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Sex: Trouble

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queer, trans, sexual difference, gender, negativity

Abstract
This essay sets out from the observation that, by and large, the Lacanian field has tended to celebrate Joan Copjec's "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" at the expense of rigorously engaging with it. Indeed, Copjec's explosive text has often been taken—wrongly—as warranting both an indiscriminate dismissal of the entire project of queer theory (especially where it contests psychoanalytic theorizations of sexual difference) and the frequent confusion of transphobic countertransference with psychoanalytic thinking. Moving against this tendency, "Sex: Trouble" disencumbers the queer- and trans-emancipatory kernel of Copjec's argument—that is, that sex serves no other purpose than to serve no purpose—from the dimorphic and sometimes "cisnormative" terms through which this radical kernel is at once elaborated and undermined. Setting "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" in dialogue with a number of queer and trans theorists, "Sex: Trouble" establishes Copjec's thought as an indispensable weapon in the struggle against the profusion of meanings that threaten to obliterate the negativity, the *nothing*, that sex *is*, and on which the freedom of queer and trans (read: all) subjects is staked.

Spol: težava

Ključne besede
kvir, trans, spolna razlika, spol, negativnost

Povzetek
Esej izhaja iz opazke, da je lacanovsko polje na splošno slavilo poglavje »Spol in evtanazija uma« iz knjige Joan Copjec *Read My Desire* na račun tega, da se ni zares strogo

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ukvarjalo z njim. Copjecino eksplozivno besedilo je bilo namreč pogosto – napačno – razumljeno kot opravičilo za brezpogojno zavračanje celotnega projekta kvir teorije (zlasti tam, kjer ta nasprotuje psihoanalitičnim teoretizacijam spolne razlike) in za pogosto pomešanje transfobnega kontratransferja s psihoanalitičnim mišljenjem. V nasprotju s to tendenco pričujoče besedilo osvobaja kvir in transemancipacijsko jedro Copjecinega argumenta – namreč, da je edina stvar, ki ji seks služi, ta, da ne služi ničemur – od dimorfnih in včasih »cisnormativnih« izrazov, skozi katere je to radikalno jedro hkrati razdelano in spodkopano. Pričujoče besedilo postavi »Spol in evtanazijo uma« v dialog z več kvir in trans teoretiki, s čimer Copjecino misel uveljavlja kot nepogrešljivo orožje v boju proti obilici pomenov, ki grozijo, da bodo izbrisali negativnost, ta nič, ki je spol, in na katerem temelji svoboda kvir in trans (beri: vseh) subjektov.

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for Joan, for everything

> Sex is the name for an elementary trouble, a trouble that besets the self-equality that underlies, in principle, the element—the part or the simple milieu [. . .] And it must be avowed: nothing about sex has been understood, even with mastery over all the phenomena of the division and recombination of gametes and also those of the attraction and the conjugation of all genders. If sex were ever to be considered as an element, it would be the element of trouble.
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> — Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sexistence*[1]

Transsexual desires aren't either good or bad: they're *real*. Ideology has no antonym, and the ultimately aesthetic decisions that mark conformity to or departure from the dictates of gender norms are, in every possible sense, immaterial. The critical question is then not whether transsexual desires are appropriately counter-ideological but *what is to be done given that they have the desires they do*. What

[1] *Sexistence*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 92.

> demands do these place on the structure of the world as it stands?
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> — Kay Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition"[2]

1

Thirty years on, is there anything left for us to do with Joan Copjec's "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason," other than to go on celebrating its unsurpassed rigor and perspicacity, its unyielding fidelity to Freud's sexual revolution at a historical juncture that, on every last page of *Read My Desire*, Copjec diagnosed in the strongest possible terms as Thermidorian? Given the occasion for the present essay, this is a predictable enough question with which to begin. Yet behind it lurks a significantly more troubling and troublesome one, which I ask with extreme caution: Have we, in the thirty years since Copjec's essay first appeared, done anything other than celebrate it?

Or: To what ends have theorists writing on the question of sexual difference in Copjec's wake put her explosive argument to work, and what modes of engagement and lines of inquiry has it thereby not occurred to us (as either possible or necessary) to pursue? One of the great theoretical interventions of the twentieth century, virtuosic in its articulation of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and feminist politics, "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" certainly has earned the apical status nearly every other major Lacanian theorist has accorded it. On precisely these grounds, though, it deserves more than our faithful, admiring echoes. Yet by and large, Lacanians have tended to restate its claims without repeating the gesture that alone legitimates them—for, however else we may wish to commemorate it, it is also a serious close reading of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

For Copjec and other major psychoanalytic feminists of her generation, the antipathy toward Freud that came to characterize so much feminist thought in the neoliberal era was in part the sign of a certain intellectual laziness, a refusal to distinguish the barbaric orthopedics that American ego-psychologists sought to pass off as the talking cure from the properly, traumatically emancipatory field of the Freudian clinic. It is therefore not a little distressing to witness several of

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[2] "Two Senses of Gender Abolition: Gender as Accumulation Strategy," in *Feminism against Cisness*, ed. Emma Heaney (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024), 144.

Copjec's otherwise most subtle interlocutors take her landmark essay as authorizing the same kind of dismissive, unrigorous ideologizing it attacks.[3] If these interlocutors are to be believed, her text is not just a careful and searing critique of the so-called "poststructuralist" presuppositions that undergird the theory of gender and the signifier that Butler articulates in their very earliest work on the subject; rather, it amounts to the last word on the question of gender as queer theory poses it, if not on queer theory's challenge to psychoanalytic approaches to the sexed subject generally. It hardly needs to be said that this implies that *Gender Trouble* (or, at best, its author) can be taken as queer theory's last word on gender—a premise so obviously indefensible that it can only be explained as measuring the degree to which hetero- and cis-normativity yet haunt the scenes of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Or, to put this more pointedly, it indexes the ease with which some "straight Lacanistas" (as Calvin Thomas cheekily calls them)[4] not only accommodate such reactionary ideologies within their elaborations of Lacan's radical desubstantialization of sex but actually proffer the contents of the former as if they were logical expressions of the latter.

