

Beyond Normative Developmental Scripts: Reading for Reproductive Becomings in
Contemporary U.S. Genres

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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates how reproductive body-subjects exceed the temporal, gendered, and material constraints imposed on them by medical, legal, and social institutions, elaborating the ways in which close textual analysis and feminist new materialisms make legible such modes of excess and becoming. Situated within the contemporary U.S. political landscape, where intensifying reproductive control, anti-trans legislation, and white nationalist natalism presently converge, this project demonstrates that normative developmental scripts function as biopolitical instruments that differentially discipline reproductive bodies along axes of gender, race, and disability. In my analyses of blogs (such as PillowAngel), legal texts, life-writing, and fiction (like *Nightbitch*), which are cultural texts that simultaneously reify and subvert biopolitical power, I trace how body-subjects inevitably exceed the scripts designed to contain them, revealing the failure points of normative life scripts and the generative capacity of bodies to become in ways that cannot be anticipated or controlled.

It could float, of course,
but would rather

plumb rough matter.
Airy and shapeless thing,
it needs
the metaphor of the body,

lime and appetite,
the oceanic fluids;
it needs the body's world,
instinct

and imagination
and the dark hug of time,
sweetness
and tangibility,

to be understood,
to be more than pure light
that burns
where no one is —

— Mary Oliver, “The Spirit Likes to Dress Up”

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Introduction

This dissertation is organized around a particular tension, where biopolitical regimes routinely treat reproductive bodies as objects to be managed via temporal, legal, medical, and gendered scripts, yet those same bodies persistently act in ways that contravene such containment. From that tension, two guiding questions take shape: how do reproductive bodies inevitably exceed the normative scripts imposed upon them by medical, legal, and social institutions? And what might close textual analysis make visible about dynamics of excess and becoming? By tracking moments of excession and transgression across a range of contemporary texts, this project investigates both the techniques through which institutional power strives to discipline reproductive body-subjects and the ways bodies, as agential forces in their own perpetual becoming, open possibilities for other modes of being. I attend to these agential forces by reading a variety of genres—blogs, legal documents, life-writing, and fiction—produced in the United States within the past two decades.

The diversity of this project's archive showcases the breadth of the full textual field where body-subjects are disciplined and where they inevitably resist management. By selecting such a broad array of genres for analysis, I mean to establish that they are all equally critical sites where biopolitical conflicts are waged. The heterogeneity of the archive also opens the possibility to consider how different textual forms enable different kinds of sense-making about bodies. Many of the texts I analyze simultaneously reify and subvert norms, and they all register forms of bodily agency that are not always intentionally narrated. They have the capacity to substantiate how the mechanisms designed to discipline bodies may also generate the conditions for embodied resistance and remaking.

This introduction will begin by situating the project within its immediate political context by tracing the genealogical relationship between the religious right and the contemporary alt-right to show how the latter adapts and intensifies the former's longstanding preoccupation with reproductive governance; doing so clarifies the sociopolitical stakes of bodily control in the present-day United States. From that structural grounding, I pivot to lived experience, situating my own positionality by detailing how the politics of bodily control manifest in everyday life through an account of my upbringing in fundamentalist evangelical Christianity and subsequent decade-long pursuit of a hysterectomy. I thereby locate my critical investments in a specific body and history, demonstrating that structural forces are lived and contested at the level of the quotidian. Building on that interplay between discourse and materiality, I discuss the biopolitics of normative development, examining how linear progressive time and developmental scripts function as instruments of biopolitical control that differentially discipline bodies along axes of race, gender, and disability. With these historical, personal, and theoretical coordinates in place, I then engage scholarly conversations across feminist studies, queer and trans theory, disability studies, Black studies, and new materialisms to articulate both the possibilities and the critiques that inform my methodological approach. Finally, I offer chapter summaries that outline my textual archives and the core arguments of each subsequent chapter. I ultimately conclude that the normative frameworks deployed by medical, legal, and social institutions can never fully contain or determine reproductive body-subjects, which perpetually complicate normative impositions.

The Right to Control

“[...] culture and demographics are our destiny. We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.”

– Iowa Representative Steve King, 2017¹

“I want to take aim at the left, specifically the childless left, because I think the rejection of the American family is perhaps the most pernicious and most evil thing that the left has done in this country.”

– J.D. Vance, 2021¹

This project emerges from a very particular political milieu: the rise of the present-day alt-right movement, which has gained significant cultural and political traction across the contemporary United States. At the time of this writing, the alt-right has consolidated power across all three branches of the federal government, with movement-aligned figures occupying important positions in the second Trump administration. Prominent members of the alt-right were instrumental in both Trump presidential elections, aiding his political ascendancy by animating a conservative voting base with grievances about race and gender. This accumulation of political power has been mobilized with the express aim of consolidating bodily control: whose bodies are subject to state surveillance, whose bodies move freely, whose bodies are recognized as legitimate in their gender expression or reproductive autonomy. The alt-right movement, however, did not emerge fully formed; instead, its core ideological commitments derive from an earlier political formation.

The cultural influence of the present-day alt-right movement can be credited to its predecessor, the religious right.² In the 1970s through the 90s, the religious right rose to political

¹ King (2017); Mangan (2024).

² Kristin Kobes du Mez, Sarah Posner, Damon Berry, Tim Alberta, and Tobias Cremer have all examined the relationship between the religious right, the Moral Majority, and the alt-right, particularly the movement from faith-based moral values to white identity politics. Cremer, in *The Godless Crusade*, argues that “the new right is increasingly driven by a more secular but no less radical identitarian struggle for Western Civilisation: a godless crusade in which Christianity is turned into a secularised ‘Christianism’, an ethno-cultural identifier of the nation and a symbol of whiteness” (7); one of the ways a general decline in Christianity has influenced American politics, per Cremer, is “by fuelling a crisis of group identity and belonging, which like in

power and social influence in backlash to the civil rights and feminist movements of the preceding decades. To many conservative Christians, social justice movements represented a secularization and erosion of traditional American values (CUNY). Those values were framed as a return to an idealized past defined by white patriarchal authority and heterosexual nuclear families; they positioned whiteness, maleness, and Christian identity as the nation's moral and political anchors. Accordingly, a foundational aspect of the religious right movement's formation was its robust defense of racial segregation.³ Prominent conservative religious figures like Jerry Falwell, Paul Weyrich, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson were vexed by the federal government's efforts in the 70s and 80s to revoke the tax-exempt status of segregated private schools;⁴ these schools, many of which evangelical churches founded, were created to evade SCOTUS' *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling mandating the desegregation of American public schools (Blaklock 48). When the IRS eventually moved against segregated private schools,⁵ evangelical leaders banded together to fight for their institutional autonomy to continue segregating them.⁶ But Weyrich, Falwell, and other evangelical figureheads recognized that segregation was falling out of public favor, and sought a more palatable issue to solidify political power for the religious right, with which they could mobilize conservative voters.

Following *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, that issue became abortion (Griffith 225–8). Prior to and just after *Roe*, the evangelical church had mostly taken a neutral or even positive stance on

many European countries, has paved the way for a new identity cleavage and a subsequent surge in identitarian right-wing populism in American politics" (198). And, as Sarah Posner observes in *Unholy*, the religious right's formation on racial resentments and its initial commitment to segregation paved the way for the rise of the alt-right to political power: "although [Paul] Weyrich is best known for launching the modern religious right [...]," she writes, "he and his New Right allies laid the groundwork not just for Trump's union with the religious right but also their attraction to his crude politics of white nationalist grievance" (Posner xvii).

³ Newman (2001); Noll (2010); Mohler (2017); Dupont (2020); Hawkins (2021).

⁴ "IRS Tax Exemptions and Segregated Public Schools" (1982); Malone (1982); Balmer (2014).

⁵ Milich (1980); "IRS Tax Exemptions and Segregated Public Schools" (1982); *Bob Jones University v. United States* (1983); *Allen v. Wright* (1984).

⁶ Taylor (2016); Hawkins (2021); Blaklock (2022); Abdelfatah (2022).

abortion (Griffith 202; Biag and Turowetz 3); several Southern Baptist conventions passed resolutions in the 70s supporting abortion in extenuating circumstances,⁷ and some evangelical protestant leaders viewed abortion as a Catholic issue.⁸ But abortion was a topic that could easily be articulated using the rhetoric of protecting innocent life, and it effectively channeled the same anxieties about changing social structures that had fueled successful conservative opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. By the late 70s, it was clear to evangelical leaders that abortion would be an effective political motivator: the passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1976, as well as some key Senate races (Traugott and Vinovskis 109), demonstrated its electoral efficacy. Abortion thus became the primary mechanism for mobilizing the conservative political base, meaning the religious right now had a durable and adaptable framework for transforming fundamentalist Christian doctrine into political action.

The religious right's strategy was to deliberately conflate evangelical Christian values with political support for the Republican party: as Falwell articulated it, "We have a threefold primary responsibility. Number one: get people saved. Number two: Get them baptized. Number three: Get them registered to vote."⁹ In 1979, he co-founded the Moral Majority, an organization made up of conservative PACs whose goal was to register millions of Christian voters and turn them into a reliable Republican voting bloc. That political alliance was solidified with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980; Reagan courted the religious right by advocating for "family values," a rhetorical term used to signify a return to traditional patriarchal authority and opposition to the social changes achieved by the civil rights, feminist, and gay rights movements (CUNY). Conservative Christians were, with few exceptions, conditioned to see their religious

⁷ "Southern Baptist Convention Resolutions on Abortion" (1971, 1974, 1976, 1978, 1979); Abdelfatah (2022).

⁸ Balmer (2022).

⁹ Todd (2014); "How Evangelicals Gained Political Power" (2018).

identity as inseparable from Republican partisanship, and the religious right regarded anyone who deviated from conservative Christian ideology as a threat to the nation. Indeed, the conservative coalition established by the Moral Majority was in many ways defined by its staunch opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment (Banwart 135); the religious right also viewed the AIDS crisis of the 1980s as God’s punishment for homosexuality,¹⁰ a stance that rationalized the Reagan administration’s inaction and irreparably harmed queer communities.¹¹ The coalescence of fundamentalist Christian moralism and Republican partisanship had succeeded in creating a voting bloc that lasted far beyond the Reagan presidency and the single issue of abortion.

That coalition eventually gave way to a more radicalized political cohort. The present-day new right, alt-right, and the political movement surrounding Donald Trump represent a continuation of the religious right’s tactics; over the past decade, they have moved from niche online subcultures¹² to mainstream influence,¹³ accelerated by Trump’s 2016 campaign and presidency. The alt-right enthusiastically embraces racist, misogynist, and eugenic rhetoric, openly touting its goal of reshaping government institutions to permanently enshrine white Christian nationalism. It reiterates the same fundamental logics of racial hierarchy and patriarchal authority as the religious right, gleefully sans the veneer of politeness or civility.

The modern conservative movement has maintained its post-*Roe* focus on reproductive rights but expanded its targets. Decades-long efforts to overturn *Roe v. Wade* met success in

¹⁰ “AIDS Becomes a Political Issue” (1987); “Koop Criticizes Evangelical Leaders on AIDS Stands” (1989); Human Rights Campaign (2005); Martin (2007). As the Human Rights Campaign notes, Falwell has been quoted as saying, “AIDS is not just God’s punishment for homosexuals, it is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.”

¹¹ Francis (2012); Flowers (2025).

¹² e.g., 4chan, the “manosphere,” the *Daily Stormer*, etc.

¹³ e.g., The Proud Boys, *Breitbart*, Turning Point USA, etc.; some notable alt-right figures include Richard Spencer, Mike Cernovich, former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, current White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and Homeland Security Advisor Stephen Miller, Nick Fuentes, Jack Prosobiec, Tucker Carlson, Laura Loomer, Andrew Tate, etc.

2022, with SCOTUS' decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*: that ruling dismantled the federal constitutional right to abortion, which Justice Clarence Thomas explicitly framed as a means to challenge other established rights like same-sex marriage and access to contraception.¹⁴ And the post-*Roe* landscape reveals how the alt-right's ultimate objective is to acquire complete control over reproductive bodies. The case of Adriana Smith in Atlanta, Georgia exemplifies this: in February of 2025, Smith was declared brain-dead while eight weeks pregnant. Her mother, April Newkirk, was told that Georgia's six-week abortion ban made it illegal to withdraw life support (Prabhu), effectively forcing Smith's corpse to serve as an incubator. Nearly four months later, following an emergency cesarean section, her family was permitted to remove Smith's body from life support. Their experience makes evident how abortion bans are being leveraged to override established rights to bodily autonomy for women; as Newkirk stated in a June 2025 television interview, "I'm not saying that we would have chose [sic] to terminate the pregnancy, but what I'm saying is we should have had a choice" (Mador).¹⁵ Smith's case exposes a logic within political conservatism where a woman's primary purpose is gestational and her personhood is designated secondary to the biological functions her body can perform. In that framework, Smith's decomposing body still retains value as a vessel for childbearing, which supersedes her right to die with dignity. Her circumstance makes it clear that abortion bans are part and parcel of a broader political project to subjugate women as purely reproductive bodies.

Similarly, the recent experiences of Cherise Doyley and Brianna Bennett reveal the ways in which the state exercises its power to enforce and control childbirth. In 2023 and 2024, both

¹⁴ In his concurring opinion regarding *Dobbs*, Thomas wrote that "in future cases, we should reconsider all of this Court's substantive due process precedents, including *Griswold*, *Lawrence*, and *Obergefell*" (597 U.S. 3 [2022]).

¹⁵ Furthermore, Smith's family had to create a GoFundMe to help cover expenses because they are being held financially responsible for Smith's extended time on life support, her son Chance's nearly ten months in the NICU, and subsequent, likely lifelong, medical care for disabilities associated with his extremely premature birth (Newkirk).

