

## **“Even a Freak Like You Would Be Safe in Tel Aviv”: Transgender Subjects, Wounded Attachments, and the Zionist Economy of Gratitude**

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*what are you?? if your not a male or a female, perhaps something in between?? then can you explain to me your ridiculous & ignorant hate against the only country in the Middle-East that someone like you could live a peaceful life, almost without prejudice, having the law on your side, and also having the same rights as a male or female heterosexual??? because darling, someone like you would be strung up by yr pigtails and stoned to death, tortured or imprisoned, in any of those “peace loving” “democratic” non-judgemental” [sic] Muslim countries that surround Israel!!*

—YouTube comment directed at me

*There is something about anger that is akin to this gift exchange. Once anger is given to you, it is passed along as quickly as possible. . . . There in the street, as the army fired over our heads, but also at us, the first impulse was to return the gift of death straight back to the original donor, with no lapse in time. But, in that case, you would be killed. So you pass it along, and it just leaps out, somewhere else and at another time. . . . There were a lot of people who returned to their everyday life unable to control their anger, and exploded into senseless rage at the slightest trifles for months afterwards.*

—Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand*

In 2007, the Israeli foreign ministry officially launched a campaign called Brand Israel. With professional corporate PR firms hired to revitalize the apartheid state's international image, a total of almost \$20 million was set aside for Israeli state propaganda in that year alone.<sup>1</sup> This rebranding campaign, which persists today, has consisted of multiple different tactics. The tactic that has received perhaps the most attention, and the one

with which I am the most concerned here, is what has been dubbed by Palestine solidarity activists as "pinkwashing" (Schulman 2011). Haneen Maikey, cofounder of the queer Palestinian organization Al Qaws, defines pinkwashing as "the cynical use of gay rights by the Israeli government . . . in order to divert attention from Israeli . . . occupation and apartheid, by promoting itself as a progressive country that respects gay rights, and, on the contrary, portraying Palestinian society and Palestinians as homophobic" (Maikey 2013). Jasbir Puar (2007) coined the term "homonationalism" to refer to this process. Since the launch of Brand Israel, there has been a proliferation of activist organizing around pinkwashing. In 2013, much of this activist and academic work culminated in a conference, titled "Homonationalism and Pinkwashing," held at the City University of New York Graduate Center in April 2013. Both Maikey and Puar were keynote speakers at this conference.

While much of this work so far has focused on the cynical deployment of cisgender queer subjectivities, the question I want to pose, then, is *where, in the age of neoliberalism and homonationalism, is the transgender subject relative to colonial economies of gratitude?* Ironically, to the extent to which this question is beginning to be addressed within the academy, responses to pinkwashing as it relates to transgender subjectivities and politics have followed the gradual "inclusion" of transgender subjects into homonationalism. During her keynote speech at the conference, Jasbir Puar raised the question of a rise, in recent years, of a trans version of homonationalism, citing the example of U.S. vice president Joseph Biden's statement that transgender issues are "the civil rights issue of our time." A question I raised to Puar during the Q&A session, and one that remains an issue, is the question of the incitement to discourse—the "call and response" that Puar describes between pinkwashing and the queer response to pinkwashing. Is this the moment, now, when transgender subjectivities can be discussed in relationship to pinkwashing and homonationalism? Did transgender subjects have to wait to be invoked by Joseph Biden into another wave of homonationalism before we could theorize our relationship to it? This call-and-response is particularly troubling, as it seems to reenact the same narrative as the historical development of trans theory within the Western academy—"First there was women's studies, then queer studies, then trans studies" gets replaced by "First there was colonial feminism, then there was pinkwashing/homonationalism, then there was trans-homonationalism."<sup>2</sup> This call-and-response is troubling in

another way. During her keynote speech, Haneen Maikey critiqued activists who took part in the first official U.S. LGBT delegation to Palestine (many of whom, including Jasbir Puar and Sarah Schulman, were in the audience) for their complicity in the “tension between LGBT solidarity with Palestine and the focus on . . . Palestinian queer lives” (Maikey 2013). Is an attempt to narrate transgender experiences of pinkwashing complicit in this same dynamic? Although not much can be done about the historical context of this essay, it is my hope, however, that through deploying an autoethnographic approach the present essay may indirectly address some of these questions.