This is not all; in what strikes me as an inevitable slippage, these Lacanians' incuriosity regarding further developments in queer theory's *accounts* of gender translates to a dismissive attitude toward the *concept* of gender altogether. In practical terms, this sweeping rejection—not of one or more specific approaches to theorizing gender, but of gender as somehow an intrinsically false way of approaching the subjective and social phenomena it is tasked with naming—manifests as a refusal to take seriously the many profound ways that queer and trans collectives, through political struggle and the cultural work of world-building, have in recent years transformed the field of gendered embodiment. Reflecting on the "rather queer" way in which gender studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis "reach for each other," Shanna Carlson observes that, while gender studies is marked by "a profound investment in thinking through psychoanalytic claims about sex and sexuality," Lacanians "return [this] attention" only "from time to time." On those rare occasions when they do, as with Copjec's "corrective" readings of Butler, their responses "are not precisely reciprocal; [they] deal primarily

3 There are important exceptions to this widespread tendency: Shanna Carlson, Patricia Gherovici, Oren Gozlan, Jay Prosser, Mari Ruti, and Gayle Salamon.

4 See Calvin Thomas, "Lacanistas in the Stalls," in *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities: From Feminism to Trans**, ed. Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler (London: Routledge, 2023), 244–61.

in psychoanalytic vocabulary [. . .] *without sufficiently identifying or attending to the rationale, or the desire, motivating Butler's concerns*."[5] I want to underscore this last observation as touching on something indispensable to any future psychoanalytic thinking that not only would not reproduce but would actively contest the field's long record of treating queer, trans, and gender variant subjects as objects to be theorized *in absentia*, from which Lacanians most certainly are not exempt.

The point of Carlson's important intervention is not to demand psychoanalytic theorists and clinicians strike a more "tolerant" or "inclusive" pose—in, say, the manner of the liberal non-politics of corporate DEI trainings, wherein merely rhetorical celebrations of difference lubricate the works of capitalist exploitation.[6] Yet, if we return to Copjec armed with Carlson's insight, we can make the following observations. There can be no doubt that her essay dexterously dismantles what we might call the correlationist, or mimetic, fallacy at the heart of Butler's deconstruction of sex-as-substance: the philosophically illegitimate "move [. . .] from the level of the concept to the level of being," which, "confusing a rule of language with a description of the Thing-in-itself," leads Butler to claim that, because signification is process without end—because the meanings that pool around *masculine* and *feminine* are ever subject to revision and indistinction—sex in itself is in flux, on the move.[7] The problem here, as Copjec carefully underscores, is not the "in flux" but rather the "in itself," which places sex somewhere in "the great Outside," an object to which the field of signifiers would more or less accurately correlate. This is a problem for Copjec not least because it posits a metalinguistic point of transcendence from which to verify the signifying chain's descriptive proximity to the Thing-in-itself, against which the entire development of critical philosophy militates. Insofar as the counterclaim that *sex does not budge* opens onto Lacan's account of sex as nothing

5 Shanna Carlson, "Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference," *Differences* 21, no. 2 (2010): 47; my emphasis.

6 And yet we ought to take seriously Kate Foord's assessment of the "clinic caught within the heterosexual matrix," about which queer and trans people are, with good reason, deeply suspicious, concerned as they are about "being returned immediately to a trashing of one's existence in the first encounter with a clinician, to being a 'transsexual' or a 'homosexual,' or of not being able to work out, from those first encounters, whether such a trashing is in store." Kate Foord, "Queeranalyst," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3–4 (2016): 528.

7 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (New York: Verso, 2015), 204.

other than the structural fact of language's falling into contradiction with itself, as the intrinsic failure of language on which every sense founders, it must also be said that Copjec's reading fails to address what most concerns Butler. In her painstaking exposition of "the stumbling block of sense," Copjec passes over what I take to be the primary objective of her opponent's text, which is to furnish an anti-essentialist account of "the multitude of meanings that try to make up for [the] impossibility" of sex, the "riot of sense" on which the subject's intelligibility to the social link hinges. While we have good reason to suspect that, as Slavoj Žižek suggests, there is something "symptomatic" about the way Copjec's argument "is silently passed over in numerous feminist attacks on Lacan," it is also plausible to read the deafening silence of her interlocutors as corresponding to her declining even to use the term "gender" in her critique of *Gender Trouble*.[8]

Setting aside for the moment whether their theoretical apparatus was adequate to its object—in a recent text, Kadji Amin plainly states that "in its linguistic idealism, Butler's early work cannot offer [. . .] a workable theory of gender"—Butler nonetheless wanted to ask: if it is no longer plausible to imagine gender as the epiphenomenal transcription of an innate substance called "sex," because such a substance has been determined not to exist except as an effect of the very discourses it was deployed to legitimate, then how are we to understand what it is and how it functions?[9] They were interested not only in discovering the logic of gendered meanings' flux, which led them to the model of Austinian performatives, but also in the widespread violence with which modern Western cultures police this movement in an attempt to contain and stabilize the referents of "man" and "woman." What is gender, Butler asked, if I can "get it wrong" (e.g., perform it otherwise, or "perform" the "wrong one"), and if getting it wrong can both feel right (as one condition among others of a livable life) and get me killed (as a consequence of my perceived transgression or illegibility)? These are obviously particularly exigent questions for queer, trans, and otherwise gender variant people. If "sex is the stumbling block of sense" falls short as an answer to such questions as *Gender Trouble* poses them, this it because it allows Copjec

8 Slavoj Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference," in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 74.

9 Kadji Amin, "We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents," *Representations* 158, no. 1 (2022): 106.

to leave unremarked Butler's basic observation that, for subjects whose way of inhabiting the impossibility of sexual difference both estranges and estranges them from the dominant forms through which culture interpellates us as man or woman, *sense itself* is not so much a stumbling block as a blockade, an obstruction erected along the path to a livable life, as obviously contingent and violent in its attempt to conceal its contingency as any police barrier.