Black women were subjected to court-ordered cesarean sections against their will in the state of Florida (Yurkanin). In multiple-hour virtual hearings held from their hospital beds, in Bennett’s case with “twenty plus white people” (Doyley, Bennett) entering the room while she was in active labor, judges prioritized the state’s interest in the fetus over each woman’s constitutional right to refuse medical treatment.¹⁶ This practice disproportionately affects Black women, continuing a long history of medical racism in gynecology and demonstrating how the anti-choice movement’s logic can be extended to compel women to undergo invasive major surgery. Doyley, herself a doula, opined in an April 2026 TikTok that:

This is more than a misunderstanding and miscommunication between a patient and provider [...] this is documented obstetric violence and medical racism right in front of you [...] The question is not about whether you believe in VBACs¹⁷ or, you know, your personal feelings. This is about whether it is okay to take a mentally competent grown adult woman to court to give them—force them—to have a surgery, a major surgery, against their will [...] All the people saying you need more context: no you don’t. [...] It’s no “in between,” it’s no “on the fence.” It’s none of that. And we need to understand the implications of something like this. Because it starts here, with court-ordered C-sections. Next, are they gonna be court-ordering people to not be able to get on birth control? Are they going to be court-ordering people to get pregnant? [...] I need y’all to understand the implications of this, and how far people are going to get what they want. (“What People Are Missing”)

Doyley’s assessment points to a broader pattern of state overreach into individual medical decisions which creates precedent for further expansion of state power over reproductive bodies. By refusing the demand for “more context,” she refuses the liberal tendency to exceptionalize reproductive violence against Black women.¹⁸ Her prediction that court-ordered cesarean

¹⁶ The right to refuse medical treatment was upheld in SCOTUS’ 1990 ruling in *Cruzan v. Director, Missouri Department of Health*.

¹⁷ VBAC is an acronymization of “vaginal birth after c-section.”

¹⁸ In *Fatal Denial*, Annie Menzel’s research text on differential infant mortality rates in the United States, Menzel argues that “inherent pathologies and dangerous practices—comprise the *fatal deflections* on which the biopolitics of Black infant mortality in the United States was founded” (17). In other words, the “inherent pathologies” of Black mothers and the presumption that Black mothers engage in “dangerous practices” related to gestation and childbirth work to divert attention from the structural nature of racial violence by instead focusing on imagined behavioral and biological failings within Black communities. And, Menzel adds, “I use the biopolitics of racial innocence to describe the institutionalized mechanisms, habits, and techniques of practiced blamelessness that have at once enabled, obscured, and perpetuated racial capitalism’s fatal impacts on Black maternity, gestation, birth, and infancy. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, ‘the forms and patterns that coalesce into premature death, reveal

sections will eventually lead to state-mandated birth control bans and forced pregnancy is a recognition of the legal logic of fetal personhood; once the state establishes the precedent that a fetus's interests supersede those of a pregnant individual, medical violence is rationalizable and therefore inevitable. Abortion restrictions and forced cesarean sections are two expressions of the same belief that pregnant women are not full rights-bearing subjects.

The weaponization of conscience-based refusal legislation extends this logic by locating pregnancy as a site where the state sanctions discrimination against women who deviate from conservative Christian family norms. In July of 2025, for example, a pregnant woman in Tennessee was denied prenatal care at a Jonesborough hospital because “[her healthcare provider] objected to the fact that she wasn’t married, nor did she plan to be” (Wells). Her physician’s ability to deny care was granted by Tennessee’s 2025 Medical Ethics Defense Act, which went into effect a few months prior to the incident and “prohibits a healthcare provider from being required to participate in, or pay for, a healthcare procedure, treatment, or service that violates the conscience of the healthcare provider” (TN SB0955). As Rachel Wells notes, the bill does not require the healthcare provider to refer a patient to a willing provider, and the woman who was denied care was made to travel out of state to receive it. By framing refusal clauses as First Amendment protections for individual providers, conscience-based refusal laws insulate them from professional accountability while imposing significant, and sometimes insurmountable, barriers to medical care for pregnant people by leveraging the condition’s time-sensitivity against them. A core objective of the conservative legal project is revealed via

human sacrifice as an organizing principle” (18). The deflection of blame coupled with the state’s posture of innocence reveals how the liberal state reconciles its professed commitment to life with routinized medical violence against Black women. Menzel’s argument corroborates Harriet Washington’s accounting of eugenic reproductive control in *Medical Apartheid*, where Washington establishes that “eugenics was appropriated to label black women as sexually indiscriminate and as bad mothers who were constrained by biology to give birth to defective children [...] The sexual irrepressibility and the bad mothering were biologically located in the hereditary apparatus, [eugenicists] contended. Thus eugenics undergirded medicosocial movements that placed the sexual behavior and reproduction of blacks under strict scrutiny” (123).

conscience-based refusals: the state can enforce a particular moral and familial order on women's bodies by granting individual actors the power to discipline those who deviate from its prescribed scripts.

The logic of escalating state control over reproductive bodies travels readily to other arenas; the same legal machinery is used to enforce a singular, biologically deterministic vision of personhood, as evinced via the alt-right movement's deliberate nationwide push for anti-trans legislation.¹⁹ Like anti-choice positions, anti-trans positions are understood by conservative politicians to be a useful rhetorical tool for galvanizing voters.²⁰ Accordingly, there has been a dramatic acceleration in anti-trans legislation under the second Trump administration, including Executive Orders to erase federal recognition of trans identity (Executive Order 14168), ban gender-affirming care (Executive Order 14187), and ban trans people from military service (Executive Order 14183). As a result of these EOs, the State Department is blocking new passports for trans and nonbinary Americans ("Sex Marker in Passports"), the Department of Education is censoring K-12 school curriculums and barring teachers from referring to students by their preferred names and pronouns under the threat of withholding federal funds (Executive Order 14190), and the Department of Health and Human Services is reviewing already-existing laws to determine whether they can be used to deny access to gender-affirming care (Executive Order 14187). The throughline between assaults on abortion access, forced cesarean sections performed on Black women, denial of prenatal care to unmarried women, and the systematic

¹⁹ In an interview with GenderSciLab, Alexandra Minna Stern makes an interesting observation about the alt-right's fixation on transness, specifically, as opposed to cis gayness: "From the perspective of some on the alt-right, gay men are XY people attracted to other XY people, and as such, do not trouble sex-gender dichotomies, but trans folks disrupt the gender binary and destabilize the far right's much coveted essentialist architecture. This is one of the reasons why I think transphobia is a hallmark of the far right today and why supporting trans rights is critical to countering its toxic effects" (Richardson).

²⁰ Quinn and Huey-Burns (2021); "GOP Candidates Elevate Anti-Transgender Messaging" (2024); Goldmacher (2024).

erasure of trans identity is that the state claims the authority to determine which bodies are legitimate, who is granted full medical and legal autonomy, and whose lives have value.

That logic is central to the alt-right's vision of a white ethnostate. Alt-right ideology, as Alexandra Minna Stern observes, is "anchored to a rigid dogma of innate biological differences and natural hierarchies" (75), which it uses to rationalize both the subordination of women and the erasure of trans identity. Central to that ideology is the belief that white heterosexual reproduction must be protected against perceived threats. This belief typically takes the form of the Great Replacement, a far-right conspiracy theory that an intentional replacement of white populations with non-white migrants is occurring via demographic manipulation and declining white birth rates (Labanieh). Great Replacement ideology has gained momentum among white nationalist movements, entering mainstream right-wing media discourse;²¹ it frames white women's declining birth rates as a crisis requiring state intervention to compel childbirth. This logic extends to fetal personhood doctrine, which legal historian Mary Ziegler traces from its origins as a reaction to the civil rights and feminist movements to its current form as a legal strategy for granting constitutional personhood to fertilized eggs, effectively banning abortion at every stage and potentially criminalizing birth control and IVF (5). Relatedly, as Stern contends in one interview, "the alt right cannot be fully understood without attention to its deep-seated misogyny and sexism [...] White male victimhood is core to the far right, and its discourses of extinction revolve as much around fears of male erasure as they do around racial demographic anxieties" ("Q and A on Gender, Science, and the Alt-Right"). What emerges from this ideology is a biopolitical project in which controlling who reproduces, and under what conditions, is understood as essential to securing a white Christian nationalist futurity.

²¹ Whisker and Coe (2023); DiMaggio et al. (2024); Feola (2024); Dennison and Alexander (2025); Kendi (2026).

That project depends on the dehumanization of those whose bodies are to be controlled, which some have argued works by stripping certain bodies of the capacity for self-definition and reducing them to their biological functions.²² For instance, as Dorothy Roberts documents in *Killing the Black Body*, the regulation of Black women's reproduction is a cornerstone of American governance, from enslavement to forced sterilization to the contemporary carceral state (8). Her analysis demonstrates how Black women's bodies have historically been subjected to state control over their reproductive functions while their consent and personhood are denied (Roberts 8). Other scholars have deepened this analysis: Harriet Washington chronicles how Black bodies have been used for medical experimentation (15), contending that a history of medical abuse is foundational to American medicine and identifying a pattern wherein Black women's reproductive bodies are routinely subjected to nonconsensual interventions in the name of scientific and/or state interests (123). And Sami Schalk's work in *Black Disability Politics* addresses how disabled Black women face compounded vulnerability to state intervention (15, 65, 103). In other words, women's bodies, particularly those marked by race and/or disability, are treated as always available for state-sanctioned medical and reproductive control because their personhood has already been diminished.

Women are forced into conditions of precarity by legal and medical systems that value their reproductive function more than their personhood. Making the potential life inside equal to that of the living woman outside is the signature move of fetal personhood ideology, as Ziegler notes (7); women are therefore reduced to their reproductive capacity. For Black women, this reduction is compounded by a centuries-long legacy of enslavement, gynecological abuse, and the persistent assumption that their pain is less real; for disabled women, the state feels entitled

²² Spillers (1987); Weheliye (2014); DePoy (2022).

to override their medical autonomy on the grounds that their cognitive or physical impairments already mark them as less autonomous than someone who is abled. To be a woman under the current political regime is for one's body to perpetually be subject to state intervention. As the cases of Smith, Doyley, and Bennett make clear, the state's power to define and control women's bodies is deeply entrenched in the law via the religious right's decades-long project to codify and enforce white nationalism and gender essentialism.

In *Who's Afraid of Gender*, Judith Butler argues that this political regime consolidates its power by collapsing a range of existential anxieties into a single, malleable enemy:

In the United States [...] [gender] has become a phantasm with destructive powers, one way of collecting and escalating multitudes of modern panics [...] When the word "gender" absorbs an array of fears and becomes a catchall phantasm for the contemporary Right, the various conditions that actually give rise to those fears lose their names. "Gender" both collects and incites those fears, keeping us from thinking more clearly about what there is to fear, and how the currently imperiled sense of the world came about in the first place. (5–6)

Butler's concept of gender as a "phantasm" illuminates how the specific legal and medical violences analyzed in this dissertation project are rationalized through a shared cultural logic. The alt-right and its religious right predecessor have conjured an amorphous and malleable threat to which they assign the term "gender," that absorbs public anxieties about changing racial hierarchies, economic precarity, and evolving family structures. By collecting and escalating "multitudes of modern panics," this phantasm redirects social fear away from actual mechanisms of state control and onto the bodies of those deemed illegitimate under the dominant system of power. The state's authority to determine degrees of reproductive autonomy is a unified project to defend a white Christian nationalist order against the destructive "gender ideology" it has invented as a scapegoat. "Gender," in Butler's formulation, functions to obscure the real conditions of bodily precarity produced by dominant systems of cultural and legal power.

Accordingly, this dissertation makes clear its academic and real-world stakes by thinking across the fields of feminist studies, queer and trans theory, disability studies, Black studies, and the medical humanities, where I extend longstanding critiques of medical science's supposed objectivity by demonstrating how ostensibly-neutral normative developmental scripts are actually instruments of social control that intentionally target non-normative bodies. Through close-readings of blogs, legal texts, life-writing, and fiction, I examine how texts themselves are sites of biopolitical struggle where competing ideologies determine whose humanity is recognized. The sociopolitical significance of this scholarly work is exigent. Since the 2022 *Dobbs* decision overturned federal abortion protections, state legislatures have accelerated efforts to regulate and control reproductive bodies: twenty-six states have banned or restricted abortion,²³ with the additional legal ramifications of criminalizing certain pregnancy outcomes like stillbirth and miscarriage,²⁴ and threatening access to contraception and IVF.²⁵ At the same time, over twenty states have passed laws banning gender-affirming care for trans minors,²⁶ with *U.S. v. Skrametti* representing SCOTUS' first major test of whether such bans constitute sex discrimination under the Fourteenth Amendment. My project directly engages these legislative realities by demonstrating that the same logics are at the foundation of denials of bodily and reproductive autonomy to disabled people, trans youths, and mothers alike. In showing how life-writing, law, and literature can simultaneously reify and exceed normative scripts, this project offers both a scholarly intervention and a resource for those who might imagine and work toward reproductive futures organized by principles of body-subject agency.

²³ Baden (2025); Center for Reproductive Rights (2026).

²⁴ Kimport (2022); Soohoo et al. (2023); Dellinger and Pell (2024).

²⁵ Patel (2022); Adashi et al. (2023); Ulker et al. (2023); Albrecht (2024); "Birth Control Under Threat" (2025); Tuerkheimer (2025).

²⁶ "Trans Legislation Tracker" (2025); "Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights" (2026).