In his ethnography of death and political violence in Thailand, Alan Klima paraphrases Marcel Mauss in arguing that “the giver [of the gift] has a hold over the receiver because the thing given away always contains within it a bit of the giver, the ‘spirit of the gift’” (Klima 2002, 240). He ties this to neoliberalism and U.S. military “aid” to the Thai dictatorship: “Development loans, aid grants, military aid, machine guns, . . . ‘advisors,’ spies, counterinsurgency expertise, . . . American anthropologists . . . —these gifts the military rulers were more than happy to receive. . . . Every Thai connected through this gift economy to the juntas was, in turn, connected to the U.S. gift” (58). Klima connects this to the “gift of death” given by the Thai military to protesters during the 1992 Black May massacre, as quoted above. He goes on to elaborate on Derrida’s critique of Mauss: “The idea of a pure gift between people seems . . . impossible to conceive. . . . In the way that Jacques Derrida writes of the impossible language of giving, once the recognition of the gift event occurs, the gift is annulled, most of all by its *noble identification*. Once a gift has been identified as such it cannot help but enter the circle of debt in which it ceases to truly be a gift, freely given” (246; emphasis mine). Rather than focus, as Derrida does, on the impossibility of a “pure gift” (which Klima argues is besides the point, for all gifts exist in this cycle of debt), I want to focus on the politics of this “noble identification.” When does a gift get called a gift and why? In other words, how does transgender “safety” become a gift given by the West/Israel?

In the YouTube comment quoted at the beginning of this essay, the absent Palestinian becomes a site onto which queerphobic Zionists may project their queerphobic fantasies. These projections accomplish several things. They allow the queerphobic Zionist to live out his own queerphobic fantasy while simultaneously deploying a pretext of caring about queer

people, in order to posit himself as the savior of victimized queers. They also posit the West as a point of origin for queerness. Zionists love to ask me, "How would you fare in Gaza?" to which I love to respond, "How would I get to Gaza?" This first question, like many transphobic heckles that I have received from Zionists, is an Althusserian hail. According to Althusser (1971), the hail serves to interpolate the individual into the subject, to bring the individual into ideology. The noble identification of "gay friendly" Tel Aviv's gift to all queers is a hail—an interpolation of the transgender body into an always already indebted subject position, one enmeshed in a "cycle of debt." Under the Zionist economy of gratitude, the transgender subject is perpetually indebted to capitalism and the West for allowing her to exist. The properly delimited space for the transgender subject within this ideology is essentially one confined to an apoliticized space of pride parades and gay bars, but never the front lines of an anti-imperial or anticolonial project. It is a queer/transphobic assault against those visibly queer bodies who refuse to be properly disciplined neoliberal queer consumers—and transgender bodies are often the most visibly queer bodies and hence the ones singled out for attack. As one cannot return the gift to the one who gave it (in this case because the Zionist disidentified from his own queerphobia), the transgender subject is forced to pass it along—to Palestinians. Hence, the queerphobic Zionist can pass the gift of his racist colonial phobia as well as his queerphobia on to the transgender subject. The projection allows the Zionist to disidentify from the transphobia inherent in his hail. This is particularly important, since it is precisely the violent transphobia—"what *are* you?"—that is an *incitement to vulnerability*. I am supposed to feel vulnerable, afraid, attacked by this hail, in order that I may pass on that gift of death to the supposedly transphobic Palestinian.

Economies of gratitude (Hochschild and Machung 1989) are marketplaces where material capital is exchanged with affective/moral capital. The fact that the Israeli state has provided a multimillion-dollar market for professional corporate PR companies to discursively project Israel onto a moral high ground over Palestinians demonstrates that economies of gratitude are very much material realities. The Zionist economy of gratitude and its incitement to vulnerability are actually a reformulation of an older dialectic of Jewish suffering/Jewish virility inherent to Zionism—what I term the Sabra-Holocaust dialectic. Zionism has historically fluctuated between deploying notions of universal, transhistorical Jewish suffer-

ing and trauma, and the muscular, masculine virility of the Sabra (Shalit 1994). Zionism has depended on deploying a narrative of victimization—from the Holocaust to suicide bombing—in order to legitimate its colonial violence against Palestinians. This leads to the almost laughable situation of Israel projecting itself as victim as it rains down white phosphorus over the Gaza Strip.

