

**TRANS* MATTER
TROUBLING AND
DISRUPTING FROM
THE IN-BETWEEN:
ON IMAGINING TRANS*
AS RADICAL
ONTOLOGICAL REFUSAL**

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Abstract

The body is not a neutral entity. Rather, it is always implicated in power structures and part of signifying processes; the body, like ‘text’ in the Derridean sense, is a sign. As such, the body produces meaning and is inscribed with meaning – it *reads* and *writes*. One way in which meanings are imposed on a body is through processes of gendering. The body, as visible corporeality, becomes the medium through which understandings of gender are mediated. Since, in the Western framework, gender is understood as reliant on binary conceptions (male and female) and supposed to ‘align’ with gender expressions (masculinity and femininity), the body as corporeal matter that is presupposed to be ‘expressive’ of dualist gender conceptions seems to pose a problem for trans* and gender non-conforming folx* in traversing gender as a binary structure. This thesis engages with questions of the body, materiality, and ontology which are all structured by the symbolic order that upholds gender within a binary cisheteronormative framework. Through problematizing the gender order as reliant on gender as a colonial construct, critically engaging with material-discursively produced binaries, and analyzing how corporeal matter is always relationally structured with/in the symbolic order, this thesis explores the possibility to introduce trans* as radical ontological refusal of gender as a binary system, and investigates how trans* could disrupt gender regimes both on the level of the symbolic and material. In concluding that trans* subjectivities are always already part of the hegemonic symbolic order, and that the desire to disrupt, refuse or ‘go outside’ this order affirms situating trans*ness within the structures of the symbolic, this thesis ultimately explores different entry points to enable potentialities for trans*ness’ be(com)ing. By re/orienting trans* as an ontological affirmation rather than a radical ontological refusal, this project aims to open up different ways of *being* and *doing* trans* within/through/of the world by imagining an in-between *otherwise* through embodied narratives and poetic interventions.

Key words: *trans* embodiment, ontology, body, gender, imagining*

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Comparable to how a body does not come into being by, in, and through itself – unrelational and independent – neither does this project of what I call my thesis. It is rather a process of becoming together-apart.

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Introduction

In the past four decades, **the body** has been a central point of investigation within feminist research. Particularly with the development of queer theory and post-structuralist thought in the second half of the 20th century, the body became a site of reference in understanding how knowledges and subjectivities are constituted in relation to power and hegemonic discourse. From French post-structuralist philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to feminist scholars such as Vicki Kirby, Elisabeth Grosz, and Judith Butler to Radical Black feminist theorists Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Tendayi Sithole to trans* theorists Susan Stryker, Eva Hayward, and Marquis Bey, all engaged with theorizations on the body as an object that is constituted through culture, language, and signification. Though different entry points and varying takes on the significance of a body's materiality in relation to signification processes, what all these thinkers have in common is their critical engagement with the body as sign, as something that can be read, interpreted, is *given* meaning, and *produces* meaning. None of these processes are neutral or innocent. Rather they are always implicated in questions of power which turn bodies into intelligible entities, into subjects through structures of race, sex(uality), and gendering. Bodies never *just are*. Instead, a body always *is* or *does something*: "this body is [insert adjective]", or "that body [insert verb]". The body, as corporeal entity, thus always seems to mediate *some* meaning. Such a process of producing meaning does not happen individually. Instead, the expressed acts [verbs] or characteristics [adjectives] are to be interpreted or 'read' by others who are in the position to see or interact with that body.

I would also like to start the introduction of this thesis with the following words by Eva Hayward: "Bodies remain trouble. Irrefutable, unknowable, and seductive, bodies are what thought wants to escape but never can" (2021, 1-3). I feel intrigued by this quote, because it captures my interest in the body well, referring to two things Hayward implies:

- 1) Thought cannot escape the body, and therefore
- 2) The body remains trouble

Besides emphasizing that the body is or does something and mediates meaning, the body also expresses thoughts (and feelings) – the body seems to be expressive of an 'inside'. In this thesis, I first and foremost understand the expression of thoughts (and feelings) through the body by ways of expressing gender identities. And it is in-between this movement – between my body

as a corporeal entity that expresses and my thoughts that feel and think gender *beyond the binary* – in which I find myself yearning to escape the body but not being able to do so. Here, the body that becomes gendered by the binary cisheteronormative matrix is what causes the trouble.

Hayward's attention to the body and thought not only implies a relationality, but also stresses the materiality of a body. When thinking of the body, we often think of its corporeal substance in relation to **gender** and **sex**. Here, sex is understood in alignment with biological understandings of the anatomy of a body whereby sex is supposed to be characterized by things such as genitalia and chromosomes and inform what are considered the sexes: 'male', 'female', or 'intersex'. In the Global West, the body as sexed entity is not and has not been a 'neutral' physical entity. Rather, as argued by many queer theorists and Black feminist scholars, the 'sexed' body is always implicated in power structures, in which the sexual characteristics of a body not solely exist but are given meaning: they are supposed to express what is called **gender**. Gender is not about a body's materiality per se, but rather about how one feels and identifies. However, within Western societies, gender is often conflated with sex, in which gender is pre-supposed to mirror sex, and sex precedes gender identification. This has led to hegemonic ideas on the relation between sex and gender, in which being born as 'male' is coalesced with 'being' a 'man' and being born 'female' is coalesced with 'being' a 'woman'. This logic, in which gender is pre-supposed to 'follow' from sex, thus stirs to the belief that there are two genders (man and woman). Furthermore, these two genders are supposed to be expressed in line with social and cultural expectations of what either of these genders 'entail'. Gender is consequently expressed in terms of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. What thus follows, as Judith Butler has extensively examined in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, is that sex, gender, gender expression, and sexuality are and have been turned into 'rigid' and 'naturalized' constructions of a **gender order** which are perpetuated and remain to structure dominant thought in Western society. This is what Butler calls the **heterosexual matrix**: the way in which all these different things are expected to be (made) congruent with each other (2006, 24).

Butler's project is centered around challenging the heterosexual matrix. Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's words "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one", Butler paves the way for the understanding of gender as discursively and socially constructed. By introducing the concept of **gender performativity** Butler argues that, rather than femininity and masculinity being inherent to being born female or male, gender (and sex) are **social constructs** (2006, 9-10). In showing how gender is socially constructed, Butler defies and deconstructs a presumed

causality and relationality between the (sexed) body and the (performed) gender identity. Gender instead, as they argue, is performative: it is not something that one *is*, but what one *does* (34). Because gender is performed, gender comes into being through a repetition of *doing* ‘gendered’ acts and gestures. Through repeating the expression of ‘gendered acts’ in a singular way, what is produced is the ‘effect’ of a ‘gender core’, which in turn causes certain characteristics or acts to be deemed ‘natural’, while in fact there is nothing natural about them (33-34). Rather, as Butler contends, gender is socially constructed. Social constructs are concepts and conventions which are (arbitrarily) made up/constructed by people but are deemed ‘**natural**’ within society, informing what can be called ‘**Nature**’. When discussing ‘Nature’, with a capital N, which I also refer to as the **symbolic order** in this thesis, I generally point to unquestioned and naturalized socio-cultural constructed understandings of topics and structures such as monogamy, race, and sex and gender (the heterosexual matrix). These constructed ideas are disguised as ‘naturally given’ or ‘Truths’ (grounded in frameworks of biological essentialist views, i.e. Science), and they form the majority of thought or ruling conventional understandings on structures (**hegemony**) which constitute our **dominant discourse**.

I want to return to Hayward’s words that “the body is trouble”, with specific attention to the body in relation to gender, sex, and the symbolic order. “The body is trouble” are words which I this time read in relation to gender non-conforming folx* for, following Vicki Kirby’s words, the “anatomical body emerges as reality's harshest truth” (1997, 71). A phenomenon I am not unfamiliar with:

As I am walking past mirroring windows, I check out my full body – shrug my shoulders – I adjust my movements to what I think is a non-feminine way of going around because I do not want to be perceived as feminine since I am not a woman. Isn’t it funny that movements are gendered? Suddenly I hear, ‘excuse me sir’. I don’t look back as I am not sure they’re talking to me. ‘Excuse me sir’ I hear again. This time I decide to look up and say something back. ‘Uhm madam, excuse me, madam, I am so so sorry’. *The sorry is where I long to linger in.*

I am providing this anecdotal evidence, to illustrate one way in which gender performance is still structured in and around binary conceptualizations of gender as relational to the body. Though considering gender as a social construct has been revolutionary in opening up what were rigid notions of femininity and masculinity, enabling a break with traditional conventions

of what it means to be a man or a woman, I have still been occupied with the questions: “what about the body?” and “how to be read?”. These two questions have guided my path in academia in pursuit of becoming a feminist researcher, especially because I cannot seem to ‘get away’ from the body – my sexed body as someone who identifies as non-binary. Although non-binary is a lived experience or feeling which cannot be captured in one definition, what most people who identify as **(trans*) non-binary** have in common is that they do not feel like they are male or female, but instead linger in-between, feel like both, or refuse to identify with either of these genders. Non-binary is thus used as a term to defy gender as a binary opposition. Confused about what has felt and still feels like a confrontation, the idea of considering gender as performative, as socially constructed, still does not open up many possibilities in *living* and *being* non-binary in the current Western world. I feel like I can perform my non-binary identity all I want, but my recognition is still stuck within processes of signification that rely on understandings of gender as a binary conception – within the binary cisheteronormative matrix. The corporeal body indeed seems to emerge as reality’s harshest truth, and my thoughts cannot manage to escape it. It is from this positionality that I depart writing this thesis, a feeling of my body betraying me in my constant gender performance – but what *about* the body?

Waiting for gender to be transformed by different repeated ‘acts’, I wonder whether these acts, gestures, and ‘the body that *does*’ will ever reach the point of referring to *nothing*, and will be interpreted as *nothing* – or as *something* that is neither masculine nor feminine. Speaking from frustration and desire, yearning for trans*ness’ potential in opening up the binary gender order, the main questions that guide this thesis are: “Can trans* be posited as a radical ontological refusal, and if so, how? Is there a way to perform a gender that can be understood as disrupting notions of femininity and/or masculinity both on the level of the material and the symbolic in the Western framework?”

Kirby expresses a similar desire as mine, to re/turn to no-*thing*, to write from the in-between. In doing so, she accurately asks: “How we might write from a position that tries to acknowledge its immersions in/as an ‘in-between’ no-*thing* can seem infuriatingly impossible, and yet all around and within us opportunities for such investigations and experiments present themselves” (2015, 18-19, original emphasis). In thinking about *matters* of embodiment, trans*ness, and the body, and trying to answer my two main questions, I seek to explore the ‘impossibility’ Kirby discusses, even aiming to speak from with/in an ‘impossibility’. Can imagining to speak from

and lingering in such an in-between be a space for trans*ness as potential, both literally and metaphorically, to disrupt or refuse gender as a binary order?

Repeat after me: “me, me, I, her, she, woman, woman, man, sir!, no, me?”

This thesis starts as a theoretical endeavor which is grounded in critical philosophical feminist engagements with theory, ontology, and epistemology. Starting with theory helps me in my first two chapters to problematize the body as both a material and cultural signifier. The second half of the thesis is concerned with opening-up gender as a binary system by ways of figuring trans* as opposing the dualistic order. Since I desire to speak from the in-between, to cause fissures in the cracks, to explore the ‘impossible’, and to rupture rigidity (both on the level of the symbolic and material), I will not propose a vast theoretical and methodological structure for this thesis because rigidity and stabilized ‘structures’ are precisely what I want to undo by attending to the in-between. I will use my desire to disrupt and refuse then to not only inform imagining a praxis – a praxis that centralizes in-between *embodying* of trans*ness as ongoing, always in becoming while always already (t)here, longing to escape the confines of language, while affirming its existence – but also to inform my theoretical approach. Defying logics of causality and relationality within the Western gender order, and rather seeking potential in refusal and un-naming, the theories and concepts this thesis builds on will be accompanied by my own embodied writings in order to re/orient towards theorizing on trans* as a venture mode that might intra-actively dazzle in its *becoming*. Shortly, by incorporating poetry and short stories into this thesis, writings that will be characterized by this font, I not only preach for trans* embodiment and *be(com)ing*, but want to put this *be(com)ing* into praxis. Inspired by and thinking with Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Marquis Bey, this thesis aims to *show* what it means to *do* the work – the work of re/figuring and re/orienting trans* as radical ontological refusal. Nonetheless, though dazzling is nice, in order to feel dis/oriented, some sort of starting point is required. Therefore, this thesis will be structured around the following questions that will all help me re/turn to my main question:

Can and should we get away from the body, and perhaps attend to the **flesh** instead – a flesh that has been theorized on by Black Feminist scholars to connote both the violence inherent to (un)gendering, as well as the potential in opposing the symbolic? Should we do away with gender, or should we get rid of any connotations of femininity and masculinity, an intervention on the site of epistemology: uncovering and deleting everything we think we know about gender

because the contemporary Western episteme is dominated by naturalized cisheteronormative dualist ideas on gender? Or would it be more effective to examine *being* trans* differently, and disrupting the ontology of gender all together, posing trans* as a radical ontological refusal? Furthermore, do we work from ‘with/in’ or from ‘outside’ the symbolic? Would working from the ‘inside’ provide enough space in opening up the concept of gender as material-discursively produced, or is it a dead end? And lastly?, if we need to attend to the ‘outside’, is there really such a thing as ‘outside’, what does this look like, and how can we get there?

All these questions are mainly occupied with notions of materiality, the body, visibility, power, ontology, and being, but before situating these questions more in their theoretical discussions and structuring them more carefully in my chapter overview, I will elaborate on one more term that is vital to my research: **trans*/trans*ness**.

Though I am speaking from a position of non-binary *embodying*, throughout this thesis I will not specify it as such. Instead, I will use the terms **trans*** and **trans*ness**. Though overlapping and maybe even implying the same thing, I will generally use trans* instead of ‘non-binary’ because it feels like a ‘broader’ concept. Further, writing ‘trans’ with an asterisk is not my idea, but it is widely used by many theorists in a similar way. Feminist philosopher Karen Barad for instance states about the term trans* that it:

employs the wildcard symbol (*) for internet searches. It is at once a term meant to be broadly inclusive (e.g., transgender, transsexual, trans woman, trans man, trans person, and also genderqueer, Two Spirit, genderfuck, gender fluid, masculine of center) of an array of subversive gender identities, and also self-consciously tuned into practices of exclusion (2015, 419).

On the one hand, trans* for Barad connotes many subversive gender identities, whereas they also remind of us of its exclusionary logics. Eva Hayward and Che Gossett similarly contend that “Trans* is meant, in part, to break open the category of transgender, trans woman, or trans man – a liberal project of inclusivity. In some ways it instances a false notion of inclusivity, like the silent T in LGBT, to include all trans identities” (2017, 21). Due to the asterisk’s aim to be ‘inclusive’, it also always constitutes processes of exclusion, for inclusion causes exclusion. Despite these points of critique, I still remain using trans*, because for me the asterisk enables potential to open-up gender as binary order: it denies claims that regard trans*

subjectivities as unitary and as easily classifiable or capturable, and instead turns to the multiplicity of gender. Trans asterisk, followed by an ‘empty space’ which enables the potential to be filled in arbitrarily and agentially – the empty space as a void which invites a “virtual exploration of all manner of possible trans*/formations” (Barad 2015, 412).

Theoretical Framework

As mentioned in the introduction, this research that is grounded in feminist theory draws forth upon **post-structuralist** and **postmodernist** thought. The first half of this thesis begins with these strands of thoughts, allowing to center and understand the body in relation to signification processes. The second half of this thesis combines **trans* theory** with **New Materialism**, and **Radical Black Feminist scholarship**. I combine these three fields, because, in contrast to queer theory and post-structuralist theory, they have in common that they emphasize lived experiences and bodily matter, attending not only to the symbolic, but also to the site of the corporeal. Because this thesis will be a philosophical theoretical intervention on the body and gender with specific attention to questions of ontology and epistemology, the groundwork to lay out all these strands of thought and their potential of engaging with embodiment requires an in dept exploration. However, first, I want to clarify what it for me means to do feminist research in the field of Gender Studies.

Feminisms

Although feminism is not a unified and demarcated term, and we should rather speak about feminisms in the plural form, what much feminist research has in common is a critical engagement with social, cultural, and political issues. Moreover, in feminist thought, these three fields are not separate, but instead are inter-related and affect people differently. Hence, phenomena should be studied from an intersectional approach. As this thesis seeks to propose trans* as an ontological refusal, without universalizing lived experiences, feelings, and potentials, I want to make a note on how theorizing on trans*ness always desires taking a critical stance towards intersectionality too, in order to be wary of undoing exclusionary mechanisms in the proposition of trans*. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, attends to how, for instance, gender, race, class, sex etc. all inform each other, and cannot be considered as univocal and distinct categories (1989). In stating that this research is grounded in feminist theory, I thus point towards the way in which this thesis critically engages with the body as constituted through different axes: my body is trans*, but also white, and abled-bodied. All these identity axes are important to take into account in making claims and challenging

hegemonic structures because one's 'politics of location', a term introduced by Adrienne Rich, affect how one navigates within the world (1984).

Post-structuralism & Queer Theory

In departing from the body as a social entity that comes into being through cultural inscriptions, this thesis follows post-structuralist thought in expanding on processes of signification. Semiotics, a method used in postmodern and post-structuralist thought expanded on by French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, helps explain how meaning making processes are constructed and rely on relations between knowledge/power, recognition, and interpretation. This project furthermore engages with and expands on queer theory which has its roots in post-structuralist thought, deconstructing signification processes with regards to knowledge and power, while specifically attending to gender performativity and cultural understandings of gender in relation to the body.

Trans theory, New Materialism & Radical Black Feminism*

Trans theory emerged as a response to queer theory, and although it is also focused on gender and certainly does not deny how gender is a social construct, it goes beyond queer theory and social constructivism in that it centralizes lived experiences and physical embodiment of trans* individuals. Here, trans* theory follows a similar line of thought as the emerging field of New Materialism and Radical Black Feminist thought.

New Materialism is a philosophical field that has been influenced by contemporary authors such as Karen Barad and Vicki Kirby. Central to this emerging field is the attention to matter as agential. Though not essentializing the body, New Materialism re-centers physical matter, while at the same time examining and traversing false dualisms such as nature/culture, body/mind etc. Similar to trans* theory, New Materialism is occupied with *being* in the world, but rather than focusing on the trans* body or embodiment, this field directs attention to relationality on the level of the onto-epistemological and does not specifically center trans* subjectivities.