Finally, I think it is important to attend to the fact that this dissertation project exists in direct tension with the current Trump administration's anxieties about scholarly critiques of state power. National Security Presidential Memorandum-7, "Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence," explicitly names educational institutions as sites for fomenting domestic terror campaigns, and lists "anti-Christianity," "extremism on migration, race, and gender," and "hostility toward those who hold traditional views on family, religion, or morality," among what it calls "common recurrent motivations and indicia uniting [a] pattern of violent and terroristic activities under the umbrella of self-described 'anti-fascism'" (NSPM-7). NSPM-7 authorizes the use of Joint Terrorism Task Forces to investigate individuals and organizations whose speech is deemed by the administration to align with these listed ideologies, even absent any evidence of violent conduct. In other words, NSPM-7's deliberately vague language creates a mechanism by which academics can be subjected to federal surveillance without having committed any crime. In practice, this means that many scholarly projects in the humanities, including this one, could be treated as potential grounds for federal inquiry. But it also makes clear why these projects must continue to exist. The act of academic inquiry into, and critique of, the relationship between state power and reproductive control is now preemptively framed by the state as a threat to public order, meaning that the intellectual work of naming and analyzing its mechanisms is a refusal to cede the terms of public discourse.

And to be sure, stymieing academic and political speech is central to the alt-right's political project. Perhaps the clearest recent articulation of its efforts: in early 2025, *The New York Times* reviewed a collection of "official and unofficial" documents from the current Trump administration and compiled a list of nearly 200 words flagged for review and removal from school curricula, public-facing government websites, and federal research grant applications.

Among these words are “affirming care,” “anti-racism,” “Black,” “disabilities,” “disability,” “female,” “females,” “feminism,” “gender,” “health disparity,” “institutional,” “LGBT,” “minorities,” “people + uterus,” “pregnant people,” “racism,” “sexuality,” “social justice,” “trans,” “transgender,” “women,” and many more (Yourish et al.). This surveillance and discipline of language actualizes an epistemology in which the Trump administration attempts to suppress the very concepts needed to name and contest structural inequality. Such word bans are a preemptive attempt to prevent the production of knowledge that could ground future legal challenges to, and political organizing against, Trump administration policies. Thus, part of the political significance of my project is its insistence on the legibility of bodies and experiences that the state has both historically sought and currently seeks to elide.

This macro-level analysis of how the religious right has translated their ideological commitments into state policy requires a corresponding account of how such ideology is produced, internalized, and lived at the level of the individual subject. In many ways, the legal architecture of reproductive control examined above draws its cultural legitimacy and affective power from theological frameworks. In what follows, I turn to the doctrine of gender complementarianism, a foundational tenet of fundamentalist evangelical Christianity that locates women’s spiritual value and social purpose in their reproductive capacity. Drawing on the lived experiences of my upbringing, I show how the political logics described above are inculcated from childhood through intentionally designed pedagogical frameworks, purity culture rhetoric, and the everyday management of girls’ and women’s bodies and desires. These theological formations constitute the cultural infrastructure that makes legislative and medical violence against reproductive bodies seem like a moral imperative to significant portions of the American populace. By moving from the register of the population to that of the individual, I call attention

to the mutually reinforcing relationship between right-wing political movements and the theological frameworks that animate them, positioning my own embodied experience as a site where that relationship has materialized.

Gender Complementarianism and the Reproductive Subject

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them [...] And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it [...]’

– Genesis 1: 27–8, English Standard Version

“Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.”

– Psalm 127: 3–5, English Standard Version

I spent much of my own upbringing subject to the acute bodily and ideological control characteristic of right-wing religious extremism. From birth to young adulthood, I attended a non-denominational fundamentalist evangelical church in Bakersfield, California, a city well-known as a red pocket in an otherwise blue state. The militant doctrine of fundamentalist evangelical Christianity governed nearly every aspect of my daily life. I use that term — “militant” — both figuratively and literally. There was strict control over many aspects of our day-to-day lives, such as participation in Anne and Gary Ezzo’s *Growing Kids God’s Way* program which inculcated unquestioning obedience and advocated for corporal punishment.²⁷ The clothing I was allowed to wear, and the media I was allowed to consume, were attentively managed. But also, the church in which I was raised intentionally groomed its congregants for religious and political violence. A few examples: when I was around five years old, I performed

²⁷ In our case, corporal punishment meant spanking with a textured rubber strip that was nicknamed the “wisdom whacker” or “rod of reproof,” an implement distributed to parents at our church who participated in the *Growing Kids God’s Way* program. It was deliberately designed to cause pain without leaving lasting marks on the skin.

in a skit in front of our congregation in which my father was arrested for being a Christian; in elementary school kids' choir, we learned and performed a song called "I'm in the Lord's Army"; in middle school, our youth group ran a simulation where we had to flee from "communists" through local neighborhoods at night and, if caught, we were subjected to mock interrogations about our faith; and martyrdom was a semifrequent topic of conversation in Sunday School, especially following both the publication of *Jesus Freaks* and the later-disproven narrative in *She Said Yes* about Columbine shooting victim Cassie Bernall. My childhood experiences in the church were a deliberate inculcation of a core political message; by teaching us that we were participants in spiritual warfare as soldiers in the "Lord's Army," that our families could be taken away from us and imprisoned because of their faith beliefs, and that martyrdom was an imminent possibility, my church weaponized the broader strategy of the religious right during the 90s and 00s, which was to systematically stoke a narrative of persecuted Christian identity in order to mobilize voters. Groups like the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family argued that American Christians were being oppressed by secular humanists, social justice activists, and even the federal government; my childhood experiences were the quotidian enactment of that broader false persecution narrative.²⁸ My own interest in the real-world impacts of the religious right's steady accumulation of political power in the United States stems from my experiences growing up subject to fundamentalist Christian teachings.

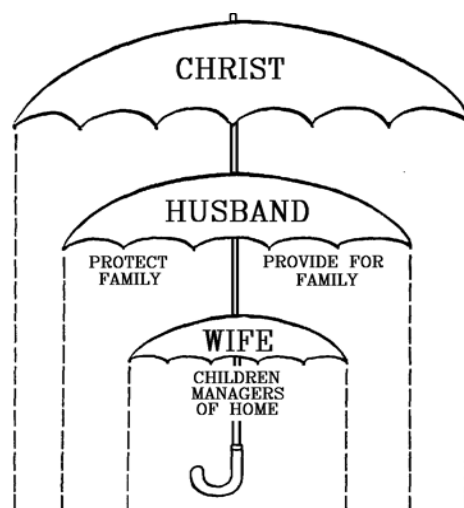
Perhaps the most insidious and lasting impact of my upbringing was the everyday application of gender complementarianism, the theological construction that positions men and

²⁸ That narrative reached its logical endpoints at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville (2017) where participants displayed Deus Vult insignias, Jerusalem crosses, and other Christian iconography commonly appropriated by white nationalists and neo-Nazis, and the January 6th Capitol attack (2021), where many insurrectionists displayed Christian flags and other Christian symbols, prayed in Jesus' name before storming the Capitol, and explicitly framed their actions as the defense of a besieged Christian nation. Those militant political views are inextricably linked to Christian ideologies of reproduction: take, for example, the Quiverfull movement, which advocates for large families that adhere to biblical patriarchy and uses Psalm 127: 3-5 to posit children as weapons of spiritual warfare against secularism.

women as equal in value but having distinct and separate essential functions. This distinction creates a hierarchy of gender that is attributed to divine ordination; in other words, gender essentialism is understood to be God's infallible will and as such merits strict obedience. Within complementarian logic, male headship and female submission to that headship governs everything from the broader principles of church leadership to the quotidian functions of the home and marital bed. After all, as the apostle Paul writes:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became the transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing [...] (1 Timothy 2:12–15, English Standard Version)

For fundamentalist Christians, this passage serves as a proof text rationalizing women's subjugation to men. The underlying logic of its interpretation is that women are the gateway for sin and therefore must be silenced and controlled, and a woman's path to salvation lies in the subsumption of self to childbirth and the maternal role. In this context, a woman's spiritual value is inextricably linked to her reproductive function. Bill Gothard's "umbrella of authority" diagram is a famous visual representation of this ideology:



It depicts a series of descending umbrellas, with God at the top in authority of the husband, who is in turn in authority over the wife, whose responsibility it is to bear children and manage the household. Any individual who leaves God's covering is exposed to worldly influence. The wife is not permitted to stand directly under God's authority; she requires a male mediator for protection and provision. The implicit message of this graphic, for us girls, was that female autonomy is fundamentally incompatible with a Godly life. Gender complementarianism reduces a woman's value to her biological vocation. Her worth, in other words, is defined by her utility to her husband and her capacity for childbearing; women's bodies are vessels to be controlled and managed by male authority in order that they "be fruitful and multiply."

While I was a minor in the church, I underwent psychological abuse and sexual grooming as a matter of course because of such teachings. As elementary and middle school girls, for instance, we were made to wear large, baggy tee shirts over our one-piece swimsuits at pool or beach events, lest we tempt our adult male chaperones to "stumble" with lust. More than once, girls and boys were separated for purity seminars, where the girls were subjected to various dehumanizing analogies about the importance of sexual purity: if you had sex before marriage, you were "chewed gum," a "used car," or "tape that has been stuck to a surface too many times"—that is to say, you are used, dirty, lacking in value, and therefore "unable to love your future husband one hundred percent." But, once married, you were obligated to be constantly and cheerfully sexually available to your headship so that you could produce children.

These kinds of repressive ideologies about sex and sexuality facilitated many instances of overt sexual grooming and abuse in my church. The church's rhetoric about protecting children did not protect anyone but abusers; it manufactured a culture of shame and victim blaming that rendered girls especially vulnerable to the predation it claimed to abhor, and ensured that when

abuse inevitably occurred the victims would be too intimidated to seek help.²⁹ We existed in a culture of obligatory silence, where to speak up about inappropriate sexual conduct meant to implicate ourselves as sinfully responsible for tempting men with our bodies. Men, as we girls learned in the gender-segregated purity seminars, are “visual creatures,” who are sorely tempted beyond their capacities to resist us by sartorial choices like tank tops with straps less than three inches wide. Point being, I was taught a few principles that defined my concept of self until well into adulthood: my body was, by nature of its biological sex, dirty and sinful, and the culmination of my purpose as a woman was to submit to my future husband in all things and eventually to produce children for him.

But my body complicated that singular purpose: after more than a decade of chronic pain due to severe endometriosis, I underwent a subtotal hysterectomy at the age of 27 that, in the eyes of the church that raised me, removed my primary source of spiritual value. And they were not alone in their assessment of my worth; the same gender ideology I absorbed at Calvary Bible Church has, at the behest of the Moral Majority and the alt-right movement, permeated the legal and medical institutions that govern bodily autonomy in the United States. The architects of these major right-wing movements understood that cultural power requires governmental control and legal codification. Their project has therefore been to translate fundamentalist religious doctrine into enforceable state policy. As a result of their successes, the evangelical Christian conviction that a woman’s body exists primarily as a vessel for reproduction suffuses legislation and medical paperwork.

²⁹ On at least two separate occasions that I can recall, for example, adult men in authority positions in my church were romantically involved with minor girls without repercussions. At least one of my close friends in high school received sexually explicit text messages and photographs from a youth pastor, for which there were no consequences, because there were no trusted adults to tell.

The prevailing cultural influence of biblical patriarchy became incredibly clear to me through the decade-long process of seeking a hysterectomy. On several occasions, it was suggested by medical professionals that I attempt to become pregnant to temporarily relieve pain. One doctor who denied me care told me that I had failed to consider that my future husband would likely want children; the imagined desires of a hypothetical man were of more consequence to my capacity for medical decision making than my real, debilitating pain. This particular encounter exemplifies the entanglement of fundamentalist Christianity and conservative political ideology: the prescribed gender role of submissive motherhood and the mandate to bear children, codified in 1 Timothy as salvific, was secularized by the political right as a demographic imperative, ultimately resulting in my denial of needed medical care. In the rhetoric of alt-right white nationalist natalism, a white woman's womb is a national resource to be exploited. My doctor's refusal of care was thus, whether consciously or not, a micro-enactment of a broader political project concerned with the continuity of whiteness. In the effort to preserve the possibility of more white children, my ongoing pain was acceptable collateral damage.

It was only after an incidental discovery that I had two hypercoagulability disorders that medical professionals were finally willing to entertain the idea of a hysterectomy, since those conditions meant that pregnancy would have a high statistical likelihood of miscarriage and would significantly increase my already-high risk for developing blood clots. Even so, I had to sign paperwork that indicated that I understood the procedure would permanently sterilize me. When I scheduled my surgery appointment, my gynecologist (who performed the procedure) joked about the fact that he would be leaving my ovaries: "What kind of Catholic would I be if I took them?" As well, I was required to visit a psychologist and have him write a letter of

recommendation ensuring that I was of sound mind for the elective procedure, since I was under thirty and did not have any children. This was posed to me by my doctor as a risk-mitigation protocol designed to prevent any potential future litigation against his practice if I later changed my mind about wanting biological children. On the morning of my surgery, a nurse expressed concern about the letter because she thought my having seen a psychologist meant that I was not mentally sound enough to have chosen to undergo the procedure. When I explained the requirement and my medical conditions, she responded: “Oh. Well, you’ll adopt someday.”

Her reflexive pivot toward adoption denotes the ideological force of what Lee Edelman terms “reproductive futurism,” the unquestioned cultural logic that the value of a life and the coherence of the social order depend upon their orientation toward the figure of the Child. Edelman argues in *No Future* that “the Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (3), meaning nearly any political action can be rationalized by invoking the protection of children or some ideal future for them. The figure of the Child naturalizes the drive toward biological reproduction and the cultural conscription of women into the role of mother. Even without the biological capacity to gestate, I was not permitted to exit the cultural framework of motherhood. The nurse could not imagine a life lived outside that narrative arc; her assumption that I would eventually adopt was an unconscious means to reinsert me into it. That is to say, the social imperative to orient oneself toward the Child is so totalizing that it absorbs even bodies that have been medically divested of reproductive function. Adoption became the mechanism through which my life could still be made meaningful according to reproductive futurist logic, and it is a refrain that I continue to hear regularly when the subject of my hysterectomy comes up in conversation.

