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Amy Marvin

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Interview on Gender/Fucking: The Pleasures and Politics of Living in a Gendered Body

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AMY MARVIN, EDITOR

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FROM THE EDITOR

Amy Marvin
LAFAYETTE COLLEGE

Dear Reader,

In this issue we have prepared for you a long interview conducted with Florence Ashley. Ashley is a professor at the University of Alberta Faculty of Law and is associated with the John Dossetor Health Ethics Centre. They were the first transfeminine clerk serving the Supreme Court of Canada, they serve on several prestigious editorial and advisory boards, and they have published on gender identity in the journal *MIND*. Our conversation centers on their new mixed genre book, *Gender/Fucking: The Pleasures and Politics of Living in a Gendered Body*, and digs into topics such as philosophical abstractions, the relationship between academic and literature writing, the state of transphobia in academia, and how we can grapple with a sense of doom about the future.

I do not like saying goodbye at the end of a party. I prefer to just leave. So, I was tempted to present the interview contained within this issue and head on my way out the door. And yet, this is a space where I am welcome to write, so it seems like a waste to not write *something*. Hence, I will summarize the work that I have done with this journal. For the past few years, I have focused on publishing interviews and more creative pieces. This bookends with a detailed interview between Nicholas Whittaker and Marquis Bey, and the following interview of Florence Ashley. I am excited about work in philosophy that takes up a more conversational or creative tone over our typical defensive style, so I have also published several essays that mix poetry, personal narrative, and philosophy across my run with the journal.

What is the future of this space? Who will be its next editor and what will be its next submissions? I do not know. It may be that the best stewardship this journal could receive is under a more senior scholar dedicated to a longer-term vision and capable of greater outreach than my contingency permits. It is easy for marginalized junior scholars to invest their time in various unpaid committees and projects that aim to make philosophy more inclusive, but this cuts into time that a scholar could use to land a job and participate in academic activities that are more highly valued. It is important to open doors for others but also to have a sense of when you risk getting thrown out using those same doors. As far as my future goes, I first plan to have a more

relaxing summer than last summer! Then we will see what trouble I can cause next.

Jovially,

Amy

CONVERSATION

Interview on Gender/Fucking: The Pleasures and Politics of Living in a Gendered Body

Florence Ashley
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Amy Marvin
LAFAYETTE COLLEGE

Amy Marvin: First of all, I wanted to thank you for joining me today to have this conversation about your new book, *Gender/Fucking: The Pleasures and Politics of Living in a Gendered Body* and your work more broadly.¹ Would you mind just briefly introducing yourself?

Florence Ashley: Yeah. I'm Florence. I'm currently an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law, the University of Alberta. I'm also affiliated with the John Dossetor Health Ethics Centre, also at the University of Alberta. I'm a transfeminine jurist bioethicist jack of all trades. I'm not really good at following disciplinary boundaries, so I do things a little bit all over the place in law, in philosophy, in bioethics, and in sociology related to science. I go wherever my thoughts take me, and one of the latest places my thoughts took me was writing a more non-academic book compared to what I've done before that essentially tricks people into reading theory by sandwiching it in erotica, or depending how you feel about it, tricking people into reading erotica by sandwiching it in theory.

AM: I love that way of phrasing it. I had just read your first book, *Banning Transgender Conversion Practices: A Legal and Policy Analysis*.² Then I was contacted by CLASH who sent me your next book, and it was interesting to track your shift towards integrating erotica alongside more theoretical insights. But you also incorporate poetry and personal narrative in a way that greatly expands your writing style compared with your other book. So I thought, to open, let's really get under the skin of a philosophical audience.

Towards the end of *Gender/Fucking*, you write, “Abstraction is a flawed epistemology. Ours must be one of love.”³ Why do you think we should prioritize love over abstraction?

FA: There’s a two-part answer for that. The first is that knowledge isn’t to be valued in and of itself. The second concerns the conceptual purity of abstraction. Abstraction may risk prioritizing clearly divided concepts through which we want to analyze the world, but often fails to track the world in the most meaningful ways and the most helpful ways. This can lead to an over-prioritization of knowledge for knowledge’s sake as opposed to what knowledge can bring to the world. Right? There’s this quote, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”⁴ And there’s a bit of this in my mindset here. But I’m also thinking about how we should approach epistemology. You cannot understand what’s going on in the world, and especially with the world as a social place, by trying to erase nuance to create conceptual categories that are abstract and that are pure, because purity is not of this world. This ties back to the book’s emphasis on human messiness, and what it means to truly know something. We have to engage with people on their own terms, and try to really understand how they are experiencing the world. Otherwise, we’re bound to distort their experiences through our abstract categories. And so, I think that’s a lot of what was in my mind when writing. And of course, this also ties back to the book’s idea of arousal as something that can be a source of knowledge rather than just a distortion of knowledge as it’s traditionally thought to be.

AM: As someone who just wrapped up and is planning another Philosophy of Love and Sex course, I really appreciate that emphasis on taking up love as epistemology in contrast to purified abstraction. I was thinking this would be a great book to assign next time around. Now that you’ve explained some of the thoughts that went into your approach, why is it that you wrote this specific book?

FA: That’s a really long and also very short story, depending on how you look at it. I think the germs of this book actually came from all the way back in CEGEP, which is a Quebec-specific educational establishment that sits right between high school and university. Being a Frenchie, we have a lot of French classes that kind of turn into continental philosophy classes, but specifically French continental philosophy classes. You know, lots of existentialism and things like that. But we had this assignment to write something inspired by the many books we read. The book I drew inspiration from the most was a book by Dany Laferrière. And it’s a book that gets quite self-reflective in many ways, but also has a little bit of salacious content. So I decided to write something inspired by that, which was my first foray into merging some erotic content along with some reflection. And if I recall, that essay was about post-modern alienation and other similar themes. I was proud of it and received quite a good grade. But now that essay is completely lost to the passage of time.