Contemporary Radical Black Feminist scholarship combines different elements of trans* and New Materialist theory, putting the emphasis on ontology, lived experiences and challenging false dualisms. However, it differs from these fields in that it is particularly concerned with Blackness. Black(ness) in this context does not merely point to embodied entities, but also

considers Blackness as a political category. Hereby, following Marquis Bey in *The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness* (2017), Blackness and trans*-ness can be understood to converge. Lastly, Blackness and New Materialism have in common that both put to praxis a different way of *being in* and *of* the world, centering living and ontology as a praxis.

The reason I put all these three frameworks together is because this thesis is grounded in intra-active approach. This means that I aim to look at questions of the body, ontology and epistemology through different lenses, which I understand to all be intra-related. Trans* theory (e.g. the work of Stryker, Hayward, and Salamon) helps me consider the way in which non-binary bodies relate to binary cisheteronormativity, and ideas of culture, and Nature. Combining trans* theory with New Materialist theory and Radical Black Feminist scholarship ultimately allows me to shift back and forth between lived embodiment, and ontology and epistemology.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter of this thesis provides a historical overview of different post-structuralist thinkers who all have engaged with questions of the body. I start with examining Simone de Beauvoir's distinction between 'being born' a 'becoming' woman. De Beauvoir opened ways for continental philosophers to start theorizing on the body, and the socially-constructed nature of 'meanings' and meaning-making processes through signification. Jacques Derrida further examined how meaning comes to be constructed through dualisms, in which terms are falsely opposed to each other, while not containing any meaning in itself per se. After engaging with Derrida's deconstruction and *différence*, chapter one moves to Michel Foucault's theorizations on power/knowledge/discourse. Power, according to Foucault, is disciplinary and produces 'docile bodies' which, through their visibility are made 'intelligible' and can be categorized. Both Derrida and Foucault, in showing how power is inherent to meaning-making processes and how power is perpetuated and enforced by signifying systems, have been of significance to queer theory. This chapter then ends with discussing queer theory, more precisely Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. In drawing forth upon Foucault, Butler, among others, argues that gender is socially constructed and obtains meaning through discursively produced understandings of a relationality between sex and gender, which play out on the body through doing 'gendered' acts and gestures. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to form the groundwork to consider how the body is constructed by 'inscriptions' through different power regimes.

Having laid out how the gendering order is structured by discursively produced meanings and connotations which aim to ‘categorize bodies’ by ways of upholding power regimes, chapter two focusses on the violent structures and rhetoric these gendering orders are based on how they are perpetuated within Western society. Gender, as I will outline first by discussing the work of María Lugones, is a colonial construct, predicated on violent colonialist logics. Examining Hortense Spillers’ theorization on how Black female flesh is ungendered, and Sylvia Wynter’s notion of the Human, this chapter seeks to expose how gender has been and is used to demarcate Black(ened) bodies to objects and disregard their humanity. Black(ened) femininities and masculinities, are, as I argue, structured and predicated on Whiteness and settler colonialist logics. Inherent to processes of dehumanization are acts of naming and categorizing which, as I will show following Tendayi Sithole, perpetuate Antirblackness and situate Black(ened) bodies in the ‘void’ – structures that are upheld and reinforced by the hegemonic order/‘American Grammar’/dominant discourse which are in turn predicated on the system of gender as a colonial construct.

Chapter three emerges from a desire to ‘get out’ of the symbolic order that predominantly deems gender as binary in the Western framework, for the gender order not only sustains Antirblackness, but also affects the embodiment of trans* subjectivities. Because (trans*) bodies are visible and are read as signs which express a gender core, gender is considered to always play out on the body within hegemony. And because gender is generally understood as a binary concept in the dominant discourse/the symbolic order, it poses difficulties for people whose gender identities do not fall within or outside such binary structure. This chapter then seeks to challenge and find ways to disrupt or refuse these hegemonic processes of ‘reading’ (interpreting and recognizing) a body in alignment with dominant discourse’s conceptions of gender as a dualism while remaining attentive to, following Vicki Kirby and Eva Hayward, a (trans*) body’s materiality. Through considering trans* bodies as bodies which might ‘write’ (express) differently (beyond the ‘intelligible’ ‘two’ genders), I examine whether these processes of reading/writing that occur through *embodying* enable possibilities to rupture the ontology of gender both on the level of the material and on the symbolic. In this project, I understand ontology to refer to the study of ‘being’, and epistemology to the study of ‘knowing’. Since (trans*) bodies and signifying processes are not rigid but instead are apt to change and always moving, this chapter concludes on the note that the corporeal body, speaking with Karen Barad, is also always already relationally and intra-actively *becoming* with others.

Hence, aiming to disrupt or refuse the symbolic order (in which we are all structured) by setting trans* ‘outside’ of it seems to be the wrong objective.

In the final chapter I start to open up conceptions on gender as binary by re/orienting and imagining differently. Through embodied narratives and poetic interventions, I attend to trans* as an otherwise that is not un-relational, separate, or outside, but instead intra-actively becomes together. Inspired by Tendayi Sithole, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe, chapter four moves by/through/with affirming trans*ness’ in-between be(com)ing. By ways of opening-up and “think-practicing” (Thiele 2018, 38) differently, this final chapter also serves as a ‘conclusion’, putting the method of opening up from the in-between as a potential for trans*ness into a praxis of imagining *more*.

chapter i. I Perform so I am (Not too Sure About my Gender Identity): A Historical Overview of Theorizations on Gender and Sex

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” – I hereby echo, as many others have preceded me, and as many others will follow, Simone de Beauvoir’s (1908-1986) most well-known words coming from her book *The Second Sex* (1949). In her introduction, De Beauvoir questions whose place it is to make any judgements regarding women; to write stories about their place in society, their *being* and *becoming* (1956, 25). She hints to an angel. I want to proclaim that it is certainly not me¹, but if I were to occupy the place of an angel for a moment, I would say it is her, Simone. Not per se because she was right, but because she was the start of something in the white Western world. A beginning, like these words are the start of this chapter. A chapter in which I will continue explaining De Beauvoir’s words in further detail, exploring how her theorization on women was the start of opening up debates on gender and sex in the tradition of continental philosophy. The term continental philosophy cannot, however, be interpreted in a singular way. For some it has been understood to refer to philosophical ideas generated in Europe after the eighteenth century (Shrift 2010, vii). For others, continental philosophy refers to a style of philosophy, one that is “more attentive to the world of experience and less focused on a rigorous analysis of concepts or linguistic usage” (vii). Although these definitions are not mutually exclusive, and as this thesis cannot capture an entire history of philosophical school of thought, I find it helpful to situate the start of my historical overview on gender, sex, the body, and relationality somewhere on the line of continental philosophy. More specifically, making a ‘cut’ and starting with De Beauvoir and the rise of post-structuralist thought. I do so because, as I am speaking from the positionality of a white Western European scholar and aim to trouble theorizations on sex, gender, and the body in this thesis, I find it important to engage with that history in a critical sense.

I start this chapter with discussing De Beauvoir’s seminal words because she was one of the first critical thinkers in the history of Western philosophy to attend to gender roles and femininity, and opened up ways for thinking the category of women differently, in a non-biological essentialist way – as something *constructed*. The other thinkers I will discuss in this chapter are Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida because they further engaged with troubling meaning making processes inherent to dominant discourse, constructions of power/knowledge,

¹ I would rather read the word angel in Dutch, angel, and be the pointy sharp thing bees and wasps sting with.

and dualisms. The topics that Foucault and Derrida interrogate can specifically be regarded to as critiquing the ‘symbolic order’ – that is, language and power structures. Throughout this chapter and the whole thesis, I will continue talking about the *symbolic*, and the *symbolic order*. The symbolic order refers to a regime of pre-existing social and cultural structures that are often taken for granted within our world, such as gender roles, language, and rituals (Grosz 1990, 154). Discussing Foucault’s theorization on discourse and power/knowledge, as well as Derrida’s introduction of deconstruction will be helpful in explaining how the symbolic order is *constructed, reinforced* and how it concerns the displacement and categorization of bodies particularly through gendering.

Although I am interested in illustrating how the symbolic order produces subjects and upholds normative subjectivities, in this first chapter of this thesis I also want to centralize the notion of the (gendered) body. I will bring in the notion of the body because I think it is central to understanding how gender and gender roles – two rather ‘abstract’ things which can be understood as being part of the symbolic order but also proliferate on the level of the material, the corporeal. While the symbolic order is intertwined with power structures and defines dominant social and cultural accepted norms, hierarchical constructions, and beliefs or expectations in a society, these power structures not only play out on the abstract, but also on the body. Because of this, I want to engage with the corporeal: to see how the symbolic order constructs bodies through different power regimes. In order to carefully explain the relation between power and the body/bodies, I will use post-structuralist theory, for post-structuralism has focused on the constructedness of such relations.

Post-structuralism can be considered a dominant movement “that emerged in the 1960s, which together with the second generation of critical theory² brought continental philosophy to the forefront of scholarship in a variety of humanities and social science disciplines and set the agenda for philosophical thought on the continent and elsewhere from the 1960s to the present” (Schrift 2010, x). “The impact of French poststructuralism on feminist theory”, Rosi Braidotti states, “is an epistemological upheaval” (2010, 224). French philosophy, as Braidotti continues

² The second generation of critical theory, which emerged in Germany in the later 1950’s, during the period of the Cold War, is a response to the first generation of critical theory (Swindal 2010, 230). Similar to the term continental philosophy, the ideas generated by the second generation of critical theorists cannot be specified in one way. Examples of main topics that thinkers associate with this strand of critical theory are: Marxism, questions of Truth, modernity and postmodernism, signs and language, aesthetics, and discourse. See James Swindal’s chapter *Second Generation of Critical Theory* in the book *The History of Continental Philosophy*, volume 6., to read more about the rise and developments of second generation critical theory.

“was clearly the inspirational force that propelled the most innovative theoretical developments for the feminist philosophers of the period throughout Europe and elsewhere” (223). As the following authors are prominent figures in this French philosophical tradition, in this historical overview I want to move from De Beauvoir’s anti-essentialist position of gender roles and sex to the influential post-structuralist thinkers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida whose theorizations further delve into the *constructedness* of concepts and notions of the body. Their conceptions on social constructivism and signifying practices, thinking along the lines of how subjects and objects are constituted, as well as how bodies are made ‘intelligible’ and ‘docile’, are valuable in understanding how gender and sex are not static and ‘naturally’ given, but rather are socially and culturally constructed. This chapter thus first examines how the body as a site of engagement becomes gendered and is structured within different signification systems and power regimes. Following this, I move to prominent queer theorist Judith Butler and specifically their introduction of the concept of gender performativity. Carefully analyzing Butler’s theorization on gender performativity will, in the bigger project of this thesis, serve to understand how conceptions on gender and gender expression are mediated through the body that is considered to be an expressive and signifying corporeality.

Simone de Beauvoir and Anti-Biological Essentialism

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir critiques women’s place in society with her famous statement that captures how femininity is not something inherent to women but rather something *constructed*. This means that acts and gestures which are labeled feminine are not innate to *being* a woman. Instead, femininity is imposed on women since they were young, and a vital part of this ‘feminine’ role is the attributed characteristic of ‘passivity’ (De Beauvoir 1956, 284). This imposition of ‘femininity’ on women is done by men through the process of ‘Othering’ and serves to uphold power structures and the subordination of women, turning women into passive subjects (175). De Beauvoir engages in *deconstructing* this process of Othering and shows how women are defined as ‘the Other’ in relation to men (159) – a relation constructed through the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectics, in which men define women as inferior – and hence proclaim themselves as masters, as superior. In critically engaging with patriarchal nodes that are inherent to all levels of society – social life, the economic and political sphere, and on the level of religion – De Beauvoir attends to the subordination of women and *deconstructs* the relation between femininity and women. Femininity³, as much as masculinity,

³ It is important to note that this femininity (as well as masculinity) only concerns white femininity (and white masculinity) and white women (and white men). In the next chapter I centralize how gender is predicated on

is a social construct that is used to relationally define, delineate, and hierarchize the category of women. In aligning femininity with notions of ‘passivity’ or ‘weakness’, but also through assigning them stereotypical characteristics such as for instance being good at (and for) cleaning, cooking, and reproducing and taking care of children, femininity and ‘female’ gender roles became intertwined with the category of women. These constructed cultural expectations that informed ‘female’ gender roles were consequently historically amplified, reinforced and justified through white patriarchy, religion, and biological essentialist views. The way in which women were expected to live up to all these social understandings of what being a ‘woman’ means, that is, in congruence with ‘femininity’ and the discussed characteristics and associations, is precisely what De Beauvoir aimed to open up in her text and referred to when making the distinction between ‘being born’ and ‘becoming’. De Beauvoir is considered to be one of the first feminist authors in the global West to distinct gender from sex, deconstructing the manner in which patriarchy structures and imposes ‘female’ gender roles to women and naturalizes conceptions on what ‘women’ have to do, act, and be like – subordinate to men. Specifically, Judith Butler in their well-known book *Gender Trouble* has interpreted De Beauvoir’s notions of ‘being born’ and ‘becoming’ as making a distinction as such, but additionally theorizes how gender roles play out on the level of the body by means of looks, acts, and gestures. Before moving to Butler and in order to understand how gender is socially constructed, imposed and mediated through the body, I will first move to post-structuralist thinkers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. I do so because their theorizations on social constructivism, language, and power/knowledge have been pivotal for understanding how meanings are constructed and reinforced. Their conceptions on discourse and deconstruction consequently help explaining how the (gendered) body as site of engagement is inscribed with and is structured by dominant material-discursive meaning-making processes.

Post-structuralism

Both Jacques Derrida’s and Michel Foucault’s works can be characterized as challenging structuralism and phenomenology, movements that arose in the beginning of the twentieth century which were interested in understanding the relation between objects, subjects, and the world as systems (Caputo 1997, 114). Derrida did so by using deconstruction, a term he initially proposed in his book *Of Grammatology* (1967). Derrida was heavily influenced by structuralist

colonialist logics, but in this chapter, I will not use race in considering the binary gendering logics of men/women and masculinity/femininity yet. I do so, precisely because I want to problematize this binary logic and the construction of subjects, as theorized on in post-structuralist theory, in the next chapter.

thinkers such as Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure, and hence specifically focused on textuality. Foucault, on the other hand, was more engaged with history, discourse, and knowledge/power, and was concerned with understanding the world through a genealogical approach.⁴ Although their divergent main interests regard different points of emphasis, their ideas and theorizations can be read alongside each other. I will set apart and lay out how both theorize on the constructedness of concepts and structures ‘we’ take ‘for granted’ by engaging with Derrida’s text *Of Grammatology* (1967) and Foucault’s texts *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). I do so to prepare the ground for comprehending the way in which bodies are perpetually and relationally structured against power regimes and signification systems. Furthermore, engaging with how these two authors think about the body as a cultural signifier, constituted by and embedded in power/knowledge systems, will enable me to clarify how gender too functions within a similar regime of socially constructed and material-discursive meaning-making processes that are inscribed on the body.

Derrida and Deconstruction

Deconstruction, as Derrida has often spelled out in his work, is “not a method or some tool that you apply to something from the outside” (Derrida in Caputo 1997, 9). Rather, what is important about deconstruction is that it “is something which happens and which happens inside” (ibid). This attention to the inside is important because it points to Derrida’s belief that there is “nothing outside of the text” and that, in my own words, nothing has a meaning ‘distant’ or ‘beyond’ the world as ‘we’ know it. To pinpoint deconstruction down to a method would be to undermine the point of it and its inherent critique on knowing, defining, doing, or applying something in a universal manner. To consider deconstruction as a method would furthermore suggest that it is ‘bigger’ than the phenomena in which it happens – this, on the contrary, seems exactly what deconstruction aims to undo, for it is something that happens ‘within’.

Deconstruction has been “the most influential feature of post-structuralism because it defines a new kind of reading practice which is a key application of post-structuralism” (Cuddon 1999, 210). Although Derrida would not label himself as a post-structuralist (Quinan 2015, 355), post-

⁴ Genealogy refers to “a way of deconstructing concepts by tracing their lines of descent” (Andermahr, Lovell & Wolkowitz 2000, 106). It is thus a specific technique of doing research through writing about historic events, examining dominant cultural ideologies, and consequently situating them in broader socio-cultural lineages or developments. Foucault specifically uses genealogy to look for “discontinuities between practices and ideologies and between practices across cultures in order to defamiliarize them and challenge their apparent monolithic or pre-given character” (ibid).

structuralist theory is nonetheless heavily reliant on his contributions, and takes from Derrida the way in which texts, that is, anything that contains signs, as well as institutions, beliefs, traditions, societies etc. and their ‘meanings’, are not universal, neither unitary, nor definable (Cuddon 1999, 210; Caputo 1997, 31). In stating that “there is nothing outside of text” (Derrida 1998, 158), Derrida thus not solely talks about objects such as books, but about anything that can be ‘read’ for ‘meaning’ as well as anything that ‘produces’ meaning, which then also includes the corporeal. As my project centers the body, I use Derrida’s deconstruction to consider how the body’s matter is also read for and produces meaning through signification.

Although deconstruction is neither a definable method nor a theory, it is important to distinguish Derrida’s use of deconstruction to the more currently generally known definition of deconstruction. In contemporary critical theory, deconstruction is often used to define a process of ‘uncovering’ or ‘taking apart’ arguments i.e. critically analyzing and interrogating the naturalization of phenomena, practices, and beliefs. Yet this counters the original Derridean logic of deconstruction. Derrida’s theorization was different. In *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, John Caputo summarizes deconstruction in line with Derrida in the following:

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things – texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need – do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, *that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy* (1997, 31, emphasis added).

What deconstruction for Derrida enhances is analyzing the way in which certain concepts are contingent upon each other, that is, how they in themselves do not have a meaning unless they are contrasted to one another. Thinking in line with Derrida here, I want to question whether bodies then also can be read as concepts or signs that do not have an inherent meaning, because similar to structuralisms’ conceptions on language and representation, Derrida too departs from the idea that meaning is not inherent to a sign. However, and contrary to structuralism, Derrida emphasizes how meanings and identities are not universal and how the observer or ‘reader’ of a sign is always already implicated in the meaning-making process, hence that meaning is constructed provisionally and relatively – it is always subject to change and dependent on one’s positionality.

