersed, extremely small minority group that is deeply unsympathetic to the vast majority of people (and therefore unable to meaningfully fight back on their own or exert enough economic influence to stop oppression) and the current go-to scapegoat for a rapidly growing and resurgent fascist movement that is ideologically in sync with mainstream conservatism is a profoundly worrying combination that historically can spiral beyond what many would think imaginable. It is becoming clearer every day that militant transphobes in charge of the international conservative movement are willing to force the question, which is proven by the recent intervention into Scottish politics by Westminster to stop a small bureaucratic trans rights bill from passing. This marks the first veto against Scotland in history. While the Tories led this, the Labour Party did little to stop it and the leader of the Scottish National Party that initially stood by trans people quickly stepped down after the incident. It is hard to imagine the national Democratic Party, i.e. Joe Biden, doing anything other

than a similar capitulation under the same circumstances. Both Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis have made clear stopping transitioning from being allowed further and introducing felony charges against doctors who perform gender-affirming care are some of their top legislative priorities should either be elected President in 2024. In the past few weeks and months, over a dozen states have banned gender-affirming care for minors altogether and reinstated anti-queer obscenity laws. Florida has banned gender-affirming care for adults altogether. (It should be noted that this legislative assault has happened so fast that different drafts of this section have had to be revised numerous times as the number of states enacting these policies and their severity has only grown.) Both Texas and Florida have attempted to create lists and registries of transgender people. In the case of Florida, at least six major public universities seem to have handed over lists of their transgender students to the state government. While Texas has attempted to compile this information through DMV gender changes in the past, it seems extremely likely they have already gotten this information through other means or will soon. Hundreds of anti-trans bills have been put forward in state legislatures this year, and there has been barely a peep out of most mainstream American media who seem significantly more concerned with Chinese weather balloons or daily updates on whatever zany antics Donald Trump is up to this afternoon or something equally as unimportant to the daily life of anyone who could accurately be called “working class.”

This situation contrasts how (mostly white, middle-to-upper class) assimilationist gay men were able to successfully lobby for the right of gay marriage in many blue states, undoubtedly expedited by a liberal Supreme Court culminating in the 2015 national victory of gay marriage. Although even this victory didn’t come until after tens or even hundreds of thousands of queer people were murdered by Reagan and adjacent administrations during the AIDS crisis. Cis gay people make up a larger and much more sympathetic group in the eyes of most people and have firmly integrated into the power structure of liberal capitalism at this point. It is not uncommon to see gay men that are CEOs, billionaires, or politicians. Oftentimes, these most prominent gay figures are firmly integrated into the most predatory and inhumane aspects of capital and American politics. (Peter Theil’s fascist funding, RuPaul’s fracking investments, Pete Buttigieg’s imperialist military experience, and George Santos’ virulent transphobia are just a few examples.) None of these men challenge the assumptions the general public has about queerness that trans people must live with. Due to being cis, their relationship to society “outside of the bedroom” has not changed, despite the fact each is gay. These men represent a queer bourgeoisie: examples that the *right* gay people (almost always white, cis, and generically conservative in aesthetic and politics) are perfectly able to succeed in capitalism; it’s the personal fault of everyone else for not doing as well. Contrasting this, trans woman will likely never be able to fully hide being trans in that way. The very sight of a trans woman walking down the street often challenges the emotions of cis people in a way someone like Pete Buttigieg never does. To RuPaul, women’s

clothes are a fun, theatrical costume that he can take off when he goes to the store or takes a walk. This is not the case for trans women. The exception are trans women who fully pass as cis women, although that often takes many years of transitioning, extremely restrictive and expensive surgery, or the privilege to transition at an early age which is actively becoming illegal. Boldly assuming that the current movement of militant transphobia slows down or ceases to be a driving force in mainstream politics (eventually, somehow) this slow integration into neoliberalism seems like one of the most likely routes trans people will go down in the next few decades. But as with Black and gay integration into capitalism and political society, it will undoubtedly mean more blood than anyone is willing to take responsibility for and trans people will still face severe transphobia until things change at a much more systematic and societal level.