This, then, is what concerns me. Copjec's landmark defense of sex as the limit-in-the-real of sense, as therefore that alone which holds open a space between the subject and the field of signifiers—in which, as ego, she is of course still compelled to make the kind of sense that will make her an object of power's calculations—strikes me at some fundamental level as necessarily on the side of queer and trans liberation. Where the anti-heterosexism of her argument is concerned, she says as much: "Sex does not budge, and it is not heterosexist to say so. In fact, the opposite may be true. For it is by making it conform to the signifier that you oblige sex to conform to social dictates, to take on social content."[10] Now, one could simply say that "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" makes a *de facto* queer- and trans-affirmative argument because it makes a universalist one—because it posits sex as universally what guarantees the subject's freedom, where "freedom" means the subject's irreducibility to discourse (that is, to power). More precisely, we could join the chorus of Lacanians who have long insisted that the universal at stake in psychoanalysis avoids the pitfalls of the universalism through which the European imperial project violently "globalized" a certain set of particulars, since the former is a universalism of lack, an empty/structural principle, devoid of any content, and therefore neither more nor less "at home" in any particular cultural context.[11] This is, I think, precisely what Copjec has in mind when she asserts that the only way not to abet "the surrender of difference to [. . .] the [. . .] crimes against otherness with which the rise of racism has begun to acquaint us" is to fight for a concept of sex as the real that subtracts the subject from the field of signification.[12] Indeed, the *subtractive* universal at stake in psychoanalysis theoretically not only avoids the destructive

10 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 211.

11 See Todd McGowan, *Universality and Identity Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). See also Bobby Benedicto, "Queer Beyond Repair: Psychoanalysis and the Case for Negativity in Queer of Color Critique," *Postmodern Culture* 33, no. 2–3 (2023).

12 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 208.

violence of humanism's substantive universal, it offers us an analytic framework by which to account for this very violence.[13]

Yet, if there is a properly emancipatory element at the heart of Copjec's argument that can and should be placed in the service of antihomophobic and antitransphobic struggle, there is also a great deal else in it that considerably undermines any such effort. When, for instance, in the course of mapping the logical isomorphism of Kant's antinomies of reason and Lacan's formulas of sexuation, she refers to "*psychoanalysis's division of all subjects into two mutually exclusive classes: male and female,*" we must object that it is not psychoanalysis, but rather a vast, well-documented history of colonialist, white-supremacist, and broadly trans-misogynist state violence that seeks (in vain) to carve humanity up into two mutually exclusive sex classes.[14] Consider, briefly, the fate of the *hijras* of the Northwestern Provinces of colonial India. For trans historian Jules Gill-Peterson, the *hijras* are some of the first victims of trans misogyny, which emerges in the second half of the nineteenth century as "a mode of colonial statecraft" by means of which "a staggering array of non-Western cultures have been irreparably marked by the reductive violence of colonialism, which included the enforcement of a male/female sex binary in which trans life acquired its present association with boundary crossing."[15] Perceiving them as a constitutionally ungovernable threat to the *Raj* (on account of their excessive, incorrigible femininity), British authorities devised the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (CTA), in part to render the *hijra* way of life illegal, with the explicit aim of hastening the "extinction" of a population whose demise they considered inevitable. More specifically, *hijras* found themselves construed as prostitutes and charged with the crime of "sodomy"—not because the authorities possessed evidence of illicit sexual activity, but simply insofar as these ascetics "lived [. . .] at a great distance from British notions of gender, family, and religion," which distance, in the colonizer's view, was evidence enough to effectuate such a charge.[16] Though the CTA ultimately fell short of its genocidal goal, it did succeed in immiserating the *hijras*, who, having been sexualized in the phantasmatic frame of the

13 I am thinking, of course, of Jacques-Alain Miller's well-known formulation of racism as a fantasized "theft of jouissance" by an other-without-lack.

14 Copjec, 213.

15 Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (New York: Verso, 2024), 16–17.

16 Gill-Peterson, 30.

colonizers, turned to sex work once their traditional means of livelihood (dancing, singing, *badhai*) were banned.

The history of the destruction of the *hijras*' way of life, on the grounds of the threat their illegibility posed to colonial authorities—or rather, as a consequence of the colonial order's "translation" of something illegible at the level of their *gender* into an all too legible fiction of *sexual* immorality—has a great deal to teach us about the material conditions in which the unsymbolizable real of sexual difference is lived. For one thing, we should note that what enables this translation is a paranoid hermeneutic that concatenates the *fact* of homosexuality with its *impossibility*. Refusing to accept on its own terms a gender system that exceeds and, importantly, predates by many centuries the binary system of Western modernity, colonizers read the *hijras*' femininity as sign of the homosexual desire that it at once telegraphed and veiled. This interpretive, symptomatizing move, which takes as its aim the stabilization of binary gender, operates a "perverse implantation" that produces (a fictional) homosexuality in order to save binary gender from the threat *hijras* posed to it. Yet, in practically the same moment that this homosexuality-as-inner-truth is conjured into being, it too must be contained, its threat to colonial order neutralized: in the illicit sexual transactions British officials imagined for them, *hijras* were effectively charged with defrauding their normatively gendered male clientele, to whom it was simply unthinkable to impute anything like a homosexual desire, let alone a trans-amorous one. In the colonizer's calculus, gender and sexual transgression cancel one another out until the *hijras* as desiring subjects drop out of the picture altogether, leaving only their "victims": male, heterosexual, *duped*.[17]

For the purposes of the argument that I wish to advance here, I want to underscore only one of the central lessons of Gill-Peterson's study of trans misogyny for psychoanalytic thinking, namely, that the task of dividing all subjects into two mutually exclusive classes, male and female, has never once served an emancipatory end. It has in fact been one of the primary weapons wielded to commit those "crimes against otherness with which the rise of racism has begun to acquaint us," *and therefore should hold no interest whatever for*

[17] This history also has something important to teach us about the ways in which the dialectic of sexuality and gender is not something for us to "intersect" with race or not, at will and after the fact, but something that is *originally* racialized.