But through the years, moving forward, starting some years ago I had a lot of feelings around bodies, and what bodies do, and the way that embodiment itself is a little non-consensual. The body does what it wants to do, which

may or may not track what we want it to do. This is far from revolutionary for anybody who reads anything from disability studies, but it is also perhaps something that a lot of people don’t necessarily think about. And these thoughts led to the first essay on “vaginomancy” from the book, and that was the first one that I wrote. It was a way of processing feeling. So I say in many ways this book was in lieu of therapy. Although that’s not entirely accurate, because I *did* also go to therapy, but in many ways I think the book helped more than therapy! And so that was where I reignited this style that I had tried out back in CEGEP. It was of course a bit different and updated. Of course, my writing style evolved over the years, along with my writing chops. One might hope. So I incorporated these erotic elements. I do feel like there’s something very French about it. This incorporation of sexuality right into the work is something I don’t see quite a lot in English language literature, but is quite common in French, like with Georges Bataille. I guess I would say Anaïs Nin does kind of do it in English, but is French, and so in our style. I think there’s a bit of an inspiration from there as well. And interestingly, I mentioned is also somebody who makes you think with erotica. There are social critiques there, despite the fact that she’s essentially just writing smut for some rich American.

So that was the first essay that I wrote. Then the second one was “Sexually Transmissible Transness,” which is the first chapter, and that one was for the t4t Special Issue in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*.⁵ But it wasn’t taken up, so I had these two essays that I didn’t know really what to do with. I started thinking that I have other ideas to continue expanding and developing and so I was like, I’ll just write a book and add more essays that reflect this style! Of course, that involved sitting down and thinking about what ties these essays together. Why am I merging erotica with theory at a bigger scale? For “Sexually Transmissible Transness,” the fit was natural. Similarly, for “Vaginomancy,” the fit is natural, because the experiences specifically involve bringing both elements together. But I wanted to develop a bigger picture of why it is that I’m mixing these things together. What can erotica and theory do together beyond just both being there? And that, essentially, was the inception of this book project.

AM: This may be more of my own personal interest, but you mentioned at one point in the book that you were telling Viviane Namaste that you had a plan to “put the sex back in transsexual.”⁶ Can you tell me more about that?

FA: It was just a statement I made in passing. I don’t quite remember where it was. I think it might have been at the anniversary event for ASTT(e)Q [*Action Santé Travesti(e)s et Transsexuel(le)s du Québec*]. And you know Namaste was there looking fly as ever, with her long, white gloves just looking like a superstar. And if I recall, I said something on those lines of, like, “bring the sex back in transsexual,” and Viviane was like, “Well, it’s never left!” This is a very Viviane thing to say, and definitely holds true for the context of ASTT(e)Q, which has never shied away from its mission. ASTT(e)Q is structured as a project within an HIV / AIDS community organization, and a lot of their work is to serve trans communities more broadly, but also everybody who has a higher risk of HIV transmission. So trans people who

use injections, drugs or otherwise, may share needles or something like that. And then there's trans sex workers. So the politics of respectability and moving away from sex was never really at the heart of ASTT(e)Q. I do think Viviane very much pushes back against respectability on a personal level as well, so it certainly rang true to my ear from her perspective. And yet it's also true that there are lots of trans advocacy organizations and trans communities that have tried to dispense themselves from anything remotely sexual, and present this much more respectable, liberal face. And so where I'm sitting in writing this book, which is a way of pushing back against that and trying to reembrace this branch of trans community that never actually left but was perhaps not given the same spotlight.

AM: Speaking of putting the sex back into things, can you say more about how you understand the book in relation to erotica?

FA: I have a few sound clips prepared for this, okay? I don't know that there's that much to fit into a more academic conversation, but I'll read them out to you just for your own pleasure. The first one was this book is an elaborate ploy to get people crushing on me. And the other one is that this book is all about taking intellectual masturbation a little bit too literally!

AM: I love that tagline.

FA: Yeah, best read one orgasm for chapter! And then, of course, I like that I called it academic smut. The only thing I don't like about the academic smut moniker is that people are running with the word academic a bit too much and not enough with the smut, right? And so people are like, oh, well, if this is academic, maybe it's not for me. And I'm like, yeah, but academic smut is not really academic! It's meant to be about this contrast and how they're seen as a little bit incompatible in many ways, especially because I didn't say academic *erotica*, I said academic *smut* quite on purpose. You know there is that sentiment of lowliness to smut, versus erotica, which has this kind of air to it that, like, oh, we're doing something artistic. Which, I mean, no insult to erotica. But by contrast, smut is seen as like, "Oh, it's just smut!" It's like it's low art. And then you bring it into conversation with *academic smut*. And first, I think that makes it a lot more interesting. Second, I think it's probably the best way to get people interested in academia, frankly. I've had a number of people say if this is what they read in academic learning, they probably would've stayed in school a lot longer! But then, emphasizing the word smut specifically also goes back to the critique of arousal as a distortion of knowledge, right? Because when you do erotica it doesn't hit home quite as much. This sentiment that arousal and sex is something that distorts knowledge. And I think "academic smut" does that more. That's why I like the term so much.