Looking at other potential avenues for a legalistic version of trans liberation, the Supreme Court stands out. As previously discussed, the key factor in the end of segregation was not the change of heart of Southern racist white people, but instead, pressure from Northern capital as manifested in the liberal Supreme Court. For most of modern history, civil rights are not measured by bills passed by Congress but by Supreme Court decisions. *Obergefell*, *Roe*, and *Brown v. Board* stand as progressive triumphs to many but, as most queer Americans are well aware, the current Court's hard conservative majority has already overturned *Roe v. Wade* and is actively threatening *Obergefell* and other more well-established legal precedents. As Derrick Bell wrote, even a victory as cemented as *Brown v. Board* was a deeply inadequate solution that merely reflected converging, bordering on coincidental, interests of white capital and Black Americans. The interests that aligned leading to *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 seem to have retracted, but it remains to be seen just how far they will retreat. For the previously discussed reasons of a lack of converging interests between capital and queer people, the current Court has mostly avoided taking up cases involving trans people and seems to have a strict attitude of "leaving it up to the states" for now.

It is exceptionally hard to imagine any past endings of legal and explicit right-wing violence ever happening in the Deep South had the federal government (representing liberal capitalism) not repeatedly forced its hand. Slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, abortion rights, and gay marriage: all of which the South was dragged kicking and screaming to adopt using Civil War, the National Guard, divestment from Northern capital, or the authority of the Supreme Court. None of these seem willing to be utilized in favor of even basic legal protections of trans rights in red states anytime soon. The trans people stuck in hostile places will have to spend their time waiting for history to change that, for better or worse.

## QUITTING SMOKING: WHAT HAPPENS TO A LIFE DEFERRED?

"The public health authorities never mention the main reason many Americans have for smoking heavily, which is that smoking is a fairly sure, fairly honorable form of suicide."

Kurt Vonnegut, *Welcome to the Monkey House*

With the previous section considered, what are the options? When trans existence and healthcare become illegal in the South (as Florida has recently made reality), what is to be done? Staying while maintaining an open trans-identity at a time when such a thing is punishable by felony is akin to a death sentence for trans women, should they be imprisoned. The clearest option and the one all trans people in the South are wondering about is whether we should simply *leave*. I mean this in a Camusian sense, as I see three fundamental choices the trans community of the South faces in the near future. Many of us have already made the choice. Do we commit suicide and end the cycle of cruelty we endure; do we stay and have faith that existing democratic systems will protect us (eventually), or do we recognize the situation and abandon our homes and move to more welcoming land and continue the struggle there? I argue the final option is, more or less, the correct choice given the current circumstances, but the others need to be discussed first due to their popularity.

## SUICIDE: DEATH BEFORE DETRANSITION

Before class recently, I and several trans friends sat in a nook near campus under a mural dedicated to a trans girl who took her own life. As we sat under this mural, we all acknowledged it, but we had no interest in discussing us. To address such a thing is almost unnecessary, as we are already familiar with our shared death drives which we have all had years to confront, often in solitude. We're reminded of them every time we see the scars on our thighs, look at the news, or are subject to daily examples of casual transphobia. After years of isolation in adolescence, the last thing most trans women want to do is linger on such things when we have achieved the conditional freedom of adulthood. Under the mural, we took drags off our cigarettes and talked about the things that make us smile. We did not leave flowers at the mural; we left cigarette butts. The mural has since been painted over, but the cigarette butts remain. They will stay there long after I have moved away from Denton, Texas.

Due to the obvious restrictions most people have on completely uprooting their lives and starting a new one, the urge to leave manifests for many as suicidality. Candidly, I can say most trans women I know have had suicide attempts before and many have persistent issues due to adjacent substance abuse, either past or current. We all have scars; some literal, some mental, some faded, some fresh. Recently, among other trans women, we realized