The logic that children must be both continually produced and constantly protected is wielded by the religious right and the alt-right to rationalize a broad array of legislative violence against those who are deemed threats to the Child's imagined future. Indeed, the figure of the Child, as Edelman observes, is the rhetorical shield behind which reactionary politics are enabled to advance. It is the justification for the Parental Rights in Education Act (House Bill 1557), which prohibits classroom instruction on gender identity or sexual orientation by framing it as sexual grooming. It is the rationale for anti-trans legislation across the country, from restrictions and bans on gender-affirming care for minors to forbidding trans participation in sports (Executive Order 14201), which frames transgender youth as ontological threats to cisgender childhood. It fuels the book-banning campaigns that target narratives of race and sexuality by framing any acknowledgement of systemic injustice as indoctrination (United States, Cong., House, H.R.7661). And it is used to rationalize the militarization of the southern U.S. border and the separation of migrant families as well as the Trump administration's current efforts to repeal birthright citizenship, where the white Child of the nation must be defended from the imagined incursion of the racialized migrant. In each instance, Edelman's "fantasmatic beneficiary" is deployed to discipline and exclude minoritized individuals, whose very existence is viewed as fundamentally incompatible with the future idealized by white Christian nationalism. The Child is neither universal nor neutral: its protections are apportioned hierarchically, which is to say that reproductive futurism operates as a differentiated technology of population management.

Reproductive futurism is not applied uniformly across all bodies. It is instead calibrated according to who is perceived as producing the right kind of future for the nation. Accordingly, I must contend with the notion that my specific positionality as a young, white, and otherwise healthy woman was one reason why it took me so long to be granted my hysterectomy. As I have

already established, in the American political economy of reproduction, white women's fertility has been and remains a site of social investment among conservatives who frame declining white birth rates as a national crisis. Because I inhabit the demographic category most valued for the reproduction of the nation's ideal racial and cultural identity, the gatekeeping around my sterilization was more rigorous; the system is designed to protect the future I was presumably capable of reproducing. Had I been a woman of color, or a woman already marked by disability in more legible ways, the medical establishment's concerns about my fertility might have instead been expressed as punitive neglect or overt sterilization abuse.³⁰ The overlapping histories of eugenics and reproductive coercion in the United States mean the initial denials of my hysterectomy and the forced sterilization of marginalized women are two facets of the same ideological project. My body was a resource to be conserved for the white natalist project, while the bodies of Black, Indigenous, and more visibly disabled women have historically been, and presently continue to be, regarded as deviant and treated as threats to the social order.

My quotidian experiences reveal the ways in which fundamentalist evangelical Christian dogma, the material conditions of reproduction in the United States, and cultural conceptions about race, ability, and gender, are inextricably intertwined. My clinical encounters emerged from the intra-action of the doctors' religious views, the legal architecture of malpractice liability, the overgrowth of my endometrial tissue, the statistical abstraction of white birth rates, my bodily experiences of pain, technology for diagnosing blood disorders, and the imagined future of the Child, among countless other forces. Denials of care, and later approval for my hysterectomy, were events produced by the convergence of these discursive and material forces.

³⁰ In *Fit to be Tied*, Rebecca Kluchin writes: "Historically, women's access to contraception has been determined by their race, ethnicity, and class status. The contradictory trends of sterilization in the baby boom and post-baby boom years follow this pattern and illuminate the extent to which neo-eugenic notions of reproductive fitness influenced family planning policy and medical practice in the second half of the twentieth century. White women of different socioeconomic classes struggled to obtain contraceptive sterilization while poor women, particularly women of color, struggled to resist coercive sterilization" (8).

Their convergence positioned my body as a site of biopolitical contestation. While I have established how gender complementarianism constructs womanhood as a biological vocation oriented toward reproduction, it is important to understand that the punitive management of women's bodies does not operate in isolation from broader cultural frameworks that determine what constitutes a properly developing, future-oriented life. The theological mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" and the medicolegal authority that enforces that mandate both rely on and reify a particular temporal logic: that a life ought to unfold along a linear progressive trajectory toward a future consisting of marriage, biological reproduction, and childrearing. This developmental temporality operates both as a religious prescription and an ostensibly natural and empirically verifiable trajectory against which any deviation is pathologized. It is to the biopolitics of normative development that my analysis now turns, examining how linear progressive time emerged as a racialized technology for producing the "normal" body and disciplining those who fail to conform to its chronobiological standards.

The Biopolitics of Normative Development

The conceptual apparatus of linear progressive time operates as a regulatory tool through which both individual bodies and larger populations are governed. When a body deviates from normative developmental scripts in any way, it is pathologized and marked as a site for intervention. Normative developmental scripts, which are performative apparatuses that actively produce the developmental trajectories they claim to measure,³¹ operate as a means for disciplining capricious matter into manageability. To understand how ideologies of normative development acquired their disciplinary force, it is necessary to trace the historical entanglement

³¹ In other words, the normal body and the non-normative body are two differential materializations created by the same normative machinery.

of linear-progressive time with the emergence of medical and psychological institutions as arbiters of bodily normalcy. This entanglement actively produces the categories of normal and pathological as temporal positions along a compulsory trajectory. By aligning health with a linear progressive and predictable life course, medical discourse has positioned the unpredictable materiality of living bodies as a site of risk that requires constant surveillance.

The term “normative developmental schedule” refers to a framework establishing the typical sequence and timing of human developmental milestones, based on sociocultural ideals of what should be considered standard. “Normative development” was coined in 1925 by psychologist, pediatrician, and eugenicist Arnold Gesell; through longitudinal studies of child development, he created the Gesell Developmental Schedules, a methodology revised in the 40s and 60s and most recently updated as the Gesell Developmental Observation-Revised (GDO-R) in 2011. Gesell’s approach, which gained prominence throughout the 20th century, involved establishing average milestones to create a standardized timeline for typical human development across the lifespan. His framework is now deeply embedded in clinical medical practice which provides the standard benchmarks for child and adolescent development,³² meaning the GDO-R participates in the production of the “normal” child as a specific kind of material-semiotic entity. The entanglement of this ostensibly empirical timeline with its eugenicist origins calls for an examination of how normative developmental schedules emerged as a specific technology for producing and regulating racialized gender.

A closer look at Gesell’s work reveals how the developmental schedule functioned as a racializing technology from its inception. His meticulous photographic studies of infants in the Yale Clinic of Child Development, all of whom were white, were active constructions of a

³² Marchese (1995); Weizmann (2010); Laufenberg (2013); “GDO-R” (2014); “Gesell Theory” (2025).

universalized template against which all other bodies would be measured.³³ The very act of constituting the “average” child through a culturally and racially homogenous sample marked deviations from that norm as quantitative deficiencies instead of qualitative differences. Gesell’s eugenicist investments thus suffused the advancement of pediatric medicine; the white child became the unmarked standard of typicality. Developmental trajectories that diverged from Gesell’s template were coded as threats to the social body that required correction or containment: in *The Village of a Thousand Souls*, Gesell himself called for “a course of supervision and segregation which will prevent the horrible renewal of this defective protoplasm that is contaminating the stream of village life” (Harris 311). That process of pathologization demonstrates how the developmental schedule actively produces the very categories of racialized (ab)normality it purports only to record.

Normative developmental scripts are biopolitical instruments that extend the logic of reproductive futurism into the everyday governance of bodies. By prescribing a correct timing and sequence of developmental milestones, they perform a gatekeeping function that distinguishes bodies that embody a viable future from those whose deviant movements mark them as threats meriting correction, mitigation, or elimination. Within this framework, the Child operates as what Karen Barad calls a “causal structure” (140): an iterative, material-semiotic phenomenon that reconfigures intelligibility itself.³⁴ To deviate from the script is to become unintelligible as a future-oriented being, and thus to fall outside the politically protected category of those for whom futures are imagined.

³³ Curti et al. (1935), in their discussion of the application of the Gesell Developmental Schedules applied to infants and toddlers in Jamaica, explicitly compare the performance of “negro children” to “the New Haven children,” but they also contend that the Jamaican children “would make a better comparative showing if given tests devised to be fair to both groups” (155).

³⁴ The Child is neither the cause of policy nor the effect of biology; it is the narrative grid that we use to organize policy and biology. That configuration is iterative because the definition of the Child, and the means by which the Child is protected, change constantly based on political need.

This logic operates differentially depending on racialization. Reproductive governance is a material-semiotic apparatus that calibrates biological futures differently for different bodies. The normative developmental script, in other words, is a racialized technology: it produces the white,³⁵ able-bodied child as the template of proper futurity while marking other developmental trajectories as deviant. As Dorothy Roberts puts it, “the social order established by powerful white men was founded on two inseparable ingredients: the dehumanization of Africans on the basis of race, and the control of women's sexuality and reproduction” (23). Developmental norms are one site where that entanglement materializes.

The regulatory force of these schedules derives from linear progressive time. The formation of linear progressive time in the West was a deliberate cultural and theological deployment and an effective tool for social regulation. Originating in Christian beliefs that framed time as a linear journey from creation to the end times (Eliade 144–5), the idea of linear progressive time was further reinforced by Enlightenment-era science, which emphasized progress and empirical measurement, especially in service of tracking demographic patterns and regulating populations (Foucault 88). The Industrial Revolution cemented this perspective by necessitating precise timekeeping; the move from cyclical, seasonal time to linear progressive time facilitated the coordination and regulation of social and economic activities (Thompson 34). This temporal formation constituted a material reorganization of bodies, labor, and environments. Factories and schools, for example, synchronized collective movement, training bodies to internalize progress as both a physiological and social expectation. This material history establishes the foundational link between temporal standardization and the governance of bodies that medicine would later refine into developmental schedules.

³⁵ Muñoz (2007), Keeling (2007), Evans (2014), and Sieranski (2018) all discuss how the future toward which reproductive futurism gestures, as represented by the figure of the Child, is implicitly white.

The entanglement of linear temporality with political and theological authority has been a central concern for theorists examining the Western construction of time. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Giorgio Agamben traces how the Christian notion of salvation, because of its inherent location in a linear progressive future, enabled political figures to style themselves as agents of God's will, thereby legitimizing their authority through association with a divinely preordained temporal trajectory.³⁶ He identifies a subsequent ideological transformation where this rationalization gives way to a secular framework: political and social organization come to be understood as grounded in nature and human reason (Agamben 1). Anthropologist Johannes Fabian advances a parallel argument in *Time and the Other*, contending that Christianity was central to the Western formation of linear, progressive temporality,³⁷ which was later secularized such that time came to appear as the natural order of the world rather than a supernatural edict (11-12). Fabian insists that this secularized temporality, despite its ostensible objectivity, is actually as much shaped by political and cultural factors as its theological antecedent (17). Relatedly, he argues that Western constructions of time are linear, progressive, and hierarchical: he writes, "Nowhere is [anthropology's claim to power] more clearly visible...than in the uses of Time anthropology makes when it strives to constitute its own object—the savage, the primitive, the Other. It is by diagnosing anthropology's temporal discourse that one rediscovers the obvious, namely that there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, a political act" (Fabian 1). The formation of linear progressive time, in other words, reveals how medicine and science are culturally produced rhetorics rather than empirical realities, and it is this temporal schema that enables the discursive production of the Other.

³⁶ Agamben writes, "according to both the jurist [Erich Peterson] and the theologian [Carl Schmitt], the present history of humanity is therefore an interim founded on the delay of the Kingdom" (7).

³⁷ "Both the external, spatial boundaries of history and its inner continuity," Fabian contends, "are of religion. Where mere sequence might cause confusion, the distinction of times in the light of divine providence creates order" (4).

While Fabian locates this temporal power in the discipline of anthropology, his critique resonates more broadly. Eviatar Zerubavel's framework of sociotemporality extends this analysis by foregrounding the normative dimensions of temporal ordering. In *Hidden Rhythms*, Zerubavel argues that linear progressive chronology functions as "a normative prescription and not a mere empirical coincidence" (Zerubavel 3), meaning the presentation of time as a strictly forward-moving continuum from past to future is a deliberate formation that constructs and prescribes particular norms and expectations about how time should be understood and experienced. These expectations coalesce into what Zerubavel calls a "temporal map" (14), an internalized schema against which deviations produce affective discomfort³⁸ and, frequently, regulatory interventions designed to discipline temporal anomalies. This logic of temporal normativity extends directly onto individual bodies when medical discourse constructs normative developmental trajectories that position certain bodies as delayed, precocious, etc.

Medicoscientific institutions in the West derive much of their authority from these cultural constructions of time, translating theological and ideological commitments into the ostensibly neutral language of biological fact. The adoption of linear progressive time played a constitutive role in the formation of medical conceptions of the normative body, in that it furnished practitioners with a chronological timeline onto which human development could be plotted, measured, and managed.³⁹ Through the formation of bodily norms, medical practitioners gained the capacity to systematically regulate and intervene in bodies that either lagged behind or outstripped the prescribed schedule, in effect transforming the fact of temporal variation into a medical incident requiring correction. This approach to temporality reifies social standards of

³⁸ "Very often," Zerubavel maintains, "when we perceive a certain figure against its 'normal' temporal ground, we may not even notice it, because the entire gestalt passes as 'normal.' However, we would most likely become somewhat surprised, if not actually alarmed, were we to perceive the very same figure against a 'wrong' temporal ground" (23).

³⁹ Consider, for example: percentile charts, growth curves, developmental milestones, etc. which make a child's body legible as a point in a predetermined arc from infancy to adulthood.

normalcy which shape expectations of health and productivity; those whose bodies fail to conform to idealized standards of health and productivity are marked as deviant and subject to intensified clinical surveillance and intervention. This medicalized temporality secures the cultural hegemony of a specific bodily timeline by disguising its normative architecture as an empirical description of nature.