The Zionist victim narrative is consistent with Wendy Brown's (1993) reading of Nietzsche's (unfortunately named) notion of "slave morality": Israel, according to Zionist self-fashioning, embodies Nietzsche's notion of the "triumph of the weak as weak." But furthermore, while Jewish and Israeli trauma is mobilized into a colonial narrative, Palestinian trauma is simply not allowed to exist, as Palestinians are, within the Zionist narrative, senseless terrorists without history or subjectivity. The deployment of vulnerability in Israel works as a mimesis to tell Israelis, "Remember that you are vulnerable," while it works to tell Palestinians, "Remember that you are less than human." This mobilization of trauma is projected back in time, turning Jewish history into a "morbidly selective 'tracing the dots' from pogrom to pogrom" (Shohat 2006, 213). This is counterposed to the rupture provided by the virility of the Sabra—only the Israeli nation-state and its militaristic dreams of security can save Jews from this history of endless suffering. We can read the shift deployed by Brand Israel as a reformulation of the Sabra-Holocaust dialectic. According to a 2005 article in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the "new approach to Israeli image control" was to cultivate an image of Israel as a place "where there are cool, hip people," without mentioning "the conflict" (Popper 2005). In other words, military prowess would be replaced by chic, neoliberal capital. Sabra virility has given way to market virility, and queers are caught between a dialectic of "gay friendly" Tel Aviv and the specter of a pervasive, global queerphobia.

Transgender pinkwashing and the Holocaust-Sabra dialectic are both emblematic of what Wendy Brown (1993) termed the politics of "wounded attachments." Brown identifies the production of an "incitement to resentment" through a "*renaturalization* of capitalism that can be said to have marked progressive discourse since the 1970s." Brown ascribes this to the growth of "class resentment without . . . class analysis" that has typified the dematerialization of identity politics. This process is at work more generally, since, using Nietzsche's concept of resentment, class resentment "like all resentments, retains the real or imagined holdings of its reviled subject." In other words, the wounded subject holds on to

the very violent structures that produced it in the first place. Brown turns away from Foucault, reading Nietzsche's "diagnosis of the culture of modernity as the triumph of 'slave morality'" as explaining how liberalism has brought about this proliferation of resentment. What she leaves out, however, are the various ways in which these proliferated resentments can become organized and directed by an affective economy such as Brand Israel. In other words, economies of gratitude and incitements to vulnerability seek to align "proper" ways of expressing one's righteous indignation and trauma in the service of capital and the state.

One of the sites of tension with members of the U.S. LGBT delegation to Palestine that Maikey referenced during her keynote was a conflict over the question of activists being "out" in Palestine. Part of Maikey's point was that the "coming-out narrative" is a Western narrative, and one needs to be aware of one's privilege in such a context. I agree; however, I would counterpose the point that the coming-out narrative is also a cisgender narrative. What does it mean for a transgender person to *not* be "out"? "Out"ness is a complicated question for transgender subjects. It is not simply a matter of whom one sleeps with or forms relationships with, but a matter of one's both intimate and public relationship with one's own body. And it is a question of *gender ontology*. In order to address this question, I wish to switch tone, toward the personal/autoethnographic—focusing on my own "coming out" as transgender. As I hope will be apparent, this is necessary in order to outline some of the specificities of the transgender subject and its relation to pinkwashing.

My own personal relationship with transgender pinkwashing is perhaps best exemplified by a former friend—let me refer to him as X—whose own articulation of a transgender identity was foundational to my eventual "coming out" as transgender. I met X in the early 2000s. X's fear for his family in Israel, as well as his pain and frustration of having had to fight so much to assert his right to be a man—*ontologically, not referentially*—coalesced to produce the first version of pinkwashing I ever encountered. Long before I learned the term "pinkwashing" or had a political vocabulary to respond to it, he told me stories about queer and trans Palestinians "fleeing" to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem—consolidating many fears around the phobogenic object of the Palestinian. X would often deploy the trauma that he had experienced—both as a trans person and as someone with family in Israel—to silence any articulation of a transgender politics that

is anticapitalist, antimilitarist, or anti-Zionist. I am particularly struck, for instance, by an argument we once had over Amanda Simpson, the first transgender presidential appointee in the United States and former project designer for U.S. military contractor Raytheon. X insinuated that any trans person who articulated a politics critical of transgender celebrations of people such as Simpson were privileged and did not understand what it is to struggle to find employment as a trans person. This deployment perfectly represents Brown's notion of "class resentment without class analysis," as the exclusive focus of X's political project was always based around responding to present pain—through, for instance, a precise and transcendent definition of gender terminology, and the ever-elusive search for "safety"—and resenting those who advocated a more systemic transformative politics as inherently privileged.

