Chapter 6

Trans feminine value, racialized others and the limits of necropolitics

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In November 2007 Salvador Kamatoy was found dead behind a mega mall in Sharjah, one of the United Arab Emirates. Also known as Sally, Kamatoy was from the Philippines. She had arrived in Sharjah three weeks earlier and found a job in a hair salon. The coroner allegedly found no cause of death; but the Philippine Embassy informed Kamatoy’s family that her head had been beaten in. According to a co-worker, interviewed in the Khaleej Times, Kamatoy was ‘new to the area but happy’. ‘He had lunch with me and told me that he is going to an internet cafe to send an email to his family, but he didn’t return’, the co-worker continued (Abdullah 2007: 1).

Kamatoy was one of the main protagonists in the Israeli documentary Babot Niyar (Paper Dolls, 2006, dir. Tomer Heymann). Screened to acclaim internationally, Babot Niyar follows the adventures of a Tel Aviv-based drag troupe called the Paper Dolls. The film depicts the Paper Dolls as queer immigrant citizens finding ‘love and acceptance’ in the global metropolis, looking after elderly clients as care-workers in the daytime and performing as drag divas at night. Sally is a key character in Babot Niyar; she flirts both with the camera and with the director, Heymann, who cannot quite grasp the complexity of Sally’s self-identity as ‘like a woman’. The film ends as a crackdown on undocumented migrants and the reigniting of tension in the Occupied Territories causes the Paper Dolls to either be deported or seek work elsewhere. Although Babot Niyar won an award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2006, the protagonists (including Kamatoy) were unable to obtain visas to attend the premiere. By 2007 at the time of Kamatoy’s death, the media spotlight had shifted elsewhere. Her death remains unremarked on the promotional website for Babot Niyar.

Kamatoy’s killer was never found. But we might look elsewhere to discover the liability for her death: the institutional processes of deliberate neglect and disposability that Mhembé and others have called the hallmarks of necropolitics. Impossible to retroactively include in a film that continues to circulate, Kamatoy’s death might remind us of the structural exclusions that dehumanize and diminish gender non-conforming bodies. In Precarious Life, Judith Butler contends that the erasure of (certain) queer bodies from public discourse dehumanizes them; these bodies, she writes, are ungrievable (Butler 2006: 36). Much recent work on queer...
death focuses on the compounding violence of this un grievability, and the necessity of reasserting the humanity of those who die in the form of discursive recognition: the question of how to mourn properly and of how to adequately represent the dead. To write of queer or trans necropolitics marks a moment in which inter- 
sectional analyses reveal (yet again, for a new generation of thinkers and activists) how the state’s institutions appear to eagerly consign queer and trans populations to disposability (Gau 2013; Haritaworn and Snorton 2013). Yet as Haritaworn and Snorton and others point out, the most vulnerable gender non-conforming bodies subject to institutional abandonment almost always occupy a position as racialized other to the nation or to whiteness: whether as migrants with precarious access to social and administrative citizenship status; as people of colour trapped in the institutional enclosures of anti-blackness; as inhabitants of the structurally adjusted global south; or as the colonized subjects of multiple imperial and colonial states or wars globally, or multiple racial otherings.

Like many other trans deaths, Kamatoy’s death might be usefully theorized as un Accountability, and consequently as a cogent example of necropolitics. Yet as her star presence as Sally in Babot Niyar shows, invocations of invisibility and dehumanization don’t quite tell the whole story. While this project takes representations of trans death as an entry-point, biopolitics has formed a crucial backdrop in transgender studies for interrogating how violence towards trans and gender non-conforming people appears inevitable (Spade 2001; Beauchamp 2009). Gender non-conforming subjects who are racialized as “non-white” or “non-Western” now hold strategic value as the mascots for the newly homo-friendly liberal democracies of the global north, repositories of future rights and future privileges.1 The colonial resonances of this desire to save infuse both radical trans political sentiments and liberal humanitarian projects advocating for legal protections of trans people in Europe, North America, and other “global north” outposts.2 The politics of saving (and/or telling stories about) non-Western gender non-conforming racialized “others” heavily weigh on documentary film as a genre. Most crucially, documentary films’ circulation in international film festivals raises the question of the value of gender non-conforming racial others, both within regimes of representation and in transnational labour economies. This chapter reads Babot Niyar, the documentary, Les travestis pleurent aussi and one ‘fictional’ narrative, The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquel, to illustrate the importance of labour value to gender non-conforming necro- and biopolitics. My analysis proceeds from a scene in Babot Niyar in which a taxi driver expresses violent disgust towards the absent Paper Dolls. I read this scene as an entry point into the economic and racializing relations that structure representations of racialized trans femininity. Arguing that the economic transaction imagined in fantasies of violence towards ‘ladyboys’ illustrates how the stereotype of the trans sex worker structures phobia towards trans femininity itself, I turn to Svati Shah’s work on sex work, monstrosity and risk to show how often expressions of trans misogyny code trans femininity as only existing within, or for a sexual economy, resulting in the hypervisualization of trans women. This allows us to understand transphobia as imbricated in transnational circuits of reproductive labour and biopolitical control: the same gender variant bodies on which violence is visited also circulate as valuable in global capital. This chapter’s contribution to the body of queer necropolitics scholarship is to argue that we cannot theorize a trans necropolitics without exploring the mobility of gender variant bodies and the circuits of capital they/we exploit and are exploited by. It is consciousness of this contradiction, I conclude, that offers a horizon of political possibility.