Attending to the way in which one is always written into a process of meaning-making, Derrida examines how meanings of dualisms have come to be constructed, through what he terms ‘différance’. With the term ‘différance’, Derrida points to the continuous process of *deferral* that happens when meaning is made through *identity* (what it is) and *difference* (what it is not). Derrida here draws forth upon structuralist thinker De Saussure. De Saussure explains how meaning is constructed because signs differ from each other in the sense that “A is A because it is not B” (Andermahr, Lovell & Wolkowitz 2000, 61). To then extend this logic to the body: it is not about what a body *is*, but about what it is *not* – a negative relation that is similar to De Beauvoir’s explanation on how the category of ‘women’ is constructed as being everything that ‘men’ are not. Derrida furthermore adds to this ‘negative’ assertion that within this process of differing, a gap of meaning is produced between the actual sign and what it refers to, and hence that meaning is constantly deferred (Derrida 1998, xliii; Andermahr, Lovell & Wolkowitz 2000, 61). He states that:

Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer. A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable (Derrida 1998, 36)

In this quote, Derrida emphasizes the ‘gap’ of meaning that is produced through constant deferral, because speech, or writing for that matter, can never be a full representation of the thing it refers to. This is what Derrida means when saying that “representation mingles with what it represents”: representation is always partial because “the structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent” (1998, xvii). Philosopher Vicki Kirby who is also occupied with signifying processes and materiality accurately states that representation (still) is conflated with “the materiality of the real world” adhering to the mantra “It just is!” (2017, 4). What deconstruction then aims to do is to reveal the ‘hidden’ meanings in a text and to question its ‘is-ness’. For Derrida, it is not merely about what is *present* in a text – which would also evoke the question of “what it is that just *is*?” – but more importantly, what is *absent* or *excluded*. My question of ‘what about the body’ – then seeks to find affiliation in Derrida’s aim to expose what is excluded: ‘what’s in a body’ then can be followed by the question ‘what is not’?

Binaries and Signification

As discussed, meanings are produced through negatives, and the meanings that stick to a sign are opposed to each other in such a way that they do not specifically refer to ‘what is’, but instead refer to ‘what it is not’. What Derrida then critiques with his use of deconstruction, is how concepts are commonly constructed as binaries because the opposed terms do not get equally valued. Rather, it is one term that “occupies the structurally dominant position and takes on the power of defining its opposite or other. The dominant and subordinated terms are simply positive and negative versions of each other, the dominant term defining its other by negation” (Grosz 1989, 27-28). In this quote in which Elizabeth Grosz summarizes Derrida’s argument, two important points are made: 1) dualisms are defined by power in which the first term of a dualism dominantly defines the latter term of the dualism; and 2) the opposed terms are in fact negatives of each other. I will first clarify the latter point by giving an example in which I want you to think of, for instance, the notion of darkness and lightness: we usually think that we cannot know what darkness means unless we have experienced lightness. The same goes for man/woman; nature/culture; presence/absence; speech/writing: the existence of the former depends and relies on the existence of the latter. These ‘dualisms’ thus are not as opposed as they seem, but instead are more similar to one another than one thinks. For this reason, e.g. darkness or lightness not being a thing in and of itself alone, Derrida wants us to think about the constructed nature and the arbitrary relative relationality between these concepts.

In his argument for “the overturning and displacement of binary oppositions” (Derrida in Haddad 2010, 116), and the necessity to “proceed using a double gesture” (ibid), Derrida not only argues how the two terms of a dualism are constructed through negation, but also how power is inherent to the binary split. Throughout the Western history of metaphysics, the term before the slash has not solely been preferred over the latter term when considering how meaning is produced. The first term of the binary split also defines the latter. Binaries thus are never neutral or innocent but instead “form a “violent hierarchy” as one of the terms is always valued over the other” (Haddad 2010, 116). This, Derrida contends, is an effect of a long history in which speech was preferred over writing, something Derrida calls ‘logocentrism’. Tracing the tradition of speech back to the history of religion and the ‘word of God’, speech was used as a tool or as a dominant medium to convey messages which were considered as to totally and fully be (re)present(ing) some sort of ‘transparent’ Truth. In the history of metaphysics, from Plato and Hegel to Heidegger, these authors, Derrida mentions, “always assigned the origin of truth in general to the logos” (Derrida 1998, 2). Derrida has a problem with this conception of

speech being able to ‘represent’ the Truth. In his seminal work *Of Grammatology*, he further examines the binary of speech and writing, and the deconstruction of it. Here, Derrida argues that speech only exists because writing exists, doing so by questioning if there is such a thing as the ‘science of writing’ (1998, 4). Following structuralist thinkers, and specifically De Saussure, Derrida engages with semiology, and posits the notions of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ also along the lines of a binary split, in which signifier/signified also become ‘empty’ concepts for each of them also only exists when being opposed to the other (Quinan 2015, 356). As an effect of the Western tradition and its need to organize itself, signs, Derrida argues, have come to refer to, or expected to refer to, unitary concepts (1998, 18). However, this erases the reality of signification processes Derrida argues, in which signs lose their multiplicities. To make this more graspable, I want to give an example of a dog. The ‘concept’ of a dog exists out of two things: a signifier and a signified. The signifier refers to the word or the acoustic image (the word ‘dog’), whereas the signified refers to the concept or the meaning that is related to the signifier (a four-legged animal). Now when I say, think of a dog, we all most likely think of a different picture of a dog – I might think of a golden retriever while you might think of a wiener dog. Our imaginary conceptualizations are different because meaning is constructed discursively, and the imaginary conceptualization of dogs are multiple rather than homogenous. This incongruence between our different conceptualizations, and hence the arbitrary constructed and naturalized relation between the signifier and signified, is what Derrida aims to show with his notion of deconstruction. As this thesis is concerned with questions of the body, and how to be read, I find it helpful to use Derrida’s *différance* and *deconstruction* because both concepts consider the way in which signification and meanings are, in my words, *sticky*. Meanings get stuck to bodies (e.g. this body is ‘male’ because it is not ‘female’), they are made ‘absolute’ while in fact, as Derrida has showed, they actually are arbitrarily constructed.

Derrida and Feminism

Derrida’s work has been of profound importance for feminist theory and his theorizations of deconstruction and *différance* have paved the way for critically engaging with dualisms and meaning-making processes. As feminist theory often is concerned with undoing and challenging norms and dominant discourses and believes, Derrida’s intervention into signs has first of all enabled feminist thinkers to engage with identity in a way that allows them to look at subjectivities in a non-static way. Since, according to Derrida, there is no fixed ‘presence’, and as ‘presence’ is always relative too, feminist thinkers have been able to use his theory to

deconstruct the category of ‘women’, countering “essentialist and universalist statements about women’s identity” (Andermahr, Lovell & Wolkowitz 2000, 61). Through arguing that every ‘thing’ or ‘concept’ is “always already infected by its other, its outside, its adversary, its boundary or limit” (Grosz 2005, 89), Derrida paved way for queer and postcolonial theory to ‘undo’ normativities, subjectivities, and dominant beliefs. Grosz captures Derrida’s influence on feminist theory well, and expresses that Derrida not only invokes feminism and the topics of women’s bodies, sexuality and maternity (89), but also how his work on *différance* has been valuable for introducing the concept of ‘sexual difference’ as further theorized by prominent feminist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Hélène Cixous, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Spivak among other French and Anglophone feminists (91). Moreover, Derrida’s introduction of deconstruction has been pivotal in engaging with descriptive statements about identities, sexualities, and bodies, exposing how hierarchical implications within these statements are actually constructed upon falsely opposed and inexhaustive perceptions.

Foucault, and Power/Knowledge/Discourse

Having discussed how concepts and meanings come to be constructed by analyzing Derrida’s work, another question then follows, namely: how are meanings perpetuated within the symbolic order? To answer this question, I will attend to Michel Foucault’s theorizing on discourse, power, and knowledge. As previously mentioned, Foucault was particularly engaged with history and the way in which power emerges through institutions and produces dominant discourses. Central to discourse is the notion of *episteme*, which is the Greek word for ‘knowledge’. Discourse, in Foucauldian terms, is about dominant *practices* within societies – practices which, rather than merely stem from linguistic systems or texts, come into being through the production of power/knowledge. Accordingly, discourse is not a static thing in and of itself. Rather, it is *productive* and it creates *objects* through power/knowledge, for power, Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, cannot be separated from notions of knowledge/intelligibility:

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (1995, 27).

In this quote, Foucault discusses how power and knowledge operate together to inform discourse. Simultaneously, discourse produces and upholds power/knowledge. To slow down here, I first want to attend to the notion of power as implying the ability to make decisions; to exercise power over another; or the power that institutions or other regulatory establishments (state apparatuses) in a society have. Differently, the concepts of knowledge and episteme are concerned with how ‘we’ think, what ‘we’ believe, and how ‘we’ relate to the knowledges, beliefs and systems that make up ‘our’ world (think of e.g. heteronormativity or monogamy). Moreover, knowledge also refers to ‘intelligibility’. Following these definitions, what Foucault argues is that power and knowledge cannot be separated (1995, 187-194). Instead, they intertwine and operate together – power/knowledge are *discursively produced*. What Foucault implies is that power/knowledge is not ‘naturally given’ or ‘inherent’ to a society. Rather, it is something *constructed*, and power/knowledge is a *productive technology* that produces discourse and vice versa *as if* it were something ‘natural’ (194). To specify Foucault’s argument, I will incorporate the notion of the body/bodies into this power/knowledge/discourse structure and examine how this system operates through categorization and classification systems which serve to keep bodies ‘in place’. As this thesis ultimately desires to introduce trans* as potentially refusing categories of the man/woman dualism, discussing how discourse/knowledge/power relate to (gendered) bodies is significant because it illustrates how categories (e.g. man/woman; white/black; abled/disabled) have been produced in the first place, what the value is in upholding these categories, and why they are so persistent: it is to remain having and continue exercising power.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault examines how, among many other examples, homosexuality was constructed through the naming of it as such – it became a ‘knowable’ thing that was/could not be part of the dominant discourse, that is, heterosexuality. Since homosexuality became something ‘intelligible’ or ‘to be named’, such a demarcation enabled turning ‘its’ subjects into entities which could be controlled and exercised power over (through regulatory mechanisms). Additionally, the concept of heterosexuality (as opposing homosexuality) was coined and reinforced as dominant discourse (heteronormativity) (1978, 43; 101).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault directs more attention to the general construction of objects and subjects, investigating how bodies were made ‘docile’. Although “[i]t was certainly not the first time that the body had become the object of such imperious and pressing investments; in

every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers which imposed on it constraints, prohibition or obligations” (1995, 136), Foucault mentions that in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, around the rise of the industrial society and the rise of capitalism in Europe (221),

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political economy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies (138).

In this quote, Foucault tends to the relation between bodies and power – bodies that are controlled by power. Within the ‘political economy’ – a political economy that is not only capitalism, but as mentioned in the previous section, all institutions and disciplines that benefit from a production of dominant beliefs and the upholding of a certain kind of discourse – bodies came to be a viable medium to project upon, embody, and reinforce a dominant discourse (symbolic order) in such a way that it produces the effect of a ‘natural’ norm. The manner in which bodies adhere to these ‘naturalized’ norms not solely happens on an abstract level, but also on a physical, ‘real’, level. Power consequently operates both through the symbolic and corporeal. This is what Foucault clarifies by engaging with the architectural design of the ‘Panopticon’.

Drawing upon Jeremy Bentham’s notion of the ‘Panopticon’, Foucault articulates how bodies are coerced into a mechanism of power, and how knowledge operates together with power (Foucault 1995, 200). The Panopticon is an architectural construction; it is a design by Bentham specifically introduced for institutions such as prisons, asylums, schools etc. (199). The Panopticon is a circular physical space in which the observer/supervisor, the object, is situated in the middle of that space and has the possibility to overlook all subjects (197). All subjects (which must be surveilled – regulated, controlled, and ‘known’) are situated on the outside of the circular space. From this point of view, the subjects are under constant ‘watch’ from the objects: their bodies, acts, and gestures are intelligible, meaning that they are literally visible

and hence can be exercised power over. In a quest for knowledge and the application of categorization, the authorities

Exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.) (Foucault 1995, 199).

Because subjects are being surveilled, Foucault argues, they/we start exercising ‘technologies of the self’ and all start adhering to (un)written norms, beliefs, and expectations. Power, as such, is disciplinary in that “is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (Foucault 1995, 187). What Foucault means with this is that subjects – and ‘we’ are all subjects – start performing acts of self-discipline because we are under continuous threat of being interpellated (and punished) because of the ever-present gaze (195). Such self-disciplinary acts thus manifest both on the level of the symbolic and on the body. We *must* function within and not disturb the political economy (that is capitalism, that is heteronormativity, that is neoliberalism, that is monogamy, that is whiteness, that is gender as a binary order etc.). By making ‘us’ intelligible through delineating and classifying acts, gestures, and bodies, both on the level of the abstract or symbolic as well as the corporeal, the power/knowledge (state-apparatuses) constructs us as subjects. In turn, because of self-disciplining technologies, subjects internalize the norms in line with expectations/dominant beliefs/the symbolic order. This process, though rather simplified, points to the way in which discourse is productive, how discourse is produced by knowledge/power, and how knowledge/power produces discourse, according to Foucault.

The reason I extensively explained these different ways in which bodies get controlled, are subjected, and how they relate to power is important for my thesis because it helps understand how gender functions within the Western society. Moreover, it helps attending to the way in which gender is assigned to certain bodies, as well as how ‘non-normative’ bodies and identities get produced within discourse, something I will come back to more thoroughly in the next chapters. The assignment of gender is one way through which bodies get categorized, are made ‘intelligible’ and make up our discourse of gender as binary. Before elaborating more on this in

the section on Queer Theory, Judith Butler and their notion of gender performativity, I will first situate Foucault's legacy within the field of feminist studies.

Foucault and Feminism

Foucault's deconstructive approach to power/knowledge and discourse has significantly influenced feminist theory. Even though homosexuality and gender were not Foucault's main points of interest, nor was he trying to make an argument on liberating subjects from power structures, his theories have been taken up by many feminist thinkers, and arguably, undeniably helped shape contemporary Western feminist politics. Foucault specifically showed "that there are no objective and universal truths, but that particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become 'naturalised', in culturally and historically specific ways" (Sullivan 2003, 39). Foucault's attention to showing how meanings are not inherent to concepts or bodies, but rather discursively produced, naturalized, and reinforced through power/knowledge has been of profound importance for feminist theorists in questioning power structures, notions of Truth, and classificatory logics and the production of subjects. Again, as feminist theory aims to 'undo' and critically engage with naturalized understandings of e.g. categories of women, race, and other identity markers, Foucault's emphasis on showing how socially constructed relations and meanings are produced has been vital for feminist thinkers to deconstruct discourses that define and reinforce categorical logics (and subordinate certain subjects). In the next section, I will examine how exactly gender as a binary system is socially constructed and discursively produced through such categorical logics by drawing forth upon Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. Discussing the concept of gender performativity is helpful in showing how discourse is dependent on repetition and the internalization of expectations and norms, and further helps to illustrate how the body becomes a visible signifier for the embodiment of the norms.

Queer Theory

So far, this chapter has mainly engaged with post-structuralist French (male) philosophers – none of them being specifically engaged with queer theory. Nonetheless, these theorists and their ideas have been taken up by feminist thinkers, laying a foundation for queer theory, a critical movement that arose in the end of the twentieth century. Using Nikki Sullivan's definition of queer theory, the influence of Foucault and Derrida on the field becomes more apparent. She argues that "[q]ueer theory, as a *deconstructive* strategy, aims to *denaturalise* heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between

them” (Sullivan 2003, 81, emphasis added). This quote shows how queer theory relates to deconstructivist interventions centered around exposing processes of normalization and discourse. Derrida, as discussed in the first part of this chapter, was interested in language, and critically engaged with concepts and meaning-making processes. Through considering opposed terms as negations which in themselves do not have an inherent meaning unless they are contrasted to one another, Derrida’s *deconstruction* opened up ways to analyze how concepts and thus also identities and bodies are subjected to others’. His attention to the undoing of dualisms through deconstruction has been of importance for queer theorists in critiquing the man/woman dualism, and, as I will show, more profoundly revealed ways to consider gender roles, gender identities and gender expressions as socially constructed. Attending to Derrida is valuable with respect to this project because his approach to deconstructing dualisms which make up the symbolic order enables me to extend this deconstruction to gender as a binary framework. Foucault’s theorizations on discourse, power/knowledge, and docile bodies have also been taken up by queer theorists to engage with the way gender is assigned to bodies, and how these logics of gender as a binary system reinforce, perpetuate, and naturalize constructed power structures. Thus, both Derrida’s and Foucault’s influence on queer theory cannot be dismissed, as both authors helped questioning power structures and subjectivities. Judith Butler is one of the most well-known authors affiliated with queer theory, and their theorization on gender performativity brings back many elements of these post-structuralist’s methods and theories on denaturalizing dominant discourse/the symbolic order, but consequently, and exemplary for queer theory’s main topic of interest, extends it to gender and sex.

Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler is generally known for their seminal book *Gender Trouble* (1990). In their text, they distinguish gender from sex and sexuality, arguing that gender is a performative social construct rather than innate – inherent or fixed to sex, or natural. Butler mentions that their text was created to counter feminist literature that centralized a presumption that gender relates to notions of masculinity and femininity (2006, viii). Instead, they draw forth upon social constructivist theories and post-structuralist thinking that questioned relationality, binaries, and power constructions. In being in conversation with theorists from a diverse academic field, ranging from Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray to Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, Butler develops their argument on gender as performative. Some of the key concepts they engage with are ‘gender-performativity’, the ‘heterosexual matrix’, and ‘intelligibility’. These three concepts are vital in carefully laying out

their argument, which I will do in what follows. Engaging with Butler and their pivotal theorizations on gender in this section serves to bring together, and more precisely relate the formerly discussed post-structuralist understandings on how language and power/knowledge/discourse construct and assign meanings to (gendered) bodies.

Discussing gender and its relation to bodies, Butler distinguishes sex from sexuality, gender, and gender expression. Whereas sex points to biological characteristics – genitalia (so male or female [or intersex]) – gender is about how one identifies (man or woman [or gender non-conforming]) (2006, 8-9). Gender expression consequently refers to how someone proliferates themselves (think of appearance, so masculine or feminine), and sexuality is about one's sexual practices and desires. Within and structured by the heteronormative matrix, or compulsory heteronormativity, all of these things are normatively aligned in the name of cultural laws and constructed pre-given social structures, something I earlier identified as the symbolic order. In the heterosexual matrix, sex and gender expression are supposed to 'follow' from sex, and sexuality is derived from sex too through compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 2006, 24). Butler contends that "the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and *asymmetrical oppositions* between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female"" (24, emphasis added). Reading Butler's words here alongside Derrida's theorization on dualisms: two terms are opposed to each other through logics of negation, and the former term of a binary split constructs the latter one. Thinking more with Derrida, such a dualism is not only constructed through unequal power relations, but also constructs the effect of a meaning to a concept while it in fact is not inherent to a sign. Shortly and concretely: femininity is posited against masculinity as everything that masculinity is not – this is also what the patriarchal symbolic order is founded on. Furthermore, these notions of femininity and masculinity are expected to be mediated through the body, the 'male' or 'female' body which is presupposed to function as a sign. The assignment of gender to bodies then is perpetuated through discursively produced classificatory logics, which is what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix. Reading Butler's words while thinking about Foucault's explanation on the docility of bodies, Butler considers the heterosexual matrix to be a "regulatory practice[s] of gender formation and division" that is constitutive of an identity (23) – an intelligible identity. They mention that:

"Intelligible" genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. In other words,

the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice (23).