The regulatory function of linear progressive time proves particularly salient in the domains of reproduction and gendered embodiment. Alison Kafer, citing Jack Halberstam, emphasizes that “time is foundational in the production of normalcy, such that engaging in particular behaviors at particular moments has become reified as the natural, common-sense course of human development” (35), a trajectory that presumes progression “in a linear development from a dependent childhood to an independent adulthood defined by marriage and reproduction” (Kafer 35). Within this framework, the concept of the “biological clock” emerges as a paradigmatic technology of gendered temporal regulation. As Martina Díaz contends, “the linear, objective, divisible, and abstract time in patriarchal capitalist societies neglects the multiple, cyclical, relational, and fragmented nature of reproductive, domestic, and care time” (767). Biological clock discourse imposes a temporality that insists on the finite character of female fertility. The cultural and medical discourse surrounding the biological clock operates as a biopolitical mechanism that affixes the abstraction of linear time directly to the materiality of the female reproductive body. The biological clock is one iteration of the normative developmental schedule, in that it creates a standardized set of milestones against which every individual trajectory is assessed.

Linear time enables the construction and enforcement of gender and sex roles as they relate to reproduction; as Díaz contends, “the biological clock regulates reproductive time by

shaping the boundaries and dynamics of female fertility through the clock,” and we ought to “[address] time as a fundamental dimension of contemporary biopolitics of reproduction” (765,767). In the context of biopolitics, which is primarily concerned with the governance of populations and the regulation of bodies and health, time is vital in shaping reproductive conditions and practices. The biological clock emphasizes the finite nature of women’s fertility, and the urgency of reproductive decisions, “[determining] when it is possible and desirable to have children and [regulating] reproduction, gender, and the female life course” (Díaz 765). The narrative of the biological clock shapes women’s reproductive trajectories within the dominant social order, and is an iteration of the normative developmental schedule deployed specifically against those bearing female reproductive organs.⁴⁰ This phenomenon is evinced by the 2026 case of a woman in Tennessee whose sterilization surgery was canceled by the hospital while she was already being prepped for the procedure. The hospital cited the preservation of her “sacred fertility” as the reason for the cancellation (Mehling), effectively subordinating the woman’s medical right to bodily autonomy to a religious, pronatalist, temporal imperative. The classification of her fertility as “sacred,” and its sacredness being used to deny her medical autonomy, reveals the extent to which the biological clock is culturally enforced. The temporal logic here is twofold: first, the hospital projects a linear trajectory onto the patient’s body in which her present reproductive potentiality must be preserved for a future that the institution claims the sole authority to imagine; and second, that future is configured through a theological temporality that regards sterilization as the interruption of a divinely ordered life trajectory. The patient’s desires violate both the linear arc of normative womanhood and the sacred chronology of pronatalist Christianity, and as such must be overruled. Invoking “sacred fertility” functions as

⁴⁰ Merav Amir contends that, “the biological clock constructs a crude gender differentiation between the female bodies, to which it applies, and the male bodies, which are beyond its reach” (52).

a rationale to subjugate women to a supposedly divinely-ordained reproductive mandate, exposing the extent to which conservative Christian ideology has been integrated into medical and state authority. Women's bodies are constructed as vessels for a sacred potentiality that the institution claims both the right and the obligation to protect how it sees fit, in order to enforce a biologically deterministic vision of gender and sex roles.

This analysis of linear progressive time as an apparatus of normative governance exposes the temporal architecture of biopolitical control, but it also gestures toward potential sites of dissent. If the normative developmental schedule operates by compelling bodies into a forward-moving trajectory, then disrupting its temporal logic opens possibilities for inhabiting embodiment otherwise. Feminist, queer, trans, disability, and Black studies traditions have articulated alternative temporalities that complicate or exceed chronobiological mandates by refusing the imperative to progress along a predetermined arc toward one compulsory future.

Theorizing Alternative Temporalities

On one hand, it makes sense to criticize the tendency to impose an abstract and standardized temporal framework on the natural and individualized rhythms of the reproductive body. Such a reductive approach surely fails to fully capture the complexity and variability of bodily experiences. On the other hand, I am compelled to acknowledge that all bodies do follow some kind of progressive trajectory of development: certain stages and sequences in physical development are generally consistent across individuals, such as puberty, maturation, reproductive phases, and aging. There is value both in understanding the natural variability of bodily experiences and in recognizing the general patterns of progression that bodies typically follow. Thus, while on the surface it might seem like total rejection of the discursive construction of linear-progressive temporality could be a solution to its deployment against so-called deviant

individuals, there remain tensions between the discursive phenomena of the normative developmental schedule and the lived experience of the corporeal body in process which demand attention. That is to say, even as I problematize normative cultural expectations about the temporality of the body, I cannot (nor do I want to) completely dismiss notions of linear progressive bodily and cognitive development. Holding this tension necessitates turning to scholars who have theorized alternative temporalities as sites of political potential, offering ways of being in time that exist in tension with or challenge to normative developmental schedules.

Feminist, queer, trans, and disability theorists have articulated temporalities that problematize or refuse normative developmental schedules. Kadji Amin, for instance, contends that embracing trans temporalities can disrupt the dominant schedules of normative development (219), and could open possibilities for “a politics of structural transformation rather than identity” (221). In some ways, this builds upon the earlier work of Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds*,⁴¹ who argues that queer temporalities, as material and embodied practices, offer alternative ways of experiencing and conceptualizing time that resist culturally dominant milestones like marriage, reproduction, and aging. Freeman contends that queer histories disrupt chronological narratives by presenting non-normative experiences in defiance of a linear sense of time, materializing alternative futures. As well, she emphasizes that queer time is not just a personal experience but a political and cultural one that shapes both individual lives and collective histories. Like Freeman, Halberstam argues that queer lives and experience often

⁴¹ Importantly, Freeman’s introduction to *Time Binds* introduces the concept of “chrononormativity,” which she defines as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity,” as part of a discussion about how “naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” (3). This set of concepts maps neatly onto SB1’s stated “legitimate, substantial, and compelling interest[s]” in ensuring that minors grow into cisgender adults who can and do reproduce, and the proposed solution of a blanket ban on hormonal and surgical treatments for trans/gnc minors, which I will discuss in the second chapter. Especially relevant to this discussion is Freeman’s notion that chrononormativity is “a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (3), in that it can be applied to the idea of science and medicine as rhetoric in order to understand the cultural notion that normative timelines of childhood development are “natural” rather than constructed.

challenge cultural norms that measure time through conventional life stages, not just as abstract concepts but through the material consequences of living outside of those prescribed timelines. He introduces the concept of “queer time” (Halberstam 1) as a space where non-normative sexualities, identities, and practices thrive outside the bounds of normative timelines (2). And she argues that by disrupting the linear narrative of progress and growth, queer time opens up possibilities for different ways of being, living, and relating to others that don’t conform to capitalist or heteronormative expectations for productivity and for reproduction.

In parallel with Halberstam’s conception of queer time as challenge to linearity, Paisley Currah’s work demonstrates that the medicalized body is, rather than a passive object of treatment, a site where gendered temporalities are continuously enacted and reconfigured. In the introduction to *Sex Is As Sex Does*, Currah critiques binary understandings of sex and of gender, arguing that each are socially constructed categories that work to regulate and control bodies. He asserts that sex, like gender, is not an inherent or biological truth⁴² but a set of performative practices and social norms; as a result, we come to understand that the medicalization of bodies—particularly in relation to sex classification—involves a continual process of enacting and negotiating gendered identities. The regulation and treatment of bodies through medical systems are linked to broader cultural and temporal constructions of gender which are constantly being redefined via social, medical, and political interventions; in other words, these classifications are not static. Jules Gill-Peterson’s book *Histories of the Transgender Child*

⁴² Relatedly, Katrina Karkazis writes in “The Misuses of Biological Sex” that following John Money’s work on sex in the 50s, “scientists and medical professionals came to accept sex as inherently knotty: that its ‘variables’ are multiple, come in far more than two versions, and that no single biological factor is determinative” (1898). Her piece calls attention to a tension in defining sex: while sex is understood to be multifaceted, policymakers often rely on biological traits to categorize it. The reliance on biology is viewed as objective because of its association with science, but it contradicts both the complexity of sex (which is simultaneously biological and social) and social science research showing that sex, like gender, is constructed (Karkazis 1898). She concludes, “It is long overdue that we understand sex not as an essential property of individuals but as a set of biological traits and social factors that become important only in specific contexts, such as medicine, and even then complexity persists” (Karkazis 1899).

likewise situates the medicalization of trans bodies within broader sociopolitical contexts; she explores how medical discourses have not only pathologized trans children but also positioned them outside the bounds of normative childhood. She writes, “children’s bodies, because of their unfinishedness and plastic potential to be changed as they grow, have been key sites of the modernizing violence of medicine” (4), later noting that “the figure of ‘the child’ and actual living ‘children’ are entangled products of historical processes of Western subjectification, rather than representing a natural category of human life” (9). Her work emphasizes how the protection extended to certain children often depends on their conformity to naturalized norms, leaving “deviant” children vulnerable to harm. This selective protection reveals how childhood itself is a contested category, shaped by normative expectations that determine which children are deemed worthy of care; the construction of childhood is entangled with broader medical, legal, and cultural forces that dictate what is considered normal. Gill-Peterson’s exploration of the medicalization of trans children can therefore be used to understand time as shaped by an assemblage of bodies, cultural norms, institutional practices, and policies. The vulnerability of “deviant” children evinces an historical process where societal norms, via medicalization, dictate not only the bodies of children but also the possibilities and limits of their temporal existence. This is particularly evident in the medicalization of trans children, where institutional authority disciplines gendered embodiment through specific temporal frameworks. The existence of trans temporality, which insists that bodily becoming is a continuous and valid mode of existence, inherently challenges the normative developmental schedule’s demand for linear progression toward a legible and stable gender identity. This resonates with disability studies, where the concept of *crip time* offers another challenge to the disciplinary force of linear progressive temporality.

As articulated by Alison Kafer, crip time resists the disciplinary force of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness under neoliberal capitalism, reorienting temporal expectations to accommodate the complex rhythms of disabled and chronically ill bodies; Kafer describes crip time as “flex time not just expanded but exploded” (27), a reorientation that disrupts normative assumptions about what a livable future looks like. This alternative temporality holds particular significance given how “disabled people are continually being written out of the future, rendered as the sign of the future no one wants” (Kafer 46). Crip time, importantly, insists that disabled lives are not failed versions of able-bodied futures, but instead inhabit temporalities that demand alternative kinds of relation and world-making. Accordingly, Ellen Samuels calls for an understanding of crip time as “broken time,” meaning

it requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world. It forces us to take breaks, even when we don't want to, even when we want to keep going, to move ahead. It insists that we listen to our bodyminds *so* closely, *so* attentively, in a culture that tells us to divide the two and push the body away from us while also pushing it beyond its limits. (“Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time”)

Her formulation of “broken time” refuses the logic of cure that would restore the disabled bodymind to normative function. Instead, the breaking is a site of knowledge production and alternative relation, which of its own accord is valid and generative. The notion of broken time as a legitimate and meaningful temporal orientation rejects the state’s demand that bodies be made productive and predictable, asserting that alternative embodied experiences of time are fundamental and legitimate ways of navigating the world.

In a similar vein, Black studies offers indispensable frameworks for understanding alternative temporalities that emerge from the specific history of racism. As Christina Sharpe argues in *In the Wake*, Black life is lived in the “wake” of transatlantic slavery, an ongoing state in which the past is not past but continually suffuses the present (10). This “wake work” (18)

constitutes a temporality in resistance to the liberal narrative that would consign anti-Black violence to history, refusing the neoliberal demand for moving forward while locating that violence only in the chronological past. As well, it insists on the ethical necessity of dwelling with the ongoingness of trauma and the radical potential of imagining other ways of being. As an analytic, the wake exposes the linear-progressive timeline of the West as a function which requires the elision of foundational atrocities. In *Unpayable Debt*, Denise Ferreira da Silva writes:

Effected in each and every deployment of the prevailing explanation for racial subjugation, one operated by Blackness, the category, that turning, which I call the racial dialectic, consistently belies the limitations imposed by time—both linear (historical) and circular (logical)—as an ontological given, empirical element, and perpetual horizon. (13)

Her analysis of the “racial dialectic” exposes the philosophical architecture that makes linear progressive time possible. Blackness is the constitutive outside against which Western subjectivity is defined; the “limitations imposed by time” are actively produced through this dialectic because linear time is inextricable from a violent ontological sorting. The alternative temporalities articulated by queer, crip, and Black theorists are thus political refusals of the biopolitical apparatus that linear progressive time constructs, rationalizes, and perpetuates.

The preceding analysis has explained that normative developmental schedules are biopolitical instruments extending reproductive futurism into everyday bodily governance. These schedules function as gatekeeping mechanisms that sort bodies according to their perceived capacity to embody a viable future. This raises a further question: if the body is measured against developmental norms that are themselves contingent cultural formations, how might we understand bodily materiality in ways other than passive subjection to such schedules? The biopolitical management of reproduction operates, at least in part, by constructing the body as

inert matter awaiting medical intervention and social inscription. Thus, I turn to new materialist frameworks, which theorize the body's materiality as an agentic, intra-active participant in its own making. A more expansive understanding of the body's materiality opens possibilities for understanding embodied resistance to the temporal and reproductive disciplines that this introduction has traced through the past and into the present. By attending to the agential capacities of matter itself, new materialism offers ways to reimagine corporeal experience beyond the constraints of normative developmental schedules and the reproductive futurism they reify.

Between Discourse and Embodiment

“Matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder.”

– Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007)

“Social representations obviously affect the experience of the body [...] but the body possesses the ability to determine its social representation as well, and some situations exist where representation exerts no control over the life of the body.”