The language I use in this chapter reflects the incommensurability and insufficiency of Anglophone trans theory’s identity-based vocabularies in writing across transnational sites, especially in a project that attempts to remain alert to the racial specificity of the multiple violences visited on gender variant bodies. The categories ‘transgender’, ‘trans women’ and ‘trans women of colour’ circulate and mean differently in multiple geographical locations. One might designate the subjects of Babot Niyar, Les travestis pleurent aussi and The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquel all as trans women of colour. However, the term ‘trans women of colour’ circulates in a particular Euro-American context, as does the term ‘trans woman’. This project’s argument depends on a critique of the abstraction of trans femininity and reducible to sex work as reproductive labour. I want to remain alert to the power of different modes of abstraction performed in the name of naming here: to name Sally, Giorgio, Jan, Mia and Raquel as “trans women of colour” would interpolate the gendered self-making they practice as reducible to both the vocabulary of “of colour” and the hermeneutic of “trans” and “woman” (even if in doing so it anticipated their affiliation with trans/queer of colour political communities).3 Straining at the limits of this political vocabulary but unable to relinquish it entirely, I deploy the term ‘trans femininity’ to designate the visual and intersubjective gendering and embodied practices that are imagined in the processes of abstraction and instrumentalization I critique.

Documentary film has become a signal form for the production and circulation of knowledge and affective imaginaries about gender non-conforming people both in the United States and in the global south. Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary Paris Is Burning set the tone for gender and sexuality studies to engage with documentary. Like the films presented here, Paris Is Burning mobilized the conventions of ethnographic realism (Nichols 1994: 73), which work to exoticize documentary subjects as outsiders while simultaneously rendering them recogniz- able for a ‘mainstream’ audience. Paris Is Burning became the centre of a debate within queer studies about whether its black and Latino protagonists were ‘authentically’ transgressive or reproduce the terms of white heteronormative capitalism by expressing the desire to pass as women, to be housewives, or to consume luxury goods (Sullivan 2003: 94–97). Here my intention is not to assess documentary film protagonists’ political suitabilty as ‘transgender’ or ‘queer’ subjects, but to interrogate the terms of representation under which they appear as vulnerable ‘Third World’ victims, positioning the act of watching as an exercise in gaining familiarity and sympathy. Particularly in transgender ‘outsider’ films, such generic conventions cast the protagonists as subjects whose vulnerability to violence and displacement make them candidates for increased protection. This protection inevitably takes the form of a homonationalist desire to save LGBT people from the global south from the putative ‘barbarism’ of their own cultural
backgrounds (Puar 2007: 15–16). As will become evident, the directors of the films I read in this chapter occupy an ambivalent relationship to homonationalism, and the version of ‘saving’ that erupts depends on different biopolitical models of inclusion, whether under the guise of human rights or economic ‘retraining’.

In order to understand these different biopolitical models, it is necessary to critically locate necropolitics in relation to value. To theorize Sally’s death as a reflection of the non-value of her life, I argue, risks bracketing the capitalist relations of production that differentiate the value of particular bodies and render them “grievable,” killable or otherwise. If it is crucial to the account of Salvador Kamato’s murder that her head was bashed in, then it is quite as crucial that she was near a shopping mall in Sharjah – in search of a more sizeable income than was possible in the Philippines, and was deemed sufficiently valuable enough in the transnational labour market that she could obtain a visa to work in the UAE. In a concise appraisal of necropolitics, the political theorist Randy Martin notes that to consolidate politics only around the figure of death “narrow[s] the whole range of social contestations over forms of life” (2007: 141). To understand why, we need a more solid theorization of the contradictions between liberal states that govern according to the militarized logic of the exception and neoliberal global capitalism – which continually and fluidly finds ways to extract surplus value even from bodies the nation-state itself wants to exclude and, in turn, affects the racialization matrices of states themselves.1 Interrogating Mbembe’s reading of Marx, Martin argues that while capital inevitably regards some part of the population as redundant, the relation between valueless life and valued life is constantly shifting with the market: “what is excluded is always poised to return in the form of some further productivity” (2007: 141).

