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OBLIGATORY FORGETTING

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I. THE CORNER GUY AND I

It is late on an ordinary weeknight in our Crown Heights neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York. A warm evening, I'm walking Ziggy, nothing too heavy on my mind. A woman coming the other way crosses the street ahead of time. Further down, another woman passes with her bag gripped tight, keys laced between her fingers, movements brisk and deliberate, not afraid exactly, but unavailable. Another has the same air, earbuds in, eyes alert. I watch her cut around a man standing on the corner, a route decided in advance, walking fast with her eyes nowhere and everywhere. I am almost back home when I register the system here, a posture, a way of holding the self. The corner guy and I are the only ones out here loose in the breeze, hands empty, gaits astray, heading wherever we want. I used to move in that economy of vigilance too. I'm not sure when all that information left my body. How'd I get this free?

II. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: STANDPOINT AND METHOD

My first instinct when information leaves my body is to ask how it got out and where it went. I am also the only available instrument for the measurement I want to take. What I know about becoming a man I know because I became one, not the natural way, but across a medical and social transition that began more than a decade ago, documented all along in personal writing, field notes and the kind of obsessive private reflection that is either a research method or a symptom, depending on who is asking. This essay draws on that archive. It is autoethnography, evidence of exactly one case, offered not because the case is representative but because it is unusually positioned: I have lived on both sides of a line most people only ever stand on one side of, and I can still, for now, remember the crossing.

I want to be precise about which line I mean, because I have crossed some and not others. I have lived as a woman and I live as a man; I have been read as queer and I am now most often read as straight; and I can compare these positions from the inside because I have occupied both. I have not crossed the line of race. I am white, and I have only ever been white, so when I describe the privileges that arrived with my manhood, I am describing the privileges of a white man, which are not the privileges of every man. The strength of autoethnography requires an honest assessment of its limitations and their nature. I can write only what I have been in a position to know. My whiteness is a

fixed limitation. I like to believe I have a critical race gaze, but it's always a white gaze. The embodied perspectives of people of colour do not live anywhere in me.

The standpoint I am reporting from is also generational. I transitioned more than a decade ago, in my early thirties, and I am writing this in my mid-forties. The social, medical, and legal terrain of transgender has shifted significantly in that decade—the political conditions are louder, the available vocabularies have multiplied. Whose trans experience am I describing, then? A particular one: a white, middle-class, United States-based trans man who transitioned at 33 and is writing this at 44, after a decade of being read without difficulty as a man.

A word about scope. The opening scene turns on a gender binary, and so does most of what follows. The binary is in the world I am describing, not in my account of what gender can be. What I am describing on that sidewalk is not what anyone *is* at the level of personal identity. It is how strangers are read at a distance, at night, by a perceptual system that sorts everyone into two categories and assigns risk accordingly. That system does not consult anyone's identity before it sorts them, and its crudeness is the thing under examination. My argument has a narrower requirement. It depends on a before and an after—a subject who was consistently read as a woman and is now consistently read as a man, and who can therefore compare the two positions from inside and measure what has gone missing between them. People whose legibility does not resolve that way, including non-binary and gender-nonconforming people and trans people who are read inconsistently or not at all, occupy positions this comparison cannot reach. To the system I am describing they are largely illegible, and that illegibility is part of how the system works—but it is not what this essay takes up. What obligatory forgetting looks like from there is a real question and not one this method can answer. I do not think the binary I am working with is the truth about gender. I think it is the operative fiction of the system that distributes safety, and I have been on both of its sides.

What I have been in a position to know is less common than what most people get to know, and that uncommonness is the occasion for this essay—though not, I want to be careful to say, its authority. The bodily memory of having lived on both sides of the gender binary is rarer than a life lived on one side. But the memory does not produce the analysis. Plenty of people carry this same double knowledge and make nothing of it, or make of it the opposite of what I am making here—a proof of innocence, a credential, a reason they of all people could not be implicated in male power. The access is one thing; what one does with it is another. In this essay I am trying to hold both positions close enough together to feel the difference between them—the hypervigilance I carried as a woman and the ease with which I move as a man. That difference is fading, and the fading is my subject. I call it 'obligatory forgetting.'

Because the argument accretes rather than unfolds, let me say in advance what is being built. The base claim is the one just named: the sight I had as a woman is eroding, and the erosion is structural rather than personal. Three claims accrete on it. First, the medical apparatus that produced my generation of trans subjects through a script of lifelong certainty now produces the next generation through a script of imminent death, and the victim-subject this script requires makes it nearly unsayable that some of us gain power through transition (Sections V and VI). Second, transition can be motivated in part by flight from the punishments of femininity toward the safety that attaches

to men—a claim I share with trans-exclusionary feminism and arrive at by a different route (Section VIII). Third, the questions these two claims raise have become difficult to ask on the left, which cedes them to the right (Section VIII). These are consequences, not foundations—what makes the questions hard to ask is the same forgetting that makes them hard to see. What the forgetting protects is the last argument, the one the opening scene was already making without saying so—that gender power operates at scale against women (Sections IX and X). The mechanism is not particular to trans men. Obligatory forgetting is how masculine privilege protects itself in every man who occupies the position. Transition only makes it visible, because only someone who crossed can report from both sides. What follows moves out from that crossing and returns to it.