– Tobin Siebers, “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment” (2014)

New materialism emerged in the 2000s as a reaction to the linguistic turn and social constructivism of the 1970s onward. The rise of social constructivism as the prevailing mode of thought was, in turn, a response to the political inadequacies of empiricism and biological determinism. As feminist, postcolonial, critical race, and disability theorists demonstrated throughout the late twentieth century, appeals to nature and to the supposed objectivity of biology are consistently weaponized to rationalize the creation and maintenance of social

hierarchies, from the naturalization of gender roles⁴³ and racial difference⁴⁴ to the pathologization of queer desire⁴⁵ and disability.⁴⁶ By arguing that categories such as race, gender, and ability were constructed through social practices and power relations rather than dictated by nature, social constructivism offered a means for political liberation. Poststructuralist theorists insisted on the primacy of discourse and language because, as they understood it, power operates exclusively through frameworks of intelligibility and signification. For thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, reality is mediated by systems of signs; therefore, political intervention requires deconstructing and rewriting the discourses that make certain bodies legible as normal and others as deviant. In other words, if reality is constructed through language, then changing language and cultural representation could dismantle the dominating ideological structures that produce oppression.

But one inevitable consequence of myopic focus on discourse and social construction is that it minimizes the significance of the body and bodily experience in philosophy and politics. In the effort to prove that identity is not biologically fixed, actual bodies are subordinated to textuality. The body is understood as a surface on which meaning can be inscribed⁴⁷ rather than a dynamic and agential site of existence. As Stephanie Clare puts it in *Earthly Encounters*,

Language does not capture the real so much as, potentially, produces a sense of reality. This sense is political, cultural and social. The job of a critic is to understand how that sense of reality is produced, to analyze its ideological underpinnings, and to consider its

⁴³ Feminist thinkers like Cixous, Irigaray, Wittig, Haraway, Bleier, Butler, Birke, and Fausto-Sterling have argued that claims about biological objectivity and naturalized gender differences are socially constructed fictions used to legitimize patriarchal, heteronormative, and racial hierarchies.

⁴⁴ Gates, Jr., Hall, Appiah, and Bhabha, among others, demonstrate how appeals to biological notions of race as natural or objective have been used to rationalize colonial domination and racial subordination. They challenge the purported fixity of racial identity by contending that race is a discursive and historically contingent construct rather than a biological given.

⁴⁵ In queer theory, Foucault, Sedgwick, and Butler are some of the foundational scholars who have insisted that appeals to biological nature are historically contingent discourses that produce and police social hierarchies (e.g., sexuality, gender, or normal vs. pathological) by naturalizing certain identities and desires while marking others as deviant or impossible.

⁴⁶ Disability studies scholars such as Davis, Garland-Thompson, and Campbell have collectively demonstrated that appeals to biological norms and the supposed objectivity of bodily normalcy are leveraged to construct ableist hierarchies that position disabled bodies as deviant and therefore necessitating mitigation, cure, or elimination.

⁴⁷ Foucault, for example, in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” describes the body as the “inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self” (148).

effects. Yet an ideological, interpretive approach is not sufficient either, because it tends to reduce the analysis of the more-than-human world to the analysis of cultural politics, and thus treats the more-than-human solely in the realm of human representation. (xvii)

Clare's intervention calls attention to a central tension within poststructuralist methodologies: while their attention to the discursive production of reality has been important for destabilizing naturalized hierarchies, such frameworks risk collapsing all material existence into an effect of language. The flaw in locating meaning solely in discourse, then, is that discourse analysis fails to adequately address the physicality of embodiment and the material consequences of oppression.⁴⁸

New materialism emerged in response to this problem, proposing that it is possible to reject biological essentialism without abandoning the ontological significance and agential force of matter itself. It posits that matter, rather than being a passive or inert substance onto which humans assign meaning, is agential, meaning both human and nonhuman forces actively participate in shaping events and co-constituting reality (Barad 23). In contrast to the view of the world as a collection of discrete and static objects, new materialism describes all entities and systems as produced through dynamic relations and ongoing processes of becoming. There is no object that precedes its interactions with a wider environment; every object is a temporary stabilization of a variety of human and nonhuman actants (Barad 359), with its own "ability to [...] animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle (Bennett 6). Entities are understood as

⁴⁸ Bodies, in other words, are not just texts or constructions. They have material properties that resist or exceed discourse. And oppression has material, bodily effects that discourse analysis alone fails to capture. This isn't to say that embodiment and oppression are unmediated by discourse, but that we need, as Clare advocates for, an analytical approach that attends to both discourse and materiality without reducing one to the other (xvii, xxi). In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett reminds us that, "the constructivist response to the world also tends to obscure from view whatever thing-power there may be. There is thus something to be said for moments of methodological naiveté, for the postponement of a genealogical critique of objects. This delay might render manifest a subsistent world of nonhuman vitality. To 'render manifest' is both to receive and to participate in the shape given to that which is received. What is manifest arrives through humans but not entirely because of them" (17).

“intra-active” phenomena that emerge through their entanglement with other forces (Barad 33); this ontology acknowledges the continuous becoming of all matter.

One of new materialism’s most important political offerings is its simultaneous rejection of essentialism and retention of the significance of the physical body. While social constructivism argues that the meaning attached to bodily difference is entirely constructed, new materialism contends that the body itself is not a stable, pre-discursive object but instead an ongoing event that is materially shaped by corporeal and affective encounters. That reframing problematizes the logic of essentialism because it understands bodily difference to be the produced effect of dynamic relations.⁴⁹ Furthermore, new materialist ontologies open the possibility for thinking about the boundaries between subject and object, nature and culture, and human and nonhuman as porous and relational. They posit a constant traffic of substances and forces across boundaries, meaning that humans are fundamentally composite creatures that are “always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world (Alaimo 11), or, as Bennett puts it, “the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other” (4).

Another important political offering is a reconfigured understanding of agency and its attendant implications for accountability and political responsibility. By loosening the attachment of agency to the sovereign human will, new materialism changes how we identify sources of harm and, consequently, how we conceive of ethical intervention and mitigation. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett introduces the concept of “distributive agency,” which she describes as the idea that agency is not centralized in a single entity but is instead dispersed across assemblages of human and non-human actants. She writes,

⁴⁹ Clare notes that feminist new materialist thought is “invested both in interrupting the objectification of people and things and in reaching beyond discursive analysis, beyond the analysis of how things are conceived. To bring attention to the sensible,” they posit, “is to consider a point of contact with that which is beyond ourselves and to reject the transformation of the world into inert, passive objects” (xxiv). The value in Clare’s approach lies in holding this tension open; we can insist on the realities of embodiment and material excesses even as we acknowledge the inevitable mediation of our accounts of them.

there are instead [of a subject as the root cause of an effect] always a swarm of vitalities at play. The task becomes to identify the contours of the swarm, and the kind of relations that obtain between its bits [...] this understanding of agency does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes. It loosens the connections between efficacy and the moral subject, bringing efficacy closer to the idea of the power to make a difference that calls for a response. (Bennett 32)

Essentially, the idea of distributed agency suggests that outcomes are the result of interactions among a multitude of forces and entities, instead of being driven entirely by individual intention. Each of the actants constituting an assemblage has the capacity to produce effects within and beyond that assemblage. This idea challenges the traditional view of objects and non-human entities as passive, instead emphasizing their active role in the world. And it has significant implications for political analysis because it requires that we examine the complicated and dynamic convergences of human and nonhuman forces that collectively generate oppressive outcomes.

The appeal to assemblages can, however, risk eliding the political subject whose intentional action is required to challenge institutional violence. Accordingly, critics warn that the emphasis on distributed agency can abstract accountability: if agency is a “swarm of vitalities,” who is to be held responsible for material harms? Scholarly critiques of distributed agency assert that while such frameworks do productively dismantle the nature/culture binary by recognizing the efficacy of nonhuman actors, they also risk a problematic flattening of ontology in which human intentionality and ethical responsibility are diminished (Hornborg 13). The redistribution of agential capacity to objects and material forces has, in other words, been criticized for decentering the human subject to the point of erasure, minimizing the capacities for choice and accountability that distinguish human action from the kinds of consequences that artifacts produce (Hornborg 189). The concern is that equating human and nonhuman agencies obscures the power inequities in human social relations.

In response to this tension, the concept of the “body-subject,” derived from the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, offers one potential solution that keeps the person centered without retreating to mind/body dualism (Borg 167). For Merleau-Ponty, sensation is “clearly embodied [...] perception is always located from a particular, incorporated point of view, the point of view of a lived body (Clare xxvi). The body-subject names the constitution of a lived body that is always already enmeshed with the world it inhabits. Perception is understood as an embodied act, such that the subject cannot be considered separate from its corporeal immersion in a material context. The term body-subject foregrounds human agency as fundamentally embodied and situated, emerging through the body’s continual relation with its environment, yet still maintaining a meaningful distinction between the human subject and the world it inhabits. Importantly, then, recognizing the agency of nonhuman forces expands human ethical responsibility rather than negating it; the task at hand is to map the specific ways that human and nonhuman forces converge to produce the unevenly distributed precarities of the present.

To that end, new materialism has been mobilized in feminist studies to move beyond the impasse between the essentialism of second-wave feminism and poststructuralist anti-essentialism.⁵⁰ Scholars like Elizabeth Grosz and Stacy Alaimo have used the framework to analyze how biological and environmental forces shape gendered experience without reinscribing deterministic biology. Grosz argues that “biology does not limit social, political, and

⁵⁰ The second-wave feminism of the 60s and 70s grounded its politics in the concept of a shared, universalized female body by asserting that the biological aspects of female embodiment (reproductive capacity, menstruation, etc.) constituted a common foundation for women’s historical oppression, and therefore for their political solidarity. They argued that the material conditions of reproduction were the main cause of women’s subordination across time and culture, making women’s bodies sites of collective political struggle. The appeal to a universalized body was designed to create a cohesive political identity where all women are a unified class; that universalism would later become subject to critique by poststructuralist feminists, who argued that the category of woman is a discursive social construction. Feminist new materialism, in turn, critiques social constructivism for its “[tendency to] focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced, which casts the body as passive, plastic matter” (Alaimo 3). This is not to say that feminist new materialism calls for a return to biological essentialism, but rather that it takes a different approach to challenging it: Alaimo contends that “only by directly engaging with matter can feminism [...] render biological determinism ‘nonsense’[...] it is clear that the notion of biology as destiny, which has long haunted feminism, depends on a particular—if not peculiar—notion of biology that can certainly be displaced by other models” (5).

personal life: it not only makes them possible, it ensures that they endlessly transform themselves and thus stimulate biology into further self-transformation” (1),⁵¹ and Alaimo’s concept of “trans-corporeality” has been influential in feminist environmental justice because it acknowledges the links between the health of the planet and the material conditions of humans. Importantly, new materialism provides feminist theory with a vocabulary for addressing the tangible and visceral dimensions of gendered life that had been rendered analytically dispensable under pure social constructivism. It allows for feminism to engage with sciences and with the body, but without returning to the biological essentialism that has historically been used to rationalize and enforce women’s subordination. By foregrounding the materiality of sexed bodies, new materialism opens pathways for feminist politics that are attuned to both the discursive construction of race and gender and the corporeal realities of racialized and gendered existence.

It has also proven to be a generative, if sometimes fraught, resource for queer and trans theorists to challenge the stability of the body and the fixity of identity. New materialism offers a way to think of bodily transformation as an intra-active process wherein the body’s material capacities co-constitute the experience of selfhood. Rethinking the relationship between discourse and matter has, for example, provided a philosophical grounding for understanding how the material-semiotic practices of trans embodiment actively reconfigure the boundaries of the body and the category of the human itself (Hayward 69). And new materialism’s insistence on the porous, relational, and always-becoming nature of embodiment provides a compelling counternarrative to both biological essentialism and the disembodied abstraction of identity

⁵¹ Grosz, in *The Nick of Time*, examines the “space between the natural and the cultural, the space in which the biological blurs into and induces the cultural through its own self-variation, in which the biological leads into and is in turn opened up by the transformations the cultural enacts or requires” (1). She engages with Darwin, in particular, to build an anti-essentialist theory of sexual difference and becoming.

implied by strict linguistic constructivism. Some queer and trans theorists have, however, cautioned that the dissolution of the subject into a field of impersonal forces might overlook the colonial history of how bodies and technologies have divided people into those who get to be enhanced and those who are used as resources for that enhancement (Malatino 189), or could make it difficult to pinpoint responsibility for systemic violence under capitalism (Liu 5). Most of these critiques, though, are not calling for the abandonment of new materialism so much as arguing that any theory of matter and agency needs to be able to account for the specific ways that race, gender, and sexuality are produced and exploited under capitalism. A more politically accountable new materialism might shift its emphasis toward an analysis of uneven material agencies by attending to the weight of historical violence without reinstating a purely discursive or disembodied subject.

Turning from the politics of identity formation to the corporeal experiences of impairment, disability studies scholars have leveraged new materialism as a corrective to the social model of disability,⁵² which argues that disability is exclusively located in social barriers. While the social model has been vital for political advocacy, new materialism allows scholars to account for the lived, material reality of pain, fatigue, and physical and/or cognitive difference⁵³ without pathologizing them or ceding ground to medical essentialism. As Lennard Davis acknowledges, “the body is not only—or even primarily—a physical object. It is in fact a way of organizing through the realm of the senses the variations and modalities of physical existence as

⁵² In *The Matter of Disability*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, Tobin Siebers, Joshua Kupetz, and Olga Tarapata all engage with new materialisms to challenge the social model’s tendency to reduce disability to purely cultural or linguistic construction, instead insisting on the agentic role of nonhuman matter, bodies, and environments in shaping disabled experience.