In this quote, Butler emphasizes the naturalization and structuring of ‘coherent identities’ through regulatory practices by the heterosexual matrix that seeks to maintain its subjects ‘intelligible’. The subject that *is*, *does*, *acts*, and *sexually desires* must, in one way or another, be made knowable within the symbolic order. This intelligibility consequently relies on the visibility of the body, for the body is considered a ‘passive medium’ that is supposed to signify cultural meanings (2006, 175). However, Butler argues that this desired coherency is an

effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (185, original emphasis).

Butler importantly notes that the ‘acts’ that produce the idea of a coherent identity are performative and are being performed on the body. The body comes to ‘stand’ for a gender, but rather than the body being gendered, it are the *acts* that create the illusion of a gender core, an “illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (2006, 185-186). This illusion of a ‘gender core’ is created in time through a “*stylized repetition of acts*”, and this repetition of ‘gendered acts’ is precisely what constructs meaning and establishes legitimization (191). Butler further continues to show how gender and gender expression are ultimately performed and rely upon the imitative structure of gender (187). Gender, Butler mentions, “proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” and “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (34). Clearly drawing upon De Beauvoir,

Butler concludes that gender – maleness or femaleness performed through masculinity or femininity – cannot be considered as something that one *is*, but rather something that one *does*, and hence there exists no natural relation between sex and gender (190). The body is not inscribed with meaning, but actively inscribes meaning, and over time, through the repetition of doing ‘gendered’ acts in a singular narrative, gender expression and gender have come to connote and refer to a singular, binaristic understanding of sex: woman/female/feminine/heterosexual; or man/male/masculine/heterosexual. These ‘relational’ conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality consequently are supported and reinforced through the binary cisheteronormative matrix (the symbolic order) that makes up the, what Foucault would call, dominant discourse (Butler 2006, 192-193).

Returning to Derrida’s theorization on how signs and meanings are opposed to each other, what seems to be created is a false dichotomy of masculinity/femininity, expressed through physical appearances and acts, which are consequently supposed to represent a male/female dichotomy. But also, I wonder, since meanings of signs are constantly deferred in this process of negation and acquire discursively produced meanings through repetition, is it possible to find a potential to open up here? Butler thinks so, and attends to the example of drag or parody to show how performances of gender that are said to refer to a ‘gender core’ can be subverted because the ‘acts’ and ‘gestures’ can be expressed arbitrarily by *any body* due to the imitative structure of gender (2006, 187). Through showing the constructedness of gender, Butler importantly contends that “there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it” (9). Is there then a potential of figuring non-binary through a deconstructive approach by further investigating the masculine/feminine dualism, following Vicki Kirby’s words when she suggests to “begin analysing the in-habiting of oppositional terms, taking leverage from the negative side of the binary, then we are inevitably faced with the spectre of *something more*, something which, because it embraces and confounds both terms, destabilizes their oppositional arrangement and refigures their meanings and implications” (2018 68, emphasis added)? To consider trans*ness as that which is *something more* than male/female or masculine/feminine? Though I will not answer this question with a rigid answer here just yet, I do want to think about whether trans*ness can find potential in the deferral, constantly re-becoming from the ‘in-between’, and not even desiring to go back to an ‘original’ or ‘real representation’? Precisely

because trans*ness might possibly occur outside the binary of man/woman and instead be lingering in the slash.

Chapter ii. Damn the Lord and the White Saviors – In the Name of Masculinities and Femininities, Amen(d)

In the first chapter I discussed post-structuralist thinkers, and their ways of considering meaning-making processes as relying on social constructs. As laid out, these social constructs reflect normative discourses that structure dominant thoughts and beliefs, depending on notions of power/knowledge/discourse, language and binary conceptualizations, and performative acts. Since this thesis engages with gender and the body and aims to problematize the binary logics inherent to the impositions of gender and its naturalized connotations, I have discussed Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. Gender, as Butler argues, should not be made equal to sex, nor does it causally follow from it. Rather, gender is a (social) construct, something performed in alignment with cultural and social expectations – which are all 'material' in nature for these expectations play out on the body and through expressions – of what 'gender' is presupposed to entail and physically look like depending on the assigned gender at birth. In other words, the body, as corporeal entity, materially manifests and signifies gender roles and the symbolic meanings that have come to connote gender. The way in which the ideas on what gender is supposed to look like and do, and more specifically, how gender as a *material* and *symbolic* expression is reinforced and re-circulated around can be, as delved into in the previous chapter, explained by using Foucault's views on power/knowledge/discourse and self-disciplining strategies. Further, the man/woman sex binary construction, following Butler's gender performativity, informs what masculine/feminine gender performances encompass in a Western, Eurocentric framework.

According to the heterosexual matrix, men and masculinity, as well as women and femininity are supposed to align with each other, thereby constructing the binary of men–male–masculinity/women–female–femininity. The body, as a visible signifier, is supposed to reflect both the cultural values and sexual characteristics that 'belong' to either side of the binary, serving to make the body 'intelligible' – something that also allows for classification and categorization. Following the Derridean logic of *deconstruction*, as I have explained in chapter one, the opposed alignments that structure the cultural conceptions of 'sex' (thus gender and gender expression) however only hold when contrasted against one another. Furthermore, as Butler shows, since there is nothing inherent to gender, femininity and masculinity make up 'empty' concepts that are constructed through a re-iterated performance of *doing* 'gendered' acts. In short, gender as it plays out on the body is both a product of *and* produces a discursive-

material reality that relies on processes of signification and performance. Considering gender as a concept that is materially-discursively produced has been of importance in deconstructing and ‘traversing’ the boundaries between the presumed men–male–masculinity/women–female–femininity dichotomy, countering biological-essentialist arguments that support the naturalization of gender roles, conservative rhetoric, and anti-gay and transphobic agendas. What I thus aimed to achieve in the first chapter is demonstrate how gender is constructed through the symbolic order, and how such symbolics and power relations are mediated through the body. What I am interested in examining in this chapter, is the way in which the discursive-material production of gender not only perpetuates gender roles and continues structuring gender as a binary order, but also reinforces and is predicated on violent colonialist logics. So besides attending to the constructedness of gender, I will focus on what such constructions *do*, who is included, and what rhetoric is perpetuated, namely, colonial and racialized discourses.

Laying out how gender is a colonial construct through engaging with feminist and decolonial philosopher María Lugones’ texts in which she discusses “the coloniality of gender”, this chapter seeks to engage with and expose the violence that comes with processes of gendering in the global West, for this violence particularly affects and concerns Black(ened) bodies and is continually and structurally used to justify and uphold systems of dehumanization. I use the term ‘Black(ened) bodies’ with respective use to Zakiyyah Iman Jackson. In her book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (2020), Jackson uses ‘Black(ened) bodies’, rather than ‘Black bodies’ to refer to the manner in which Blackness is a prescriptive and racialized category imposed on Black bodies. These impositions are not neutral, but instead turn the Black(ened) subject into the non-human, the animal, or the superhuman at once (2020, 1-3). Through racialization, the category of Blackness contains many connotations, and I use the ‘(ened)’ to emphasize how these racialized logics actively structure and posit Black(ened) bodies into the zone of ‘non-being’. To speak about Black(ened) bodies then highlights how Black bodies are *made* Black and consequently dehumanized by Whiteness and Antiblack discourse⁵.

By attending to the violence of gender and its colonial implications, this chapter aims to further problematize gender as a binary category and as something that is assigned to a body, or rather,

⁵ Importantly, as this chapter also engages with other decolonial feminist thinkers such as María Lugones, Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter who also theorize on Blackness, and as I do not wish to alter their wording, I will remain using the terms ‘Blackness’ or ‘Black’ when discussing their texts and relating it to Black bodies.

some bodies – particularly white ones. The question that guides this chapter then follows as: “How have femininities and masculinities come to be constructed in the Western world and what has been the ‘value’ of these conceptions?” As this thesis is concerned with the politics of gender and the body, and ultimately aspires introducing trans* as an imaginative potential to oppose cisheteronormative binary gender logics – as a hopeful and possible imaginative ‘way out’ – I find it important to first attend to the problems of gender, for they are reliant on binary and colonialist logics. In exposing the violent rhetorics in gender, I hope to draw attention to how the project of binary gender is *bigger* than just gender, and actually traverses other controlling operatives of the symbolic order, namely race and racialization. As such, the main goal of this chapter is to problematize gender and the imposition of gender on the body, for this process is, as said, predicated on colonialist logics.

As also laid out in the first chapter of this thesis, the constructed gender order is not as innocent as it seems, for it concerns questions of power and attends to systems of domination and mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion. To focus on the coloniality of gender, in line with Lugones’ thinking, is particularly important because it reveals the violence and violent structures inherent to the imposition of gender on bodies, not only for Black(ened) women and femininities, but also for masculinities and Black(ened) men. To specify this argument, I will focus on an understanding of gender as a modern/colonial Western concept which *humanizes* (white) people, for in order to become human, one needs to be gendered. Gender, as such a colonial construction, has and continues to purport systems of *humanization* and therefore also *dehumanization* through its impositions and symbolic meanings – systems of dehumanization that deem and actively construct Black(ened) bodies as abject. Hereby, the questions that structure such practices of dehumanization all rely on the general themes of inclusion *and* exclusion and follow as: “who is regarded human?”, and “who is deemed a man/woman – not just as a subject, but also as an object?”. As I will argue in this chapter following the decolonial and Black critical thinkers María Lugones, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, Tendayi Sithole, and Marquis Bey, Black(ened) bodies, through white imperialist and colonialist logic, are neither deemed objects, nor full subjects. Rather, gender as a colonial order structures Black(ened) bodies as ungendered subjects, for to assign a gender, one must be regarded to and recognized as human and vice versa. In order to make this argument, I divide this chapter into two sections. The first section engages with Black(ened) female bodies and the manner in which female flesh is ‘ungendered’. The second section then interrogates Black(ened) male bodies and masculinities. Though I generally aim to undo dualisms and desire to not make a rigid

distinction in genders because this perpetuates violent connotations inherent to the constructed dualism of man/woman, in this chapter I will run *with* distinguishing masculinities from femininities, for the manners in which gender is assigned to, or more precisely stripped off Black(ened) bodies is done through colonialist logics and methods. As will become clear, whereas Black(ened) women's bodies are sexualized and exoticized – stripped of their 'femininity' and becoming Black(ened) 'females' instead of 'women' – Black(ened) men face another problem, that is, they come to occupy an ambivalent place: one where their bodies are regarded to as non-human and superhuman at once. What this chapter then aims to do is problematize gender impositions and show how gender as a binary concept is used as an analytic category to abject Black(ened) bodies.

The Coloniality of (Un)Gender(ing) and Female Flesh

As this thesis is grounded in the field of feminist research, a field that aims to critically engage with power structures and the (de)naturalization of social, cultural, and political questions and topics such as race, class, and sex/gender, the first chapter of this thesis particularly engaged with gender and the body from a post-structuralist theoretical framework. Gender, as discussed in chapter one, is a material-discursive productive organizing structure that is imposed on and read through the body – a classifying system reliant on notions of 'coherency' – in which gender is presupposed to mirror biological understandings of sex. As a structure that consequently enables categorization and delineates normative discourses on bodily expressions, gender is indeed, as Lugones argues, at work "as a central organizational element of the modern neoliberal nation-state" (2020, 26). In the modern Western neo-liberal nation state and its organizing strategies of economic, political, and social life, this necessity of gender "is sometimes justified in terms of the nature of humans, their experiences, and the nature of biological and social reproduction" (29). In such organizing strategies, gender is furthermore (deliberately) confused for sex, understanding gender as both the "normative socialization of sex" and "the biological fact of the matter" (29). While Judith Butler has distinguished gender from sex, to not make a distinction as such precisely serves to perpetuate racialized logics.

In introducing the concept of the 'coloniality of gender', Lugones argues that the modern gender system is constituted through colonialist logics because the "classification of the population in terms of race is a necessary condition for its [the colonial, modern, gender system] possibility" (2008, 12). In other words, the imposition of a gender system is inextricably related to the

coloniality of power⁶ and the imposition of race, and either of these impositions exist in a mutually constitutive relation to each other (ibid). What this means more explicitly is that socialized understandings of sex (gender) were imposed on the colonized by the colonizers, and the hierarchical constructed distinction between the categories of men and women has become the mark to classify what is ‘human’ and thereby what is civilization (Lugones 2010, 743). The hegemonic heteronormative binary cisgender system that classifies, structures, and imposes conceptions of masculinities and femininities on bodies then not only forms a problem for trans* folx in the West, but importantly also manifests through the racialization of Black(ened) bodies.

The underlying colonialist logics of imposing gender systems stems from the necessity for colonizers to classify the colonized. Classification through gendering was done by the colonizers to maintain their own white, superior, European, modern bourgeois positions – only the civilized were categorized as ‘men’ and ‘women’ (Lugones 2010, 743). In adding gender to Aníbal Quijano’s argument on the coloniality of power, Lugones notes that “neither male nor female Indigenous people nor people kidnapped from the African continent and enslaved were considered and treated as gendered. Since animals are not gendered, gender became one of the marks of the human” (2020, 26). In this quote, Lugones states that gender is not always necessarily *assigned*, but more specifically *denied* – demarcating the binary between who/what is considered human and who/what is not. Gender thus comes to connote notions of humanity, and that exactly became something the colonizers deprived the colonized of, treating and perceiving them as non-human:

Thus, the human/non-human distinction plus the gendering of bourgeois European women made gender a mark of the human heterosexual couple. This is what I call the “coloniality of gender,” the dehumanization of colonized and African-diasporic women as lacking gender, one of the marks of the human, and thus being reduced to labor and to raw sex, conceived as non-socializable sexual difference (Lugones 2008, 33).

⁶ In his text *Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America* (2000), Aníbal Quijano coined the expression ‘coloniality of power’ to denote how power is predicated on and introduced by European capitalist settler colonialist logics in modernity (the era of colonialism) and continuously informs structures of hegemony and control.

In this quote Lugones not only exemplifies what she means with the coloniality of gender, relating the imposition of gender to humanity, but more importantly also discusses the consequences of enforcing sexual difference. In considering the colonized *only* sexually marked as male or female, “but without the characteristics of [masculinity and] femininity” (Lugones 2008, 13), their bodies became objects to be violated, rapeable, and “turned from animals into various modified versions of “women” as it fit the processes of Eurocentered global capitalism” (ibid). Similarly, Jackson makes a strong argument on the ontologized plasticity of Black(ened) bodies⁷. Jackson notes that in considering African woman as female rather than woman, “femaleness is paradoxically placed under the sign of absence, lack, and pathology in order to present an idealized western European bourgeois femininity as the normative embodiment of womanhood” (2020, 8). The process of gendering consequently not only denies Black women their womanhood, but also structures Black women’s sexuality. Lugones expands on the sexualization of Black women, and states that: “the behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful” (2010, 743). In short, Black women’s bodies were regarded as non-human, while simultaneously sexualized – an ambivalent relation between gender and sexuality which, in the confines of both Whiteness and patriarchy, strips Black(ened) women of their subjecthood. Interrogating the relation between sexuality and gender has also been of great importance to Black feminist scholar Hortense J. Spillers. In her seminal text *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book* (1987) she criticizes the *Moynihan Report*⁸ for pathologizing Black family structures. This work by Spillers is one of the most-cited texts within Black feminist scholarship, and I too will discuss this text in what follows because it helps to further inquire into Black femininities and the violence imposed on Black women’s bodies.

In *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*, Spillers shows how Black women’s genders are constructed. Criticizing patriarchal structures and showing how Black female flesh is *ungendered*, Spillers distinguishes the concept of the body from the flesh. This distinction allows her to attend to the

⁷ In her book *Becoming Human*, Jackson introduces the concept of ontologized plasticity to refer to the manner in which Black(ened) bodies occupy and are expected to be multiple things at once e.g. both ‘animal’ and ‘supra-human’ – a logic that shows how Black(ened) bodies are stripped of their personhood so that the body becomes excessive.

⁸ This highly criticized text written by sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan is officially called *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. In this report, Moynihan tried to do research on poverty among Black people in the United States, and one of the conclusions was that the dominant Black matriarchal, single mother, family structure was not caused by unemployment, but by absence or lack of the Black father figure.

way Black bodies are subjected to captivity. She writes that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (1987, 67). What Spillers here brings to the fore is that what from a Western post-structuralist perspective is considered as ‘Nature’ – the body – is actually mis-construed. Spillers argues that to have a body is to have subjectivity, i.e. a legibility in the social/discursive structure. And surely, in colonial times, this is something the liberal subjects (colonizers) do have but deprive the colonized of – instead, they are merely ‘flesh’. “If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative,” Spillers continues, “then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard” (ibid). The flesh in the way Spillers introduces it, first of all connotes that Black(ened) bodies are stripped of their humanity: it is the de-humanized abstraction of a body. Because Black female bodies were ungendered through colonialist logic, imposing and causing a “*loss of gender*”, what became necessary was an “altered reading of gender” for Black women as well as for Black men (77), hence her turn to the flesh. The abstraction of a body consequently not only continues to structure Black femininities, but also Black masculinities, and Spillers emphasizes the way in which Black(ened) bodies are continuously marginalized in the U.S. through being excluded from dominant normative gender orders and kinship structures (80). This structure is what Spillers calls the ‘American grammar’ (68): the symbolic order in which Black(ened) bodies are situated in the latter term of the constructed dualism of body/flesh, and that diminishes Black(ened) bodies to flesh that is not human and ungendered.