III. DEFINING WHITE MALE PRIVILEGE

By 'white male privilege' I mean a position within a structure of racialised gender domination—not an inventory of advantages held by individual white men, but a location within a system that produces and distributes power between and across genders and races. I follow Kimberlé Crenshaw in treating these privileges as co-constituted rather than additive: white male privilege is not white privilege plus male privilege but a specific position irreducible to its components.[1] I follow Marilyn Frye and R.W. Connell in treating this position as fundamentally *relational* and *structural*: the advantages that accrue to white men who are read as white men are not free-standing goods but the counterpart of disadvantages imposed on others, most directly on women and most acutely on women of colour.[2] A white man's assumed competence is the inverse of others' assumed incompetence. A white man's bodily autonomy in public space is the counterpart of others' vulnerability in that same space. A white man's access to credibility, authority and ease is paid for in another's loss of those things. Peggy McIntosh's well-known knapsack metaphor treats privilege as a portable inventory of advantages — useful pedagogically, but it lets the privileged subject imagine "unpacking" the knapsack as an act of will.[3] The structural framing makes clear that privilege cannot be renounced through individual disavowal. One does not stop receiving credibility by feeling guilty about receiving it. One does not stop being the person women cross the street to avoid just because one used to be the woman crossing the street. The position continues to distribute its resources regardless of the recipient's politics. Distribution is also context-dependent: the credibility extended to a white man in a workplace may not be the credibility extended in a domestic argument, for example. This dynamism is part of why white men can sincerely deny that privilege exists; in any given moment, the advantage may be subtle or absent, even as the structural distribution remains intact. What can change is how the recipient understands and inhabits the position, though this should not be overstated—many privileges simply arrive, regardless of whether one knows what to do with them. If privilege could be renounced through awareness, obligatory forgetting would be unnecessary—one would simply stay aware. The forgetting is necessary precisely because the structure remains in place. The privileges arrive whether they are noticed or not, claimed or not, wanted or not. What the forgetting does is render the structure itself invisible to the one benefiting from it—and that invisibility is the privilege's most efficient operation.

I must operationalise feminism in the context of this essay. Feminism, here, is the

analysis and contestation of gendered power. This analysis operates at multiple scales at once. It takes seriously the structural conditions women live inside—the violence directed at them, the devaluation of their labour, the unequal distribution of political voice and economic resources, the constraints on bodily autonomy. It also takes seriously the daily micro-interactional and embodied texture through which those structural conditions are produced, reproduced and naturalised—the small adjustments, the deferrals, the management of male proximity, the running commentary, the labour of being read. The micro level is not preliminary to the structural; it is one of the forms the structure takes. Both registers matter politically, ethically and morally. Nothing in this definition restricts feminist analysis to women. Men can do it too, and have. But the availability of feminist conviction—the felt sense that the analysis is urgent rather than abstract—is unevenly distributed by position. One of the things this essay is about is what happens to that availability when a position changes.

IV. TWO REGISTERS OF OBLIGATORY FORGETTING

The forgetting works in at least two registers. It is worth separating them conceptually, even though they are always lived in a mobius simultaneity. The first is *epistemological*. There is a tradition in feminist thought—standpoint epistemology, developed by Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins—where your standpoint, where you're coming from, determines what you can know.[4] The people at the bottom of a hierarchy can see its workings in a way the people on top cannot. Subordination is an education. You learn the shape of power by being on the receiving end of it. The second register is *affective*. Iris Marion Young and Sara Ahmed, among others, have described how gender is not only a set of ideas but a way the body encounters space—braced or loose, scanning or unbothered, claiming the sidewalk or yielding it.[5] What I lost in transition was knowledge in both senses: a way of knowing from inside the experience and a state my body once lived in.

What are the respective weights and rates of thinking and feeling in a changing human body? The feeling went first. I stopped scanning before the explanation (and rage) for why women scan lost its urgency, and the urgency only began to fade once the scanning had been gone a while, the way a language you no longer speak recedes into a mere haunting. I want to be exact about the mechanism: the forgetting is not training and it is not a decision. Cis men are trained, in boyhood, not to see—they are socialised into the not-seeing so early that there was never a before. I missed that training entirely. I arrived in manhood without the orientation lessons. I pass as someone with a compulsory education I never got. But being a man is not the same thing as stopping being a woman. Forgetting is erosion—the slow result of time spent no longer being treated the way we treat women. The sight I had was maintained by an ongoing condition, the daily fact of feminisation, and when that condition stopped, the sight began to starve. Nobody took it from me. It's dying of disuse, a bit like my uterus.

I want to resist the story my culture tells about all this, the one where transition is both authorship and authority—the self-made man, gender as a thing you design and build to spec, and in a stunning reversal, a special group whose stance on gender can never be questioned. Transition is less like authorship than like being set down in an unfamiliar country with a map you drew from somewhere else, trying to navigate terrain that keeps rearranging itself under your feet. The territory imposes on two levels at once. Socially:

I had imagined I would keep something androgynous, some nail polish, some refusal. Then I learned, through other people's faces and other people's slurs, that the refusal cost more than I wanted to pay, and the costs schooled me toward a plainer masculinity I had not exactly chosen. Materially: testosterone does what testosterone does. Sex hormones move the body through largely binary ranges; the in-between, whatever one wants from it, is physiologically hard to hold for long. I am describing how thoroughly transition transforms. Anti-trans writers invoke 'biology' to argue the opposite—that transition is impossible or fake. I am arguing that it is profound: the body commits. It reorganises along lines I did not author and cannot fully steer. I did not build this face. Testosterone surfaced it—my father's eyebrows, unmistakable—a male template I had been carrying all along, dormant genetic markers given an occasion, by injection.