AM: That's why I was thinking that I should assign your book for class. So I'm teaching Philosophy of Love and Sex again in the fall, and I found that over time I have been changing how I manage the content of the course compared with when I first taught it, when it had the same title but was mostly just Philosophy of Love. And then student evals

were great but also like, "Oh, you kind of tricked us into filling the class by having sex in the name but then just focusing on love." So now I've been emphasizing the sex part more, especially since it's so important to talk and think about. We discussed bell hooks's "Eating the Other." And at one point she writes about this dynamic of *fucking the Other*.⁷ So we had a whole class discussion—respectfully and professionally, of course—about the many ways we use the words "fuck" and "fucking," you know, philosophy as analysis of language use! And then how can we use this to think about what hooks is up to with deploying the word "fuck" philosophically? Because hooks isn't just using it to mean sex, but also exploitation, and using another person. So I think there's a way you can combine these topics that will get people excited about academic work and also help them think about their own lives. Your book navigates that dynamic really well.

FA: Yeah, I would just like to get people thinking. I mean, I know people have been finding it very helpful for themselves and thinking about their lives. I mean, primarily trans folk, but I do think it is relevant for a wider group as well. I do think it has been interesting navigating the question of who is the audience for my book. And I'm like, well, there's so many ways to answer that. On one hand, my audience is transfems and other trans folks. But I mean, in another sense, the entire world is my audience, because I do think that a lot of it is just about living in a body, and we all live in a body. Anybody who's not living in a body should probably let me know their trick. That sounds interesting! But until then we're all living in a body. And so I think there's something to be learned about that. And we're all living in a world that attributes meaning to us, partly based on our bodies. And I think that's true of everybody, it's not just marginalized folks. Marginalized folks feel it very differently, obviously, but everybody has meanings projected onto them. And then their relationships to other people are mediated through that. But I'm still thinking about who my audience is and who it could include.

AM: I guess the audience is just whoever makes it sometimes, right?

FA: Yeah.

AM: It also seems like you're thinking about the institutionalization of trans studies in the context of the academy. You mentioned the t4t issue of *TSQ*. And I know the book grapples with the chaser essay situation at *TSQ*. We don't have to go here if you don't want to, but did you have any thoughts on how you're engaging with trans studies?

FA: Yes. I was interested as somebody who's been involved with the Center for Applied Transgender Studies, which was itself a bit of a response to trans studies at times speaking in high abstraction primarily to other people who did more of a critical theory or cultural theory around trans issues, which is, you know, perfectly fine. But a lot of people felt like there wasn't much room for more. So that's definitely part of the feeling that's feeding into it. And yet, at the same time, this is a book that in many ways very much speaks to the abstraction crowd a lot more than

most of my other work. There is this kind of ambiguity and ambivalence which I work directly into the critique. That's not inherently a problem. The problem comes when we feel like journals only take that abstract style. But I'm not inherently against high abstraction—I mean, this book is about as masturbatory as it gets, quite literally.

AM: We're getting a lot of helpful context here for how you approach the book, how abstraction can become a flawed approach, and how you understand your writing process. Your previous book was *Banning Transgender Conversion Practices: A Legal and Policy Analysis*.⁸ I read that as well. I highly recommend it. Currently, we're having a chat for *APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy*. So I assume most of our readers will be academic. How is the process with CLASH Books different from a more academic press like UBC Press? What was it like to go with a more popular press? I'm somewhat familiar with CLASH Books because the cover of *Darryl* was inspired by a photo that I took. So I have interacted with them before very briefly. But it was really cool to have them email me and be like, oh, Florence is writing this creative book! I didn't know you were heading in that direction.

FA: I didn't know I was going to head in that direction until I did! It was very different. I mean, I guess there's two main elements that are very different. The first one is for more popular presses. You're doing simultaneous pitches. So you're just kind of throwing it all out there and hoping, you know, hoping something sticks, which is very different from the academic experience where you're typically pitching one press at a time. The other thing is there's no peer review in the more literary scene. And so you're really just working with the editor directly, and you don't have this kind of back and forth with peer reviewers that you have to satisfy, and especially with a smaller press like CLASH. There's also no publishing board that has to move all of the decisions to the top, like the people that had to prove it were the people I was talking to. And so it's a very, very different vibe. I went with CLASH because of the enthusiasm that they had for the project. And that's an interesting thing. I don't see this level of enthusiasm in academic publishing in general, although for my third book project, there has been some pretty strong enthusiasm from one press. But overall, it's just a very different vibe, because when you're doing academic writing, you're definitely closer to the realm of abstraction than you are to the realm of love, at least as conceived in this book. I mean, you know you try to move as much as you can towards love within the academic mindset. But the structures of academic writing, especially in stiffer fields like law, and similarly, in science and bioethics, definitely limit your ability to be more creative and humane. And so very, very different. I also like the fact that the editing wasn't too heavy-handed, which is a little bit unusual even for a literary press. Oftentimes there's quite a lot of back and forth with editors, but I think the editors had concern about messing with the voice of the book too much. So while, of course, we did have editing and back and forth and stuff like that, it was not particularly heavy-handed.

So yeah, a very, very different experience! And of course, another thing that I'm living through now is the element

of marketing, because with academic books there's a lot less emphasis on marketing, especially in Canada. Yes, you do a little bit of marketing. But at the end of the day, you just put the work out there and hope people buy it and do book reviews and stuff like that, because also most people are going to get it through libraries or there are academics who want to buy it. They're going to buy it either way, regardless of what you tell them, because it's going to be relevant to their research. But here we're trying to speak to people as people, not just sharing research. And so I have to show people what they'll get from it and that's been a bit frustrating as an author as a flip side to the enthusiasm. But people are so enthused about the book already! There are three Goodreads reviews so far because it came out on Tuesday. But two of the three already said it was life changing for them. And the most consistent feedback I get from people is that it made them cry, and that is so amazing to hear. But then you're turning around and trying to get other people to buy this book and letting them know it's going to be great for you. Look—I'm an academic. I have a salary. I'm not doing this book for money. I'm doing this book because I think it can actually bring something to people. And so there is this sense of being sad that you can't reach everybody who would like it. I'm not trying to convince people who aren't interested. I'm trying to reach the people who are and would be, and that's just hard to do. That's quite a frustrating experience.