In a similar vein, Pheng Cheah reads philosophies of exclusion, such as necropolitics or ungrievable life, as insufficient, because they inevitably neglect the biopolitical structures of human capital production that constitute neoliberal subjectification (Cheah 2011: 298). Writing about feminized domestic workers in Singapore, Cheah cites the incentive to become a migrant worker in order to enhance skills and thereby increase one’s earning capacity (2011: 305). Such self-investment is part of the logic of post-Fordism, wherein precarity reigns supreme – although precarity always reigned supreme for those outside the global north. While, in this instance, Cheah relies far too heavily on informants involved in the institutional infrastructure that offers a rosy picture of workers enjoying their increased capacity, skills and proficiency in English as the result of semi-indentured labour for little pay, his focus on desire and motivation is instructive. What drives the desire to immigrate as a foreign reproductive worker (as it does the desire to participate in the global economy within the global south – in tourist economies or networked economies such as Internet porn or call centre work), Cheah argues elsewhere, is the ‘crafting of their interests as subjects of needs by biopower’ (2007: 98).

Kamato’s status as a reproductive worker – a parlorista, a carer of old people – begs us to reconsider the labour value of racialized gender non-conforming bodies. Many accounts of reproductive labour tend to assume reproductive workers are always non-trans women (Federici 2010). A more nuanced analysis of the feminization of transnational labour migration takes the devaluation of ‘foreign domestic workers’ and the concomitant maintaining of racialized and gender hierarchies, as central to economic development globally (Cheah 2007). For trans women of colour to be subjectivized as foreign domestic workers – which is also to be equated with particular forms of reproductive work – legitimizes a range of institutional and individual violences. Thus, considering value and racialization alongside necropolitics illuminates our understanding of transphobic hate speech and violence, but also the modes of subjectivization that stage exclusion from the social as merely another way to include bodies in the structural grid of capital. This chapter challenges queer engagements with necropolitics to account for the relentless inclusion of trans bodies in the social fabric, an inclusion as exhausting as it is energizing, as cruel as it is optimistic. To illustrate the centrality of modes of production to imaginaries of gender variant necropolitics, I turn to a scene in Babot Nayer in which affective expressions of disgust reveal complex webs between transphobic violence, economies of racialization and value.

Affective instrumentalization

The trailer released to promote Babot Nayer optically glosses the Paper Doll troupe’s time in Israel as ‘outsiders finding love and acceptance in a different world’. The film itself counters that optimism through an episode that counterposes the ambivalent yet seemingly sincere ‘acceptance’ of the director, Heymann, with the reconstructed contempt of ‘other’ Israelis in relation to whom Heymann looks benign. Two members of the Paper Dolls drag troupe, Jan and Gorgio, in a taxi with Tomer Heymann and a camera operator at night. The taxi driver, a Mizrahi Jew, asks where Jan and Gorgio are from and says that he once lived in the Philippines. Seconds later, Jan and Gorgio exit the cab. As they walk out of the frame, Heymann still sitting in the back seat, the taxi driver begins to expostulate. “Two disgusting creatures. I don’t know what to call them. They disgust me as men and as fake sleazy women, I can’t even describe it. Honestly.”

The camera operator turns the camera on Heymann, who is sitting in the back. “Why does it disgust you?” he asks. As they drive through the Tel Aviv streets, the driver unleashes a tirade I quote in full here:

Why? Because a woman should look like a woman, not those animals, those disgustingly stinky Filipinos. Let me tell you what goes on in the Philippines. The Philippines is a very poor country. For a dollar and a half, you can have two Filipinas for the night, you don’t know if you’re taking a ladyboy or ... Until you check where they put the toilet paper. They hide their ass so deep inside their ass, that you can’t tell a thing. You think you’re with a total babe, and she is a babe! Then suddenly you get the cock, you beat her
up, you throw her out of the room, and everyone makes fun of you for a week. I don’t like them, they steal... They’re disgusting. Homosexuality is natural for them. That place is the devil’s cradle, the origin of all evil.

At various points as the taxi driver speaks, the film cuts to images of Heymann the back seat of the car, silent and impassive, perhaps disgusted. An Israeli taxi driver calls Filipina drag queens names while a gay Israeli filmmaker stands by, saying nothing. In a previous draft of this essay, I argued that the taxi driver views the Filipinas through what I named a white managerial gaze, drawing on Ghassan Hage’s work—transposable, I thought, from an Australian to an Israeli hybrid (Hage 2000: 131). What I initially and inadequately named as ‘hate speech’ refers the viewer to other moments in Babat Niyar at which sentiments erupt: a drag queen at a mainstream Tel Aviv nightclub for whom the Paper Doll troupe are ‘amateurs from the Central bus station’ and Heymann’s own ambivalent characterization of ‘it’ as strange or repulsive in a conversation with Sally towards the beginning of the film, revealing them to be part of the same racist imaginary. The taxi driver, I argued, conflates Filipino ethnicity with non-normative gender presentation as similarly ‘dirty’, part of the same problem, to which the only appropriate response is vicious physical violence—both to restore his masculine self-image, and to maintain the border that places him in a position of white managerial power in relation to ethnic others in general.