And here is why it is *obligatory*. The forgetting is not painless, and it is not pure loss either. The relief is what carries the forgetting along—it is genuinely easier to stop seeing, lighter. It's privilege and, worryingly, it's pleasurable. What's grievable is not my lost womanhood, it's my lost feminism—the tangible urgency of that kind of embodied rage, the inability to look away from gender inequality that was sustained by being on its receiving end. Well, good for me. The cost is not just mine. My feminism is receding—losing its edge, its intelligence, its depth of experience—and that is consequential for my wife, my daughter, my students, my scholarship evidently, and for every relation I move through as a political and ethical subject. Grief, however political, cannot rebuild the conditions that produced the sight. This is the trap. I didn't forget because I'm weak or complicit. I forgot because remembering has become unpaid labour with no external occasion, and the not-remembering feels like rest. Fear with no predator, dead on arrival.

V. HISTORICISING THE TRANSNORMATIVE SCRIPT

In the global north, the modern shape of gender transition is rooted in the emergence of medical sex change in the mid-twentieth century. The story enters public imagination in 1952, when the *New York Daily News* runs a front-page report on Christine Jorgensen under the headline "EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY: OPERATIONS TRANSFORM BRONX YOUTH." Photographs juxtapose before-and-after. In both, Jorgensen looks remarkably ordinary, and it is her ordinariness that sells the story: a person crossed from one sex to the other and emerged not as a curiosity but as a recognisable woman. Within weeks the doctors who treated her are receiving hundreds of letters, telephone calls and visits from people asking how to acquire a sex change of their own.

The technology was experimental. The science of sex hormones was new, surgical sex modification was improvisational and the medical field was in heated disagreement about whether such interventions were ethical at all. But once the demand existed, it created its own conditions: doctors who would treat became gatekeepers, and people seeking treatment had to produce a narrative that would persuade these gatekeepers to work on their bodies. The historical record shows that two narrative strategies emerged and proved effective.

The first was *duration*. Patients reported they had wanted to live as the other gender since childhood—the desire was lifelong, deep-seated, pre-social, intractable. The longer the duration, the more it could be presented as a fact of the patient's nature rather than a choice the patient was making, and the easier it was for doctors to treat

the intervention as medically necessary rather than electively cosmetic. *I have always felt this way* did the work of establishing that the patient was not asking the doctor to do something *to* them but to confirm something they already *were*. The second was *safety*. In a socio-legal context that criminalised gender nonconformity and licensed both private and public violence against it, patients argued that medical transition would let them live without being arrested, beaten, fired or institutionalised. If a doctor could help a patient pass convincingly as the 'other' sex, the patient would no longer be vulnerable in the same way. This narrative reframed transition as harm reduction—not the granting of a wish but the relief of a danger.[6]

Both narratives worked because they made the doctor's role tolerable. *Duration* made the doctor a witness to nature rather than an author of transformation. *Safety* made the doctor a humanitarian rather than an enabler of deviance. But the narratives did more than reassure the individual clinician. They fortified the *institution*. Duration in particular underwrote the irreversibility of the treatments, foreclosed the worry that a future version of the patient might want something different and rendered the procedures legible as medical care rather than aesthetic intervention—which is to say, billable, insurable, defensible in court. The script protected the apparatus as much as it protected the patient. Patients learned what to say; doctors learned to be persuaded; insurers and hospitals learned how to underwrite the work; and the experimental practice consolidated into systematic protocols, eventually becoming the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care that govern medical transition today. What began as improvised testimony to negotiate access calcified, over half a century, into the institutional ground on which trans medicine stands.

I want to name something the historical summary risks obscuring. The medicalisation didn't only produce a *narrative* requirement. It produced a *type of subject*. The trans person legible to medicine—the one who has always felt this way, who is in danger without intervention, who is asking to be made whole rather than made different—is a kind of person the apparatus brought into being and made recognisable to itself and to the public. Once that subject type existed, it began to shape who could show up at the clinic and be helped, who could recognise themselves as trans in the first place and what kind of story a person had to be able to tell about their own life in order to count. This is what Michel Foucault and Ian Hacking have, in different idioms, called *making up people*: the apparatus does not simply find the subject it treats; it produces the subject it can treat, and then the subject finds itself produced.[7] By the time I arrived at a clinician's office to ask for hormones, the subject I needed to be in order to be helped had been waiting for me, fully formed, for 50 years.

The strategic narrative had become the hegemonic available narrative. It was no longer one way of accounting for the desire to transition; it was the only way intelligible to the institutions that controlled access. Passed from generation to generation, it became the script that gender-nonconforming people learn to deploy—sometimes consciously, more often not—in order to secure medical treatment, legal recognition, family understanding and political legibility. It is, to be clear, not a false script. Many people genuinely experience their gender in the terms it offers. But it is also not the only true script, and its hegemony has costs, including the foreclosure of other ways of narrating what brings a person to transition.