AM: I hadn't even thought about the way you have to really ramp up marketing in the context of this kind of book. I noticed at one point—and, once again, this is a place where we don't have to go—but I think you were receiving some pushback online as a member of a committee and you had to lock down your social media account. Did this interfere with your marketing at all?

FA: Oh, yeah, I have so many thoughts on having to lock down. So what happened, essentially, was I was appointed to the WHO Guideline Development Group for the trans health guidelines, and because of complexities around scheduling—it was initially supposed to be earlier, and it was rescheduled for later—it essentially wasn't feasible for me to go anymore. And they were quite unaccommodating around possibilities and options for making it work. So I withdrew. But I didn't want to be the one making the withdrawal public. I was waiting for the WHO to make it public. But in between me telling them and it being made public, there was an immense amount of backlash and criticism towards, well, really, everybody's involvement in it. But they kind of homed in on me because I said, "Be gay, do crimes" in a *TikTok* and I have a big "Do Crimes" tattoo, which looks really fucking awesome. And you know they were all up in arms around that and also around the fact that I supported access to gender-affirming care in peer-reviewed publications, which is like—okay, that's what you're angry about, like, come on, be for real. But yeah, so at some point I had to lock down, but it wasn't even the harassment per se. It was more the fact that far-right journalists were clearly going through my Twitter and going through all my publications, finding anything you can drum up outrage about. Especially things they can just, like, put completely out of context in order to drum up outrage. And so this felt very invasive. And so that was why I ended up

locking things down for a little bit. But when you're locked down you can't really share on social media. And one of my main avenues of reach is on Twitter, because that's where I've built my audience. So it definitely made this hard. And that's why I ended up putting my profile back to public once I was getting closer to the last rush of marketing before the book comes out. And I think if I had felt the need to keep my profile locked longer, it probably would have had a negative impact on marketing and on sales. But hopefully it didn't in the long run. I wasn't locked down for terribly long, but also the reason I wasn't was precisely because of that marketing aspect.

AM: You just mentioned another board that you were appointed to and unfortunately had to duck out. But I know you've been involved with many important committees. You've also done important law work. How do you understand *Gender/Fucking* in relation to this public work?

FA: That's a good question. What's been fascinating to me is that I was kind of worried of how my colleagues would respond to learning about the book. But the feedback has been quite positive. Of course, none of them have read it, so maybe they'll change their minds once they read it! But, like, people have seen the cover, people are aware that it's a book with a lot of erotic content, and they actually think it's pretty cool, and they're quite excited about the fact that the feedback has been very, very positive. I see all my work as being interconnected, because at the end of the day what I am trying to do is to make trans lives better in whatever way I can, and a lot of my work throughout has been really engaging with the messiness of trans existence and of human existence more generally. And that's a recurring theme in a lot of my work. And also, I tried to fit "genderfucking" in the titles of everything. You know, I have not just the book that's called "gender/fucking." But I have a published law review article where the title starts with "genderfucking," and then I have an upcoming article that sets out genderfucking as a critical legal methodology.⁹ That's also going to be coming out. And in that academic work I described genderfucking as a politics of messiness, which I kind of situate as in between a politics of recognition and a politics of refusal—definitely, with more affinities towards refusal. But not quite the politics of refusal in and of itself, because it really centers more on the messiness aspect, and I understand there's a bunch of reasons for that, which I go into in the book, but this theme of trying to capture the messiness of the heterogeneity of human experience and of trans experience as a microcosm of that is a thread that runs through a lot of my work, very far from just this book. And so, even though this book is very, very different, and the style speaks to a very, very different audience, it still has these strong ties to a lot of my work, and so I do see it as kind of the continuation of the same work much in the same way as you might think that the work of existentialists, such as the theoretical work of French existentialists, are continued in their theater and fiction work, and so I see it a little bit like that.

AM: With the theme of emphasizing messiness and heterogeneity, I want to ask how do you understand the kind of polyvocal style you brought to *Gender/Fucking*? Do you consider it a kind of memoir? A kind of poetry? A kind

of autotheory? And along with this, what or who were some of your inspirations while writing this?

FA: Yeah, that's a good question. The answer is I don't know! I think partly half the fun is the fact that it's all so messy with regards not just to gender, but also to genre, which in French is the same word! And so there is a memoir element. But also, the memoir is not quite fully memoir, right? There's an element of distortion that goes on there, while the stories are pretty much all inspired from actual scenes that happened in my life. I do have tweaks, or composites, or some critical elements changed for narrative purposes to work a bit better. Like, to better make the tie-in with the essay work, and what I'm trying to convey work. I mean, an obvious example is in the "Libidinal Vertigo" chapter. I have this whole thing where it features a sex scene with a vampire. But here the vampire is the image of vampirism as a sort of stand-in for trans femininity and a way that is perceived by society as predatory. Yet, as I hope to show in the actual vignette, it is very much not, but I couldn't let transfemininity be represented for transfemininity, because the entire book is about that. So I had to find something else that was coded as predatory, and yet that I could show as not in fact such. And so you have these things that I play with in a text. Does that make it a memoir? I don't know. Is it autotheory? Maybe. I mean, I don't totally know what makes autotheory. I am certainly doing theory, right? And some people always talk about autofiction. And I'm like, well, but it's also not really fiction either. So I don't really know how I fit against that. I do think that for distribution purposes it's being classified as a memoir. That all has to do with which categories you want to be placed into in the bookstore, essentially. So it's less about actually describing what's going on.