Drawing forth upon Spillers while discussing flesh’s ‘collateral genealogy’, Black critical thinker C. Riley Snorton accurately articulates that gender under captivity “refers to not a binary system of classification but rather to what Spillers describes as a ‘territory of cultural and political maneuver’” (2017, 12). In other words, the onto-epistemological framework that distinguishes the flesh from the body, in which “[captive bodies’] flesh functioned as a disarticulation of human form from its anatomical features and claims to humanity were controverted”, serves to uphold and reinforce the ‘American grammar’ (Snorton 2017, 18-19). In a move of reclamation, Spillers not only introduces the flesh to connote dehumanization, but also theorizes it as radical potential. Spillers states that: “in this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this social subject” (1987, 80). Precisely because Black women are placed outside normative gender and kinship structures, Spillers contends that a space of reclamation is opened

up to gain “ground as female social subject” (ibid). This is done not by “joining the ranks of gendered femaleness”, but rather through claiming, as Spillers states, “the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to ‘name’), which her culture imposes in blindness” (ibid). Although the flesh is ungendered, dehumanized, and places Black female subjectivities outside the normative American grammar, tuning in to this ‘monstrous’ flesh is also a site for resistance and potential according to Spillers.

In Snorton’s book *Black on Both Sides*, I also read the flesh as encompassing potential, precisely because he notes that the “[f]lesh is, above all else, a thing that produces relations—real and imagined, metaphysical and material” (2017, 40). Bringing attention to materiality and relationality, what attending to the flesh then does is that it emphasizes how power neither operates separately nor individually, but always in *co-constitutive* ways. Here, I consider the racialized flesh to be given a certain type of agency which forces into the world a relationality that moves in-between and throughout subjects *and* objects – a move that I will try to extend to trans* subjectivities in the next chapter by using the concept of transpositionality and attending to the corporeal – which always, besides imagined symbolic relations, produces material relations too. Though attention to relationality is important in opening-up and imagining potentialities for countering hegemonic power structures, I want to stay with troubling power and its coercive mechanisms in a hierarchical way a bit longer, thinking alongside Derrida and Foucault, to further expose the colonial violence and power structures inherent to the processes of gendering.

As this chapter aims to conceptualize how femininities and masculinities are constructed in the West and consequently show the inherent violent colonialist logics on which the assignment of gender is predicated, it is required to further problematize the way in which Antiblack discourse ungenderes Black(ened) bodies by disregarding them from humanity. Since this thesis is engaged with both critiquing the process of gendering, as well as the symbolic order that is inherent to such processes, discussing Blackness and race in relation to gender strengthens the value of my argument that eventually introduces trans* as potentially refusing the imposition of gender as a binary analytical category retracted from and imposed on the body. In order to further comprehend how colonial violence is intrinsic to the co-constitutive relation between race and gender, it is necessary to make visible the way in which a subject must first be recognized in dualistic structures of the body/flesh and conceptualizations of human/non-human by Western hegemony. In classifying and making Black(ened) people intelligible as non-human, (bare)

flesh, the gendering discourse that is structured by the American grammar/symbolic order/European (settler) colonialism continues to rely on and perpetuate Antirblackness. Sojourner Truth's famous question "Ain't I a woman?" could then only be answered with a 'no' (Lugones 2010, 745), for the Antirblack discourse would not even consider her having a body/being human. I am aware I am answering Truth's question here with a short 'no,' but would like to expand on this, not only by further investigating the question of what it means to be human, following Sylvia Wynter's argument on the construction of the Human and Man, but first by considering the manner in which Black masculinities relate to violent gender impositions. In doing so, I wonder: ain't they men either? These questions are not as neutral as they sound, for they also bring up other doubts, namely: what is the violence of being included in either of these categories of men or women; what is the potential of being included, or should we rather interpret the 'no!' as an agential affirmative refusal?

So far, this section has engaged with the feminine side of the symbolic *and* material dichotomy of gender. Before moving on to troubling the question of the Human and the assignment of gender on the onto-epistemological level as an analytical category, I will first run a bit longer with the man/woman dualism. I will interrogate the category of masculinity, more specifically, Black(ened) masculinity, since the modern colonial order of gender not only imposes violence upon Black(ened) women's bodies, but also upon Black(ened) men's bodies. In the bigger project of my thesis, interrogating what gender does and how it is used as and based on racializing and exclusionary mechanisms helps problematizing the structures into which the naturalized and constructed gender binary functions within hegemonic Western society.

Black Masculinities and the Question of the (Hu)Man

Having discussed Black(ened) women and femininities, in this section I centralize Black(ened) men and masculinities, because gender as a colonial construct not only considers Black women as ungendered, but also affects Black men. Recently, when I was walking through the city of Rotterdam, I overheard a confrontational conversation between two men and heard the white man calling the Black man 'boy', while the Black man was clearly over his 30's. The term 'boy' was a carefully chosen term, aimed at diminishing the Black man's masculinity and manhood to less than the white man's manhood. Paradoxically, I am also thinking of the murders that

took place in the United States of Tamir Rice, a 12 year old kid⁹, and Adam Toledo, a 13 year old kid. The two non-white kids (who were presumed to be equipped with guns but, in fact, did not carry them when they were being shot) were murdered by white police officers, respectively in 2014 and 2021 (Democracy Now, 2015; Democracy Now, 2021). In these instances, the police officers perceived the boys as no longer kids; instead, they were seen as men who were capable of doing ‘grown-up’ acts¹⁰. These two instances of white men expressing power over non-white men and boys through naming *and* acting upon this naming are exemplary for how Black masculinity is defined by white patriarchy. Being interested in further examining how language is used to purport and perpetuate violent structures through processes of *reading* Black (men’s) bodies and *naming* them, this section seeks to expose the way in which, under white patriarchy, Black masculinities and men are continuously and rigidly structured in a subject position in order to continue problematizing the white Western heterosexual gendering order. I do so by first examining Sylvia Wynter’s work with specific focus on the text *No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues* because it centralizes the issue of Black masculinities and the way in which Black males’ bodies get inscribed with meaning. Engaging with Wynter’s discussion on Black men’s bodies and their exclusion from the category of the Human helps illustrating how the corporeal Black male body is always read for and always already inscribed with meaning. I then move on Tendayi Sithole’s argument regarding *The Black Register* and the necessity to define Blackness from the position of the ‘category of the Unthought’. In this section on Black masculinities, I discuss Sithole’s introduction of what he calls a ‘Black Register’ because it is helpful in starting to open up and imagine differently the position of Blackness on the level of ontological and the symbolic. Last, my chapter aims to extend Sithole’s argument in view of Marquis Bey’s theorization on trans*ness and Blackness as fugitive from hegemony – a fugitivity that not only imagines the ontology of Blackness differently, but also focusses on embodiment and materiality. Bey affectively writes with and on the category of Blackness, similar to Denise Ferreira da Silva, Fred Moten, and Hortense Spillers, as some sort of philosophical skepticism – a praxis of invention that is responsive to white patriarchy/the Law. Discussing Bey’s argument helps bringing into view how Blackness

⁹ An article in *The New York Times* reports that in the case of Tamir, what was called across the radio was: “Black male, maybe 20, black revolver, black handgun by him” (The New York Times 2015). He however was not twenty, he was just twelve years old.

¹⁰ The white police officers acted towards the Black kids as if they were ‘superhuman’. Zakiyyah Jackson discusses the term ‘superhuman’ as something in which Blackness is produced as “a form where form shall not hold: potentially “everything and nothing” at the register of ontology” (2020, 3). In the examples of Toledo and Rice, their non-whiteness was suddenly recognized in structures of ‘manhood’ – which would, following Spillers and Lugones, imply gendering (so humanity). Contradictory, despite and because of their gendering, they were simultaneously acted upon as if they were ‘non-human’.

and trans*ness can be considered as unruly forces – forces that are in constant flight from hegemony that relationally structures and hierarchically defines Blackness (and Black(ened) bodies) in relation to Whiteness; and trans*ness (and gender non-conforming bodies) in relation to gender as a binary order. In this move, positing Blackness and trans*ness as political categories rather than subjective identity markers alone, Bey aims to open up the category of Blackness and trans*ness in order to imagine an otherwise and radically rethink ways of being. I discuss Bey’s work because while on the one hand they critique the symbolic order and show how Blackness and trans*ness are always in relation to the symbolic order – a line of thought I will continue to follow too – they also emphasize how being part of it also enables potentiality for resistance through fugitivity. Engaging with Bey’s thinking, their theorization makes me wonder if trans*, in and through its fugitivity, can indeed be posited as ontological refusal? Before trying to answer this question, which I will do in the next chapter, I first focus more on the relation between language, power, and Black(ened) male bodies to discuss how processes of naming and defining simultaneously precede the construction of subjectivities as well as produce fugitive bodies.

Responding to the problematic ways in which Black(ened) men are stripped of subjecthood through naming, Wynter sets up an open letter to her colleagues. In this open letter, she responds to the beatings of Rodney King. King, whom among many other young Black men who were unemployed and lived in the ‘inner city ghettos’, was referred to by the Los Angeles judicial system as N.H.I. – an acronym that stands for ‘no humans involved’ (Wynter 1994, 42). Reading this text in 2021, I am immediately reminded of George Floyd, a Black man who was killed by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on May 25th, 2020. Floyd’s repeated plead, while being choked by the policeman’s knee on his neck, that he “cannot breathe” went deliberately unheard – an intentional and fatal ignorance that closely fits into the narrative Wynter critiques. A narrative that follows the violent line of thought that black men are not considered/treated/respected as humans, and therefore their ability to breathe ‘does not matter’. Their matter does not matter, answering Barad’s question about “What makes us think that matter is lifeless to begin with?” (2015, 389): it is Blackness that is perceived and acted towards as if its matter is lifeless, as if there is no human involved. This classificatory mark of N.H.I., as Wynter presents it, reflects an Antiblack discourse in the West, one in which the lives of Black people, and specifically Black men, are constituted on approaching death for Black men are not regarded to as human. Now where does this leave us with Black masculinity?

Spillers, who is discussion with Saidiya Hartman and others in the round-table discussion *Whatcha Gonna Do?: Revisiting "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"*, revisits her influential essay twenty years later, elaborating on the way in which Black maleness is constructed:

That is what I was trying to suggest about certain performances of maleness on the part of black men, and what I was hoping to suggest is that black men can't afford to appropriate the gender prerogatives of white men because they have a different kind of history; so you can't just simply be patriarchal. You have to really think about something else as you come to that option. If there is any such thing as a kind of symbiotic blend or melding between our human categories, in this case of the diasporic African, then this is the occasion for it. Men of the black diaspora are the only men who had the opportunity to understand something about the female that no other community had the opportunity to understand, and also vice versa (Spillers 2007, 304).

In this quote, Spillers discusses how men of the black diaspora understand something about the female, and something which they understand about them, that is, what it is like, as elaborated on in the previous section, to not be regarded to as fully Human – as not being assigned a gender within the white patriarchal heterosexual gendering order. Reading Wynter's critique on the acronym N.H.I. together with this quote by Spillers, the manner in which Black masculinities are constructed not only relies on being excluded from the category of Human, but also reveals how this exclusion intersects with white patriarchy. I want to emphasize how this oppressive intersection inherent to the gendering order operates, for it shows how Black(ened) men's bodies get ascribed meaning through different exclusionary mechanisms which operate simultaneously and co-constitutively. The Black male body and its connotations make up a vital aspect of the perception of Black masculinities, functioning as a signifier to purport and justify violence through classificatory logic of which not only 'race' is part of the expression, but also sex. In Antiblack discourse, Black men cannot be 'as much men' as white men, and at the same time Antiblack discourse disregards them as Human – two moves that continuously inform and uphold the violent structures and are used to justify violence done to Black men. Within the logics of the dichotomy Antiblackness/Blackness, as Wynter continues, "the jobless, and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males can be *perceived*, and *therefore behaved towards*, only as the *Lack* of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American[?]" (1994, 43, original emphasis). This categorical logic in which the acronym N.H.I.

is relationally structured to Black men/masculinities makes up our, as Wynter cites Foucault, “present order of knowledge or *episteme*” (47). In a different yet resonating sense, Christina Sharpe accurately poses a question that summarizes the way in which Antiblackness, as argued in the previous section on Black femininities by drawing forth upon Spillers, makes up the symbolic order/American grammar: “[w]hat happens when instead of becoming enraged and shocked every time a Black person is killed in the United States, we recognize Black death as a predictable and constitutive aspect of this democracy?” (2016, 7). The symbolic order/American grammar constitutes Black(ened) subjects and informs an Antiblack discourse in which Blackness is predicated on death, on non-humanness: it is constitutive of ontologizing Blackness to a zone where its matter is situated in the zone of non-being, and especially the gendering order has informed and continues to perpetuate these violent structures which are based on the assignment of ‘humanness’. In what follows, I discuss Sithole’s text on Blackness and its relation to Antiblackness, as I seek to clarify how the symbolic order categorizes bodies and informs Antiblack thought that not only emerges through and on the site of the body or corporeal, but also and more significantly on the onto-epistemic level.

Political scientist Tendayi Sithole in his book *The Black Register* extensively examines the relation between Antiblackness and humanity, also by engaging with Wynter and her question of the Human. Sithole analyzes Blackness and Antiblackness at the level of the ontological, and his main argument is that Blackness is “written outside the register of the ontological” and instead “inhabits the zone of non-being” (2020, 8). It is this zone of ontological non-being that “structures Blackness to be in the ontological void, the zone which is marked by death as opposed to life” (ibid). This zone of non-being is characterized by death. It is a zone in which, when speaking about Black bodies, there is ‘no human involved’. The zone of non-being is thus a racialized position in which Black(ened) bodies appear in the world through their corporeality, which is set against Whiteness/Antiblackness (9). What then does it mean for black men to perform masculinity – a masculinity that cannot, as Spillers says, just be patriarchal for patriarchal masculinity is defined by white men and Antiblack discourse? The way in which Black(ened) men’s masculinity is differentiated from white men’s masculinity becomes evident when considering that Black(ened) men are not expected to go to school or work (Wynter 1994, 43). Black masculinity is instead associated with ‘being a Thug’ or fighting (Bey 2019, 45). Marquis Bey exemplifies this type of Black masculinity when stating that “I’ve never been in a real fight in my life and now I got a bunch of people expecting the big Black dude with tattoos to do his big Black fighting thing. Shit” (ibid). Masculinity (and specifically the connotations

for Black(ened) men) is not only harmful in perpetuating white masculinity, but also simultaneously is used to diminish Black(ened) men to, essentially, no-humanness. Masculinity then, again, functions because of and through Whiteness as an exclusionary mechanism. What happens when, considering that white masculinities define black masculinities through Derridean logics (think of the ‘slash’ and the imposition of meaning/signification in the dualism: white men–males–white-masculinity–human–life/black men–males–black-masculinity–non-human–death), we stay with Blackness as the latter term of the dualism? Or is the only way out for Blackness to not be equated with death and no-humanness to first and foremost do away with the order of gender altogether? In other words, the constructed episteme/discourse/symbolic order of Black(ened) bodies as ontological-zeroes is imposed by Antiblackness/Whiteness and comes into being through the order of gender. What happens if we only stay with the term after the ‘/’? I here want show how Black(ened) being is put into *praxis*, using the term *praxis* in line with Wynter’s introduction of “being human as a *praxis*” by way of referring to the “realization of the living” (2015, 3-4). Starting to move to open up narratives of how Blackness and Black(ened) masculinities and femininities can define themselves – possibly sidestepping hegemonic forces, for Black(ened) bodies get inscribed with meaning while simultaneously get written out of discourse through racialization – I first examine how Blackness and Black(ened) bodies may find ways to refuse categorization and ontological defining by further analyzing Sithole’s argument on Blackness as ‘ontological zero’. In a move of reclamation, of lingering in the ‘void’, with reference to Barad who theorizes on the void as an endless exploration of possibilities (Barad 2015, 396), I read Sithole to be imagining a potential in refusing ontology yet being relationally structured by it. Sithole’s move is something which I in the bigger project of this thesis aim to do with trans*ness, tuning in to the questions if and how trans*ness can be posited as ontological refusal, or whether it is sufficient to be relationally structured by the symbolic too?

Sithole, in thinking *from* and *within* Blackness as ontologically defined against Whiteness/Antiblackness, is invested in re-defining a Blackness that is “uttering for itself, without being mediated” (2020, 4). In introducing what he calls ‘The Black Register’, Sithole aims to open up an otherwise. While considering how Blackness is relationally defined by Antiblackness, Sithole also forms a critique that precisely departs from Blackness as the “onto-epistemico site that has been rendered object and thus dehumanized” (2). Through staying and dwelling in the embodiment of Blackness, ‘The Black Register’ proposes “ways of thinking, knowing, and doing that are enunciated from existential struggle against Antiblackness” (ibid).

This position that allows for different ways of imagining an otherwise comes into being exactly because Blackness is placed outside the zone of humanness and in the zone of non-being: the notion of the Human is, after all, predicated on anti-black racist logics that structure the Human in opposition to race (Human/black), gender (Human/female-male), and the animal (Human/animal) (Jackson 2020, 2-3). In making Blackness equal to non-being/non-humanness, a discourse reinforced by and for Antiblackness to be upheld, any thought that comes from the oppositional stance against hegemonic claims that devoid Blackness of life, is an affirmative thought that thinks, knows, and does otherwise:

[T]he thought that comes from those rendered nothing, the thought that comes in a form of discursive oppositions in order to affirm life itself, Blackness is no longer defined; it defines itself, and yet at the same time, it admits that there is still colonization of thought be subjected to discursive oppositions, since subjection still remains. (Sithole 2020, 23)

I understand Sithole to be arguing for staying with the nothingness – the N.H.I. – and it is in and from this nothingness that Blackness occupies the ‘Category of the Unthought’ in which bodies can articulate their thoughts. Through staying with the nothingness – or perhaps rather amounting to Donna Haraway’s call of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016, 1), in which “Blackness will cause trouble, trouble, trouble” (Bey 2019, 32) – there is “a fugitiveness of refusal, objection” (Sithole 2020, 21). In other words, through the affirmative move of thinking ‘unthinkable thoughts’ that are emergent from bodies rendered as non-existent, what happens then is that a mode of *praxis* is activated – a mode of onto-existential being that objects to modes of subjection (Sithole 2020, 21). Similar to Sithole, Zakiyyah Jackson offers to think of the potential that might arise when thinking of Blackness as outside structures that are deemed “legible and codified in law and the dialectics of Man” (2020, 36). For within these dialectics of Man, they argue, Blackness is said to be included in a ‘universal humanity’ that precisely perpetuates Antiblack logics (32). In Eurocentric humanist thought, “instead of denying humanity,” Jackson states, “black people are humanized, but this humanity is burdened with the specter of abject animality” (27). They consequently wonder which different ways of being/knowing/feeling emerge from sidestepping notions of ‘universal humanity’. Comparable to Sithole, I read Jackson to also be saying ‘no’ to Eurocentric hegemonic orders of humanity and inclusion, amounting to, what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls, “refusal as a mode of engagement” (2018, 22). In short, these authors all see potential for Blackness in sidestepping ontological defining as this is always already implicated in Whiteness/Antiblack discourse.