VI. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GRIEVANCE

There was a time when trans politics had a different posture. Sandy Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back," written in 1987 in answer to Janice Raymond's charge that transsexual women were agents of patriarchy, did not petition for inclusion in the category of women. Stone refused the terms on which trans women had been made legible at all—the medical demand for a seamless, unremarkable femininity and the feminist demand for a legitimating origin story. The proposal was that trans people stop passing as either, and speak from the position the apparatus had tried to render unspeakable. Sylvia Rivera, who founded STAR with Marsha P. Johnson to house homeless queens, was likewise not asking the gay movement to admit her. She was naming what its respectability politics had already traded away, most publicly when she was booed off the stage at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day rally for saying so. What I mean by refusal is this: declining the terms of recognition rather than petitioning for recognition within them.[8] Something has changed, though I want to be careful about how I name it. I do not think refusal has disappeared. I think the institutional architecture that now produces trans visibility—the clinics, the advocacy organisations, the legal infrastructure, the social media platforms that flatten political speech into recognisable affect—selects for grievance over refusal because grievance is what these institutions can metabolise. Refusal produces nothing institutionally extractable. Grievance produces funding streams, legal standing, professional roles, narrative legibility. There is a political economy here, and it is worth saying so plainly.

I know this because I lived inside the earlier version of it. To social workers, doctors, therapists and psychiatrists I repeated, over and over again, "I have always felt like a man." I said it because I knew it was the effective thing to say. The medical apparatus that gatekept my access to hormones and surgery required a particular narrative—a lifelong, intractable, pre-social gender—and I produced that narrative because producing it was the price of admission. I did not feel like a man. I had never been one. That is why I was there. I was looking to become one.

The script has been updated. The current version is suffering-coded in a sharper register: I will die if I do not transition. Trans kids will die without gender-affirming care. Affirmation is suicide prevention. I am not contesting that trans people experience real distress or that gender-affirming care saves lives. I am noticing that the structural function of this script is what one says to unlock the resource. The medical pipeline that taught my generation to narrate ourselves through always-having-been, now teaches the next generation to narrate itself through imminent death. Same apparatus. Updated affect.

This matters for the argument I am making because the suffering-coded script produces a trans subject who is paradigmatically victimised—by laws, by violence, by erasure—in a way that makes it difficult to say what is also true: that some trans people, including me, have gained substantial power through transition, and that power includes the power to stop noticing what we once could not stop noticing. The victim framework forecloses this admission. It also forecloses, more consequentially, any honest accounting of gender inequality between women and men, because if all trans people are victims of gender oppression, then the basic question of which gender is structurally subordinated gets cancelled before it can even be asked.

VII — COUNTERSUBJECTIVE CONFESSIONS

I am sitting at the end of the long bar at Nostrand Pub with a book. (Martini, gin, perfect with olive *and* twist.) No one tries to talk to me. No one has asked what brings me to the neighbourhood, whether I'm waiting for someone. The man two stools down is also alone and we are extending each other the courtesy of mutual non-acknowledgment. I have been here for an hour and a half. I'm 40 pages into a novel I bought earlier today after browsing at McNally Jackson, where I also moved among others unbothered.

This is one of the great pleasures of my life now. Not the bar, not the martini. It is the absence of every form of attention I used to attract simply by being a woman alone in a bar, anywhere. The pleasure is *negative*: the pleasure of nothing happening, of nobody requiring anything of me, of being permitted, by virtue of my body and my face and the satchel of social associations attached to both, to occupy a public space without having to manage it. I enjoy being a man in part because I do not have to be a woman anymore.

The narrative I'm culturally encouraged to tell here is one where I always knew I was a man and this pleasure is not privilege, but a reflection of my human right, finally realised, to have my outsides match my insides. Gender is social; there is no pre-social place inside a person where a gender can have always been waiting. The 'always was' narrative is also part of how the current discourse produces the trans subject—as a person whose authenticity is secured by lifelong suffering and whose legitimacy depends on victimisation.

It is important to be precise about what the relief is and is not. The relief is not about anything *inherent* in male bodies or male spaces. My flat chest does not feel good because of anything inherent in flat chests as such. What feels good is the absence of breasts, and more precisely, the absence of the way breasts are received in this culture: as always-already sexualised, subject to running commentary by strangers, assumed to be on offer or in need of management. I like having a male chest because of the social meaning that male chests are accorded (very little social meaning, my own personal business). Becoming a man, you could say, was the stunt I pulled to get treated the way I deserve to be treated—and wanting to become a man could only have been a desire that surfaced in the context of living in a global patriarchal order that structures every single microinteraction we have. The same is true of almost every pleasure I have named: the privilege of solitude in a bar; of walking somewhere without being addressed; of not having my face commented on. None of these are pleasures *in* manhood as such. They are pleasures of *not having to be a woman*—which is to say, the underside of the same gender order whose top side I now occupy.