The poetry was interesting because I added that later on, and I'm very self-conscious about poetry because I struggle with anything metaphorical. I'm not a very—I'm not good at metaphor. But I was like, well, but poetry doesn't have to be good, the poetry is not there to be good. The poetry is there to be like the piece of ginger that you eat between sushi, right? And so it's really kind of a palate cleanser between chapters and all it needs to be is good enough not to break the flow. So it is there to act as a sort of reset in between chapters, and I hope that it does a decent job at that. I know some of them I'm more attached to and I think are decent. But I'm not a poet. Probably the only way I can actually get poetry published is by putting it in between chapters here and there!

Now, in terms of inspirations—God, it's so hard to say because there's so many people. How do you even pick out just a few? And also, I think, most of my inspirations are people in my life more so than authors. But, God! I don't even know how to answer that. It's such a big question. I feel like I take in the entire world. And so the entire world is an inspiration. All my friends are inspirations. Every book I've ever written is an inspiration in one way or another. And there are places when the inspirations are fairly obvious because I just quote them outright. So when I'm quoting Audre Lorde or when I'm mentioning Jorge Luis Borges, this is obvious. But then there are things that are less obvious. And then, of course, you know, Torrey Peters, t4t, I

mean, the essay includes all of that. There's your thoughts on t4t and the ethics of care, like transferring ethics of care and stuff like that have definitely also been an influence. You know, Hil Malatino's work has been an influence. There's just so many people have been influences that it feels almost unfair to name anybody, because I can't name everybody. I guess when I am writing at no point am I trying to specifically take inspiration from any particular style. It's more just the way in which all of these readings have built me up as a person and built up my thinking as a person, and that's where the inspiration and of influence lies.

AM: The reception of my t4t essay has been so interesting to me because more people read it than I expected! I guess it's difficult to avoid gossip even if it's made philosophical. I wonder if there's something there with writing a more personal piece as well. Because you get to the question of, well, who has influenced me as the person who I am in the world? Of course, that is going to be so broad! You can't list every single person or author, or musician, even, or pet, or anything like that.

FA: Yeah.

AM: So part of why I was interested in asking about the style of the book is that there's a specific moment I wanted to focus on. The "Cutting Table" chapter ends with a note that the journal was written by someone else and was found later. I have taught and written on Søren Kierkegaard before, so while reading I was thinking about when Kierkegaard will create a pseudonym who finds writing by another pseudonym, and how this forces us to think more deeply with or at least not as straightforwardly about his work. And this was a style of writing that I don't think I've seen from you before, so I was wondering what your thoughts were when you were framing the chapter in that way.

FA: Yeah, so the note at the end is a later addition and also, because you've seen the advance reader copy, I've bolstered that part a little bit more between the ARC and the published version. But I added that later, really to emphasize the distance and the kind of, like, sense of weirdness and alienation in the process and its medicalization. That's what the whole chapter is essentially about. The inspiration is, just very openly, Borges. Borges, is one of my favorite authors. In part, because I have ADHD and he writes short stories. One of my favorite stories by him is like the one paragraph "On Exactitude in Science," which is a fantastic piece about the map territory problem and nuance.¹⁰ And well, not just science, but everything. And I mean, this goes back to my ideas around abstraction versus love. But that essay, along with so many others, are attributed to fictional people that don't exist, and he has this thing where he does book critiques of books that don't exist, written by people that don't exist, and it's such a fascinating gimmick. Because sometimes, first of all, the idea of a book is what's most powerful, not really the execution. Sometimes the idea is where the power lies. And so in that case you don't necessarily need to write the book. You can just write a fake book, critique it a bit, but it's kind of a gimmick and a gimmick inside a gimmick, right? Because, like, the whole journal is set up to be a little bit like I don't know what's going on. Like, who are these people?

That kind of thing happens a little bit in my book, during the section at the doctor's, which is all very inspired from *Malone Meurt* by Samuel Beckett, which is, like, a complete slog of a book!¹¹ And frankly, one of those books that would have probably benefited from never being written, but having a critique of the book being written about because it is a slog. But also, it's a very fascinating book about, essentially, this guy who's in a kind of, like, hospital or hospice-type bed, and seems to be awaiting death in some way, but doesn't really know what's going on. And I mean, we don't really know why he doesn't know what's going on, and there's sort of a mystery around that, but it brings up a lot of feelings about the weirdness of the world. It's an existentialist book. And so I wanted to—the journal is really about turning the lens back on trans health providers as the weird ones as opposed to doctors being the creators with trans people as the weird Frankenstein's monster. And so I was kind of reverting that lens, which makes sense because we all know that Frankenstein, the doctor Frankenstein, was the weird one, not the monster. The monster is perfectly justified. Well, I mean, okay, maybe don't murder people, but metaphorically, the monster is the victim here. Which then, again, brings us back to Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, and the critique of medicalization, and all of that. I wanted to make that clear for the reader in the end. But then there's that gimmick in the gimmick style of writing I left my own mark on. Oh, the doctors are weird. And by the way, this is based on my actual journal that I kept from surgery! Then the ending bits, treating the journal as something that's been found, but as written by something else by somebody else, is itself a kind of Borgesian gimmick, but then, it's pretty evident that the surgery journal is, in fact, written by the person who gets it, right? But there's a refusal of recognition there and so it is meant to disorient. I think the point is that it's meant to disorient. It's meant to be an extremely unreliable narrator both at the level of the journal itself and at the level of the reflection afterwards. and my goal with making this disorienting and having an unreliable narrator is to convey that sense of alienation, of weirdness—of bodies, of medicine, and of the relationship that trans people have with medicine.

AM: So would you say that's part of writing as a form of refusal like you mentioned earlier?

FA: When I say it's a refusal, I think it's a partial refusal. I think it goes back to the politics of messiness and affinities with refusal without ever being fully a refusal, because at the end of the day, yes, there is this kind of rejection going on, but it's also in the context of engaging with the medical sphere. It is not a complete opt out. And so it's ambiguously and ambivalently situated vis-a-vis rejection and refusal. Which is where I get to the sense of messiness a bit.