Through refusal, a praxis of imagining/being/thinking/knowing/feeling subjectivities otherwise is created. I am interested in further engaging with what such an activated mode of refusal entails, aiming to extend this praxis to trans*ness, in which trans*ness might refuse gender, by ways of potentially disrupting the symbolic order – the imposition of gender as a binary cistem. In illustrating what such a praxis of refusal with regards to Blackness (and trans*ness) might look like, both on the level of the symbolic as well as on the level of the corporeal, I tend to Marquis Bey’s notion of fugitivity.

In *Them Goon Rules*, Bey considers Blackness (and trans*ness) to be a para-ontological refusal. They convey that Blackness and trans*ness, both as political categories and embodied subjectivities, form modes of irregularities that threaten hegemonic heterosexist and racist structures: Blackness and trans*ness “go by them goon rules”. To go by them goon rules is “a praxis of *unruliness* in the sense that the deviancy cast upon those who undermine systemic rule is mobilized in service of the deviant” (Bey 2019, 16, emphasis added). The systemic rules they talk about not only encompass rules as in the Law – in which Blackness/trans*ness hinge on a certain kind of lawlessness, one that specifically can be elaborated on when turning towards Black(ened) masculinities. These systemic rules also relate to non-normative socialities – dominant discourse’s biggest nightmare to think with Foucault’s ‘docile bodies’ for a moment because hegemony needs everyone and all bodies to participate. Despite hegemony’s desire for inclusion, Blackness (and trans*ness), according to Bey, come into being through excess and are always already deemed unruly by the symbolic order (and/or the ‘American Grammar’/hegemony) because these regimes are structured by Antiblackness/binary cisheteronormativity. What then occurs for Blackness and trans*ness is a kind of fugitivity that opens up an otherwise. In the next chapter I will profoundly and extensively focus more on *how* Bey argues for an otherwise that is “in excessive refusal of what we have now” (20), because their pedagogy of unruliness through reclaiming a fugitivity enables potentials for imagining trans*ness and *embodying* trans* otherwise. For now, I particularly show *what* notions of excessiveness and unruliness *do* to Black(ened) masculinities: how Black(ened) masculinities are fugitive from and in opposition to hegemony, and instead linger in an unruliness that screams from and forms a disruptive lawlessness as a praxis of being – a disruption or refusal that does not blink for Foucauldian categorization and docility. I do so by engaging with Bey’s affective writing on them ‘being called a Thug’ and participating in ‘dawg’ fights.

What is in a name – “[w]hat’s in a thug” is what Bey questions when they are being called a ‘thug’: a likening they have experienced ever since they have put on some muscle and got their first tattoos (2019, 37). Visibility of the body here again instantly does the work of classification, congealing their aesthetics “into an instantiation of Blackness” (Bey 2019, 39): this Blackness, and the idea of a Thug happens “in the *gap* between appearance and the perception of difference, streamlined through a history that has emblemized criminality through proximity to Blackness” (37, emphasis added). They thus note that Black masculinity, performed on the body in a certain way, connotes and is in proximity to being called a Thug – a naming that in the U.S. is a “consolidation of projected fears and the irruptive breach of social propriety”: “a fear of power’s disintegration” (40). This image of a Thug combines maleness and embodied Blackness into a persona that exemplifies the anti-thesis of White patriarchal masculinity (which for all sakes cannot be interrupted). This idea of a Thug converges with the type of young Black males Wynter talks about when critiquing the enactment of violence inherent to the used acronym N.H.I.: a logic in which their ‘unruliness’ (think of the jobless, the school drop-outs/push-outs, the ‘ghetto’ – all possible ‘threats’ to normative regimes in which ‘thuggish’ Blackness embodies, as Bey calls it, ‘existence manqué’: ‘existence gone wrong’ (2019, 42)) can be *perceived* and *acted towards*:

One need not mourn the murder of a thug, it goes, as the thug (admittedly an overwhelmingly masculine term) was inevitably going to—if he hadn’t done so already—commit some unconscionable act, whether jack your car, gun down an innocent child, mug an old lady, smoke a doobie, or burglarize your house. Hell, the thug may have been going to church, helping the sick and dying, volunteering at a homeless shelter, rescuing kittens from a burning building, donating to charity, or eating chocolate chip cookies. So long as the thug was given over to Blackness and thus, by virtue of that Blackness, *bound to* be on their merry way to do some dastardly deed, then it’s only morally upstanding to eliminate the threat—the inevitable threat— before it strikes. As long as the name is placed, it follows that one will act in accordance with what that name signifies. And of course, who in their right mind would treat a thug well? (Bey 2019, 40, original emphasis)

This quote by Bey affectively reminds us that thugs (and in general Blackened male bodies [say their names: George Floyd, Vincente Belmonte, Robert Howard, Xzavier Hill, Patrick Warren, Jenoah Donald, Marvin Scott III, Dominique Williams, James Lionel Johnson, Daunte Wright,

Matthew ‘Zadok’ Williams (SayEvery.Name)]) simply do not have a chance in *living* and *being* whether playing not or playing by the rules – so why not be unruly anyways? Because “what’s in a thug?”; what’s the use of “going by them rules?” To depart from Blackness allows, precisely because it is placed in the zone of non-being, to enact from and dwell in the Undercommons (Fred Moten and Stefano Harney 2013): to stay with and find otherwise thoughts, unthinkable thoughts that rather be fugitive than compliant to false assimilationist promises, to participate in dawg fights because “people wanted to see the buff Black dude fight” (Bey 2019, 45).

Bey thus too, alongside Sithole, not only lingers with and in the trouble, or rather, that what is made troubling (Blackness), but also finds refuge in here. This doing/being Black in an Antiblack world, by virtue of being, “signals a fugitive escape that provides a glimpse into another way, an other way, to be” (Bey 2019, 41). Is this what happens when lingering in the latter term of the slash of the dualism Whiteness/blackness, destabilizing Whiteness in such a sense that the body becomes “unstable – a shifting scene of inscription that both writes and is written; a scenario where the subject takes itself as its own object, and where, for example, an image could be said to re-write the image-maker in a movement of production that disrupts the temporal determination of what comes first” (Kirby 2017, 69-70)? Is there indeed, as Bey imagines, a potential for Blackness in living in a space that puts one’s being into the void, and that already presumes an unruliness/Lawlessness/threat written on a body. Imagining an otherwise through unruliness and fugitivity as a contra-stance to pessimism, for imagination remains vital in order to keep living (Hartman 2019, xiii-xiv). How can we, within the hegemonic order, imagine such a space of the void as not only suffocating, but also as opening-up different ways of being and finding endless possibilities (Barad 2015, 396)? Bey considers Dawg fights to exemplify such a praxis in a space. These street fights that happen, are “not senseless acts of violence but meaningful forms of racial and gendered validation, economic restoration, community building, and self-assessment. These fights are worthy of tears” (51). In taking part in street fights (something forbidden by the Law), new rules emerge in that unruliness – rules in which Blackness has an opportunity to stand up and not be knocked down, and I guess that even a defeat would be fine, for at least their bodies were ungoverned and it for once was a fair(er) game to begin with.

Chapter iii. Trans* as Ontological Refusal and Disruption: E#/Fb ; B#/Cb

Do you know about the philosophical thought experiment about perception and observation:

“If a tree falls in a forest while there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

I invite you to imagine a domino effect of falling trees; colossal damage; grounded roots being pulled out of the ground & the ravaging wind blows silently.

Sssstt keep quite;
shy wanders & delicate shivers

Am I the tree or the wind?;
does the sound even matter?

Contrary to the past couple of years, I suddenly find myself remarkably disinterested with, or perhaps indifferent to, the question of gender. Non-binary expressed and practiced smoothly and remarkably *undisturbed* – a soothing lack of disruption, interpellation, or misgendering. My concern with “how to be read?” – my body usually betraying my mind – was not answered with a response. Might it be the lack of social engagement and interaction due to the global pandemic that has impacted everyone’s life in the past year? Or might it be the constant engagement with the topic of gender as a Gender Studies student? And/or might it be a notion of acceptance – I do think it is the former reason. Different from the first two chapters in this thesis, this chapter will be less of a theoretical endeavor. Instead, I will depart from ambivalent embodied feelings: disinterest, frustration, and desire. While I yearn for recognition, I, similarly to trans theorist Susan Stryker who speaks with, through, and from her rage, am fed up with the heterosexual economy that dictates the symbolic order and ‘invites’ trans* people to partake in some sort of ‘proper’ embodiment.

In 1994, Susan Stryker wrote her seminal piece *My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage* in which she speaks from and about her transgender rage. While the text has been published more than twenty-five years ago, I still feel affected by and recognize myself in this rage. Stryker’s transgender rage stems from her feeling of embodiment: the embodiment of a transsexual body that is deemed ‘unnatural’ by the ‘natural

order' because the 'natural order' is structured around living up to satisfactory "norms of gendered embodiment", something Stryker's 'monstrous' transsexuality 'fails' to live up to (1994, 253). In claiming a 'monstrous' transsexual subjectivity, Stryker turns towards non-human embodiment as a way of subversive resistance: a reclamation that allows her to deny being structured in accordance with the hegemonic gendering schema (Butler) because it relies on a regime of signification and processes of materialization which function to stabilize binary gendered categorizations (Stryker 1994, 253). By saying that "I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster" (246), Stryker both precedes and turns away from the act of being included into classificatory regimes of 'humanity' for, as she states, the natural order would not grant her subjectivity as fully human due to the means of her embodiment that exists out of "flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born" (245). To turn to non-human embodiment, or the (in)human, then "cuts both ways, toward remaking what human has meant and might yet come to be, as well as toward what should be turned away from, abandoned in the name of a better ethics" (Stryker 2015, 228). This move of denying and resisting notions of humanity has significantly influenced the field of Trans Studies, and laid ground for and inspired other scholars to attend to the materiality of marginalized bodies. Similar to Stryker, authors who have significantly influenced the field of Trans Studies by finding different usages of language, methodologies, and entry points by means of critiquing the category of the Human are Eva Hayward, Karen Barad, Vicki Kirby, and Marquis Bey. What all of these authors have in common is their turn towards physical matter – attending not solely to the signified or symbolic, but also to the 'real thing' e.g. the materiality of bodies or objects – and their engagement with (para-)ontology. Inspired by Hayward's notions of regeneration and wholeness, Barad's intra-activity and agential matter, Kirby's question whether Culture was Nature all along, and Bey's theorization on the para-ontological force of fugitive trans*ness, this chapter seeks to critically engage with the ontologization of trans* matter, and specifically aims to find ways in which trans* could function as a refusal *and* disruption of binary conceptions of gender. The question that guides this chapter follows as: Is there a way to perform gender that can be understood as ontologically refusing or disrupting notions of femininity or masculinity as defined by the Western framework, both on the level of the symbolic and the material? In an effort to answer this question, this chapter will move between *embodying* trans*ness on the level of the material, that is, the corporeal, and trans* matter as figured through onto-epistemological frameworks. It is in the relationality between these two levels – the material matter of the (gendered) body and the being-ness of gendered bodies in which I find myself experiencing rage – that this chapter tries to find ways to introduce trans*

as a potential disruption or refusal of Western hegemonic symbolic understandings of gender as a binary framework. In rage and laughter, I think of all the times when

my friends and I often joke saying that ‘my body is a cage’ – a c c c c a a g eeee//catch me (if you can)//say it//you got me trapped//‘madam’ *uhm* ‘sir’: I don’t turn my head and certainly don’t speak up but echo Foucault’s ‘visibility is a trap’ in my mind

In her critique on transsexual embodiment and the symbolic order, Stryker notes that “[T]he subject must constantly police the boundary constructed by its own founding in order to maintain the fictions of “inside” and “outside” against a regime of signification/materialization whose intrinsic instability produces the rupture of subjective boundaries as one of its regular features” (1994, 252). Within the binary cisheteronormative matrix/the symbolic order/Nature, the ‘outside’ that Stryker talks about is the body and its physical features which are gendered and get assigned meanings to. The body, as corporeal entity, or physical matter forms the ‘outside’ – it is what one can see and something that is ‘read’ for meaning. This ‘outside’ body (the body as expressing a gender) functions as a visible signifier which is supposed to be intelligible and represent the ‘inside’ – one’s gender identity. The body which is always already (t)here, as Derrida would say (1998, 291-292) is here only read as a passive text that, under all conditions, must be (made) understandable because

bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transforms the flesh into a useful artifact. Gendering is the initial step in this transformation, inseparable from the process of forming an identity by means of which we’re fitted to a system of exchange in a heterosexual economy. (Stryker 1994, 253)

In this quote, Stryker discusses how the process of gendering has come to be a way of ‘mattering’ in the sense that only through the process of gendering a body it is assigned subjectivity and in turn can be regarded to as meaningful. Stryker and her transsexual body, as mentioned before, want to get away from this relational gendering order – a relationality that collapses the body/mind; sex/gender; and gender identity/gender expression – and she does so by turning to (in)human monstrosity. In defying to aim for coherency and humanness, she, like

Eva Hayward, turns away from claims of human subjectivities in theorizing on being trans*¹¹. Finding ways to express trans*ness, I read trans* subjectivities as theorized ‘like the monster’ (Stryker 1994) or ‘like a starfish’ (Hayward 2008). Indeed, trans* is *like* the monster, and yes trans* is *like* the starfish but no *matter* whether trans* is ‘monstrous/unnatural’ or ‘whole’ to begin with – re-generative; re-folding; and re-working – most of all and what is important to my question is that trans* *is*, adhering to its existence and being-ness. And it is precisely in this *is*-ness, in its being-ness, that I wonder if trans* secures its existence and defies the logics of the imperative ‘Don’t exist’ (Cox in Hayward 2017, 191) and hence disrupts/refuses? Put differently, I want to examine if trans* in existing always already forms a resistance to cisheteronormative discourse’s wish for a compliance of gender within a binary system. In order to lay out *if*, and *how* trans*ness disrupts, this chapter moves in-between registers and converges corporeal embodiment *and* ontology, desiring to illustrate how trans* bodies often pose not only a dissonance to signification/materialization regimes, but also how they traverse binaries between culture/nature, and mostly in the shape of conceptions of femininities/masculinities.

Materiality and Trans* Embodiment

Reading the prefix ‘trans-’, I think of trans-* as in going *across* or *beyond*. Though either of these meanings do imply some sort of linearity – moving from one place or thing to another – what either of these meanings also have in common is that they are grounded in an idea of *movement*, of *change*. Poet and gender non-conforming activist Alok Vaid Menon beautifully writes the following line in their text *Being Felt, Not Necessarily Known*:

who i am — let alone my gender — is in constant flux, shifting on where i am, who i am with, what i am doing, what i am feeling, what i am needing. i understand the desire to be known, i empathize with the desire to be recognized. but recognition at what costs? sometimes i worry coherence is another form of containment (2019).

¹¹ While Stryker and Hayward speak of transsexuality, a term that today can possibly be interpreted as rather outdated and stigmatizing because it has come to imply the process of undergoing of physical changes from one gender to the other, I speak of trans* as an umbrella term to denounce non-conforming gender identities. A trans* that opposes binary cisgender categories and more specifically calls itself non-binary. Though there is not one definition of what non-binary identities contain, what most people who identify as such have in common is the desire to traverse/go beyond/linger in-between the dichotomous male/female categories. Personally, and to position myself, what trans* non-binary means to me is to turn everything that is considered ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ into an ambivalent question mark and to embody this open-endedness that follows from it. A trans* that might be a bit rebellious indeed, like Tendayi Sithole’s figure of “the Rebel” (2020, 47), that stands up and says ‘no’ to any gendering order.

Alok here affectively writes on their gender as being in flux, apt to change, but not just a changeability that is rooted in itself for itself, but that is rooted in the desire to be recognized. A recognition of gender that is mediated through the body which is expected to be expressing a coherent 'inside'.

Similar to Alok's concern regarding the body as a container, a bag of nouns, Hayward similarly emphasizes how the body is in constant shift. "The body", as Hayward states, "(trans or not) is not a clear, coherent and positive integrity" (2008, 256). Although often cited as having the function of containment only, the body is an unstable entity which is in constant flux. As Hayward shows in her text *Lessons From a Starfish* (2008), the body adapts, changes, interprets, is interpreted, and constantly is in the process of *becoming*. Contrary to this intrinsic nature of change-ability – the body always *in* and *on* the move, breathing and aging – in hegemonic Western discourse, the body as corporeal substance is preferably denounced as a fixed rigidity that can be carefully aligned in frames of 'intelligibility' in order for it to be spoken into appearance and for it to be categorized. To give an example: one often finds expression such as "that body is black/female/disabled" or "this body is white/male/abled". As discussed in chapter one, in alignment with Foucault and his theorization on docile bodies, gender functions as a disciplinary power, in which the materiality of a body functions as a signifier from which meaning can be *retracted* and on which meaning can be *imposed* due to its visibility (Foucault 1995, 187). Within the signifying system that is structured around the legibility of cultural codes and the production of knowledge/power, bodies are made intelligible. Intelligibility functions through a signifying regime in which bodies are read for certain characteristics which are to be interpreted and are expected to produce and contain meaning in a specific context. Bodies then not merely just exist as physical entities, but physical characteristics have come to *connote* and are *read* for other implicit meanings. As further laid out in the second chapter of this thesis, such impositions of implicit meanings and connotations function through a gendering order and concern notions of humanity, racialization, and sexuality. Concerned with exposing the violence inherent to gender impositions and the function of gender as disciplinary power, I specifically looked at Black(ened) bodies and the manner in which Black(ened) bodies are made ungendered through colonialist logics on which gender is predicated.