But, as two readers pointed out, the taxi driver in this episode is not white; he is a Mizrahi Jew, and this radically shifts the focus of the reading.5 Mizrahim, or Arab Jews, occupy a precarious position within Israeli Zionist culture: marginalized by the Ashkenazi elite but yet still considered biopolitically superior to other ethnic ‘minorities’. Mizrahi masculinity is particularly maligned: according to the scholar Raf Yosef, Mizrahi men are the focus of an Ashkenazi colonial fantasy fixing them as hypermasculine, savage and violently homophobic. Queer Israeli cinema in particular has deployed the stereotype of the sexist, homophobic Mizrahi male; Yosef argues that such representations function as the repositories of repressed fantasies of Ashkenazi masculinity, working to define normative, civilized Ashkenazi gay identity in opposition to Mizrahi masculinity (2004: 86; also see Seidel-Arpaci 2011: 206).

The visceral quality of the taxi driver’s speech might point us in the direction of affects, rather than gazes, perhaps towards Sara Ahmed’s work on disgust. For Ahmed, disgust is intimate and involves the feeling of recoiling from something threatening and close, referencing ‘an intimate contact on the surface of the skin’ (2004: 88).7 Transferrable or ‘sticky’ in a manner that constitutes particular objects socially as inferior to the speaker, disgust publicly assumes the existence of a community of the disgusted. In doing so, it calls that community into being and thus both constitutes and maintains the borders between the revisited object and those who feel disgusted (Ahmed 2004: 94–95; Probyn 2006: 131).

Disgust saturates this brief scene in Babat Niyar. The taxi driver is disgusted by Jan and Giorgio; Heymann looks disgusted by the taxi driver. The taxi driver is transported to a fantasy in which he beats up the ‘total baba’ in disgust. Viewers might feel disgusted at the taxi driver’s words. In this semiotic web of repulsion, the viewer’s disgust aligns her with Heymann, the director, who works to subsume Heymann into a position as the ‘good’ subject in relation to the ‘uncivilized’ working-class ethnic other. The politics of space and territory are key here: the central bus station, where the Paper Dolls perform and live, is historically a Mizrahi neighbourhood (the taxi driver himself might live nearby). In this light, we could read the taxi driver’s words of disgust as a foil for the film’s own repressed preoccupation with the strangeness of its subjects. Indeed, Babat Niyar depicts Heymann as having renovated away his feelings of disgust or shame towards the Paper Dolls by the end of the film, a move that subtly in the attitudes of ‘mainstream’ viewers assumed to view the Paper Dolls through Heymann’s eyes and who also might feel differently towards the Paper Dolls by the end.

The taxi driver’s free association not only marks the Paper Dolls as objects of intense disgust, but likens them to ‘ladyboys’. This stereotype is familiar as a hallmark of the dominant cultural imaginary about trans women, particularly brown trans women or those recognized as such. It also draws on an orientalist cultural imaginary that pervades South East Asia, in which Thai and Filipina feminine bodies in general are naturalized as particularly adept at, or in its more contemptuous formation, as ‘only fit for’—prostitution and other forms of care work (Haritaworn 2011: 215). Stories like the taxi driver’s abound in global tourist discourse about South East Asia, casting trans feminine individuals as not only sexually available, but deceptive and criminal.8 This affective disposition not only constitutes tourist masculinity as ‘innocent’, but also interprets trans feminine bodies into an economic relation, in which they are understood as being available for hire—compounding the stickiness of the disgust that attaches to trans femininity. Such an affective relation is dependent on an epistemological understanding of trans femininity as instrumentalized; as only of value within the transnational market for reproductive labour. In a North American cultural imaginary too, trans feminine bodies are constantly represented as prostitutes; the stereotypical ‘transsexual prostitute’ is a stock character in television shows and films, easily dismissible as tragic or deviant (Serano 2009: 261).

The stakes of this misrecognition become more evident if we think about political and theoretical responses to it. Liberal trans politics might read the conflation of trans women and sex workers as a mistake one must shrug off to get at the ‘real roots’ of transphobia. This argument aligns itself with a discourse of respectability clearing trans people deemed to be the deserving recipients of transgender rights—the gainfully employed or upwardly mobile, either white or assimilating folks of colour—from those who are not: sex workers, drug users, undocumented migrants, racial others, the trans Lusotipofilipinotrad. An alternative theory is that the conflation of trans women and sex workers reflects transmisogyny: Serano regards the trans sex worker stereotype as evidence of social beliefs that trans women crave fetishization and live as women in order to be sexualized.
underlining how the blame for sexualization (and sexual violence) is located with trans women themselves (2009: 202).