Noah Zazanis put a version of this question in print in "On Hating Men and Becoming One Anyway," extending Andrea Long Chu's "On Liking Women" (2018)—which had named the desire to become a woman as inseparable from the patriarchal conditions that produce womanhood—to the transmasculine side: "If turning your back on manhood is an ultimately feminist act, what are we to make of the decision to become a man?" I am writing one answer to Zazanis's question from inside the crossing he was naming.[9]

Sometimes I imagine trying to explain all of this to Cathy, the name my parents gave me, the person I used to be.

Me: It is so much easier being a man.

Cathy: How do you feel about that? Is ease what you're after in the project of assembling your gender? Being a woman is a political opportunity and ethical responsibility.

Me: Sure. But should I have to engage in the project of being a woman just because I was born a girl?

Cathy: Yes. I think feminism obligates it. Don't you feel like you gave up on the project of womanhood? Sisterhood? Don't you feel you've betrayed women and are now in a complicit celebration of masculinity itself?

Me: My politics haven't changed. I'm still a feminist.

Cathy: Are you sure? You've completely lost your edge. It's like you don't really care. You've lost touch with what it's like to be a woman day in and day out. You're so satisfied. You're so fucking happy.

She is not wrong about the edge. I have lost it. The version of feminism that came from being on the receiving end of feminisation is a version I no longer have full access to, and what I have in its place—analysis, memory, conviction—is colder and at greater remove. I can still think a thought about gender inequality, but honestly it doesn't bother me much, not for real. She is not entirely wrong about the betrayal either. I did leave. I had reasons that felt urgent and that I still believe were sufficient, but reasons are not the same as an absence of cost, and the cost was paid in part by the women I was no longer standing alongside.

The smaller reliefs accumulate. I can stop at a gas station in the middle of nowhere at one in the morning and pump gas with my eyes closed if I want. I can ride the train at any hour. I can go to a wedding without being asked when I am having children. I can host nothing. I can soothe no one. I can decline to be reassuring, to be cheerful, to be available, to be patient with a stranger's emotional weather. I can take up the space I take up and no one comes to collect rent on it. Each of these is unremarkable on its own. Together, they constitute the daily texture of a life I had not realised was possible because I had never lived inside it. Now that I'm here, I will say, I'm a bit scandalised.

What I want to be exact about is that these reliefs are not gifts and they certainly weren't owed me. They are *transfers*. The space I have been freed to occupy in a public bar is space that women in the same bar are still being asked to manage. The interruption I do not experience is being directed somewhere else. The credibility I am extended is credibility being withheld from someone. The structure of male privilege is that of a redistribution, and I am on the receiving end of it. The pleasure is real. The transfer is also real. I do not know how to stop being its beneficiary without ceasing to be the person I have become, and I do not want to cease being the person I have become. That is the part the available scripts do not have room for.

I used to be the meanest dyke I knew. Now she's gone and I've never felt better. I won't answer to my deadname but I can comprehend the loss of her. And isn't it perhaps a problem that we're now in a gender order where I don't want to admit that because then they might take my testosterone away, outlaw the M on my passport? This is, in part, an attempt to rescue a certain type of feminist discourse that seems to have disappeared,

where the personal is political, and politics requires ongoing reflexive engagement with the material conditions within which I come to know the world. Nothing I have experienced in my life has changed the shape of reality quite like changing my gender.

VIII. "SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING A TERF WOULD SAY"

The claims I have been making in this essay resemble claims associated with trans-exclusionary 'radical' feminism.[10] Trans men gain male privilege when they are read as men. Gender-based violence overwhelmingly affects women regardless of trans status. Trans misogyny is misogyny, which is to say it is the misogyny of a culture that has hated and disciplined women for as long as the category has existed and that does not stop doing so when some of the people it directs that hatred toward are trans. The 'always was' narrative is a strategic discourse, not an ontological fact. Hormones operate in roughly binary ranges. These sentences do sound like the sentences trans-exclusionary feminists write.

There is a substantive observation I share with trans-exclusionary feminism. They argue that trans men are women fleeing the punishments of femininity into the apparent safety of masculinity.[11] I reject the first part of that—trans men are not women—but the second part is something I have been arguing throughout this essay. Transition can be partly motivated by the desire to escape the punishments directed at women (I am hard pressed to imagine how it could be otherwise). When we are drawn towards masculinity we are being drawn away from femininity. Hey, I don't make up the rules. Real patriarchal manhood; it's compulsory.

The questions trans-exclusionary feminism raises and the answers it offers are two different things. TERFs offer that trans women are not women; trans men are confused women; trans existence is a mistake society made and should unmake; trans existence is a wrong turn in feminist history to be corrected by reasserting biological sex as ground truth. These are bad answers. Trans women are women. Trans men are men. But also, who cares? We are all casualties of ideology. That does not make us less real or less deserving of the lives we are building. What I am worried about is when individual ego-protection—the urge to defend our gender categories against scrutiny—forecloses the questions worth asking. This essay is not about individual gender presentation, it's about the analytic spaces available to feminism.