To come back to the body as signifier more generally, the body can be understood to operate as a mediator in a relational constitutive meaning-making process: following Butler and Foucault,

on the one hand, the body is *read* for meaning, while on the other hand, the body also *produces* meaning. While always implicated in power and notions of knowledge and discourse, in this two-dimensional process, the body is then not only a passive object, but also an active subject that, as Butler argues, continuously participates in a discursive performativity that produces the effect of and re-installs a hegemonic order (the heterosexual matrix) through repetition (2006, 24). Yet, at the same time, although the body is not just a blank page ready to be inscribed with meaning according to Butler, I understand the (gendered) body to still be functioning as signifying material whose meaning can change depending on cultural and social interpretations of its visible materiality. In her discussion on Butler's introduction of the concept of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Vicki Kirby accurately remarks that "the body's surface becomes the site of engagement. Butler reads the body as a changing text, or as a discursive effect, such that the body's perceived outline is constantly changing" (1997, 126). Materially and discursively produced, for Butler the body is thus not a static or rigidly inscribed materiality, but instead is apt to change. This is a conclusion that can also be made when considering that gender is performative: since gender is not inherent but rather an effect of something 'real' that comes into being through repetitive acts and gestures which are presumed to refer to a 'gender core', these performances ought to be done 'differently' and create a different illusion of a 'gender core' – something Butler shows through the example of drag. Nonetheless, despite the body not just being a blank surface to be inscribed, and though effects of gender are discursively produced on the body, to theorize alongside Butler, the recognition of a body's materiality (that performs whatever 'gender core') remains reliant on notions of 'dependency' or 'causality'. Here again I would like to quote Kirby's critique on Butler, who states that: "Matter for Butler may not be a blank or passive surface, *but it is still a surface*, and one that demands to be interpreted or written upon, *by something other than itself*. It seems that matter is unintelligible to itself, and this lack of intelligibility can only be remedied by thought/language" (1997, 114-115, emphasis added). The body thus comes into being relationally and through language pertaining to others' interpretations/recognitions while it does not necessarily come into being by 'itself'. And it is exactly in-between these relational interactions where my problem with the body as signifying matter that emerges through culture and socially constructed conceptions lies. For the being-ness of matter, and thus also the recognition of trans* matter, remains dependent on processes of interpretation (reading for meanings) and writing (imposing meanings) *by others*. The body, trans* or not, is then always already predicated on constitutive logics that happen *in relation to others*. Referring to the introductory words of this chapter, for the falling tree or the sound to be perceived, the tree

itself first *must* be perceived in one way or another by someone or something. What I want to hint towards is that the be(com)ing of a body, perhaps like the tree, is in a two-sided relationality, because the body, trans or not, reads and writes. However, this is a two-sided relationality that essentially still builds upon and lingers in-between a cause-action model – a model or process in which my be(com)ing and existence depends on others’ recognition of my be(com)ing. Does perception precede the affirmation of existence, or can we affirm existence without being perceived?

While trans* matter might write itself through expressing and be(com)ing, because of its dependence on others’ conceptions on intelligibility, trans* matter nonetheless might still be read in alignment with the hegemonic binary cisheteronormative matrix. In short, while the trans* body *is* an active subject, its attempts to write beyond the binary (and resist the constructed ‘intelligible’ frames of male or female) are easily undone by hegemonic processes of ‘reading’ a body – processes that are informed by dominant symbolic connotations. To clarify this, I want to think with Kirby’s critique on Butler’s consideration of the relation between matter and signification. Kirby states the following: “Butler notes that “signs work *by appearing* (visibly, aurally), and appearing through material means”. As the sign is made up of “the materiality of the signifier itself,” Butler concludes that materiality is therefore “bound up with signification from the start”” (Butler in Kirby 1997, 110). What Butler argues in these quotes is that meaning is always already given to a sign when it appears: meaning thus precedes materiality and material becoming. Reading the body as a sign which is already bound up with signification from the start, I wonder to what extent trans*ness’ materiality that, although writing for itself (e.g. expressing itself in ways that might not be in alignment with dominant conceptions of ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’), can disrupt hegemonic meaning-making processes? This question stems from the desire of imagining trans*bodies as not immediately being ‘classified’ (through appearing) into either of the binary categories of male/female – a process which, if considering that bodies are already bound up with signification from the start, will undeniably occur because the signifying processes (that allude to categorization) are structured by the symbolic order that dictates gender as a binary order. The body’s signifying matter, presuming that the body is a corporeal sign, is still said to go through a vacuum of interpretations that disregard trans* subjectivities as monstrous, (in)human, non-existent, and most of all, still as man *or* woman because “we’re really just the gender we were assigned at birth” (Cox in Hayward 2017, 191). The tension that occurs from this perpetual presence of the physical (trans*) gendered body which remains rather rigidly and relationally structured to the

pervasive construction of gender – gender as an analytic, colonial, category which aims for congruence – consequently raises the following thoughts or questions: Can and should we try to get away from the body, and/or can we read trans* bodies as being in a different relationality to the hegemonic – oppositional structured – gendering order? Is there still a way in which trans* can disrupt gender as binary order, and if so, how so or what would that look like?

In trying to make an argument on how trans* materiality disrupts hegemonic conceptions on gender, I want to return to Kirby's words when she notes that the "anatomical body emerges as reality's harshest truth," (1997, 71) and also that "If we are only ever dealing with the signification of matter rather than with the stuff of matter as such, then 'constructedness' cannot be opposed to the fact of matter" (73). Here, Kirby brings to attention how materiality should not be forgotten in considering how meanings are constructed through signification. I read these words not as giving in to biological essentialism – which is also not something Kirby is arguing for – but rather as a way to open up and give agency to trans* matter writing for itself, because it is precisely through signification that trans*ness appears, is spoken into the world, and is confronted with its corporeal 'Truth'. Could trans*ness' confrontations with its corporeal truth also affect others' confrontation with theirs? For solely engaging with culture, reading, or signification seems to do too little for trans*ness and its imaginative potential of writing. Should trans*ness indeed turn to its materiality in order to open up a space for trans*ness to write from the in-between, disrupting hegemonic meaning-making processes both on the level of the symbolic *and* the material?

As the body is not a static or rigid entity, but rather, as Butler and Hayward argue, a changing text whose outline continuously changes, what happen when trans* materiality might desire to change its outline in such a way that it would not be intelligible or known? What happens in the instances when some trans* materialities do write themselves in a way that traverse boundaries of and intervene into hegemonic conceptions of femininity/masculinity by specific gender performances, expressions, and repetitive acts and gestures? Hereby defying notions of rigidity in an effort to potentially realize an unintelligible reading and dazzle them all, making them scream wishing they had encountered the monsters, but are nonetheless still faced with the response "Don't exist", because "we're really just the gender we were assigned at birth" (Cox in Hayward 2017, 191)? Trans* – the way I want to introduce it here in my argument – then might disrupt the material. But does it disrupt the symbolic, considering the meanings these writings produce on the body and consequently get assigned through processes of reading (in

alignment with dominant discourse) are still caught *within* the heterosexual economy/binary cisheteronormative matrix/symbolic order/culture? – is Derrida right after all and is there really nothing outside text? Or is there a way in which we might figure trans* differently? A trans* which, by virtue of its *being*, is more of a threat to the symbolic than it seems?

To stay with the corporeal for a bit longer, trans* bodies – in the way I want to introduce them into this text – might pose a threat to hegemony and its ‘reliable’ knowledge acquired through vision. Always in becoming, adjusting, and performing, the materialization of trans*ness might occur as sidestepping its defining regimes. Is there a potential for trans*ness to be lingering in a refusal to be named by a normativity that tries to secure itself and its power over bodies through processes of naming and categorization? Like Blackness threatens Whiteness, and like Antiblackness is predicated on the position to secure its Whiteness, can trans*ness form a similar threat to cisheteronormativity and the Western binary gendering systems? When following Marquis Bey’s statement that “[e]xternally imposed genders that precede one’s identification and foreclose one’s refusal of identification are a captivity demanding servility to its laws” (2019, 82), can trans*ness form a threat to the gender order, which is predicated on keeping bodies intelligible through imposing gender? Can trans* materiality be figured as fluid? A trans*ness that may aim to escape the confines of be(com)ing a properly gendered subject? A trans*ness that expresses itself through refusal, and knows that while its efforts of refusal might not be interpreted as such because of hegemonic conceptions on gender as a binary order, it would persist because it does not mean nothing is oozing from below. What would happen when each time trans* materiality is turned into a ‘good’ (intelligible) gendered subject, it would become more enraged, and silently laugh because in that (deliberate) misunderstanding/misgendering/misinterpreting, it would know it is on its way to ripple and plant seeds that might form cracks in the seams? How can trans*ness reclaim a different relationality in which it perhaps is always already posited in relation to the symbolic order?

What would happen when trans*ness starts to move up and down, slowly, moving along what is not

a rhythmic ‘bopping your head along’ but into an arrhythmic tune coming from rhizomatic soundwaves generated by a specific kind of polyvocality (perhaps so arrhythmic this white body does not seem out of place when dancing along).

What would happen when trans*ness starts chanting, screaming, and whistling

in tones that cannot be captured, that rise from the below, the in-between that is not included in the Western pentatonic scale; the E[#]/F^b ; B[#]/C^b that desires not to be named but yearns to be heard

If trans*ness does any of these things, it does not do it by itself alone. Instead, it is relational, for their chanting must be heard, or their movements require to be seen – a relationality that again must be affirmed by others’ perceptions. And I wonder, how might trans*ness and trans* materiality become in this relationality?

Response-ability and Relational Becoming

Having laid out how trans*ness and trans* materialities relate to the symbolic and its processes of reading, and while wishing trans*ness could independently be(come) in itself, I want to return to how trans* is still often interpreted by binary cisheteronormative discourse in alignment with dominant conceptions on gender and the body – a relationality in which my becoming and existence depends on being recognized by others. In this section, I will further engage with the relationality between the body and the symbolic, and I wonder if there is a way out of this relational becoming – whether trans* materiality can separate itself from regimes in which the body is made intelligible, or whether there is also a potential in staying with the trouble/relational?

In an interview with Ken Corbett, Queer theorist Gayle Salamon, who particularly engages with phenomenology notes that “[o]ur lives are only thinkable, and livable, through our bodies” (2011, 223). In her theorization on gender non-conforming bodies and their connection to materiality and relationality, she introduces the concept of ‘transpositionality’. Transpositionality, according to Salamon, is the swapping and switching “from one place or state to another” and also refers to “the thing that is produced by such an exchange or switching” (227). Salamon considers the body to always be in relation with the psyche in the world. This, however, is not a singularly axed relationality, but rather one that consists of innumerable amounts and possibilities of transposition (225-227). The body, according to Salamon, not comes into being separately nor singularly, but through the relation between the body and the world. What consequently makes a body, she continues, is both the continuing exchange of fleshiness, including its sensations, desires and perception as well as the end product of such exchange (ibid). Defying understandings of the body as a passive entity and instead emphasizing the continuous movement, the body then turns from a noun into a verb – it is an

ongoing *becoming* (223). Similar to Hayward's ongoing *materialisation*, Salamon also considers the body (trans* or not) as an ongoing *becoming*. Considering the body as transpositional – denoting the constant movement between the body and the world – also reminds me of Karen Barad's notion of intra-activity. I bring in Barad's concern with agential realism and a praxis of mattering because their approach to matter, relationality, and causality is helpful in understanding the way in which trans* bodies can be given agency, drawing forth upon its capability of writing, while at the same time critiquing the way in which knowledge is causally mediated and constitutive of objects.

In *Queer Causation and the Ethics of Mattering* (2008), Barad engages with causality, relationality, ontology, and materiality. To turn to their argument is important by means of further considering trans*ness as *always relational*, yet not static – a line of thought that is comparable to Salamon's understanding of transpositionality. According to Barad, matter is intra-active and generative. They explain this in a variety of texts by examining lightning and its in/determinacy and im/possibility, touching, Quantum Field Theory and entangled Queer Particles, diffracting patterns, a brittlestar, and trans*materiality (Barad 2008; 2010; 2012; 2014; 2015). What these theorizations on these phenomena have in common, Barad argues, is that they are viable examples for showing how matter does not operate separately in the world. In talking about how bodies are *of* the world, constantly re-figuring boundaries, not only of the discursive-materialization of the world but also space and time, they state that “No-thing stands separately constituted and positioned inside a spacetime frame of reference, nor does there exist a divine position for our viewing pleasure located outside the world” (2008, 326). Barad thus contends that ‘no-thing’ exists absolutely *outside* or *inside*, but that everything is in continuous becoming ‘within’. This means that we cannot move ‘outside’ the symbolic order, because we are always already part of it, and despite trying to ‘go outside’, we still function ‘within’. The relationality Barad discusses is thus one that defies notions of causality and separability, and instead emphasizes that matter is always intra-active. As such, it is an ongoing material-discursive practice. This means that matter re-iteratively and co-constitutively enacts and produces entangled bodily boundaries (325). In other words, matter emerges through its always ongoing intra-activity *of* the world and hence “Embodiment is not a matter of being specifically situated in the world, but rather of being of the world in its dynamic specificity” (327). The process of *mattering* then is one of entanglement, and these entanglements are not “intertwinings of separate entities, but rather irreducible relations of responsibility” (Barad 2010, 265). In re-thinking matter through an intra-active agential realist approach, Barad

reworks traditional notions of causality and separability. In doing so, their theorization on intra-active matter defies logics of individual causality and instead reveals narratives of how knowledge is not a mediated activity, but rather a “direct material engagement” (2008, 329-330). To consider trans* bodies as intra-active allows me to start theorizing from the body (as a material force) that is always *of* the world, and constructs itself through encounters with others, but always as an ongoing materialisation that has the capacity to blur boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or ‘objects’ and ‘subjects’. The ‘Other’ here is then, as Barad states, not a separate, independent, non-relational entity, but “irreducibly and materially bound to, threaded through, the ‘self’ – a diffraction/dispersion of identity” (2010, 265). Consequently, Barad’s theorization on the onto-epistemological notions of intra-activity, dis/continuity, and entanglement enables me to think of trans*ness as not solely being-there in its is-ness in a world that is given and contains pre-defined meanings, but instead allows me to consider trans* as materially-discursively implicated with(in)/through the world and Others that are also enacting dis/continuous entanglements.

For we now can contend that trans* bodies are always already in a relationship within the world, a relationality which I understand to counter narratives that proclaim that trans*ness does not exist, or aim to make trans*ness non-existent, what might trans*ness do when following Barad’s theorization on intra-active matter? What happens when we consider a trans* body as transpositional, like Salamon claims, meaning that trans*ness emerges both through and as an effect of movement between the self and the world. A trans*ness that, following Bey, is fugitive. A fugitive trans*ness that is “ruled by unruliness, which is no rule at all, but rather a *movement* in which life is garnered, in which the improper thrives due to its obstinacy. Refusing to sit still, refusing to settle, refusing to commit to being is the fugitive’s lot” (2019, 16, emphasis added)

Like Hayward’s re-generative ‘cut’, Bey’s fugitive force, Barad’s intra-active agential matter, and Stryker’s monster, trans* constructs a relationality that not only depends on being inscribed, but when taking into account that a body also writes, *impresses*. In existing, trans* bodies hold the potential to forcefully bring into being a relationality that besides ongoingly *becoming/materialising* itself, also risks revealing the “constructedness of the natural order. Confronting the implications of this constructedness can summon up all the violation, loss, and separation inflicted by the gendering process that sustains the illusion of naturalness” (Stryker 1994, 254). In *be(com)ing*, this relationality that trans* forces upon the world and where it takes

its place as such, does, as Hayward rightfully says, “the now-familiar work of suggesting the unclassifiable. To be trans is to be transcending or surpassing particular impositions whether empirical, rhetorical, or aesthetic” (Hayward 2008, 253). Holding the potential of suggesting the unclassifiable, trans* bodies, in their being and praxis of doing an unruly rebellious otherwise-gender, might form the imaginative force to undo the “fundamental bedrocks of whom we have come to believe we are” (Bey 2019, 68). This undoing of the ‘fundamental bedrocks’ is also what Stryker pleaded for when she warns that

Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. (...) You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself (1994, 247).

This affirmative move of proclaiming (an) existence by way of pointing out the constructedness of both the self *and* other within Nature does not solely undo and produce cracks in the bedrocks of those who are already fugitive from gender. Rather, precisely because of an intra-active relationality and becoming, trans*ness has the potential to activate a mode of denaturalizing Western conceptions on gender that dictate what is called ‘the Natural order’. To consider trans* matter as intra-active agential matter, as I want to suggest here, therefore allows to rework a relationality that is predicated on notions of reading and interpreting, a causality in which the trans* body as passive entity awaits to be inscribed and given meaning to. In thinking about the mediated and entangled relation between the self and the other in which trans*ness mutually becomes and co-constitutes, I am reminded of Stryker’s words about her dream in which she is underwater. The water annihilates her, and she questions: “Why am I not dead is there is no difference between me and what I am in?” (1994, 251). She is in the water and becomes part of the water, while the water becomes part of her too. In this be(com)ing, she and the water, which one can read as the symbolic order/Nature, are in an entangled relationship that affects both (the boundaries between) object and subject. The relation between Stryker’s body in/and the water then relates to Barad’s intra-active entanglement for there is no longer a “fixed dividing line between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘past’ and ‘present’ and ‘future’, ‘here’ and ‘now’, ‘cause’ and ‘effect’” (Barad 2010, 265). Is this the re-figuring of trans*ness from with/in? A similar intra-active relationality can be found in Hayward’s text *Fingeryeyes: Impressions of a Coral Cup*, in which she examines cross-and multispecies encounters between

herself and corals (*b. Elegens*). In writing about her encounters with coral cups, she mentions that by touching the coral, “we, the corals and I, enfolded elements of each other within ourselves” (2010, 590) while the coral, by reaching out its tentacles to eat, ‘tasted’ her fingers and retracted (585). The relationality Hayward alludes to here is one that departs from the consideration that “perceptions are moved (affected) by the movements and actions that they provoke in other organisms” (580). It is a relationality in which we can understand trans*ness as always already impressing, causing movement and a/effect, enfolding within, through and *of* the world and the symbolic order. Following this logic, trans* bodies, in their being and in their ability to write themselves, do not solely disrupt the material, but the symbolic too. In relationally and intra-actively becoming in a space dominated by a “hegemonic grammar that utterly disallows the very possibility of transgender” the existence of trans* “in a space that is constituted through the assertion of the impossibility of trans* and nonnormative bodies is, by virtue of that inhabitation of public space, radical” (Bey 2017, 277). Bey here contends that trans*, by the act of *being*, already secures a radical stance in relation to hegemony. Not from an outside, but from with/in, and I hear myself thinking out loud

You better be scared of us because if subjectivities rely on relational becoming and mutual recognition, we (who are trans*) take you down with us too. If we stay on the ‘inside’, we are in and we stay right here.