Having first learned of the term "transgender" from X, as well as a series of encounters with mostly binary-identified trans men (trans men who identify solidly within the gender binary, as men), I began a difficult process of interrogating my own relationship to my body and what gender meant to me. Having felt that the subject position of the "transgender," which, by that time in the early 2000s metropolitan United States had already become firmly entrenched as a discourse, did not seem to completely fit with me, I felt ambivalent. Further contributing to my ambivalence was my, at that time, total commitment to a certain tyrannical articulation of identity politics that was (and remains) so popular among college-educated first world radicals: not recognizing my own sense of gendered embodiment as something legible within the currently existing articulations of gender, I did not wish to "appropriate" another. Since then, my relationship to gender has shifted. I did not so much "come out" as transgender as "come into" a transgender subject position—one I felt had already been prearticulated.

Transgender people, in general, are placed in an impossible bind. On the one hand, the need to exert a stable gender identity in response to the violent hegemony and apparent naturalization of assigned-at-birth gender means that the transgender subject must produce an illusion of coherent gender. On the other hand, this is impossible, as gender is *always* a mimesis. Often exoticized within queer theory and queer spaces as examples of the incoherence of heteronormative gender roles, we are frequently forced to speak out of both sides of our mouths when it comes to questions of gender essentialism: "yes, but . . . no." While it is the case that gender is



always mimesis, the struggle for the transgender woman is to be a woman *ontologically, not referentially*—to say, "This is not drag; this is not a parody." The politicization of the transgender subject's present pain rather than future liberation forecloses the question: What does *transgender* exist in reference to? This foreclosure easily leads to liberal concepts of justice and equality. As Brown (1993) argues, claims to inclusion, which have originated from far more liberatory intentions, are "tethered to a formulation of justice, which, ironically, reinscribes a bourgeois idea as its measure"; (394) the transgender woman seeks an "equal chance" at being included in the stable category of "woman," and transgender politics becomes deeply tied to a proliferation of precisely defined signifiers—as if we can somehow signify our way toward liberation. The tragic result of this contradiction, in combination with the renaturalization of capitalism within identity politics, is that the transgender subject must form a wounded attachment to the very terms of gender that oppress her in the first place. It is this fear of illegibility, the need to exist in spaces where one's relationship to gender is legible, even as one grapples with the intangibility of gender—the fiction of gender essentialism that trans people are forced to take on—that makes our need for intangible things such as "safety" and "security" so easily co-optable. The incitement to vulnerability ("what *are* you?") serves to remind us of that.

The contradiction between *being* and *becoming* is one that we live intimately—how else can one explain the process of transition, of *becoming* what one already *is*—and yet we cannot, for fear of becoming a parody, identify it as such. Piled on top of that, the struggle for the nonbinary transgender woman is to establish the ontological foundation of her womanhood before she can find the space to afford a playfulness within that femininity—"No, this is not drag; . . . but yes, it is drag." In order to deal with this tension, I felt the need to produce an ever-increasing string of qualifiers in order to delicately navigate the world of first world "radical" queer politics. From genderqueer butch trans men who are bottoms, to binary-identified trans women who enjoy drag, there has been an endless and explosive proliferation of queer and transgender subject positions, held together by a matrix of (neo)liberal multiculturalism—sometimes in the guise of anticapitalism. What we have is an infinitely expanding fractal of politicized identities, each one produced in a state of resentment against another. Part of what motivates this process is that, within the logic of neo-liberal politicized identity, if one cannot name one's pain, then one's pain



is not politicizable. This creates a further proliferation of subjectivities and resentments.