But the questions themselves: *What happens to feminist analysis of male supremacy when some women become men?* That is an interesting question, not inherently transphobic*. Does the political category of 'woman' survive being defined entirely by gender identity rather than by structural subordination?* Also a real question, extremely important. *What happens to the inability to look away from gender inequality—what Section IV called obligatory forgetting—when a cohort of feminist thinkers crosses the gender line? And what happens when, having crossed the line, they seem unable to look back in any meaningful way—when 'looking back' is replaced by the work of asserting our own genders, our own legibility, our own legitimacy?* Pressing questions, and interesting, certainly worth feminism's time. None of these questions has a trans-exclusionary answer baked into it. Each is a question feminism would benefit from sitting with seriously, without rushing to defence or dismissal. Maybe, when trans men and trans people are asked, *how has your gender transition affected your gender politics?*, instead of getting

offended, we could sit with the question. (Julia Serano describes her own transition as having sharpened rather than dulled her feminism, and she is not alone in that.)[12] And what is the alternative? That our genders do not affect our gender politics? I do not buy it, and at the level of my own experience, I cannot even comprehend it.

What has happened instead, in much of left and trans-political response to the trans-exclusionary resurgence, is reaction. The questions get treated as inseparable from the bad answers, the bad answers get treated as the only thing motivating the questions and the questions themselves go unanswered—not because they cannot be answered but because asking them out loud might get you cancelled. Luckily, I have tenure. This silencing is the political-economy dynamic Section VI described, operating now at the level of theory: the discursive economy of trans politics under current conditions selects for defence over inquiry, because inquiry is punished. But critical discourse was never meant for comfort. When inquiry on the left is foreclosed, the right becomes the dominant political force engaging the questions I have just named at the level of mass politics.[13] Republicans, evangelical fundamentalists, trans-exclusionary activists working through legislatures—these are the people asking, in their various distorted forms, what happens to gender politics when our genders change. The left's answer has largely been to refuse the question. The cost of refusing is that we cede the question to people whose answers are reactionary, and we end up arguing against their answers from a position that cannot ask the underlying question at all. This is a catastrophe for feminist theory and it is happening in real time.

Paisley Currah has made a version of this diagnosis in his recent *Yale Review* essay on Judith Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender?* and Jules Gill-Peterson's *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*, arguing that the structural-materialist analysis Gill-Peterson offers is what the left needs in order to meet the anti-trans backlash analytically and politically.[14]

There is a contradiction in these questions being asked by me. I am a beneficiary of the apparatus I am critiquing. I have male privilege. I am protected from the worst of what trans-exclusionary politics directs at trans people, especially at trans women. The position from which I can ask these questions most clearly is the same position the questions are about. The essay does not resolve this. It is, in part, what the essay is about, why it can surface through me at all.

IX. WHAT FORGETTING PROTECTS

If obligatory forgetting is the structural condition I described in Section IV—and it is—then it is worth asking what, exactly, the forgetting protects. Obligatory forgetting is one of the ways the apparatus that produces trans men sustains the structures of male power those men come to inhabit. It does this not by adding to patriarchy's coercive force—patriarchy does not need our help—but by subtracting from the resistance to it and by making the seeing itself socially costly to articulate. I want to name three of these arrangements and what, together, they are in service of.

The first is the felt sense of gendered authenticity—the experience of one's gender as natural, given, not subject to question. The self-made man's authority—trans or cis—depends on this feeling: the conviction that the gender they inhabit is *theirs*, properly and self-evidently, rather than a position they have been distributed into by an apparatus that needed them to occupy it.

Obligatory forgetting protects this conviction by removing access to the conditions that would expose it. As long as I cannot remember the vigilance I once carried, my present ease can feel like *my* ease, native to me, an expression of who I am. As soon as the memory returns—usually briefly, usually by accident—the ease starts to look more like a distribution than a property, and the man starts to look more like a position than a person. The forgetting closes these openings before they widen. It is the blind spot we inherit from our new location.

The second is the political alliance under the transgender umbrella. The real, totally undisputed victims of gender power are women, trans or otherwise. The umbrella's strength as a coalition depends on this fact being slightly obscured—not denied, but flattened, treated as one truth among others rather than the primary truth feminism organises around. To say 'trans people are persecuted' is intelligible. To say 'trans people are persecuted but some of us also benefit from male privilege at the direct expense of women, including some trans women, and this complicates the coalition' is intelligible too, but it is harder to organise around. The umbrella requires a certain flattening. Obligatory forgetting helps maintain that flattening for trans men specifically: I forget the position I am no longer in, which lets me speak of 'trans people' as if the category of trans were doing the actual political work, when in fact the categories doing that work, for someone like me, are 'white' and 'man.' This is also where the question of *cis* gets tangled. The term emerged from trans discourse to name the unmarked gender position; it was an analytical achievement. But over time it has hardened into a category that flattens difference among non-trans people as much as the umbrella flattens difference among trans people. In its looser uses—and I mean the vernacular register of the term, not the scholarship that introduced it—it comes to name a class of people who are the source of gender harm rather than a position within a gender system. I think that usage is a fiction, and a costly one. Gender harm is organised where men benefit and women lose, and the trans/cis binary, by suggesting otherwise, makes that organisation harder to see. The forgetting helps maintain it.

The third is the white trans man's investment in his own innocence—what I think of as the inoculation function. The inoculation is against being seen, by self or others, as implicated in male power. If you can't see your own weapon, you don't know how to use it. To hold onto women's history as protection against accruing male supremacy is to use that history as a credential, which is exactly the kind of thing forgetting can afford. *I cannot be implicated in male power because I used to be on its receiving end.* The forgetting makes the inoculation feel earned, liberatory even. That feeling is what the forgetting protects, and at whose expense? The inoculation feels earned, in part, because the becoming is something I am actively doing.