AM: So back to messiness! One thing that I noticed throughout the book is grappling with difficult conversations. One aspect of this is your frank discussion about sex and specific sexual experiences. You also discuss chasers, which we might define broadly as people who seek out trans people reductively to fuck. You discuss trying to find sexual agency, despite the association between transfeminine people and predation. You also discuss harm within trans

communities. So how do you tend to approach these difficult conversations? And what was it like to put this into writing?

FA: Yeah, it was not easy. All of them are equally difficult. There's a lot of very kind of different difficulties with writing about different things. A lot of it touches the fact that I like to say I'm reckless. Partly in response to people being like, "Oh, you're so courageous!" to be out as trans. I'm like, I'm not courageous. I'm just reckless. But it's that sense that if things need to be said, I don't necessarily care about the risk of vulnerability that comes with it. I think there is also a way in which being overly vulnerable itself acts as a defense mechanism where you're just like, well, I'm putting it out there. So if you hurt me with it, then you're the asshole. And also, really, it was exercising my agency and giving you the power to hurt me. So it's fine. So there's that aspect. But then there is also throughout a desire to also be kind of accountable. And in conversation with other folks in trans communities, and especially the ones that I revolve in. And so a lot of those chapters were read by people long before they were published and had gotten feedback. And then there was a bit of an iterative process in engaging with thoughts that the writing brought out in other people as well. And so I did. I think part of it was also the writing becoming a way of making it less just about me and more about broader experiences and phenomena. But yeah, it's not an easy thing to write about, and it's something you have to be very careful and sensitive about, especially because, going back to messiness, there's so many different experiences where you can't just be like, "This is the answer. And this is the situation. And this is how people are like." There's no such thing. And I think there is this kind of tentativeness to the whole book where I'm not trying to give you answers. I'm trying to give you my thinking in the hope that it helps people find answers for themselves.

AM: And now I'm thinking back to your way of grappling with messiness. So would you say that there is a distinct kind of carefulness that you need to bring towards writing about messiness? Because that is an interesting dynamic.

FA: Oh, yeah, 100 percent. You need to be very careful when you write about messiness. There is an irony in writing about and doing right by messiness—that if you want to do right by messiness, you can't be too messy! You can be messy. But then your relationship to writing about messiness is going to be very, very different. Because in part if you're very careless about engaging with messiness, then you're not necessarily showing this sort of loving attention and love and care that we want from a politics of messiness, and at the same time we need to leave ourselves space to be human and to be messy to a certain extent, right? There's no way of fully leaving behind the messiness when you're writing, and so there is a tension that you have to navigate. But I think all writing involves so many tensions that we have to navigate, and so in many ways this is just another example of the countless tensions that are involved in writing. But you're absolutely right that there is an element of being careful when writing about messiness and being thoughtful around certain claims that are made. One I think about is there's this quote from Porpentine, which is from "Hot Allostatic Load"—a fantastic essay for

people who haven't read it—and there's a quote where she says, "When I look at a cis woman these days, the first thing I think is, I bet no one ever casually called her a rapist."¹² And, of course, this is not necessarily the most nuanced of thoughts. But also, it's just a feeling, it's a thought that is impressed upon Porpentine's mind. And I see that's just an expression of that messiness, right? Porpentine is not saying that nobody ever calls cis women rapists, but rather this is a thought and impression. So when I'm engaging with that, I have to be like, well, transfeminine bodies don't have a monopoly on demonization. And yet there is still a really important truth that lies within that statement about the way transfeminine bodies are framed as inherently predatory. And so it's about recognizing these truths and these feelings and the truth within the messiness, while also holding space for the fact that none of them are absolute truths. And there's no totalizing experience here.

AM: And another experience that you write about in the book is becoming the first openly transfeminine clerk at the Supreme Court of Canada. You go into detail about the deeper aspects of interviewing for the position that relates heavily with propriety and professionalism, so specifically views about sexuality and transfeminine embodiment when perceived as ill-fitting for the courtroom and the academy. So now that you're a law professor, I want to ask, what is it like to navigate these tensions? If you're willing to talk about this.

FA: Yeah. So it's interesting. I think, in many ways, being a law professor gives me a whole lot more freedom than I had as a clerk. For one, there are few places you're going to be as restricted in who you are as clerking for the Supreme Court because you're an extension of your judge. Anything you do will reflect upon them while you're clerking for them. This goes both ways, right? It does mean that part of the judge's judicial independence extends over to you, which does give you a measure of freedom. But the flip side is also that you're severely constrained by the fact that you have to maintain the honor of your judge and of the institution. And as much as I can be a person who's like, "Fuck institutions," it is something that I took very seriously while I was there, and I don't think I was wrong to do so. For many reasons, one of which being that I see what's happening in the United States, the politicization of the Supreme Court, and in Canada we haven't had that degree of polarization but some people are attempting to go down that road. It's something that is extremely detrimental to the entirety of law. And so the court's ability to rise above attempts at politicizing it in Canada has been part of its strengths, and it's a strength that, I think, is generally beneficial as much as I'm highly critical of the Supreme Court as an institution. Now that I'm no longer a clerk, I'm not at all shy of saying things that would have been absolutely impossible for me to say while I was there, and that I wouldn't have wanted to say while I was there. It's been years since I was there and it's a very, very different dynamic. And I get to have a very different relationship to the court because I don't have these role obligations that come with working there. But it's interesting writing about it, because then you're positioning yourself at a time where you did have these role obligations, while speaking from now where you don't have these role obligations. And this allows me to be a lot

more provocative in the things that I say. But now, being a law professor, because of academic freedom, there is actually so much more that I can do and say! And people aren't policing. I mean, some people attempt, but not at my university, and not my faculty, right? And none of my colleagues are trying to police what I do. They're just, you know, kind of letting me be. Of course, you know, if I went and did things that are highly inappropriate within the role obligations of a professor, that'd be a different thing. But as long as I do nothing that's going to seriously negatively impact the learning of my students, then I do have quite a lot of freedom, and it's something that I enjoy a lot, given how much the far right seems to hate me—especially now that I've become a professor they've come to hate me even more.