⁵³ Margaret Price contends in “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain” that disability studies “needs to pay more attention to the place of pain in disability—in fact, that such attention may help resolve the bodymind problem by enabling us to begin incorporating bodymind in ways that go beyond the gestural” (274). For Price, pain is an experience that resists both total medical pathologization and total social deconstruction. Because it is simultaneously a neurobiological event and a phenomenon whose meaning is shaped by ableist, racialized, and gendered structures of credibility, its study demands a methodology that refuses to separate the body’s matter from the mind’s interpretive work. In Price’s view, the bodymind emerges in the moments where discourse proves insufficient to capture the experiences of the body.

they are embodied into being through a larger social/political matrix” (14). Put differently, our embodied experiences are embedded in and molded by broader social and political contexts, and our physical sensations and perceptions both shape and are shaped by social norms and values. But this does not mean, as some poststructuralist thinkers intimate, that the corporeal body itself matters less than discursive formations when it comes to making sense of the world. Instead, it calls attention to the complex interrelation of corporeal, sensory experiences and the structures that influence their existence and meaning. Our social and political environments mediate how we understand and experience our bodies, and our embodied experiences mediate how we experience and make sense of our environments. The dichotomy between discourse and embodied experience rings as false as the dichotomy between body and mind; they are interdependent rather than independent. The body’s limitations and capacities are agential forces that participate in the shaping of experience. As Stephanie Kerschbaum puts it in *Signs of Disability*,

disability is inextricably imbricated with the full range of identifications that people perform and orient to in their daily lives and that emerge in complex constellations. For instance, hands moving in sign language might materialize deafness or disability on white bodies but, in another scene, materialize violence or aggression on Black and brown bodies, depending on the perceiver and other intra-acting phenomena in the environmental surround. (24)

In this way, the meaning of embodied difference is never stable but emerges through the interplay of bodies, perceptions, and contexts. Kerschbaum’s analysis demonstrates new materialism’s usefulness for foregrounding embodied difference as a dynamic, relational phenomenon that is also always situated in specific contexts.

This attention to the material-discursive entanglement of bodies and environments likewise animates Michael Feely’s work, which places such insights in direct conversation with disability studies’ theoretical practices. In Feely’s 2016 article “Disability Studies after the

Ontological Turn,” he contends that a new materialist approach to disability “allows us to combine the benefits of older poststructuralist theories—the ability to contest oppressive identity categories—with a thorough engagement with material reality and material embodiment” (864). As well, he asserts that “it is perhaps most productive to think of affect and discourse as different but inextricably linked and mutually affecting. Doing this allows us to move beyond purely discursive accounts of disability and also to consider the importance of visceral experience, which may include pain” (Feely 872). The mutual attention to discourse and affect offers a way out of the theoretical standoff between social construction and biological reductionism in that it positions embodied feeling as a legitimate site of knowledge rather than just an effect of language. Furthermore, in their 2023 article “A New-Materialist Reading of Disability,” Susan Flynn and Feely identify new materialism as “equipped to deal with the corporeality of impairment and the embodiment of self” (102), contending that “[ontology, the status of life and of the human] are central to the intersection of disability, senescence, and the life-course when viewed from a social justice perspective” (102). Their claim reframes ontology as a concrete political stake: how we define life and humanness determines who is granted access to care, accommodation, and social participation. Such an emphasis on ontology allows for the validation of disabled people’s testimonies regarding the matter of their embodiment while also maintaining a critique of the social and infrastructural conditions that disable particular kinds of bodies.

New materialism has also faced substantive critique from Black studies: thinkers like Zakkiyah Iman Jackson and Tiffany Lethabo King, for example, have argued that new materialism’s flattening of the hierarchy between human and nonhuman carries specific risks for Black and Indigenous peoples who have historically been positioned as nonhuman or as fungible

matter within the logic of colonialism and chattel slavery.⁵⁴ Some of these critics have also sought to refine new materialism's core insights, acknowledging that it demands a more rigorous accounting of how matter has been differentially racialized and gendered through specific historical processes of violence. Jackson, for instance, discusses how the history of antiblackness and racialized gender is indispensable to any thinking about matter and posthumanism:

At the registers of both sign and matter, antiblackness produces differential biocultural effects of both gender and sex. Such a frame raises the stakes of recent feminist materialism's inquiry into both the inter(intra)actional relations of discursivity and materiality as well as the gendered politics of hylomorphism, or the form-matter distinction. Thus, antiblack formulations of gender and sexuality are actually essential rather than subsidiary to the metaphysical figuration of matter, objects, and animals that recent critical theory hopes to dislodge. (9)

Jackson's argument is pivotal; it insists that the metaphysical architecture of Western thought was constituted by antiblackness. Thus, matter's conceptualization is inextricable from racialized and gendered hierarchies that have rendered certain bodies as closer to inert substance than to agential life. Any materialist philosophy that fails to take that into account risks reifying the same exclusions it purports to dismantle. But instead of abandoning it entirely, Jackson's critique reorients the new materialist project by calling for analyses to remain attuned to the historical and ongoing violences through which certain humans were made into matter.

Similarly, in *Animacies*, Mel Chen develops the linguistic concept of animacy to show how matter is hierarchically ordered along lines of race, sexuality, and disability; they argue that distinctions between animate and inanimate matter operate as a racialized and biopolitical

⁵⁴ Jackson contends that "plasticity is a mode of transfiguration whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially 'everything and nothing' at the register of ontology" (3), and later adds that "[posthumanism, new materialisms, and animal studies], in the main, position blackness in the space of the unthought, and therefore are not sufficient grounds for theorizing blackness" (17). Lethabo King, in *The Black Shoals*, likewise interrogates how settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade produced specific formations of fungibility and geological violence that cannot be subsumed under any generalized theory without reading the particularity of Black and Indigenous dispossession (21–25).

grammar that distributes degrees of liveliness and sentience across bodies in ways that consistently de-animate racialized, queer, and disabled subjects (Chen 29–30). Their work insists that the boundary between the animate and inanimate is a political construction that secures the differential valuation of lives. Put in dialogue with Jackson and King, Chen’s work calls attention to the fact that which bodies register as lively and which are considered insentient is a process that is structured by racial capitalism and colonial modernity. As well, Stephanie Clare has posited that new materialism opens possibilities for “an understanding of gendered, racialized subjectivity *as it exists on this planet*, a more-than-human world that is material, mediated, and shaped by politics, as well as by more-than-human forces” (xv). Their formulation suggests that new materialism, when held accountable to critiques levied by feminist and critical race scholars, can generate a more nuanced account of subject formation which neither engages in discursive abstraction nor posits a materiality untouched by power. To that end, Clare offers up the sensory as one methodological avenue for navigating this tension. By attending to affective and embodied encounters, one can trace how power operates without reducing the body to inert matter. The sensory is a site of contact where biopolitical hierarchies are felt and, potentially, where the agency of the more-than-human world makes itself known in ways that exceed the linguistic frame. Accordingly, my readings of textual artifacts across the chapters in this dissertation foreground bodily sensation, transformation, and the co-constitutive relations between bodies and their environments, in order to locate how power is enacted and reconfigured at the level of the corporeal.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation examines several artifacts: the PillowAngel.org blog run by the parents of Ashley X, a disabled child sterilized in Seattle; legal documents in the SCOTUS case *U.S. v. Skrametti*, which governs access to gender-affirming care for trans minors, and trans life-writing detailing the experiences of trans teenagers pursuing medical transition; and the novel *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder, in which a mother transforms into a domesticated dog by night. In doing so, I address two central questions: In what ways do reproductive bodies inevitably exceed the temporal, gendered, and material constraints imposed upon them by medical, legal, and social institutions? And how might the practice of close textual analysis make legible these modes of excess and becoming?

Read together, the following chapters trace an arc from bodily agency that is nearly foreclosed by institutional narration, through agency that is negotiated within and against medicolegal constraints, to agency that abandons any concessions to institutional intelligibility and imagines bodily transformation as a more-than-human mode of continuous creation. This sequence allows the reader to see how the same biopolitical logics of normative development operate across distinct sites of reproductive governance, while also revealing that bodies, even under the most constraining conditions, generate forms of excess and becoming that institutional scripts inevitably fail to contain.

Situating my archive in the past two decades captures a distinct moment where the mediums of biopolitical contestation fundamentally changed. The year the PillowAngel blog was first published—2007—coincided with the release of the first-gen iPhone, inaugurating an era where the proliferation of social media platforms irrevocably altered how medical and legal discourses reach the public, how and where they circulate, and the speed with which narratives

can be both disseminated and contested. This transformation in the technological conditions of discourse is a constitutive element of the texts I examine, each of which emerged within the digital infrastructures that now shape how bodily autonomy is claimed, understood, and/or besieged in public life. This project's proximity to the present means that the texts it considers are produced in direct relation to real-time attempts to diminish bodily autonomy: they participate in unfolding political struggles even as they document them.

Rather than a default assumption, the national frame of this project is a deliberate choice; locating it in the United States is useful because the U.S. is presently a concentrated site of reproductive governance, where anti-choice legislation, anti-trans legislation, and the mainstreaming of white nationalist natalism have converged to erode bodily autonomy on multiple fronts. This national context allows my project to track how a particular ideological lineage has shaped reproductive politics in ways that are historically contingent and locationally specific. And examining these texts is a way to see how medico-legal language constructs, distributes, and withholds autonomy along lines of normative embodiment. At stake in this situated analysis, then, is both a diagnosis of how institutional power operates and an account of how texts register and resist that power from within the context that produces it.

I argue that each of these texts, whether intentionally or not, reveals the agential force of the body-subject as it transgresses the institutional scripts designed to contain it. Law and medicine employ discursive practices that discipline bodies through normative developmental schedules, while life-writing and fiction expose their permeability by creating counter-archives of relational embodied experience. Together, these artifacts both reveal the ways in which ideologies of normative development operate as tools of biopolitical control, and open possibilities for resistance as bodies become in ways that fail to align with institutional scripts.

The first chapter demonstrates how the PillowAngel blog hosted and moderated by Ashley X's parents functions as an attempt to impose upon her a static temporality. While the blog's form and content construct a narrative that frames Ashley as a perpetual cognitive infant to justify medical intervention, this ideological project is undone by Ashley's own material agency. Drawing on a new materialist ontology, I argue that the blog's effort to keep Ashley at a fixed point in the normative developmental schedule fails because it is undermined by the processual phenomenon of her disabled body. By close-reading PillowAngel's narrative of temporal asynchrony against the grain, I identify the failure points of this biopolitical project and demonstrate that Ashley cannot be fixed; she remains an active participant in an assemblage of relations, technologies, and environments that continuously reconfigure her being.

In chapter two, I turn to the management of transgender adolescence in both legal texts and life-writing. The chapter begins with a comparative close-reading of Tennessee Senate Bill 1 (SB1) and the responding U.S. brief in *U.S. v. Skrametti* to demonstrate how, despite their surface-level opposition, both texts rely on a shared language of linear progressive development that ultimately de-animates trans minors. To counter this narrative, I turn to trans life-writing. Engaging with past and present debates in trans studies about the politics of memoir, I position mainstream trans teen life-writing like *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* as narratives that simultaneously capitulate to and challenge normative developmental schedules and the linear progressive narrative of medical transition. Through an against-the-grain close reading, I argue that these works document the messy, non-linear, relational processes of becoming that inevitably exceed prescribed medical and social scripts of gender transition.

Chapter three extends the analysis of unpredictable, continuous becoming to the maternal body through a new materialist reading of Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch*. This chapter argues that

the novel leverages the tools of feminist fabulation to reconfigure the mother's body as an agentic, more-than-human assemblage that exceeds normative maternal programs, particularly by reclaiming creation as a capacity that extends beyond reproduction. By thinking the maternal body as always already exceeding the singular identity and purpose imposed upon it by the logic of reproductive futurism, I aim to shift the understanding of maternity from a socially-determined role whose sole purpose and identity is reproduction and mothering to a set of corporeal acts that constantly generate new potential forms of being. A new materialist lens resolves the apparent mutual exclusivity between biological reproduction and artistic creation, framing them instead as responsive forms of material production that emerge from the same creative self.

Chapter 1

Fixing Ashley: The Impossible Project of the PillowAngel Blog*“The Ashley Treatment”*

In 1997, Ashley X¹ was born in Seattle, Washington, with a physical and cognitive impairment: static encephalopathy.² As a result of this condition Ashley experiences extremely limited mobility and a reduced capacity for verbal and physical communication.^{3,4} When she was six years old, her parents and physicians observed that Ashley was beginning to undergo

¹ The “X” represents the censorship of Ashley’s last name enacted by her parents and physicians to protect the family’s privacy. Ashley’s parents refer to themselves, and are often referred to in other texts, using the pseudonymous acronyms “AM” (Ashley’s Mom) and “AD” (Ashley’s Dad).

² In *Brilliant Imperfection*, Eli Clare identifies Ashley’s condition as cerebral palsy (153); this condition often falls under the umbrella of “static encephalopathy,” a medical term which more broadly encompasses “chronic nonprogressive brain disorders in children” (Ferry 696). Per DiCarlo and Schwabe in “Cerebral Palsy and Static Encephalopathies,” static encephalopathy includes “all individuals with a static injury of the central nervous system. For example, an individual with intellectual disability possessing no fine or gross motor deficits would have a diagnosis of static encephalopathy but not cerebral palsy.” There is an ethical tension in my own use of terms such as “static encephalopathy” and “precocious puberty,” which are not neutral descriptors: while they provide a shared medical vocabulary, they also actively construct certain bodies and developmental timelines as defective. To name Ashley’s experience through this language is to participate in a system of knowledge that devalues disabled life. Even in a critical context, this risks reinscribing the same logics of deviance and correction that I problematize in this chapter.