Neither of these theses, however, incorporates the racializing moves that identify trans women of colour as the designees and the targets of this discourse. Analyses that invoke a more intersectional perspective – particularly in the social sciences, and particularly those that do not issue from trans of colour critique itself – tend to run aground by assuming that transphobia, sex worker phobia, and racism are discrete, abstract categories that only intersect in the space of overlap, embodied in the ‘trans sex worker of colour’ and that the identity categories these terms index (trans woman; person of colour; sex worker) match up with the bodies of those who are materially vulnerable to violence. What we might name ‘intersectionality lite’ discourse poses vulnerability and identity as a Venn diagram, wherein trans woman, sex worker, and person of colour are identities – or communities – that coincide in the body of an individual. In this schematic, if one ‘intersects’ both the categories of trans woman and sex worker, one is subject to ‘double the risk’ for violence; being a person of colour adds another overlapping circle to the Venn diagram, ‘tripling’ the risk. Cyndee Clay, the director of Helping Prostitutes Survive, a harm reduction organization for sex workers in Washington, DC, states, ‘Violence against transgender women and violence against sex workers in our country is epidemic ... Both communities are seen as outlaws, gender or otherwise ... If a woman is both transgender and a sex worker, she is doubly at risk for violence’ (Ditmore 2010: xxv). No matter how usefully this reading draws on the comprehension that racial violence is central to transmasogyny, its political potential lies in the assumption that identity categories map faithfully onto bodies.

Trans of colour critique in various manifestations has more capacious strategies for illuminating the instrumentalization of trans femininity. Pauline Park writes, ‘such oppressions are not merely additive in nature. ... rather, these oppressions are interactive and mutually reinforcing’ (Mock 2012; Park 2012: 1). An analysis that additionally incorporates institutional and structural violence into this nexus points out that the trans sex worker stereotype does a particular kind of work of legitimating violence and coextensively, institutional regulation and criminalization. As an INCITE fact sheet on sex work notes:

[T]ransgender women of color are often perceived by police through racialized and gendered stereotypes framing us as highly sexualized and sexually available. Law enforcement officers’ internalization and perpetuation of these stereotypes ... results in police profiling women of color, and particularly transgender women of color, as sex workers, and selective targeting of women of color for harassment, detention, and arrest.

(INCITE n.d.: 1)

This stereotyping functions not only to reduce trans women to sexual objects for the patriarchal gaze but also to reduce them to the level of exchange value.

In such a specular economy, trans women are understood as only worth the specialized sexual labour they are universally imagined to perform. Such an instrumentalization of gender non-conforming bodies takes place in a transnational context wherein many gender non-conforming people, particularly those living in the global south, find that sex work is the most lucrative employment. It rests on a capitalist economy requiring the devaluation of trans women of colour in the US, Khlong sex workers in Thailand, Filipina baalsa in the Philippines and elsewhere, Ecuadorian, Brazilian and Mexican travestis all over the world – and the assumption of their universal equivalence in order to supply cheap labour for low pay, and in order to be found, the fantasy of equivalence intact, on hundreds of websites advertising ‘shemales’. The taxi driver’s dollar and a half is as central to the imagined encounter with the ‘ladyboy’ as the beating.

But what makes us able to compare this moment, in a Tel Aviv taxi, with other iterations of violence towards brown trans bodies? Here we founder in the incommensurability of this or that expression of disgust; this or that (or another) stereotypical image of trans femininity. The stakes of reading across transnational borders and multiple vocabularies become most visible precisely in my abstraction of the thick relations of the cinematic moment in Babot Nijar to an instance of a broader ‘epistemological order’. Babot Nijar does not understand Jan and Giorgio, or Sally, as trans women, or trans women of colour (and it could be argued that they might not understand themselves so). Yet, in the global imaginary in which I am writing this chapter and in which Sally’s death might be mourned at a Transgender Day of Remembrance vigil, their bodies are available to theorize as trans women of colour, or as trans feminine at the very least. But this move founds its specificity as paramount in the specificity of location: the sounds of the cab’s engine; the specifics of migration flows; the specifics of Ashkenazi–Mizrahi relations and how both might be collapsed into the category ‘Israelis’ from the vantage point of an office on the east coast of the United States in which I write this.

Trans necropolitics appears here at the nexus of a reproductive economy framing the epistemological and semantic order in which trans femininity becomes legible. If this image of the ‘ladyboy’ – or the trans sex worker of colour – haunts representations of trans feminine bodies in general, it is instructive to look at the ways in which biopolitics addresses sex workers and transgender sex workers, as subjects: HIV prevention epidemiology and transnational anti-prostitution organizing, both of which constitute assemblages of diverse policing bodies, all levels of government, aid organizations, the United Nations, and a host of other large and small bodies. In short, to theorize trans necropolitics adequately, we need a necropolitical – or biopolitical – account of sex work. In theorizing such, I draw on the two scenes from Les travestis pleurent aussi.