psychoanalysis. To the degree that clinicians and theorists busy themselves with such sorting out, the psychoanalytic clinic fails sufficiently to distinguish itself from the regimes of power into which the Michel Foucault of *La volonté du savoir* rather hastily sought to collapse it. It is well known that Juliet Mitchell laid to waste a certain line of feminist and anti-Freudian thinking by pointing out that Freud's work sets out to describe, not to recommend, the patriarchal order within which he and his hysteric analysands invented the talking cure. Could the same be said of Lacan with respect to "man" and "woman"? Of Lacanian discourse more broadly? Gill-Peterson's research on trans misogyny belongs to a wave of recent queer and trans scholarship in history, anthropology, cultural studies, and literary studies that, taken together, renders it impossible to claim in good faith that "there are only men and women" is not a prescriptive statement masquerading as a descriptive one.[18]

To be clear, none of this should be taken to suggest that psychoanalysis ought to abandon the question of sexual difference, that queer ordeal of masculinity and femininity from which not one analysand can have escaped. The point is rather that what Lacan formulates via Gottlob Frege as the two ways in which subjects may situate themselves *vis-à-vis* the universal function of castration (subjective division) and the failure of the sexual relation (to exist) describe stances, not classes. (We ought to add that Copjec's revelation of the formulae's isomorphism with Kant's antimonies implicitly ratifies this.) "These positions—to be 'not-all' or 'all' inscribed within the phallic function—are 'sexes,'" Carlson writes, "but there is nothing necessarily gendered about them; neither do they refer to biological sex. Instead, they describe stances a subject takes with respect to subjective division. According to this view, language 'sexes' us in that it demands that we take a position with respect to our own division."[19] What this means, of course, is that there is a considerable difference between claiming that the speaking being cannot *not* assume a position from which to live (with) castration, on the one hand and, on the other, that each speaking being is either a man

18 See Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Sita Balani, *Deadly and Sick: Sexual Modernity and the Making of Race* (New York: Verso: 2023); María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–209.

19 Carlson, "Transgender Subjectivity," 169.

or a woman. The former claim allows us to maintain Copjec's crucial insight into one of the major consequences of psychoanalysis for philosophy, namely, its revelation that the subject of critical philosophy is necessarily *not* neuter, while dispensing with the claim that the conceptual framework of gender inevitably seeks the restoration to the subject of this neuter status.

My uncontroversial wager, then, is that the only way to properly honor "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" at thirty years is to allow the context in which we return to it to open it to a new reading—to determine what it yet has to teach us, now that we find ourselves on the other side of a number of intellectual, cultural, and political sequences, not to mention certain tipping points and backlashes, that expose the purely ideological character of many of the dominant uses to which Lacan's theorizations of castration and sexual difference have been put. To this end, it undertakes the modest but urgent work of attempting to wrest the emancipatory kernel of Copjec's anti-historicist defense of Lacan's account of sexual difference from, one the one hand, those points at which her argument lapses into a "cisnormative" status quo and, on the other, psychoanalysis' broader theoretical and institutional context that, mistaking its own countertransferential complicitly with the transphobia of its cultural milieu for a theoretical position, has tended to conflate what is and is not radical in Lacan. My aim, then, is not to single out Copjec's essay as an exemplary or extreme case of Lacanian theory's parochialisms (it is not). Neither is it to fault her for not having written her essay from a vantage point that postdates it by a few decades.

Instead, I wish to encourage among us some measure of distress regarding the fact that, over the course of those few decades, Lacanians have tended to use the so-called Master's late formulations of sexual difference as pretexts to seal their thinking off, on the one hand, from transformations to sex and gender unfolding in the social link and, on the other, from historical research that has firmly established the contingency and fragility of Western modernity's distribution of the sexual. Darian Leader's withering assessment of this situation is worth quoting at length:

> Phallic and non-phallic logics are endlessly contrasted and opposed, and it is a real question why the same formulae are repeated again and again with so little critical perspective. The notations for sexuation from the seminar *Encore* have generated hundreds of expositions, ranging from scholarly articles to clinical

> case reports and even entire books. Yet, the reasons why a suggestive, illuminating yet clearly inconclusive set of pseudo-mathematical formulae should prove so popular remain unexplored.
>
> To have a reality check on this, one need only [. . .] to consider the question of whether any new idea about sexuality has actually been put forward in the last 50 years in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The formulae [. . .] have had the unfortunate effect of totally blocking any further work on an area which contains many open questions [. . . and] theoretical and clinical uses of this apparent emancipation tend to be lazy and judgmental.[20]

Almost without exception, the trans or gender variant subject has been for psychoanalytic thinking and practice an occasion to forfeit the critical difference from the medical clinic that alone constitutes the therapeutic specificity of its own clinical space. In *The Desire of Psychoanalysis*, Gabriel Tupinambá observes, "by turning its attention from the visible physical body toward a specific sort of speech, psychoanalysis found that, as far as psychic suffering is concerned, *the subject who is supposed to know* [. . .] is *part of the pathology*." What therefore distinguishes this clinic from its medical antecedent is not exactly some novel element that gets added to the latter to produce the former; rather, the space of psychoanalysis is the result of "the frame of the medical clinic fall[ing] into what it is supposed to frame."[21] Corroborating this point in a searching text on the analytic encounter with queer- and trans-identified analysands, Lacanian analyst Kate Foord writes:

> If one enters the medical or the pastoral there is no hope of hearing the analysand, who is the only one to say the name from which to live [. . .]. The analyst must know how to function as the place of that missing signifier for long enough to enable the analysand to work through the defiles of the signifier to the fall of the analyst as subject supposed to know. One can see how quickly, how violently, an analysis with a queer person could run aground on an analyst's belief that, for instance, he "really is" a man, or she "really is" a woman.[22]

[20] Darian Leader, "The Gender Question from Freud to Lacan," in *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities*, 88–89.

[21] Gabriel Tupinambá, *The Desire of Psychoanalysis* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 190.

[22] Foord, "Queeranalyst," 529.

If the inclusion of the frame in what it frames—in a word, the transference—figures as *sine qua non* of the psychoanalytic procedure, this procedure falls to ruin at the very moment the analyst herself, giving herself over to the countertransference, supposes to know what (gender) the analysand *really* is. From here it is a horrifyingly short distance to the conformist vision of psychoanalysis as adaptation to the social link against which Lacan staked his entire life.