three out of the four of us had HPPD, or hallucinogen-persisting perception disorder, due to past drug abuse. Those with HPPD have vision that is altered, often including constant visual fuzz or persistent minor visual hallucinations, almost like a mental/visual form of psychedelic tinnitus. The perceived hopelessness and want of escape that prompted this excessive drug use and parallel suicidality is not found on this scale in any other group: no other demographic seems to have a suicide rate as high as trans people (around 40% have attempted it). Most trans people will make clear the reason for this is not internal, such as the idea we are just depressed and mentally ill. It is externally driven; it is our environmental, familial, socio-economic, and political situation that prompts this. Trans people, with their geographic and social isolation, are entirely detached from political power in any meaningful sense and we all know it, to speak it aloud is just a grim reminder of that reality. On the topic of the political agency of the marginalized, critical race theorist Patricia Williams wrote, "We live in a society in which the closest equivalent of nobility is the display of unremittingly controlled will-fulness. To be perceived as unremittingly will-less is to be imbued with an almost lethal trait". Our political powerlessness is not changed by the fact that the Biden Administration will appoint an occasional trans person to a prominent position. (In fact, the massive inevitable backlash for doing so usually becomes all that is remembered of such appointments, i.e. Sam Brinton or Rachel Levine). While many persecuted groups have had large and influential organizations fighting for their rights and freedoms, trans people have no such *distinct* movement; at best being a "+" or added to the end of LGBT as "and transgender." There are no common examples of transgender agency in which we can find solace. One of the only examples that people actually know about, the Stonewall Riot, has been so thoroughly co-opted by bourgeois-assimilationist forces and removed for their original contexts that an exhibit titled "Rise Up: Stonewall" at the Dallas Holocaust Museum can be sponsored by Wells Fargo and Texas Instruments with much of the exhibit dedicated to people like Ellen DeGeneres and Pete Buttigieg.

## FAITH: ONE NATION, UNDER GOD

Trans people don't tend to be very religious or very big fans of liberal democracy. Obviously, these two concepts have a long history of directing energy toward the oppression of trans people and so we mostly perceive them in opposition to our existence. A common push of the anti-trans movement is that trans people did not exist until the last few years, and this speaks to our invisibility and lack of social prominence or power within a society dominated by Christianity and liberal democracy. Very few Southern trans people have any faith that we are going to be saved by democracy or adjacent idealistic projects. After all, when has peaceful democracy ever been what stopped the South? While it is useful from the position of a social theorist to consider democratic solutions, the conclusion that they will not help us here is something that most of us have been able to figure out on our own time. There are

certainly *some* that believe in the power of democracy, although they are often confined to areas where social progressivism is dominant and where they face little immediate existential threat from the political right. To be fair, things are looking better for trans people in places like Minnesota or California which have recently passed massive and often unprecedented pro-trans legislation, but even this is almost entirely in efforts to offset the more explicitly genocidal laws being passed in the South and other red states. Many of these laws are not additional and needed legal protections for trans people, but rather commitments by states to not extradite or cooperate with the genocidal politics of the South. The South has done the same, attempting to pass laws giving officials the ability to prohibit leaving states for gender-affirming care, meaning states are being drawn into direct legal conflict with each other. This conflict is rather unprecedented, and it is not uncommon to see columnists and writers publish things like: "It appears that no such law allowing states or citizens to reach across boundaries to enforce a state law without an extradition procedure has been enacted in the U.S. since the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, one of the most detested statutes ever passed by Congress." While evocations of the lead-up to the Civil War are common in media (they have been whenever there is social strife), I think it is safe to say, as was discussed in the first section of this essay, that there will be no Civil War over trans people. Such a fundamental overturning of democracy will take a much larger (i.e. economic) catalyst, first and foremost. The nation's largest opposition to Southern oppression, the Democratic Party (Don't laugh!), didn't come close to civil conflict over the removal of Roe V. Wade, and they will not come to that conclusion over the removal of trans people, as trans people are seen as a comparable "social issue" to a large enough portion of them.

Similarly to democratic norms, Southern trans people are rarely tied down by religious faith as most organized religions here completely hate us. There are small exceptions like reform Judaism or certain types of spiritual Christianity, but for many trans people, abandoning the faiths we were brought up in was easy, given our necessary rejection of all adjacent systems of power instilled into us from birth: parental influence, trust of government, and social/sexual norms more generally. The worst damage of religion is often inflicted on those that clung to it or were forced to stay through means of coercion. I have known several people who were sent to conversion camps or were institutionalized and typically the only thing they have to show for it are scars and a nicotine addiction.