By now, the reader may have noticed that at certain moments, I unavoidably slip between signifiers such as “gay,” “queer,” and “trans” in discussing these discourses. This is somewhat unavoidable, since in many of these discourses—particularly pinkwashing discourses deployed by queerphobic Zionists—there is not just a conflation of “gay” and “trans” but also the assumption that the illegible “someone like me” (“what are you?”) can be legible/“safe” only within the confines of a social formation called “LGBT” or “gay,” located in the West/Israel. The heckles I have received, as with most transphobic attacks, do not fall neatly along the lines of self-identification. Transgender people, after all, are often singled out for violence simply for being the most visibly queer bodies, regardless of how we identify. But this fear of illegibility is also something internalized by transgender people—the notion that we can only really travel in spaces that have a certain *a priori* reading of gender. This wounded attachment to the gender binary, and the fiction of a transcendent (and trans-affirming) gender essentialism, lend themselves easily to imperialist cooptation. When the transgender subject reads (cisnormative) homonationalist narratives, even when we are not specifically hailed as *trans* subjects within them, the assumption is that it is *only* within those limited “gay friendly” spaces that we may find an even smaller subset of *trans-friendly* subspaces. I want to turn now toward a critical reading of three different texts that speak about gayness in transit—both the transit of gay migrants and the transit of gay signifiers—with the understanding that the transgender subject, although not always specifically referenced, is implicated within this. Although the three texts have very different politics—Marxist, homonationalist, and anticolonial—what they have in common is a certain *linguistic* attachment to gay signifiers.

Drawing from Foucault, Gay Marxist historian John D’Emilio, in his 1983 article “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” correctly notes that “gay” and “lesbian,” as identity formations, “are a product of history” whose “emergence is associated with the relations of capitalism” (102). This emergence is, of course, clustered around large cities. However, D’Emilio still essentializes gayness, equating gay liberation in a typical Marxist teleological fashion, with the rise of capitalism and the move toward a liberatory utopia. “Capitalism has created the material conditions for homosexual desire

to express itself as a central component of some individuals' lives," he argues, and outlines his vision for a utopic gay socialist future: "Now, our political movements are . . . creating the ideological conditions that make it easier for people to make that choice" (109).

D'Emilio's historicism is useful, although his teleology is not. What we can take from a critical reading of this, however, is that holding on to an attachment to the subject position of "gay" or "lesbian" in the fashion that D'Emilio does (even while recognizing it as socially constructed), can be colonial. D'Emilio's gay socialist futurity has a temporality that marches to the same drum as manifest destiny. This settler futurity is the same practice as Marxist colonialism—for instance, consider the Soviet discourse around Chechens: "lumpen proletariats" who needed to go through all the proper stages of capitalist displacement and alienation in order to reach the telos of proletarian subjectivity necessary for socialism. Part of the problem here is that the subject of the proletariat contains within it the capitalist displacement that was necessary for the production of the proletariat—hence, a kind of jealous gaze is directed toward those who are seen as having not yet experienced this alienation, especially indigenous peoples who have not been fully assimilated into capitalism. I want to make a controversial claim here, in not viewing Marxism and late twentieth-century identity politics as dialectically antithetical, but rather reading certain dogmatic strains of Marxism as a form of proletarian identity politics. Within this universalized proletarian subject is another kind of wounded attachment. The proletariat subject position contains within it the very rupture of displacement that produced the proletariat class and the heteropatriarchy necessary to sustain capitalist production.

A similar kind of attachment to displacement is at play in liberal gay humanitarian narratives. In 2005, the tellingly named studio After Stonewall Productions released a film titled *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World*. Featuring interviews with various LGBT activists from different countries outside the West, spliced up and lumped together haphazardly, the film delivers the following overarching messages: that it is not safe to be queer in the "developing world," that what queer spaces do exist in the "developing world" are to be found in certain metropolises—Cairo, Kuala Lumpur, Calcutta, Rio de Janeiro—and that these sites trace their genealogy to the Stonewall riots. Furthermore, according to the film, queerness/gayness and sometimes transness (when it is acknowledged) were invented in the West. Epistemic breaking points such as the Stone-

wall riots and canonized locales such as San Francisco and Greenwich Village are the originating points of this innovation against the backdrop of a timeless, pervasive heterosexism. This cosmopolitan gayness/queerness then “spreads” from the metropole to the periphery, forming a web from city to city. This coincides with Jack Halberstam’s (excruciatingly white) analysis in his book *In a Queer Time and Place*: the idea of “metronormativity,” that “the rural is made to function as a closet for urban sexualities in most accounts of rural queer migration” and that “the metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative” (2005, 36–37). We can extend Halberstam’s analysis further and see the ways that the closet/rural/(post)colony as well as out/urban/metropole get collapsed onto each other—the queer is always pulled closer to the heart of capital.