Silicone and biopolitical risk

The documentary Les travestis pleurent aussi reveals the interplay between a management of life in the form of risk and a form of social abandonment that belies
the French republican vision of liberté, égalité, fraternité. In Les travestis pleurent aussi, undocumented Ecuadorian trans sex workers negotiate doing street-based sex work in the Bois de Boulogne, Mia, or Mujeron, does street-based sex work in the Clichy district of Paris, to where they migrated from Ecuador. The initial footage of Mia shows them applying drag makeup in their tiny apartment, preparing for a night’s work. Mia is Afro-Ecuadorian, undocumented, with a boxers physique: they trained as a boxer in Ecuador as a teenager. ‘I dress as a woman only when I go to work’, they say, brushing on sea foam colored eye-shadow. ‘I am very different from the other travestis. I keep my identity to myself, I only show it when I have to work.’ Mia’s voice continues over footage of them standing on the street, waiting for clients:

When I first arrived, I had trouble. A travesti made me pay for a spot to work. He told me I had to respect him because he had been in Paris longer. He wanted 200 euros a night. On top of that I had to pay for the hotel. I couldn’t afford to give him the money. I have a husband to support, and that husband is my mother. My lover is my mother. My boyfriend is my mother. My mother didn’t know what I was doing.

For Mia and their non-trans sister Issy, who joins her from Ecuador and also works the street, the Bois de Boulogne and Clichy are living and work spaces straddled by mobile territorial boundaries and multiple hazards: immigration raids, police harassment and predatory violence from johus or others. The sex workers resist these hazards and creatively. Issy keeps a branch in her makeshift tent in the Bois to defend herself; Mia instructs new girls how much to charge for a blow job in order to maintain standard rates. They all inject each other with silicone to enhance their figures. Silicone injection, however, presents another hazard. Romina, the other main protagonist in Les travestis pleurent aussi, is mestiza Ecuadorian and gave up medical school to live as a woman. We meet Romina when Mia and some other friends visit her in hospital. She is recovering from an infection. ‘After I had the silicone injected, I felt really sick’, Romina says from her hospital bed. ‘I got an infection. They didn’t take the silicone out, it was stuck between the muscle and the skin... [my] body rejected the silicone, so we tried to put it back in.’ Far from regretting her decision to inject silicone, Romina regrets the waste. ‘It was good quality silicone!’ she says. ‘The little that was left over was used for Betty’s forehead and cheeks!’ This sparks the travestis in the room to begin talking over each other in Spanish, at which point a white nurse enters and sideeyes them all. They stop talking. ‘Bonjour. Have you finished your meal?’ she asks Romina pointedly, as if Romina’s sociality itself were evidence of her general culpability.

For Mia and Romina, sex work is a form of reproductive labour, premised on the travestis sending remittances home to families who are dependent on the money but are ignorant or disapproving of its source. Socially marginalized by their undocumented status, their gender variance and further by the work they do, Mia and Romina are at constant risk of deportation or eviction. Rather than offering narrative closure in the form of a ‘hopeful’ ending, Les travestis pleurent aussi’s rhythm is repetitive and cyclical in a manner that emphasizes the quotidian character of the multiple violences the protagonists contend with. The film attempts to avoid the inevitable homonationalist narrative of finding greater freedom to ‘be who you are’ in the West, in the process skewering the vision of a Europe defined by multicultural tolerance. However, by dint of its cinematic form – showing Mia, Romina, and Issy’s life to others who are assumed to be outside the world they inhabit, ideologically structured to produce indignation in the spectator at the travestis’ helplessness – Les travestis pleurent aussi simultaneously reproduces the terms of a liberal humanist ethnographic gaze that displaces Mia, Romina, and Issy’s agency onto spectators, who are invited to ‘do something’.

Within the terms of the film, Mia and Romina are depicted as being invested in the neoliberal project of managing risk. Simultaneously – as the hospital scene shows – the film implies they may be vectors of risk themselves. What are the relations between risk, making die, letting die and making live that govern the biopolitics of sex work? Writing on HIV prevention and human trafficking discourse in India, Svat Shah points out that governments ascribe epidemiological ‘risk’ to sex workers, who are: ‘written into the discourse on AIDS as vectors of HIV transmission and as inherently risky subjects... The familiar terrain of risk is framed by the broader rubric of fear and the social and political marginality it produces’ (Shah 2010, 142–143).

That is, sex workers are both produced as vectors of HIV contamination and seen as the repository of risk, which then displaces risk ‘reduction’ measures from other individuals and populations to sex workers. The representation and regulation of sex work are structured by understanding individual sex workers as monstrous and prostitution itself as a monstrosity – ‘fear sustains the motion of the sex worker monster, a “beast who is all body and no soul” ’ (Shah 2010: 143). Regulation measures aimed at reducing risk to the ‘normal population’ are, in themselves, normativizing.