## RECOGNITION: "AND THOUGH ENGLAND IS MINE, I MUST LEAVE IT ALL BEHIND."

If we want to deal with the issues facing the transgender community, we must first accept that the first two impulses are untenable with reality should we wish to ensure our survival. But where can trans people go that guarantees safety in the long term? It seems like the majority of Western nations are either already extremely

hostile to trans people, or on track towards becoming so, pending an election cycle or two. Hard blue states and more socially progressive countries like Canada are the best options, currently. (It is important to note many Asian countries offer notably better transgender care than much of the West and it is not uncommon for Westerners to travel to Asia for transgender healthcare. But these places pose many unique challenges relating to immigration and finances that are beyond this essay's scope.) These places are not yet swept with the current wave of government-sponsored transphobia the UK and parts of the US are seeing, and thus are the most likely to be prioritized by trans people. Unlike many past mass migrations of marginalized groups, there is no historical homeland for trans people to turn to; such a suggestion is absurd. There will be no transgender Garveyism, Zionism, or traditional revolutionary nationalism. The closest thing we, in the United States, are likely to see to this is continued waves of mostly internal migration to gay, not trans, neighborhoods, not nations. Neighborhoods like Bushwick in Brooklyn or more historically safe spaces like the extremely gentrified Castro in San Francisco stand out as examples.

As previously discussed though, the treatment of trans people in gay-centric neighborhoods often reflects the will of cis-normative gay business owners (coined "homonormativity") first and foremost. A clear example of this is Vancouver's most notable gay neighborhood, Davie Village, although examples can be picked from nearly any major city. In the '80s, the existing networks of largely trans and indigenous sex workers that worked in Davie Village were forcibly displaced by cis white gay petite-bourgeois locals who claimed they were cleaning up the neighborhood and making the gay community look better. Trans and indigenous sex workers were forced into progressively more precarious and dangerous neighborhoods, leading to many deaths, with as many as 49 being murdered by Canadian serial killer Robert Pickton into the 2000s. The gay neighborhoods that are the clearest and safest route for trans people who wish to not only survive but thrive do not guarantee safety for trans people in any sense if they are still subject to the will of queer-tolerant capital. Petite-bourgeois individuals and organizations which prioritize the further accumulation of capital before the lives of trans people, of whom a primary line of work under capitalism is certain to be sex work will not side with trans people unless they are forced to, likely through capital or whatever other means are necessary. Certainly, should self-determination and agency be truly secured for trans people, it will take prolonged conflict with not only the explicit agents of transphobia and anti-trans violence, but also against those who *should* be our allies but have been willing to throw us to the wolves at the door when expedient. These neighborhoods of cis-gay capital are where our existing power is the strongest and therefore, constitute the most likely places where we can successfully exert enough influence to meaningfully impact policy and capital enough to secure our rights, although constant attacks from all directions are almost certain, as they have always been.

Should we carve space in the urban landscape out for ourselves, we will need cigarette butts at our feet, not flowers. Fundamental values of cis society such as fertility and birthrates (evoked by fascists just as much as liberals) do not matter to us, and an evaluation of our relation to all such values, heteronormative or homonormative, is needed. The next generations of trans people will emerge and grow regardless of our personal reproductive capacities. This conventional infertility and inability to directly engage in social reproduction are what differentiate us in the first place. We have found a way to exist in spite of the existing order, and our continued existence will never be able to purely integrate into that order. We are cast in contrast to the natural world by our detractors, but this conflict is core to our existence. This conflict of cigarette butts and flowers, of mustard gas and roses attempting to occupy the same ground is what defines us to those who perceive us. Should we establish territorial political power that will guarantee our future rights, it will be through unrelenting campaigns of hundreds, if not thousands, of cigarette butts filling the streets, marking territory as safe for us. A red rose on a lapel will quickly die, but the cigarette butts we leave behind will stay long enough for the next group in our space to add to the pile after we have left. All that will eventually grow in this disordered land of cigarette butts will be beautiful wildflowers, the kind that get cut down by lawn mowers in every suburban yard daily for daring to reside there. This land of cigarette butts and wildflowers will be ignored or actively distained by most who walk by, but we will know better. For us, it will be home.

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