And yet, even when considering that by existing, trans*ness might take such a radical stance against the symbolic (and material), I continue to wonder: what about the recognizability of and responsiveness to trans* bodies *within that hegemonic grammar*, and does it have the possibility to disrupt? Because for whatever is granted to vision following this kind of relationality, I still feel ambivalent about a possible disruption of the symbolic and I approach the imaginative potential that lies within this relationality with skepticism, because as Alok Vaid Menon eloquently puts it:

we don’t change our appearances & we get misgendered & we do & we still get misgendered. we don’t change our appearances & we experience incredible pain & we do and we still experience pain. this is the impossibility of gender non-conforming life.
(2018)

In this quote, Alok turns their attention to the matter of a trans* body, and the catch 22 that trans*ness faces due to hegemonic gendering ordered ‘readings’ of trans* materialities’

expressions. Though trans* might take a radical stance in such hegemonic readings and, echoing Barad, while recognizability is “not a fixed and universal notion but rather it too obtains its meaning through its ongoing use in specific practices” (2008, 331-332), what is at stake is still a notion of response, more specifically, *response-ability*. While a response (to a trans*ness’ expressions) is not required per se, for, as I have argued, trans*ness exists either way (whether it is deemed possible or not and by virtue of getting a response or not): it impresses and writes anyway, whether its matter is recognized or not. Instead, response and responsiveness indicate the presence of an ethical gesture in the process of intra-active be(com)ing together with the entangled ‘Other’. Simply put: what does it mean for trans*ness to perform, do, and be(come), while it might not be responded to? Like Hayward’s encounter with the coral cup and her trying to touch the coral cup while the coral cup retracts, or like Barad’s concern with touching oneself or an ‘Other’, what does response-ability entail when “[e]ach of ‘us’ is constituted in response-ability. Each of ‘us’ is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other” (Barad 2012, 215).

Though response-ability is mutually constitutive, in my yearning for trans*ness to disrupt and refuse the symbolic and material, I think I desire to move from, with/in and through the in-between, not dependent on be(com)ing myself, but by controlling or *disrupting* others’ perceptions. And although I love to imagine the potential for trans* as an ontological refusal in which trans* appears through movements – moving away from naming and categorization, disrupting other’s perceptions – this is a desire that by virtue of its desiring already constructs a relationality, situating trans* not as an ontological refusal, for it needs to affirm itself in order for that desire to be acknowledged. This is a trans* that, in its desire to ‘get out’, is always already in relational becoming with/in the symbolic order. I want trans* to disrupt intelligibility by sidestepping it, refusing the symbolic order, but I must also remember, I am always already part of that symbolic order too. As such, I wonder if the desire to refuse and disrupt then is not one that precisely stems from and is constructed by the hegemonic order that reinforces itself and produces the dualistic regimes I want to get away from?

I started writing this thesis with the questions if and how trans* can function as ontological refusal, and I think I will not be able to answer this question, for we are always already within the symbolic, and to even desire refusing an ontological definition would be to function within hegemony for ‘we’ are ‘all’ relationally constituted and response-able for each other. When considering that we cannot ‘go out’, following Barad stating that “Subject and object, wave and particle, position and momentum do not exist outside of specific intra-actions that enact cuts

that make separations – not absolute separations, but only contingent separations – within phenomena. [T]he pair is no longer outside/inside, that is to say, objective vs. subjective, but something between inside/inside” in which “differences are within” (2014, 175), where then to find potential for trans*ness in opening up? Having problematized not only the ‘outside’ but also the ‘inside’ throughout this thesis, I wonder whether there is a different way of opening up from the inside, a re/orientation towards imagining trans* as radical ontological affirmation? What then might be asked is not a question of refusal, nor a question that aims for disruption, but one that seeks affiliation with the words ‘to think differently is to practice differently’ (Thiele 2018) – a question of change through imagining differently.

chapter iv. On Being and Becoming from the In-Between, Or Has there Ever Been a Starting Point to Begin with?

Trans*, as I have contended so far, does and is ambiguous: on the one hand it disrupts, disturbs, and cracks the material *and* symbolic order through the praxis of *embodying* as a mode of engagement – one in which its subjective materialization relationally and discursively becomes in itself, but also *with* and *through* others’ through notions of recognition, intra-activity, and response-ability. However, and on the other hand, even while disrupting, the body and its materiality, through which its matter is recognized and interpreted, are still structured around the symbolic order of heteronormativity, i.e. the Western gender/sex binary. Lingering in and not seeming to get away from the gendered body as material cultural signifier, my desire for trans* *embodying* is one of “refusal” (Bey 2019; Ferreira da Silva 2018), one of ontological refusal, in which trans* tries could situate itself outside the hegemonic order that is also called ‘Nature’ (with capital ‘N’). One in which trans* speaks for itself, instead of being narrated through others. This means shortly and concretely: my yearning for the ‘liberation’ of trans* matter does not seem to lie in an in-between, but in a moving away – a fugitive gesture from language and signification, hereby finding affiliation with Marquis Bey’s para-ontological fugitivity which I elaborated in the last chapter. But I wonder now, is this aim to ‘get away’ from the body, and asking the question of how to do so the right question to ask? “Can trans* be posited as radical ontological refusal?”, a question that might be implying to fully sidestep ‘everything’ we ‘know’ and unrelationally *become* in itself and separately from the symbolic order. To move away from the symbolic order, and the rooted desire to do so could also be seen precisely to be the problem: in naming this yearning, I contend my subjectivity to be able to be different from or outside of Nature, while in fact, I must consider the question whether I am also *part* of or *of* the hegemonic order – for everything is intra-active (Barad 2010). While remaining hopeful in the potential of the im/possibility of trans* subjectivities and their *becoming*, the question that from there needs be asked is a different political question. It might become a question of re/orientating towards imagining differently, for that is what my projects wants to propose: a potentiality of trans* embodiment *in* the world and as *part of/of* the world, defining and uttering for itself while being recognized relationally.

In the previous chapter, I stated “catch me if you can” – trying to challenge the Western heteronormative gender binary framework. But what now if I instead contend that I am already caught, and to continue to think from that antagonistic stance is to reify and linger in the

normative order? What if we depart from the consideration that the dominant discourse is reinforced and upholds itself by making us think that we *can* think outside dominant discourse? A problem of naming, or rather un-naming, because as soon as I want to define the ‘outside’, it immediately becomes part of the ‘inside’, too. Or to give another metaphor: I want to think of hegemony’s grip on trans*ness as a swamp, the more you try to move, the more stuck you get so you need to find a different method to make it lose its grip on you. However, it is vital to remember how intra-activity and being *in* the world informs the production of discursive materialized subject formations, for as Hayward mentions: “species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters” (2010, 581). I think of this dance as my relation to the symbolic order: my body being ‘safely’ kept away at arm length in a hold, a myth of separation or distance – a rather boring repetitious waltz in which I will be followed each time I try to step away. The question that needs to be posed then is not one of: “how do *I* get away?” nor “how do I get *you* away?”. And it is neither a question that takes into account how good or bad we are at dancing – but one that imagines what happens when we change the style and rhythm and turn on some hard-edged punk or funky improv saxophone jazz instead of some pop-music with a predictable formula – repetitious choruses and some verses that are in one key and 4/4 time. Or one that does not seek to play the in-between ‘non-existent’ notes in the Western heptatonic scale, however nicely they might sound (E#/Fb; B#/Cb). Instead, it is a question that departs from the conviction these tones (E#/Fb; B#/Cb) *do* exist nonetheless while simultaneously choosing to rather use the instruments wrongly to produce some cacophonous melodies. I bop my head to a rhythm of da DUM da DUM, and though these words might not make sense when they are just ‘read’ by my reader here, what I hope to evoke in this final chapter of my thesis is a sense of a un/comfortable wonder and in-betweenness:

to feel stained glass, sounds sharp in minds of ours
in the flesh we saw some more potential
songs Holy, hissing upon ghostly powers
will you tell me now who brought them all down?

The final chapter of this thesis seeks to offer a framework to imagine trans* differently, to seek the potential in *being* and *doing* trans*ness relationally (to the symbolic order, for ‘we’ are

always within (Barad 2010)) and rigorously while keeping in mind that there is no absolute separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In other words: “how can trans*ness produce change when everything is intra-active?” I will try to answer this question by using a different tool – no longer trying to find a rigid answer through mere theoretical interventions but imagining differently through the form of poetic embodied and affective writings of(f)/from/through the body by means of considering trans* as a radical ontological affirmation. Although I am as much of a poet as I am a woman or a man¹², the form of poetry as a way of producing affect enables to approach knowledge differently, and it allows for what Eve Sedgwick calls for in her text *Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You*: a ‘reparative reading’. Distinguishing a ‘paranoid reading’ from a ‘reparative reading’, Sedgwick argues that a paranoid reading involves anticipation, reflexivity and mimicry, is rooted in strong theory, enhances negative effects, and “places its faith in exposure” (1997, 8-9), while a reparative reading on the contrary is one that expects surprises, excepts surprises, and never presumes an answer (8-9). Desiring to find a ‘way out’ of the symbolic order for trans*ness, I think I have to admit I am guilty of not doing a reparative reading, for I hoped to answer the question “how to posit trans* as ontological refusal?” with a rigid answer, conflating my desire with expectations and presuming an answer that allows to ‘go beyond’. Although I do engage in exposing how the symbolic order naturalizes non-normative gender identities, I meanwhile have always wanted to propose a way of ‘liberating’ these trans* subjectivities so to speak, so going *beyond* exposure here, too. However, in not succeeding to find an answer to this question and instead being surprised by the complex discussion of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, seemingly not being able to go ‘beyond’, I arguably move from a paranoid reading to a reparative reading – a place that possibly *does* offer more potentiality in answering this question. While I remain sitting with the vague feeling that ‘something’ is ‘off’ – a characteristic exemplary for paranoia – and my skepticism towards the hegemonic order and its processes of naturalization, gendering, and reinforcing power structures continues, I want to let myself and my theorizations on trans*ness be surprised by unexpected turns and readings, because only by surprises one can imagine how the “future may be different from the present” (Sedgwick 1997, 24). And it is precisely in this opening-up in which I believe one can find hope for change – a change in which trans*ness, as imaginative potential, always already disrupts dominant Western conceptions on gender as binary construct, both on the level of the material and symbolic. In order to propose trans*ness as imaginative

¹² As my acknowledgement of not being a poet can weaken my argument, I would like to add on to this concession a quote by Bob Dylan who supposedly said that “I think a poet is anybody who wouldn't call himself a poet”.

potential for disrupting hegemony, I will first draw forth upon Radical Black Feminist scholars Tendayi Sithole, Christina Sharpe, and Saidiya Hartman, whom I consider having in common remarkable manners, tools, and methods on imagining differently, while remaining attentive to intra-activity and being *inside* the world. To remain in a critical stance towards the notions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is vital for these authors and their theorizations on the ongoing effects of chattel slavery and colonialism, because for them to move ‘outside’ would be to step away from the violence imposed by and inherent to the aftermath of the continuing Antiblack discourse. Though I am certainly not working towards arguing that Antiblackness is comparable to binary cisheteronormative discourse, I do feel inspired by these authors’ their embodied writings and ways of re-configuring, re-positioning, and re-writing life otherwise.

Imagining and Potentiality

In writing this section, I will depart from the words ‘to think differently is to practice differently’. This line that is often emphasized by the feminist philosopher Kathrin Thiele echoes in my head – an advice to help remember that thinking *matters* because it makes up the praxis of worlding:

Envisioning difference differently – i.e. theorizing a different difference – leads to a thought-practice in which concepts are not abstractions *from* the world, but an active force *of* this world – and thus always/already implicated in and concerned with world(ing): practicing *and* envisioning specific practices for this world (Thiele 2018, 39).

According to Thiele, thinking and theorizing thus not only are mere abstract practices, but actively produce our ways of being *of* the world – an intra-activity and response-ability that not only happens through materiality or the body, but also through the mind and the practice of imagining. Christina Sharpe is to me one of the inspiring authors who engages in such a practice of imagining. In her proposal in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* of rethinking Blackness and the ongoing aftermath of slavery, Sharpe introduces the notion of ‘wake work’ as an analytic to “imagine otherwise from what we know now in the wake of slavery” (2016, 18). Wake work is an embodied mode of remembering and memorializing the violence perpetrated by settler colonialism in order to imagine different and new ways to live in this wake of slavery. This move of doing and inhabiting wake work, Sharpe mentions, activates and functions as a means to rupture these ongoing effects “with our known lived and un/imaginable lives” (18). It

is both a way of living with and being inhabited by the “terror visited on Black life”, but also of refusing it (116). Similar to Sharpe who stays ‘inside’ and with the ‘trouble’ (to speak with Haraway (2016)), also Saidiya Hartman in her work is always concerned with imagining, and more specifically, re/imagining and re/writing Black life differently. Telling stories from the ‘inside circle’, in her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* Hartman activates a specific mode of narrating history differently (2019, xiv). She does so by re/creating and re/imagining the worlds and lives of young women as radically otherwise in order to open up new and affective potentialities, arguably, speaking from the position of the ‘Unthought’. Her pedagogy is one that puts to praxis the act of imagining differently through a re/orientation to histories, for the past, present, and future cannot be separated. Rather, they are ongoing, and by re/creating and re/imagining the ‘past’ differently, Hartman opens up a space to re/orient towards the ‘presence’ and ‘future’ *otherwise*.

The position of the ‘Unthought’ is finally also what afro-pessimist scholar Tendayi Sithole expands on in his book *The Black Register* in order to propose what he calls, ‘the Black Register’. A Black Register, Sithole argues,

Is here what might be referred to as the ways of thinking, knowing, and doing that are enunciated from existential struggle against antiblackness, and which dwell from the lived experience of being-[B]lack-in-an-antiblack-world which must be ended (2020, 2).

This register, he contends, operates to redefine the Black condition otherwise (2), that is, a radical thinking from the positionality of the unthought: thoughts from the outside of being that “put[s] blackness as a challenge to the world that denies the existence of blackness” in order to “object[ing] to modes of subjection” (21). The category of the Unthought is necessary for the Black Register to exist, and specifically for Blackness to “position itself and to ask fundamental questions outside the hegemonic epistemic terrain that denies blackness its own humanity” (25). The Black Register thus enables to imagine the ‘impossible’ ‘outside’ of the Antiblack register, as the Unthought is the “thought that nevertheless continues to think while it is rendered non-existent” (24). In short, Sithole’s ontological proposition is, as I read it, one in which he posits the Black Register as an ontological-existential framework that refuses Antirblackness’ impositions and imagines Blackness to narrate itself. Though Sithole’s project seems to move

away from the ‘inside’ more than Hartman’s and Sharpe’s, what his theorization on imaginative potential, similar to Hartman and Sharpe, inspires me to do in this thesis is to start thinking of trans*ness in a different, affirmative move. Considering that thinking differently *matters*, and being inspired by the three aforementioned authors and their ways of re/configuring, re/writing, and re/orienting in order to provoke imaginative potentials, I wonder if there is a way to imagine a trans*ness that is centered around the praxis of feeling/thinking/being otherwise, and that comprehends a way of affirmingly *doing* and *being* trans* through rewriting/narrating/uttering for itself by itself and in itself.

How could trans*ness figure ways of changing and rupturing hegemony, not by trying to refuse or ‘go outside’ but by staying with/in and thinking and imagining differently as both a method and praxis of *mattering*, for “Mattering is a matter of what comes to matter and what doesn’t” (Barad 2014, 175)? What could a trans*ness do by re/orienting itself to the symbolic order differently, following Sharpe’s activation for rupture through *thinking* the un/imaginable and to *embody* and *inhabit* the “impossibility of gender non-conforming life” and the “experience[d] incredible pain” (Vaid Menon 2018)? What could a trans*ness do by way of Hartman’s pedagogy, re/writing and re/imagining itself with/in the symbolic order differently for such a praxis opens up an *otherwise*? What could a trans*ness do if it follows Sithole’s mode of perpetuating thinking from and lingering in an existence – no *matter* where this place of thinking and existing comes from – and instead of trying to ‘move away’ stays with/in and redefines itself otherwise?

*To trans**,

In a desire to un-name, I rip apart the letters t/r/a/n/s – which trans rants?

trans s n art
trans [a]s [a]n art //
trans [a]s n[o] art //
trans [i]s n[o] art //
trans [i]s [a]n art //

I have always been interested in art. trans [i]s [i]n art: is it in the facelessness of ‘her’ (Hayward 2021)? Is it in the art of monstrosity, sewing together/apart? Could trans, like

art, be fugitive from language, the symbolic and signifying practices – might it escape and oppose the model of the Western gender order that functions with and through colonialist logics, possibly situating trans*ness in the abyss? The abyss, the demonic non-ground, the *damné*, I am reminded of my art history classes in which we analyzed Catholic churches whose tympanums depict judgements of good and bad, respectively on Jesus’s right and left – heaven and hell – to frighten both the faithful obedient and the unruly. Each time I pass a church entrance I envision myself as one of the figures on the left, climbing from hell up to the ‘world’ to give Jesus a sm*ck (on the ass), and scream to all those below to escape and walk away and to never look back.

Eva Hayward beautifully writes that “Bodies remain trouble [and *troebel*¹³]. Irrefutable, unknowable, and seductive, bodies are what thought wants to escape but never can” (2021, 1-3, words added). What stran[ge] encounters happen with/in these troubling modes of fugitivity where the body and thought meet somewhere at the in-between?

Might trans*ness turn to opacity rather than trans*parency? Opaque waters and fluid *becomings* in which trans* may escape the confines of graspability, always in flux yet shapeshifting and adjusting to possible containments. Would trans*ness find its place in troubling/*troebele* water streams alongside flatfish (which are the most asymmetrical vertebrates on the world) whose survival depends on the evolutionary process of becoming an ‘anatomical disaster’ or alongside salmon who for their survival must swim upstream, against the current.

In a secret desire to “literally, get out from – the impossible demands of bodily existence” (Hayward 2021, 3), I want to re/orient my attention to bodily existence different through attending to the void. The void as “a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming” (Barad 2015, 396) is which trans* stares right through the trouble.

In opaqueness, I think of ‘here goes no-thing’: a no-thing; a death space; a gap (Kirby 2015, 16) that insists on staying quiet, blending in and incents on surrendering while I wholeheartedly laugh as I add some sweetener to the water to the wine. Barad says that Nature is birthed out of ‘chaos’ and ‘void’ (2015, 393), I imagine its color to be a shade of off white – ain’t nothing not grey yet. Double negatives usually confuse me, but I put my

¹³ *Troebel* is a Dutch word to describe, most often, water or other liquids as not being transparent, as opaque.

pulverized matter to work anyway and in the continuous space in-between I scrape myself together, like cement – a dry powdery substance consisting of minerals that become hard when water is added – and hold myself tightly

notes for my friend/s

i trace your eyelids with my fingers – it is okay not to know (where your body ends and skin starts or where your skin ends and body starts) oh matterf*cking fleshy beings it doesn't make sense. we joke about when we lost our sanity and that are bodies are cages ha ha ha what do we mean with ontological leakages i see you dripping and slipping apart-away – are we the trees that need to be cut in order to grow back better bigger but yet we are that same kind of tree ya know but still here I am, here I am, and I see you and you see me and we smirk at each other, thinking of all the things we are not but in our being-ness we know that we are.

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