Shah’s analysis could be extrapolated to other locations and historical moments in which the criminalization of sex work has been inextricably linked to the desire to ‘save’ sex workers from themselves. It also recalls my earlier point about the conflation of trans women and sex workers. Reading the hate directed at trans women as an extension of, and analogous to, this fear of sex workers reinforces an analysis of hatred and violence directed towards trans women as imbricated in transnational circuits of reproductive labour and biopolitical control. The representation of sex workers as slaves and victims is key here. Drawing on Mbembe’s (2003) characterization of the slave as an ‘instrument of labour’, who is ‘kept alive but in a state of injury’, Shah argues that that sex workers’ representation as modern slaves casts them as the living dead: (infectious) zombie-like monsters needing to be rescued back into non-sex worker “alive-in-life” humanity. Those pruriently labelled ‘sex slaves’ thus must be rescued and simultaneously normalized through anti-trafficking initiatives.
Transnational optimism

A 'fictionmomentary' – a fictional film drawn from life, but made to appear as a documentary – *The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquel* is about a Filipina trans woman, Raquel Dios (played by herself) who is recruited for a camgirl website owned by a New York business man, Michael (played by Stefan C. Scharff). The plot centres on Raquel’s hope to meet a European or American man online who will fulfill her dreams of taking her to Paris. When Raquel finds success as a camgirl, the website owner takes an interest in her and offers her a short vacation with him in the city of her dreams, Paris. As shots of Raquel working the camera in her Cebu City home alternate with shots of Michael on the subway and in his back garden in Brooklyn, Michael speaks the following voiceover:

[Raquel] has the potential to do extremely well and really set herself up, and set her family up if she chooses to stay the course, and do the, you know, change her life. And she’s, so far, she’s sticking to the program... I’m impressed. She’s smart. She’s clean. She has a good sense of humour, which is important. She knows how to be sexy. These are all things that are attractive to people, and she knows how to... She was on the streets, and she’s been able to reassess, sit back and look at her life, and fortunately she wants to straighten out her life, so we’re gonna help her.

Michael’s monologue folds a corporate evaluation of Raquel as a worker sexy, smart, a good sense of humour – into a neoliberal logic of upward mobility. The rubric of self-investment and self-improvement Michael draws on sound like the most stereotypical rationalizations of ‘humane’ capitalism. The effect of this monologue is to highlight Michael’s ambivalent status as part entrepreneurial wolf preying on the lambs of the Third World for profit, and part ‘ethical’ employer assisting those lucky enough to be discovered as talent. This ambivalence shortens becomes central to the plot. Becoming the fairy godmother and Prince Charming in Raquel’s dream of a rich Westerner falling in love with her and bringing her to Europe, Michael arranges for Raquel to get a visa and plane ticket and meets her in Paris. Predictably, Michael turns out to be a fussy control freak. They fight, he leaves and Raquel returns to Cebu City. Like the dreams of other queer subjects in the postcolony, Raquel’s dream of the global metropolis of Paris turns out to be chimerical.

This narrative articulates a dynamic of what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism, the persistence of an attachment to a dream of the good life that will never materialize (2011: 1). The film stages the viewer as conscious of spectating the progression of such cruel optimism without letting its protagonist in on the joke. Even if unaware of the fantasy of Europe she invests so much time in, however, Raquel is scripted as perfectly conscious of the capacity for self-improvement that working for an Internet porn company affords her. Crucially, this is an opportunity for upward mobility that capitalizes on, rather than
condemns, her gender variance. An early scene in *Queen Raquela* features Raquela being interviewed for nursing school (in male drag); the interviewer asks her a number of questions, then tells her to get married and have children (the implication is that the school will not admit her unless she presents as more gender normative). But unlike this heteronormative model of class mobility, which would require Raquela to be gendered as male, in Internet porn Raquela’s gender-non-conforming body is her value. Indeed, the crossover between the fictional film and reality confirms this: Raquela Dios the actor is now building a career from starring in the fictionalized account of her life.

It is worth returning to Randy Martin’s critique of exclusion as a basis for politics in relation to capital here: that ‘what is excluded is always poised to return in the form of some further productivity’ (2007: 144). A situation in which it might be more lucrative to do camgirl work as a trans feminine performer than to present gender normatively and go to college shows precisely why a queer neocapitalism without an analysis of capital is insufficient. To understand queer or gender variant life in an Agambenian mode as emblematic of bare life (or even ‘near life’, following Stanley [2011]) is to overlook the extent to which queer and gender variant bodies, too, are the excluded surplus poised to return in the form of some further productivity. We only need recall Cane’s work on transnational reproductive labour to understand that it is particularly migrant labour that is reincorporated via precisely the kinds of biopolitical management the character of Michael espouses in *Queen Raquela*: assistance aimed at disciplining workers into a new kind of work ethic based on the hope or fantasy that their dreams will come true. That is, rather than excluding the disadvantaged or rendering migrant reproductive workers unproductive, capital incorporates their needs, desires, into its fabric.