AM: I noticed that Alberta is doing some crackdowns on trans healthcare. Have you found that this is impacting your research or your teaching while you're there?

FA: I think I'm more impacted by the general atmosphere of attacks on trans people. Yes, of course, I'm more emotionally impacted by it happening in Alberta, because I'm here. And also, it's placing a load on my time because I'm in a good position to help. But that means, of course, it is a lot of work to help out, but I do feel like the anti-trans stuff overall has been so detrimental to my research, and I'm not the only one I know. A lot of people feel that way, because, I mean, I remember when I started in academia and where we had to fight against kind of liberal-ish gatekeepers in trans healthcare and pushing for moving more towards informed consent and less gatekeeping and stuff like that. Now we're completely in a different space, where we have to just try to justify not having our care taken away, which (1) is stressful and (2) is boring as fuck to argue. It's not a fun thing to argue. It's like being trapped in 101-level shit. And you're trying to write, you know, like graduate seminar-type stuff. And so it just kind of kills your soul academically. And I think that's perhaps part of why I'm turning a little bit more towards literature and meaning making. It's not just a kind of immediately practical intervention because it's the way of keeping my soul alive. And also, because I think we're moving to a place where, because of the degree of polarization, it's less and less clear to me as time goes on how much my writing is actually going to help. Because when it was liberals that were making the decision, I know how to appeal to liberals, and there are only so many ways I can appeal to liberals when it's conservatives making the decisions. They're not going to listen to what I say, no matter what I say, and so it moves towards, well, maybe the most impact I can make on people is by making them feel heard and making them find a sense of meaning and community and care within what's happening. And I guess that is changing the way I approach writing and being an academic. But it's rough, it's really disheartening. It's really hard to find the motivation to write papers. And I say that as somebody who famously pushes out, like, a gazillion papers a year. And I'm just really finding it hard to even find energy in topics that I'm enthused about anymore because of all that's happening.

AM: I'd like to know a bit more about what the climate in law is like. So I mainly know about philosophy. And I feel

like law and philosophy have a bit of a kinship, you know—sometimes I've heard philosophers described as failed law professors and sometimes I've heard lawyers described as failed philosophers to some extent, but I was wondering, what is the climate like over there? Because in philosophy I feel like I'm in the center of the Transphobia Thunderdome, even if people pretend that isn't the case. Is it better over in law?

FA: You know, things are very different, from my understanding, in the US and Canada, but in Canada I think things are generally pretty good. I mean, we just had an open letter where thirty-six primarily law professors with a few staff lawyers at different academic institutes wrote an open letter opposing what was happening in Alberta, and just from two law schools.¹³ So thirty-six people from just two law schools, of which over thirty are professors, is quite a lot of people writing in opposition to that and they are a lot of my colleagues. And that's just the people who signed too. You have to add the people who had reasons not to sign, even though they are supportive of the opposition. So it's been pretty good although you do, of course, have more hostile elements. But I don't feel like they have nearly as much power as they do in philosophy and disciplines like that. But you know, sometimes they're given political power because that's another thing in law. Professors end up being elected to offices or being given really high positions within governments. And so that's another thing about it. I had a colleague who was just appointed Deputy Minister of Justice in Alberta, which means that in likelihood he's going to be the one defending this law, right? And so there are feelings about that. But you know, first, I don't know his personal views on any of these things. But also, overall, I will say law is definitely in a much, much, much more comfortable position compared with philosophy when it comes to transphobia for sure. Again, *asterisk*—in Canada. Yes.

AM: I keep thinking maybe I should find my way over to the Tim Hortons side, but we'll see what ends up working! With your response to the previous question, you mentioned the difficulty of grappling with contemporary politics. The final chapter of your book, "Daydreams of an Apocalypse," took some turns that I didn't expect for your conclusion, but also resonated deeply with some of the bad feelings I've been grappling with lately. You ask the question, "How do you live in a world that will never be repaired?"¹⁴ Then you turn to what you call palliative care, which is a care in the now and then, rather than yearning for a utopian future. When I reached the section I was thinking of McKenzie Wark's *Raving* where she emphasizes that the rave offers escape into an alternative time beyond the doom of the near future,¹⁵ and also led me to think about the ending of Voltaire's *Candide* with the focus on tending one's garden.¹⁶ So I wanted to ask, what do you think that palliative care looks like on the ground right now?

FA: Yeah. So first of all, I wanna ask, I'm curious. Why did it feel so unexpected?

AM: I think for me it was the turn you made. So you were writing about experiences with sex, of course, and with surgery, and with becoming a law clerk, that kind of stuff,

and I think that it felt so visceral to suddenly look at doom in the present. I think I wasn't expecting to suddenly also be called to grapple with my own emotions about how I'm going to keep going in the face of how bleak the future looks in this way. So that turn at the end was pretty heart-wrenching for me as well.