The overarching savior narrative occurs towards the end of the film, when each interviewee, in clips spliced together, tells his or her story of emigrating to the West. After a particularly heart-wrenching story of Ashraf Zanati’s departure from Egypt, the narrator comments that “Ashraf Zanati left Egypt. Ashraf had become part of a planetary minority.” Although the film purports to care about the status of queers in the “developing world,” it actually forms a wounded attachment that fetishizes displacement and bifurcates the queer from his or her society. This narration of non-Western countries as inherently unsafe for queer subjects produces the very displacement it describes, in a manner similar to the ways nineteenth-century colonial archaeology laid the foundations for Zionism and the dispossession of Arab Jews. Writing about the European “discovery” and destruction of the Cairo Geniza—a building that had housed pieces of paper documenting centuries of Jewish Egyptian history—Shohat (2006) shows us that the discursive/ archival dislocation of Egyptian Jews by the forces of European/Ashkenazi colonialism anticipated the later dislocation of Egyptian Jews. This dislocation would form part of the backbone of Zionist historiography’s production of a “morbidly selective ‘tracing the dots’ from pogrom to pogrom.” The fetishization of queer displacement, as projected by *Dangerous Living*, performs a similar historical flip to the one Shohat documents: “If at the time of the ‘Geniza discovery’ Egyptian Jews were still seen as part of the colonized Arab world, with the partition of Palestine, Arab-Jews, in a historical shift, suddenly became simply ‘Jews’” (Shohat 2006, 205). Through various colonial practices, there was a discursive bifurcation between the “Arab” and the “Jew”; in the case of

*Dangerous Living* there is a similar bifurcation between the "Egyptian" and the "Queer."

Joseph Massad (2002, 2007) coined the term "gay international" to refer to the colonial politics that are intrinsic to projects such as *Dangerous Living*. However, Massad falls into a similar trap, although for opposite reasons. Massad's writing is excellently critiqued in a blog post by Samir Taha (2013). Taha argues:

Massad's whole thesis is premised on a vast and unbridgeable (except through an imperializing act) divide between the "West" and the "non-West," one in which the West is always positively defined as possessing certain epistemic categories, primary among them the category sexuality with everything that it contains from homophobia and heteronormativity to gay politics and queer resistance, while the non-West is also always contrastively and negatively defined as lacking both the categories and the need for the politics they contain and generate. The divide can be summed up in one statement: the West has sexuality, the non-West does not.

Massad even goes so far as to attack queer Arab activists for being inherently "complicit" in imperialism *by their very act of forming sexual identification*. He goes even further and blames their "complicity" for acts of queerphobic violence they later experienced! I would hate to see what Massad would have to say about transgender subjectivities—thankfully he has not yet seen fit to write about them/us. While *Dangerous Living*, consistent with the Zionist economy of gratitude and narratives of queer and trans Palestinians "fleeing" to Israel, posits queerness as a gift given by the West to the non-West, Massad actually makes a similar argument—just reversing the value judgment. The *signifier* "gay" still belongs to the West. The noble identification becomes an ignoble identification. This is the same kind of wounded attachment as transphobic second-wave feminism, which reified/reacted to the gender binary by reversing the value judgment without questioning the formation of the binary itself.

It is undeniably true that many queer, trans, and LGBT people from the third world migrate—for numerous reasons—closer to the heart of neocolonial capital (along with their straight/cisgender neighbors), just as it is undeniably true that signifiers such as "gay," "queer," and "trans," as English words, have histories that originate in the West. The problem here is not with the "truth" of these statements, but with their interpola-