2

Where do we discover the radical-emancipatory kernel of "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" that sets Copjec's thinking against the heterosexism and cisnormativity that to this day pervade the Lacanian field? What in her argument authorizes my placing it in the service of queer and trans struggle? Counterintuitive though it may seem, I want to suggest that we take as our starting point a moment in her argument that at first glance might seem especially hostile toward trans experience. "Sex does not budge," Copjec writes, "and it is not heterosexist to say so. In fact, the opposite may be true."[23] It hardly needs saying that, given how central the plasticity of the sexed body and the signifying contingency of gender have been to the theorizations and, more importantly, the practices of trans life—given that, at the most elemental level, the very possibility of trans life is staked on the subject's capacity to effect certain kinds of relocation vis-à-vis her sexed being—Copjec's hard line regarding sex's stubbornness would seem to be a non-starter.[24] It is precisely this insistence on the imperviousness of sex, specifically to culture's "manipulations," that leads Grace Lavery to observe that "this particular strand of Lacanian thinking will not easily lend itself to an explanation of trans phenomena."[25] Granted, the terms through which she characterizes Copjec's argument in order to arrive at this observation strike me as inapposite: one can only claim, as Lavery does, that Copjec posits sex as something "ahistorical" and as "a matter of something like human essence" if one fails fully to appreciate how deadly a blow Freud's theory of the drive dealt to the very notion of human essence. Such misprisions notwithstanding, Lavery's impression of Copjec's position as one from which "trans phenomena" will

[23] Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 211.

[24] On trans and plasticity, see Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*; on contingency, see Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," 135–57.

[25] Grace Lavery, *Pleasure and Efficacy: Of Pen Names, Cover Versions, and Other Trans Techniques* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 53.

be difficult (if not altogether impossible) to see deserves to be taken seriously, if only because so much Lacanian ink has been spilled by authors who presume to diagnose, analyze, allegorize, or pathologize trans subjectivity from just such a position. Why wouldn't Lavery see in Copjec's argument the widespread tendency among non-trans theorists to construe their own sexed embodiment as the unbudging norm against which the movement of "transness" shows up as exceptional?

On its surface, we can observe that the pair of claims *sex does not budge* and *to claim sex does not budge is not heterosexist* is effectively homophonous with the discourse of "mainstream" transphobic ideology. There, one encounters the putative common sense that the facticity of binary sex is outside of and impervious to intervention at the level of desire or will, signifier or flesh, political transformation or historical flux—from which it follows that to say so is simply to rehearse a set of value-neutral facts. Yet the threat this homophony seems to pose dissipates in the next moment of the transphobe's "reasoning," when, in an attempt to secure its legitimacy, he must say where the immovable realities of sex are located. Conventionally, the location provided has something to do with God or science, sometimes both. Sex here is something that cannot be made to budge, something lodged in its place at the center of the subject's being, which the subject is duped to think she can *re*-place in turn.

I have raised the specter of the apparent identity of Copjec's Lacanian statements with those of the transphobe because it marks the point at which the psychoanalytic concept of sex emerges in its inassimilable difference, not only from the sex at stake in transphobic discourse, but from all other discursive fields that claim to take sex as an object. Why, according to Lacan, does sex not budge? Precisely because, in order to budge, *it would have to be something*. *That which is, budges*. By contrast, *nothing cannot budge*.

In a footnote added in 1915 to the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud sought to distinguish a properly psychoanalytic sexual difference from the muddle of "masculine" and "feminine" senses as they pertain to bodies and languages. These terms, Freud writes,

> are sometimes used in the sense of activity and passivity, sometimes in a biological, and sometimes, again, in a sociological sense. The first of these three

> meanings is the essential one and the most serviceable in psycho-analysis. When, for instance, libido was described in the text above as being 'masculine,' the word was being used in this sense, for an instinct is always active even when it has a passive aim in view. The second, or biological, meaning [. . .] is the one whose applicability can be determined most easily. Here 'masculine' and 'feminine' are characterized by the presence of spermatozoa or ova respectively and by the functions preceding from them. Activity and its concomitant phenomena [. . .] are as a rule linked with biological masculinity; but they are not necessarily so, for there are animal species in which these qualities are on the contrary assigned to the female. The third, or sociological, meaning receives its connotation from the observation of actually existing masculine and feminine individuals. Such observation shows that in human beings pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found either in a psychological or in a biological sense. Every individual on the contrary displays a mixture of the character-traits belonging to his own and to the opposite sex; and he shows a combination of activity and passivity whether or not these last character-traits tally with his biological ones.[26]

How can this moment in Freud's thinking help us grasp both the crucial distinction on which Copjec's polemic hinges and its queer- and trans-affirmative potential? One should begin by underscoring that, in cataloging the three epistemological frameworks in which "masculine" and "feminine" circulate, Freud explicitly designates both the biological and the sociological frameworks as inessential *tout court*, not merely "for psychoanalysis." Thus, if he accepts that, within the domain of biology, we can determine what "masculinity" and "femininity" index "most easily," this turns out not to be the Good News on which naturalist defenders of biological sex's putative certainty have hung their hopes. For, as he was well aware, Freud's contemporaries in the experimental life sciences were busy discovering how exceedingly narrow the remit of this signifying ease really was: all it could be said to cover were "the presence of spermatozoa or ova respectively." Beyond the bare fact of sexual reproduction, all else bears witness to an eminently plastic and fundamentally bisexual organic disposition; nothing of the organism is "purely" masculine or feminine, and anything can be made to budge.[27] Moreover, Freud mentions the link between the

[26] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 85–86.

[27] Bisexuality will soon enough be found to hold even at the level of the gonads.

presence of spermatozoa and the "concomitant phenomena" of "activity" (by which he means virility) only to remind his reader that this association is in no way expressive of a "natural order," given that in other sexually reproductive species these same phenomena are found linked to the other sex.