FA: That's fair, that's fair. Yeah. Also, another thing that you perhaps noticed is it's also one of the few chapters that actually has a long narrative, but that doesn't involve any sex at all. And that was very purposeful in a couple of different ways. One of the main ones being that when I was writing it, I was dating somebody who was asexual, and I wanted that relationship to be represented in the book. But also, it felt right for the theme, which is a bit more about coming down and laying in our difficult emotions. Not to use that word too seriously, but a little bit of a "post-nut clarity" vibes, and so it felt like the cuddlier aspect of the vignette was more in tune with the topic of just trying to find ourselves in the world. But it does, I guess, track it. A different tone would be to turn from just the sheer intensity of the topic. So then it's a very different kind of intensity for this last chapter. It's also very intense, but in such a different way. I don't know what it looks like in the world. That's an answer I'm still trying to grapple with this in terms of how it is activism. How do we do this activism? How do we craft these spaces of love and care that I see as partly escapist, but also more than escapist because there is something that's meant to be sustaining in the longer term there? And, you know, a lot of it is mutual aid. But a lot of the classic image is like, let's just get a fucking farm far away from the city and just live in a little commune. But of course, these things also get real messy and can turn south quite quickly, but it's part of what I was thinking of.

I was also thinking of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's Star House and other things, where people are just doing their best to care for one another and make life more livable, if not, hopefully, happy and sustainable. But I think what that looks like is just so different for everybody, and especially something I struggle with personally as somebody who's a little bit of a hermit and is not and doesn't necessarily have an easy time connecting with people in general, at least in a deeper manner. It's hard for me to know, but it's something I've been trying to figure out and trying to invite others into the conversation to help me figure out as well and also figure it out for themselves. But to me it's just so important, just because I feel like many of us are struggling with hopelessness. And we can be like, "Oh, no! Have hope!" but sometimes hopelessness is just reasonable. Like, in the chapter I talk about revolution and stuff like that. And given enough time, yeah, capitalism will collapse. And maybe we'll have a revolution for something better. But there's a bit of a doomsday clock like we're in *Majora's Mask*—you know, the moon is going to crash down and we have a time limit to stop it.¹⁷ It's not clear exactly what the time limit is. But there's a time limit more or less because, realistically, we're not going to do well by climate change. And I don't think that climate change is probably going to fully kill off all of humanity. But certainly a lot of people are going to die from it, and the world will be hugely different afterwards. And so there is this sense of, well, we're not getting to the better place on earth in time to deal with a

climate apocalypse. So there is a hopelessness that sets in. But the answer can't just be to turn inwards and not do anything. And so a lot of it is just trying to grapple with that and trying to find a motivation knowing that, yeah, maybe we're not going to be able to change the world. But if we can make life a little bit better and happier for a few people, maybe that's just enough.

AM: Speaking of the future, what can we look forward to seeing from you next? Is there anything that you wanted to mention that you're up to or things you're excited about other people being up to?

FA: So what *am* I doing next? Surviving my first year as a professor? Teaching is the first thing. Also, looking forward to getting a handle on my meds. In terms of what readers can look forward to, I am working on the third book, an academic one based on my doctorate research, on how courts approach science in family cases involving trans youth in Canada and especially when it comes to social gender, affirmation, and parental behavior towards trans youth. So it's a fun and interesting project about how science is a little bit of a double-edged sword! Even within the context of Canada, which has, you know, not yet fallen and the global courts which have not yet fallen into the whole anti-trans disinformation campaign, although we are starting to see it. So that's one thing. And then I'm excited for my "Genderfucking as Critical Legal Methodology" paper,¹⁸ which, I guess, is a nice complement to the book. But for the law crowd! But, you know, I'll be honest right now, it's mostly about making it through the first year of teaching! It's such a black hole.

AM: It can be such a time sink! I feel like I'm in a moment where I've been teaching for a while, and I did a 3/3 of almost entirely prep courses for the past two years. And right now I only have a 1/2 teaching load, and this semester I'm just teaching two versions of a course that I've taught before several times. And I'm like, wow, this is so much easier now than it used to be!

FA: Yeah, I have a 1/2, and I'm dying! But, I mean, of course, I haven't taught these before. But like, holy shit, I mean, just my one criminal law class is so much—maybe I should stop going down all the rabbit holes. That would probably help. But the rabbit holes feel so worth it!

NOTES

1. Ashley, *Gender/Fucking*.
2. Ashley, *Banning Transgender Conversion Practices*.
3. Ashley, *Gender/Fucking*, 132.
4. Marx, *Theses on Feurbach*, 145.
5. Awkward-Rich and Malatino, The 14t Issue.
6. Ashley *Gender/Fucking*, 12.
7. hooks, "Eating the Other," 367-368.
8. Ashley, *Banning Transgender Conversion Practices*.
9. Ashley, "Genderfucking as a Critical Legal Methodology."
10. Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," 325.
11. Beckett, *Malone Muerte*.

12. Porpentine, "Hot Allostatic Load."
13. Canadian Press. "Legal Experts Raise Concerns about Alberta's Plans for Transgender Youth."
14. Ashley, *Gender/Fucking*, 143.
15. Wark, *Raving*.
16. Voltaire, *Candide*.
17. Miyamoto and Imamura, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*.
18. Ashley, "Genderfucking as a Critical Legal Methodology."

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APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy invites members to submit papers, book reviews, and interviews, conversations, and more experimental writing formats for publication in the spring 2024 and fall 2024 editions. Submissions can address the areas of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, asexuality, gender, and sexuality studies, as well as issues of concern for LGBTQ people in the profession. The journal seeks quality paper submissions for review. Reviews and notes should address recent books, current events, or emerging trends. Members who give papers at APA divisional meetings, in particular, are encouraged to submit their work. Please pitch the editor before the deadline if you have an interview or more experimental proposal.

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Submit all manuscripts electronically (.doc or .docx format), and direct inquiries to Amy Marvin, Editor, *APA Studies on LGBTQ Philosophy*, marvina@lafayette.edu. In the event of an editor change, Dr. Marvin will forward any submissions to the new editor.

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