tion into discourse—the way these movements are narrated politically. In order to avoid the pitfalls of Massad, for instance, it is important to draw a distinction between the politics of *Dangerous Living* and the individual life narratives of the people interviewed in the film. What *Dangerous Living*, Joseph Massad, and John D’Emilio have in common is a certain *linguistic* attachment: they all fall for the deterministic trap of reading a signifier as attached to its point of origin. This is precisely what Foucault criticizes in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1977). Allow me to use one moment in *Dangerous Living* as an example of a different reading. Alyssa Sasot, a transgender woman from the Philippines, recounts the story of how she came to identify as transgender: “The term ‘transgender’ . . . well, thanks to the Internet. I learned it when I was in fourth year high school. I put like ‘gays who look like women’ [into the search engine] and, it says ‘transgendered.’ . . . *Oh!*” We must leave room for a kind of transcendence of subjectivities such as “transgender” if we are to avoid the reductionist pitfalls of Massad. There is, at least for an instant (the “*Oh!*” moment), a transcendence whereby the term “transgender” literally exists outside of geography or even history, within the intimate subjectivity of Sasot and others. “Transgender,” at this moment, is neither a benevolent gift from the West nor an assimilation of Western cultural imperialism. And yet it is precisely the openness of this moment—the opposite of the unbridgability of Massad’s gap between West and non-West—that allows a vulnerability to imperialist co-optation, as the film attempts to credit the West for this subjectivity production.

Wendy Brown’s words ring just as true today as they did twenty years ago when they were written. While Brown did not explore what, exactly, mobilizes wounded attachments, what we have seen since 1993 is an increase in the deployment of wounded attachments by neoliberalism and neocolonialism. The Zionist economy of gratitude, as part of a multibillion-dollar propaganda industry, is an economy in a very literal sense. Pinkwashing deploys preexisting tropes of Jewish victimization inherent to Zionism, in an attempt to hail the transgender subject into a debt of gratitude toward neoliberalism. This narrative deploys vulnerability as economic capital, and its historical rise coincides with a tactical and discursive shift by radical and progressive politics within the West. This shift has been a move toward hyperindividualized projects of semiotic and representational interventions into existing systems. This is encapsulated in the assump-

tion that through better (media) representation, and precisely defined terminologies, transgender people and other oppressed people may find liberation.

The renaturalization of capitalism within late twentieth-century identity politics is both a product of and produced by the reframing of both temporality and the individual's relation to the collective within purportedly liberatory political projects. No longer part of a mass movement that aims toward liberation of the collective in historical time, we are instead relegated to a totality of atomized individuals, each struggling to survive. The struggles for survival are very much real, but the ways in which they have been politicized—even more, the ways in which survival within the existing system has become *the* political project—reflect an internalization of Margaret Thatcher's infamous quip "There is no alternative." We are often grappling with subjectivities that have been produced by disciplinary regimes in order not to survive. Liberation will mean the ceasing-to-be of many of these disciplined subjectivities. And there are few things more terrifying than calling for the death of one's own subject position.

But this may be the point where it makes sense to part from Brown, as Brown parts from Nietzsche. After all, Brown does not account for movements—such as, say, the Black Panther Party, to name one example—that politicized identity as part of a liberatory project, avoiding both liberal co-optation and crude Marxist reductionism. Rather than focus further on Brown's notion of wounds and traumas, it may be useful to reevaluate Fanon's notion of catharsis in the twenty-first century. What might we imagine a transgender catharsis could look like? To Fanon, catharsis happens as part of decolonial struggle, which is, in his words, "an agenda for total disorder. But it cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand . . . or a gentleman's agreement." Fanon specifies that decolonial struggle "is an historical process" (1963, 2). Liberation, catharsis, and healing from trauma will not happen on the level of a matrix of individuals, or a more precise regime of signification, and no theoretical intervention (even on the part of this text) will bring it into being. Again, we cannot signify our way toward liberation as something that happens in historical time; we cannot make a priori promises of safety or security. There is unfortunately no predicting what, exactly, a historical unraveling of a violent system may bring about. But we can, at the very least, prepare ourselves, by critically examining what sort of political tropes we reproduce in attempting to name our pain. Demanding liberation in historical time, through a collec-

tive struggle that places more weight on the material than on the semiotic or symbolic, while simultaneously allowing geocultural cross-pollination of ideas and signifiers without a historically deterministic search for “origins” (Foucault 1977), may allow us to break out of cycles of debt and gratitude. But this change will not happen through theoretical intervention alone; it must happen through a structural and material transformation of the world we live in.

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### Notes

1. As a point of clarification, contrary to how it is often construed, the use of the term “apartheid” is not to invoke a comparison with South Africa (although there are many similarities), but rather to apply a term with a legal definition (see Millard 2012).
2. I would call it “transnationalism,” but that word is unfortunately already taken.

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