The distinction between the psychoanalytic and biological concepts of sexual difference has proven easier to maintain than the one between psychoanalysis and the cultural, or what Freud refers to above as the sociological. Whereas psychiatric and cognitivist-neuroscientific attempts to reduce what psychoanalysis calls the subject to an epiphenomenal effect of the organism's neural activity are typically proffered *as disproving* the claims of psychoanalysis, Jung's "full retreat from" psychoanalysis, a direct consequence of a culturalizing rather than a biologizing impulse, was peddled *as psychoanalysis*. And when, at the conclusion of *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement,* Freud likened Jung's "modification" to Lichtenberg's knife, Freud effectively sounded a warning that culturalism figured a considerably more insidious threat-from-within to psychoanalysis than did biologism.[28]

Eighty years later, Copjec explicitly modelled her critique of Butler on Freud's polemic against "the Neo-Zurich therapy." Like Jung before them, Butler is charged with having "picked out a few cultural overtones from the symphony of life and [. . .] failed to hear the mighty and primordial melody of the drives."[29] But what does the footnote from the *Three Essays* contribute to our understanding of the cultural "use" of the terms of sexual difference? What is most striking in this passage is that, having stated that the sociological meanings of these terms derive from "the observation of actually existing masculine and feminine individuals," Freud declines to go beyond, or "get behind," what this empiricism yields. Instead, he simply repeats the obvious: In reality, there are neither purely

[28] Notwithstanding, if we read Jung closely, we understand to what extent culturalism rescues biologism, that is, restores the exhausted dualism that Freud's metapsychology so thoroughly subverted. "The pleasure and satisfaction [the baby] finds in feeding is localized in the mouth, but to interpret this pleasure as sexual is quite unjustified. Feeding is a genuine activity, satisfying in itself, and because it is a vital necessity nature has here put a premium on pleasure." Carl Gustave Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 5, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 161.

[29] Sigmund Freud, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 74.

masculine men nor purely feminine women, but only individuals in whom qualities "belonging to his own and to the opposite sex" are mixed. It is of crucial significance to our argument that in this moment Freud effectively leaves the sociological framework intact: that there are no men entirely without "feminine" qualities and no women purified of "masculinity" is offered up as not in need of psychoanalytic clarification. It is instead a fact that, as we have already noted, Freud determines is *inessential to*—which might also be taken to mean "beyond the remit of"—the space of the psychoanalytic clinic. Alain Badiou formulates this point as follows: "infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences."[30] It is therefore specious for Alenka Zupančič to argue, in *What IS Sex?*, that Freud pits his elaboration of sexual difference against what she calls "the spontaneous 'liberal' understanding of sexual difference," according to which "Masculinity and Femininity [. . .] exist nowhere in reality (no person is one hundred percent masculine or feminine) [and] men and women exist only as differently portioned mixtures of the two ideal states."[31] As one can see above, Freud's remarks on "actually existing [. . .] individuals" take up nearly verbatim the "liberal" position she rehearses—not in order to refute it, but rather to emphasize that, when psychoanalysis speaks of sexual difference, it is concerned with something other than "what there is."

Nonetheless, Freud's way of restating the obvious produces its own minor estrangement effect, alerting us to a seeming contradiction at the heart of gender (which is quite clearly what is at issue in what Freud designated in terms of sociological observation). For, if its sole actuality is combinatory rather than binary—if in reality it is only ever found as a mixture of "masculine" and "feminine" qualities—this, of course, begs the question as to how or why we would be capable of identifying any such quality as "belonging" to one or the other sex in the first place. The picture that Freud observes leaves us at a loss to understand why the melee of gendered qualities as they are actually lived does not simply come apart at the seams, why the idea(l) of two proper places from which distinct sets of traits would issue does not collapse under the weight of an infinitely variegated reality. Neither does Freud swoop in to supply us with the missing psychoanalytic concept or measure that would stabilize or otherwise orient its confusion.

30 Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 25.

31 Alenka Zupančič, *What* Is *Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 45.

How, then, are we meant to square the fundamental (infinite) errancy of gender's senses with the tenacity of the binary terms we use to describe it? Jack Halberstam's seminal *Female Masculinity* is particularly helpful in this regard. There, Halberstam argues that there is only apparently a contradiction between the obviousness of infinite alterity and the durability of binary classification:

> In a way, gender's very flexibility and seeming fluidity is precisely what allows dimorphic gender to hold sway. Because so few people actually match any given community standards for male or female, in other words, gender can be imprecise and therefore multiply relayed through a solidly binary system. At the same time, because the definitional boundaries of male and female are so elastic, there are very few people in any given public space who are completely unreadable in terms of their gender.[32]

This passage finds Halberstam retracing Freud's steps, though in a way that reveals the dialectical truth at the heart of how gender works. For, far from being the object of a clearly drawn conflict between the multiplicity of being and a conceptual binary, the entrenched persistence of gender dimorphism would seem to result from the "harmonious" encounter of two impossibilities. On the one hand, it is strictly impossible to arrive at ideal masculinity or femininity—not because we mere mortals, in our finitude, can only ever move asymptotically toward something that only exists in an ideal form, but rather because this ideal point is precisely what is missing, or subtracted from, the field of gender. On the other hand, gender's terminological imprecision generates a signifying "space" that is claustrophobic in its capaciousness: impossible to arrive at, "masculinity" and "femininity" have also proven all but impossible to fall outside of. Halberstam thus credits binary gender's "resilience" not principally to the rigidity with which its normative scripts are enforced, but rather to the fact that it is very difficult to break what never ceases to bend. Against the widespread cliché of gender existing "on a spectrum," his illuminating account suggests something stranger: gender exists on a spectrum that is missing its extreme poles.[33] One way to resolve the impossibility of such a spectrum—and here we rejoin

32 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 20.

33 One must tread carefully here: Halberstam's text accounts for why, at the time of its first publication in 1998, the proliferation of genders beyond the binary *had* not occurred, not why this *should* not or *could* not occur.