The credential takes more sophisticated forms too. I could claim, instead of innocence, superior analytical access; I can describe male power better than most men because I am newly inside it. That version of the credential is more flattering and probably more defensible. It is still a credential. The forgetting protects this version too, by letting me keep believing the analytical access is current even as the position that grounded it recedes. And the credential does work beyond either innocence or insight. It also licenses the continued claim to feminism—the right to call myself a feminist now, to be read as one, to participate in feminist discourse with the implicit authority of having been on the receiving end of feminisation. The credential protects not only my self-

image but my political legibility. By the time the credential no longer matches the position—by the time you are unmistakably a man receiving male privileges every day—the forgetting has progressed far enough that the mismatch does not register from inside. The trans man arrives at full implication in male power exactly as he loses the access that would let him see it.

These three protections—felt authenticity, the flattened umbrella, the credential of innocence—are not really three separate things. They are three ways of saying that gender power gets to stay intact, and that the people best positioned to notice would have to feel something they no longer feel in order to notice it. The big stake of obligatory forgetting is not personal. It is that violence and oppression against women is currently operating at scale, normalised through everyday micro-level male supremacy, legitimated through the millions of tiny interactions we are all trained to reproduce. We do not live in an equal society. It is only in the context of widespread violence against women, structural devaluation of women's labour and the daily diminishment of women in public and private life—because there is no outside of it—that some women decide to become men. The point is not to condemn the deciders. I am, after all, one of them. And to be fair, trans defensiveness has reasons. The Trump administration and the conservative legislatures advancing trans-restrictive law across the United States are coming for our hormones, our documents, our healthcare, our recognition. The threat is not hypothetical. The defensiveness is not paranoia; it is rational response to actual political conditions. But the conditions do not exempt the larger questions from being asked. Threats from the right cannot be permitted to dictate inquiry on the left. We have enough time in our day to worry about our access to T and to worry about the real social conditions of women. The point is that we would be lying if we did not admit that some of this operates, structurally, to reassert patriarchy—not because patriarchy is doing it from the outside, but because there is no outside, and the apparatus that produces trans subjects is the same apparatus that produces, sustains and re-naturalises male power. Gill-Peterson's recent *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (2024) makes a parallel argument: the devaluation of femininity and the veneration of masculinity are mutually structuring conditions of modern gender, sustained across centuries of colonial and medical apparatus.[15] I am working in the same materialist register from a trans male standpoint. The forgetting is one of the mechanisms by which the apparatus keeps doing both jobs at once—producing trans subjects who become men and sustaining the male power those men come to inhabit.

It is striking how much of gender on the left is now theorised, taught and legislated about through the trans subject. I am not claiming that trans people are deferred to as experts, or that no one is writing about gender inequality between women and men. I am claiming something narrower and, I think, more consequential. The analytic work of the past decade has gone into destabilising gender—showing it to be assigned rather than given, contestable, individually authorable—and that work has been necessary and largely correct. But feminism's oldest claim requires gender to hold still long enough to be a structure: that women, as a class, are subordinated to men, as a class. These two moves are in tension. The first dissolves the category the second needs.[16] I do not think anyone intended this trade, and I do not think it is a reason to stop making the first move. I think it is a cost that has gone unaccounted, and that the accounting is overdue. What has become hard to say on the left is not that trans people are oppressed. It is that women are.

There is a second mismatch underneath the first, and it is a matter of scale. If we step back to remember how minuscule the relative numbers of trans people are to women, the strangeness of the arrangement comes into view. A small cultural minority has become the reference point for a system of power that primarily targets women. Trans women are in both groups, which complicates the categorical neatness but does not undo the scale mismatch—the minority increasingly does not share, or shares only partially, the conditions of the group whose gender politics it has come to organise. Something has gone badly wrong with how the left has organised its gender politics. The people most directly subjected to gender power should not be the people whose analysis of it is most easily dismissed as suspect or out of fashion.

I cannot end this section without saying what is true. The forgetting I have just described is operating in the writing of this paragraph. I cannot fully see what I am no longer in the position to feel. The essay is partial because I am partial. That is not a confession of failure. It is what the analysis amounts to from where I am standing now.

X. CLOSING

It was an ordinary day. I came down the stairs into the subway station and saw my sixteen-year-old stepdaughter on the platform below. I called out her name. She couldn't hear me—train noise, tourist voices. I kept approaching her and she was like a slippery fish. Something in her body registered me as coming toward her, recognised me as male, perhaps imploring, but not her stepfather. She kept rolling away from me, feigning reasons to look and walk in the other direction as I followed her, calling out to her. At first, I was amused that she didn't recognise me. I was smiling at what felt, momentarily, like happenstance, then I saw what was happening, her protective agency emerging as something disguised as happenstance. Then a pang of grief. This is what I am to women now: always first and foremost a possible threat. No one rolled away from me when I was a woman.

The moment with my stepdaughter is not particularly remarkable. It is what women do, all the time, with men they do not know. The reason they do it is that they cannot tell which men are dangerous, so they manage all of us the same way. What is structurally produced by patriarchy is not only the threat; it is the impossibility of communicating across the gap the threat creates. Women cannot afford to read each man individually. Men cannot fully access what it is like to be on the receiving end of that calculus. The gap is not a misunderstanding that can be cleared up. It is the working condition of the system.