The processes of capitalization, skill enhancement and job security remain tenuous here, however. The stratification of immigration regulations between undocumented migrant, temporary worker and citizen largely prevents foreign domestic workers from being permanently absorbed into the labour market. Even more importantly, reproductive workers (especially sex workers) must contend with a biopolitical matrix in which they are both subjects to be ‘saved’ and the targets of criminalization in order to reduce ‘risk’. The fantasy of sanitizing the odds and ‘meeting a nice European guy’ or finding the perfect, long-term job in an overseas market sustains hope, but is ultimately only for an exceptional few.

Do the characters of Raquela, Mia, Romaina and Sally really form affinities to the process through which they are told they can succeed in the international division of reproductive labour? Do they imagine themselves to be ‘capacity building’ like good neoliberal subjects? Do they really desire inclusion in the social matrix that can only include them on the basis of a commodifiable corporeal difference? It would be a critical error to claim here that the affective attachments or decision-making logics of the protagonists in *Queen Raquela*, *Les travaux pleurent aussi* and *Babot Njar* can be transparent. Throughout this chapter, I have suggested that to think about trans subjectivity – and particularly racialized trans subjectivity

- in terms of exclusion and nothingness alone would mean risk sight of the biopolitical and economic contradictions that link the sexual and economic value of ‘ladyboys’ or ‘trans women of colour’ with their instrumentalization as universally equivalent and their consequent disavowal, criminalization, subjection to violence, and with the biopolitical discourses through which they become subjects of transgender rights, sex worker rights or otherwise.

The ambivalent politics of the ‘they’ I cite so many times in the preceding paragraph direct me to the most important point, which is that this writing – the production of knowledge in queer studies and transgender studies – is equally implicated. I cannot write ‘we’ – I cannot talk here of my instrumentalization as a white, middle-class, trans man who has performed the role of the ‘exception’ economically despite slim beginnings. My writing this chapter is clear evidence of the discursive conditions under which trans women of colour never seem to be in control of their own representation. (All the films I have written about in this chapter were made by non-trans men, not trans people.) There is, in any case, no we. As speedily as the ‘trans person’ stripped of racial, gendered and sexual specificity became the universalized subject of transphobic academic production, culture and politics, the cracks in its edifice split open and disgorged a multiplicity of voices clamouring to distance ourselves from one another.

It is tempting to end this chapter on a more upbeat note. One could mobilize visions of agency in the face of death: a move to acknowledge the fierceness or fabulousness of a variety of visible queens, from Sylvia Rivera to CeCe McDonald to Miss Major; a citation of the numbers of trans women of colour in the US and elsewhere who are instrumental in creating and sustaining trans and gender-non-conforming cultures of resistance. While it is important to acknowledge all these things, taking refuge in a narrative of empowered agency as antidote conceals an understanding of individual action naturalized as sovereign intention. Practical sovereignty, to lift a phrase from Lauren Berlant, consists also in the ‘vague and gestural’: the desire not to be a subject, not to make intention, not to always fight back, ‘build community’ or ‘think positive’. Nevertheless, there is a distinction between being exhaustively excluded from the state’s biopolitical fostering as neocapitalism might have us imagine, and the vague, gestural or otherwise nonsovereign coping mechanisms I am talking about here. What motivates this chapter is the desire not to consign the most vulnerable trans and gender-nonconforming subjects to bare life or near life, but as Fred Moten, citing Fanon, spoke of in a talk in Baltimore in 2011, to be conscious of how the spaces of non-being are ‘already zones of alternative being, where people have already figured out ways to live – struggling to preserve the forms of life that we have made under duress, almost as it were impossible, and that we continue to make every day’ (Moten 2011). This is not an optimistic point but a realist call to honour the zones of alternative being emerging under the duress of impossibility and to remain open to not knowing what they look like in advance.
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Notes

1 Butler's formulation of 'ugnirevability' also neglects the mourning for trans or queer of colour dead within and beyond trans/queer of colour communities. The important question appears to be, 'ugnirevable for whom?'

2 Colonial feminists and LGBT rescue projects have been critiqued soundly by a number of authors, including Mohanty (1991), Haritaworn, Tawfiq and Erdem (2008) and Paar (2007).

3 This is not to say that other diasporic subjects elsewhere to the global north do not understand themselves as trans women of colour; only to defer from claiming a universal that might conceal differences within/across categories.

4 This might also be read as a critique of racial capitalism as theorized in Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Robinson 1983) or more recently, Joel Melamed’s *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Melamed 2011).

5 The term *pagdaya* is a reference to Kamatay's status in relation to the Philippines-specific figure of the lower class *bida* who works in a beauty salon (see Benedict 2008; 318). I refer to the Paper Dolls as reproductive workers here following Manansan (2007). Reproductive labour here indexes work that involves ‘caring’ or emotional relation that reproduces the day-to-day functioning of an individual and thus of capitalism. On care work as reproductive labour, see Parreñas (2001: 37–38).


7 The following reading of disgust is indebted to Adi Kuntsman’s reading of disgust in relation to Russian LGBT communities in Israel (2008).