Copjec—is to see that it is a Möbius. "Rather than two species of the same genus, the sexes and the antinomies should be read as positions on a Moebius strip."[34]

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"In fact, the opposite may be true." In Copjec's estimation, the trouble with *Gender Trouble* comes down to the fact that, in seeking to evacuate sex from its proper placelessness—as we know, to speak of the "domain" of the drive is as misleading as it is necessary—so as to relocate it to the order of the signifier, Butler opens queer thought to a difficulty that it will prove incapable of resolving on its own terms, an impasse that comes to paralyze the field's attempt to think sex. We can state this difficulty as follows. In their attempt to situate "sex" at the level of the signifier, by treating gender *in lieu of sex* (which they are right to negate as substance but wrong to negate as such), Butler subjects it to the supreme law of sense, namely, the inevitable dialectical transformation whereby any given positivity engenders its own antithesis. One divides into two, and so on.

From this a number of consequences follow, of which I shall describe only a few. First: once a certain attitude toward gender is made available as a determinate use-value to a political project—once it is tasked with precipitating a state of "subversive confusion" with the potential to "displace [. . .] naturalized and reified notions of gender that support [. . .] heterosexist power"—there is nothing stopping the capitalist system from subsuming (and thus neutralizing) this use-value as exchange-value.[35] What might have been a hypothetical at the time of *Gender Trouble*'s publication is now undeniably a widespread condition of the present moment, in which sentimental media narratives about discovering one's "true self" via gender circulate *ad nauseum* and, crucially, are increasingly impossible to disentangle from the culture industry's imperative to "build your brand." As Kay Gabriel writes, then, "*gender for capital assumes the form of an accumulation strategy*, an ideological scaffolding that sustains an unequal division of labor, contours practices of dispossession and predation, and conditions particular forms of exploitation, including and especially in the form

34 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 217.

35 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 44.

of un- and low-waged reproductive labor."[36] And yet—second consequence—it would be naïve not to notice that, even before the capitalist class begins to formally and then really subsume queerness, selling back to us our true gendered selves as so many consumer durables and services and construing the genderqueer subject as exemplary entrepreneur, the argument at stake in *Gender Trouble* already sets the stage for *its own* dialectical "subversion."[37] For what begins as an antinormative attitude, insofar as it is enlisted to a particular set of political aims, cannot but become in turn a new norm. That is to say, once the queerness of sex-as-*rupture*, as an instance of unbinding negativity, is "filled in" with and *bound to* a positive political content—no matter how morally laudable this content may be—queer has already been nullified as rupture, alchemized into material for a new idealism. "Queer," Tim Dean observes in a polemic against the state of the field of queer studies, "currently functions in the North American academy [. . .] as a progressive ego-ideal—something to aspire to—that inevitably conforms to the logic of identity. Institutionalized as an identity knowledge, *queer* has become about the ideological purity of academic egos rather than about sex. Needless to say, that purity requires extensive disciplinary policing."[38] In *Queer Forms*, which opens with a survey of current "queer, feminist, and trans* theorizing and social justice politics," Ramzi Fawaz corroborates and expands on Dean's scathing audit. Observing that much of the theory and practice in question touts gender "fluidity" as the supreme queer (read: progressive) value, Fawaz arrives at the following:

> In practice [. . .] fluidity frequently shifts from being a description of the commonly shared existential reality of mutability and change to a demand that one's personal expression of gender and sexual multiplicity be recognized as the fundamental inner truth of the self. Here, a contemporary value of fluid selfhood whose stated purpose is to resist forms of essential or fixed character paradoxically inverts into its own type of *identitarianism* [. . .] the twin constructions of

36 Kay Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," 140.

37 It is possible to describe the "development" of drag culture in the era of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in terms of the movement from formal subsumption to real subsumption, which transforms drag from a queer social practice into a set of culture industry goods and services.

38 Tim Dean, "No Sex Please, We're American," *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 618. The year 2015 also saw the publication of a special issue of *Differences* on "Queer Theory Without Antinormativity," which marked an important turning point in the field's relationship to certain founding positions that we have a right to call Butlerian.

> *formlessness/fluidity* and *rigidity/identitarianism* [. . .] are often merely two sides of the same coin.[39]

To Fawaz's keen insight we wish to add two things: First, that what accounts for the flash-freezing of fluidity is precisely its being linked to a "stated purpose." Second, that a properly psychoanalytic approach to this problem—neither Freud nor Lacan are anywhere to be found in *Queer Forms*—will begin not by contesting this instrumentalizing rigidification, but rather by casting doubt on the actuality of fluidity *prior* to its "inversion." This second point requires more attention than I am able to give it here; let it suffice to say that the repetitions of the drive bear witness to a stuckness at the heart of the subject, a return to the same on which gender's abstract fluidity repeatedly snags.

Only in the last decade have queer theorists begun to come to terms with the deadlock to which Butler's early theorization of gender performativity, to the extent that it became dominant, fated the field—a deadlock, it must be said, which Copjec spotted straightaway, in its most germinal state, and argued against in the strongest possible terms. After all, *this is what concerned her*. "For it is by making it conform to the signifier," she wrote in 1994, "that you oblige sex to conform to social dictates, to take on social content. Freedom [. . .] is inconceivable within a schema such as this."[40] Of course, we may construct whatever schema we like, but sex will never oblige those who oblige it to take on the kind of signifying, "sense-ible" existence a certain kind of "good politics" requires. Indeed, as Avgi Saketopoulou writes, "the sexual, unwilled and overbrimming, pushes beyond identity categories and past the ego's binding [. . .] engaging desires that do not yield to the Orwellian censorship of good politics."[41] It is in this sense that we should understand "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason" as making an argument "in the service of" queer and trans struggle—certainly not because it elaborates a more compelling way to slot sexual and gender variance into a "good" political program, but rather because it insists on sex as definitively *not in service of*. We can translate Copjec's claim that sex "serves no other function than to limit reason" in the form of a tautology: *sex serves no other purpose than to serve no purpose*.

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39 Ramzi Fawaz, *Queer Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 9–10.

40 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 211.