I have argued in this essay that obligatory forgetting is the structural condition of becoming a white man inside a structure of male privilege. I want to be clear about the larger claim that has been gathering underneath. Obligatory forgetting is not unique to trans men. It is the epistemological machinery of masculine privilege itself, operating on every man who occupies the position. Transition only made it visible—only let one person stand on both sides of the threshold and report on the crossing. The cis men around me are inside the same forgetting. They cannot see it because they have nothing to remember.

There is a version of what I have written here that does the exact work obligatory forgetting is supposed to do. The trans man who has seen through obligatory forgetting

performs his seeing in an essay, and the seeing becomes the new credential. The essay describes the trap and then closes by demonstrating the writer's mastery of it. The forgetting continues, undisturbed, having now been performed and processed and aestheticised into theory. This essay's existence is one of the things its analysis would have to suspect. There may be a better-edited version that reads like the silence that a fugitive leaves behind.

Being trans does not in itself change how gender inequality structurally operates. The population on whom gender power most acutely operates—women (trans or cis, doesn't matter)—is the population whose analysis should be structuring feminist politics.

The most urgent feminist concern in this moment is the global oppression of women. The trans-centred gender politics of the past decade has flattened this fact—has made the political category of trans, rather than the structural category of woman, the organising site of feminist energy. Trans-centred gender politics is not feminism. It can be made consistent with feminism, but it has often been made instead the substitute for it, and the substitution has been costly. Some of this essay's argument is that the costliness is structurally produced by the apparatus that produces trans subjects who become men. Some of it is more straightforward: a small population, increasingly distinct in its material conditions from the larger population that gender power targets, has become the organising site for that larger population's politics. The corrective is not to expel trans voices from feminist discourse. The corrective is to stop centring them and to listen, instead, to the women whose analysis of gender inequality is grounded in the conditions that gender inequality actually produces—including trans women, women of colour, poor women, immigrant women, mothers, domestic workers, sex workers, girlfriends and wives, daughters, sisters, nieces, the secretary, the nanny and definitely the grandmother.

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1. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67; and "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.
2. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Crossing Press, 1983); R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1987), and *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2005).
3. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine* (July/August 1989): 10–12.
4. Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Reidel, 1983), 283–310; Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Cornell University Press, 1991); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Unwin Hyman, 1990).
5. Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006).
6. It is worth noting that the framing under which medical transition became *the* solution was historically contingent rather than necessary. Violence against gender-nonconforming people could have been understood as a public-health problem (the violence itself as the pathology), as a spiritual matter calling for recognition rather than correction or—in some pre-colonial and non-Western traditions, as anthropologists have documented—as an occasion for distinct social roles outside the binary altogether. Under each of these framings, the surgical and pharmaceutical solution does not arise, because the *problem* it answers does not exist in the same form. What consolidated was one possibility among others, given political and institutional staying power by the particular framing the mid-twentieth-century Western medical establishment was equipped to recognise. On the Jorgensen coverage and the correspondence it generated, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Harvard University Press, 2002).
7. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon, 1978); Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," in *Reconstructing Individualism*, ed. Thomas C. Heller et al. (Stanford University Press, 1986), 222–36.
8. Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," *Camera Obscura* 10, no. 2 (1992): 150–76 (originally circulated 1987); Stone was responding to Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire* (see note 11). On Rivera, STAR, and the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day rally, see Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, 2nd ed. (Seal Press, 2017).
9. Andrea Long Chu, "On Liking Women," *n+1* 30 (Winter 2018); Noah Zazanis, "On Hating Men and Becoming One Anyway: Transmasculinity, Feminism, and the Politics of Online," *The New Inquiry*, 24 December 2019, https://thenewinquiry.com/on-hating-men-and-becoming-one-anyway/.
10. Writers in this tradition mostly reject the acronym 'TERF' as a slur and prefer the self-description 'gender-critical feminist.' The position is associated with figures including Kathleen Stock and Helen Joyce, and organisations such as Woman's Place UK, and has been more dominant in the United Kingdom and Australian feminist discourse than in the United States. I retain 'trans-exclusionary feminism' here as the more analytically precise term and the one used in academic literature.

11. Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (Routledge, 2014), esp. chapters 4–5; Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Beacon, 1979), provides the foundational text for this tradition.
12. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, 2nd ed. (Seal Press, 2016).
13. Important work engaging these questions from the left is being done by feminist and trans-of-colour thinkers Amia Srinivasan, Andrea Long Chu, C. Riley Snorton, Marquis Bey and others, but in less visible registers than the mass-political mobilisations currently shaping legislation and public discourse.
14. Paisley Currah, "Gender Wars: Two Scholars Excavate the Origins of Today's Trans Backlash," *The Yale Review* 112, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 126–40.
15. Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (Verso, 2024). See also her earlier *Histories of the Transgender Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
16. Paisley Currah frames a version of this tension in his reading of Butler and Gill-Peterson, arguing that the left needs a structural-materialist account of gender to meet the anti-trans backlash on analytic rather than purely defensive ground. See Currah, "Gender Wars." See also Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*.