41 Avgi Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia* (New York: New York University Press, 2023), 124.

If I seem to draw from all this a warrant to advance a "depoliticizing" conceptualization of sex, this both is and is not the case. On the one hand, I want to underscore what James Penney makes clear in *After Queer Theory*: it is impossible to deduce from any given sexual "orientation" or gender "identity" a concomitant *political* "orientation" or "identity."[42] The mere existence of fascist rodeo clowns like Milo Yiannopoulos and Caitlyn Jenner, neoliberal hardliners like RuPaul Charles, and Zionist pinkwashers like Michael Lucas renders this an indisputable fact. Yet from this it does not follow that we should imagine sexual and gender variance as having no bearing on politics. If "queerness" and "transness" are in themselves without political meaning, we know only too well how eagerly and emphatically political projects burden them with "social content," with meanings tasked with stabilizing (or, rather, mobilizing) the imaginaries that legitimate such projects.

This brings me, then, to the third and final consequence of Butler's argument I wish to address here. Within a theoretical space that interprets the iterative deconstruction of gender's normative scripts as a micropolitical strategy that denaturalizes and subverts heterosexist / patriarchal power, transsexual desires—desires "to have a certain embodied relationship to the signification of sexual difference, and to assert autonomy over that relationship"—cannot but register "as misguided, regressive, or disgusting," as an instance of "false consciousness in the extreme."[43] As Kay Gabriel points out in her excellent "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," this familiar "transphobic canard" is parroted by figures across the political spectrum who otherwise would seem to hold nothing in common: "anti-trans feminists, right-wing shills for the ruling class, and queer theory darlings"—a list to which she may as well have added "the vast majority of Lacanian psychoanalytic practitioners and theorists."[44]

42 "The authentic socialist insight is precisely the illegitimacy of *the move from an idea of sexual identity or behaviour to a determinate political judgment*. More strongly, as psychoanalysis would concur, the very premise that sexuality lends itself to identity categories and their deconstruction is what is most essentially bourgeois about the discourse of sexual orientation." James Penney, *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 49.

43 Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," 142.

44 Gabriel, 141.

"Two Senses" paints an unsettling picture of the current tangle of meanings that transsexuals must navigate. On the one hand, in undertaking transition—a process which obviously is only deconstructive up to a point, and only in order to facilitate a novel (re)construction—she finds herself charged with ratifying the very gendered constructions that she ought to be out in the streets fighting to dismantle.[45] On the other hand, the trans woman is susceptible to a contrary and, I think, only *seemingly* more affirmative framing, one in which her transition is read as an act of will by means of which she "actually destabilizes or denaturalizes or undoes" the "ideological force" of gender, "just like that."[46] Taking the macho autotheoretical heroics of Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* as exemplary of this way of measuring transition's value, Gabriel observes that Preciado's position "shares with the moralism it rejects its commitment to the malleability of ideology, and the determination of ideology over the subject."[47] Note the fate of the trans subject's desire, caught as it is between these contraries. The first, obviously injurious and transphobic—which, again, is implied by a queer theoretical overestimation of the political force of deconstruction—actually *affirms* the existence of transsexual desire, but only in order to pronounce a moralizing judgment against it, a judgment that, taken to its limit, entails the annihilationist anti-trans measures currently proliferating in the United States and elsewhere at breakneck speed. The second, putatively trans-affirmative (and fervidly so)—transposing queer theory's overestimation of the political force of deconstruction—in fact negates trans desire, insofar as it subordinates the desire for transition as such to a politics within which transition is explicitly instrumentalized as a particularly lethal weapon in the "attack on normative modes of possible subjectivity."[48] Against the standard of Preciado's sometimes comically masc ideal of the trans militant laying waste to "what society wanted to make of [him]," the subject whose transition is not undertaken primarily as a means to such heroic ends may from this contrary position once again show up as "misguided, regressive, or disgusting."

45 In a similar vein, Grace Lavery writes that, "under conditions in which womanhood is associated with humiliation, this kind of desire finds itself caught in a paradox. It is a wish to be a thing that nobody would wish to be—indeed, a thing defined in some ways and by some people (including feminists) by its wish to be something else." *Pleasure and Efficacy*, 35.

46 Gabriel, "Two Senses of Gender Abolition," 142.

47 Gabriel, 142.

48 Gabriel, 142.

Of these two ways of making sense of transsexual desire, Gabriel declares that "both are moralisms, and both are equally useless."[49] Drawing on her thinking, and by way of conclusion, I want to advance the claim that *today, queer and trans liberation must take the form of a struggle against the various meanings with which they have been freighted, whether in an effort to legitimate their existence or their annihilation*. This would involve, for instance, articulating a collective demand for access to the material resources that would enable "everyone to enjoy the kinds of aesthetic contingency that capital cordons off for the wealthy," without consenting to the identitarian, narrativizing ransom that trans subjects especially have long been expected to cough up in exchange for any resources at all.[50] If there is something enduringly useful in Copjec's theorization of sexual difference for those of us who yet again find ourselves cast in the role of the fascist order's other, it is, literally, *nothing*—I mean, the *literal nothing* that sex is. That this nothing-but-the-fact-that-language-fails can be assumed in two different, incommensurate ways—that the subject *must* in fact assume castration in either one or the other of these two ways—must once and for all be disentangled from cisnormative claims against the proliferation of genders beyond man and woman and transphobic claims against trans desire as an attempt to outwit the phallus. Such claims effect a trivializing regression from the properly psychoanalytic idea of sexual difference to the *status quo ante* of the biologico-sociological sex binary, as though the former could be the long-awaited explanatory framework for the latter, which neither biology nor sociology were able to supply. Lacanian psychoanalysis must now or never confront the deadlock to which the institutionally dominant reading of sexual difference has led it. We must confront the fact that its pathologizing framing of transness, as an attempt to elude the universality of castration, in fact projects onto the trans subject this strand of psychoanalytic thinking's *own* longstanding refusal to admit them into the space of this universal. It is time to ask what fundamentals of Lacanian thinking (theory and practice) will need to change, in order that it may finally be compossible with a world in which it no longer falls to psychoanalysis to tally genders or determine the meaning of trans desire. Compossible, that is to say, with the world it already inhabits.

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49 Gabriel, 143.

50 Gabriel, 137. See also Grace Lavery: "Trans people pretend to conform to the dominant identitarian narratives about transition in order to obtain their treatments." *Pleasure and Efficacy*, 37.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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