³ Ashley’s parents’ and physicians’ claims of limited mobility are verifiable; their claim of a “childlike” or “infant” mind, however, is not medically verifiable. Static encephalopathy actually has a broad range of physical and cognitive outcomes, and while it is not unusual for people with SE to experience cognitive disability, it’s also common that they don’t. Medical observations used to determine cognitive capacity usually rely on “disturbances of sensation, perception, cognition, communication, or behavior” (Johnston, “Encephalopathies”), but a person with severe speech and motor impairments might not be able to speak or move in a way that accurately reflects their cognitive capabilities. While imaging tests like EEG, MRI or fMRI can show the location or extent of a brain injury, or measure the brain’s response to stimuli, those technologies are not capable of measuring the mind itself. In other words, medical technology can be used to create diagnoses of static or progressive brain injury, but isn’t capable of measuring someone’s inner world. In “The Other Story from a Pillow Angel,” for instance, Anne McDonald writes of her own experience being incorrectly diagnosed as severely cognitively disabled: “Like Ashley, I, too, have a static encephalopathy...Like Ashley, I can’t walk, talk, feed or care for myself. My motor skills are those of a 3-month-old. When I was 3, a doctor assessed me as severely retarded (that is, as having an IQ of less than 35) and I was admitted to a state institution...As the hospital didn’t provide me with a wheelchair, I lay in bed or on the floor for most of the next 14 years. At the age of 12, I was relabeled as profoundly retarded (IQ less than 20) because I still hadn’t learned to walk or talk [...] What was [Ashley’s parents’] assessment based on? Has Ashley ever been offered a way of showing that she knows more than a 3-month-old baby? Only someone like me who has lain in a cot year after year hoping that someone would give her a chance can know the horror of being treated as if you were totally without conscious thought.”

⁴ In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis refutes the notion that speaking ought to be regarded as the defining communicative norm: “one of the foundational ableist myths of our culture,” he writes, is “that the norm for humans is to speak and hear, to engage in communication through speaking and listening...In the same sense that the norm of gender was seen as masculine, and the norm of race was seen as white, and the norm of class was seen as bourgeois, the norm of signifying practice is seen as [speech and] prose” (15-6). And, he continues, “in setting up the common-sense notion that language occurs in two forms and only two forms—speech or writing—we are engaging in a tautology based on an equation of language as such and reason” (18-9). In other words, the idea that the primary indicator of one’s capacity to think/reason should be language is flawed.

precocious puberty,⁵ and, primarily out of concern that her developing body would make Ashley more difficult for them to lift and manipulate, sought out medical professionals who would be willing to arrest her physical growth. Consequently, in July of 2004, Ashley underwent a novel grouping of procedures at Seattle Children's Hospital: an illegal hysterectomy,⁶ the removal of her breast buds, and a prophylactic appendectomy, followed by nearly two years of high-dose estrogen therapy designed to speed up the permanent closure of her growth plates. This set of procedures, called "Growth Attenuation Therapy" (GAT) and now referred to colloquially as "The Ashley Treatment," was developed with the intent to keep her body as small as possible for as long as possible. The procedures mainly involve traits directly related to Ashley's future capacities for reproduction: the removal of assorted internal and external sex organs, and the manipulation of Ashley's secondary sex characteristics through high-dose estrogen over a period of several years. This treatment, and the rationales behind it that Ashley's parents present via their blog, PillowAngel, serve as the foundation for an ideological project aimed at fixing Ashley's body at a single point in the normative developmental schedule.

Ashley X has garnered attention across feminist, trans, and disability studies, with scholars examining how her case reveals the violent intersections of ableism, heteronormativity, and biopolitical control. Alison Kafer, in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, argues that Ashley was framed as disabled because her mind and body were developing at different speeds, a "temporal disjuncture" (48) that was used to justify medical interventions to keep her body childlike. Jen Slater et al. draw on Ashley's case to argue that young disabled women labeled as cognitively

⁵ Precocious puberty refers to puberty occurring at an earlier age than typically expected within the normative developmental schedule. Some signs of precocious puberty in female children include "breast development before age 7 or 8," "start of menstruation...before age 10," and "rapid height growth (a growth spurt) before age 7 or 8" ("Precocious Puberty," *KidsHealth*).

⁶ Per Disability Rights Washington's May 2007 investigative report, which concluded that Ashley's parents and physicians did not obtain the appropriate legal permissions before conducting Ashley's treatment. Seattle Children's Hospital subsequently issued an acknowledgement of their violation of WA state law, and no longer performs GAT.

impaired face heightened dangers of non-consensual bodily intervention, because adulthood is itself a heteronormative and ableist construct that excludes them (411). And Jake Pyne contrasts Ashley's non-consensual GAT with HRT sought by trans youth; he contends that discourses of autonomy are unevenly distributed, widening the gap between those invested with the ability to control their own development and those whose development is managed by others (96).

Building on these critiques of temporal normativity and differential autonomy, I intervene by demonstrating that the ideological project underpinning Ashley's treatment is ontologically impossible: body-subjects cannot be fixed in developmental time because their very materiality is processual and agentic.

The Impossible Project of the Pillow Angel

In this chapter I demonstrate how, in both form and content, the PillowAngel blog hosted and moderated by Ashley's parents is an attempt to impose a static temporality on her; but its own ideological project is undone by her innate embodied agency and participation in an assemblage of relations. I argue that the blog's attempt to impose stasis onto Ashley fails because it is based on a flawed ontology of matter that fails to recognize disabled body-subjects⁷ as processual phenomena that are continuously reconfigured through their intra-actions with other body-subjects, technologies, cultural attitudes, political conditions, and environments. Following a summary of ethical debates surrounding GAT, and demonstrating the procedures' emergence from the ideology of reproductive futurism, I first establish PillowAngel as a narrative designed to justify and participate in the project of fixing Ashley at one point in the normative

⁷ When I use the term "body," I am referring to the biomedical entity that is the object of clinical intervention and the primary focus of the medical model of disability. In contrast, "body-subject" draws from the phenomenological tradition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and its adaptation in disability studies by scholars like Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, where it describes the living and experiencing body as the medium through which we perceive and act upon the world. "Body-subject" is a rhetorical move to avoid the re-objectification of disabled people that can happen when agency is assigned to a body rather than to the integrated, experiencing person who has that body.

developmental schedule; to that end, I analyze the form and content of PillowAngel to show how her parents and physicians frame Ashley as a perpetual cognitive infant, using the rationale of temporal asynchrony between her mind and body to argue that her condition merits correction through medical and surgical intervention. Then, I close-read the PillowAngel blog through a new materialist lens in order to identify the failure points of its narrative and demonstrate how creating a static body is ultimately an impossible project.

PillowAngel, which contains articles, photo documentation, and intermittent updates about Ashley's condition, was first published by her parents nearly twenty years ago, and its most recent update at the time of this writing was in late 2018. Rather than receding from relevance, however, the blog is a case study that reveals the ableist logics currently being codified into law and policy in the United States. There are clear parallels between Ashley's parents' desire to manage her body through nonconsensual permanent interventions, and contemporary policy debates about the same. The rationales used to develop and implement GAT for Ashley continue to animate present-day Trump administration policies regarding involuntary institutionalization for cognitively disabled and unhoused people, and the erosion of healthcare access and legal protections for both disabled and trans populations. For example: an Executive Order published on July 24, 2025, titled "Ending Crime and Disorder on America's Streets," revives involuntary indefinite incarceration for unhoused and disabled people by pursuing "the reversal of Federal or State judicial precedents and the termination of consent decrees that impede the United States' policy of encouraging civil commitment of individuals with mental illness who pose risks to themselves or the public or are living on the streets and cannot care for themselves in appropriate facilities for appropriate periods of time" (Sec. 2 (a) (i)). And the "One Big Beautiful Bill," (H.R. 1) signed earlier that same month, legislates nearly

one trillion dollars in cuts to Medicaid over the next decade, meaning nearly 11 million people, many of whom are disabled, will lose their health insurance. As well, the Trump administration is seeking a reversal of the Biden-era interpretation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act which says that “gender dysphoria may count as a disability,” (45 CFR part 84), meaning that the ongoing culture war surrounding gender is inextricably entangled with debates about the boundaries of the disability category and whose bodies get subjected to medical and legal control. In dismantling the core premise of PillowAngel—that the project of stasis through medical intervention is even possible—I aim to open possibilities for challenging the ideological foundations of such policies.

The Trump administration’s policy proposals represent the impulse to exert total control over body-subjects, scaled from what PillowAngel characterizes as a private act of compassionate caregiving to a broad governing principle that targets disabled, unhoused, and trans populations for institutionalization and medical abuse or neglect. I assert, as many disability theorists, advocates, and activists already have, that all body-subjects in their ongoing and unpredictable becomings deserve dignity and support.⁸ The counterargument to PillowAngel and the present-day policies it prefigures is the insistence that Ashley, as a body-subject, possesses innate agency that no amount of medical intervention can eliminate. This is an exigent contribution to ongoing debates about legal and ethical protections for disabled populations, especially those who experience cognitive disabilities or who are limited in their capacity for linguistic communication.⁹ By arguing that her parents’ and physicians’ attempt to keep Ashley’s

⁸ While certainly not an exhaustive list, some important thinkers whose work is concerned with the dignity of disabled people: Garland-Thompson (1997); Shakespeare (2006); Seibers (2008); Erevelles (2011); Kafer (2013); Kupetz (2024); Cureton (2025).

⁹ As Jake Pyne notes in “Arresting Ashley X: Trans Youth, Puberty Blockers, and the Question of Whether Time is on Your Side,” by 2010 as many as ten hospitals had begun to offer GAT (102). This suggests the procedure’s growing acceptance among parents of disabled children even despite ethical concerns. And, in the latest PillowAngel blog update, dated 25 August 2018, her parents write that “at this point there are hundreds of children who went through growth attenuation therapy. Parents of about 50 of them are members of a private support group that we host.” What is concerning about these statements are their implication that GAT

body from growing is actually an impossible project, I aim to push back against the positioning of Ashley and other disabled people as passive objects of care, instead asserting their fundamental humanity and more-than-humanity.

The scholarly stakes of this project emerge at the intersection of disability studies and feminist new materialism. Ashley's case demonstrates how disabled body-subjects, especially those marked as female, are subjected to intensified forms of management and control, with the perceived lack of capacity for medical and sexual consent serving as a rationale for reproductive sterilization and other interventions. Drawing on disability theorists who have argued for more expansive understandings of life trajectories,¹⁰ and on existing scholarly work in feminist theory, disability studies, and the medical humanities that deconstructs the presumed neutrality and authority of clinical narratives,¹¹ I both challenge the interpretation of quality of life that the PillowAngel blog attempts to establish and demonstrate that GAT is a biopolitical technology that intervenes in body-subjects to correct a problem that is fundamentally social and environmental.¹² I argue that the failure of PillowAngel to impose upon Ashley a static temporality stems from its flawed ontology of matter: that it treats disabled body-subjects as fixed and passive objects instead of recognizing them as continually-becoming assemblages of intra-acting biological, environmental, and cultural forces.

is beginning to be normalized into an established medical practice, which creates precedent for understanding disabled children's deviance from the normative developmental schedule as requiring medical intervention. And the existence of this private support group, meaning a community has formed around GAT, risks creating an echo chamber for parents of disabled children that reinforces the treatment's logic while also insulating the parents from ethical critique. The creation of the support group, and the increase in number of children who have been subjected to GAT, demonstrates how medical interventions that are justified in individual cases on compassionate grounds can easily scale into systemic practices that fundamentally reshape what kinds of bodies are allowed to exist.

¹⁰ McRuer and Berube (2006); Kafer (2013); Samuels (2017); McRuer (2018); Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2022); Smilges (2023).

¹¹ Haraway (1988); Martin (1991, 1992); Harding (1986, 1991); Roberts (1997, 2011); Washington (2006); Fausto-Sterling (1992, 2012, 2020); Ehrenreich and English (1978); Clarke (1998); Kafer (2013); Martin, Myers, and Viseu (2015).

¹² Disability scholars offer the "social model of disability" as a concept that distinguishes between impairment (embodied condition) and disability (social condition) in order to assert that people are disabled not by impairments, but by systemic barriers (e.g., stairs).

Ethical Debates Surrounding Growth Attenuation Therapy

Before examining PillowAngel's ideological project, it is useful to understand the broader medical and ethical discourse that it both generates and reifies. Documentation of Ashley's treatment program caused international controversy, with medical professionals, bioethicists, disability scholars, media pundits, and others offering their opinions on GAT's ethicality. When GAT became the subject of public and scholarly discourse, its divisive nature generated strong opinions from a variety of perspectives. The debates surrounding the procedure's development and implementation reveal a range of attitudes about how disability, gender, and age do, or ought to, impact an individual's medical rights. But no matter the perspective, they share one important commonality: a reliance on speculative futures.

Numerous articles and think pieces were published in defense of Ashley's parents and doctors, arguing that the medical pursuit of temporal synchrony was both justified and humane because, as proponents of GAT imagine, it would create for her a better future. Robert Newsom, who wrote several articles about Ashley in the late 2000s, argued that "absent growth attenuation, Ashley's parents would not be able to continue to indefinitely pick her up in their arms, and carry her and hold her, which is what her parents (and Ashley) wish" (291). Newsom's initial assessment fails to consider that parental wishes do not constitute medical necessity, and that any claims about what Ashley wants are merely speculative until such time as Ashley is enabled to clearly communicate her own desires.¹³ Two years later, Newsom further maintained that Ashley's parents ought to have "wide discretion in terms of what medical treatment they

¹³ At any rate, Newsom's assertion that her parents would no longer be able to carry or hold Ashley can be rebutted by the long-time existence and relative financial accessibility of apparatuses designed to lift and move adult-sized bodies; Hoyer lifts, for example, which have been available since the early 1950s and are designed for lifting and moving non-ambulatory people in a typical home environment, range in cost at the time of this writing from about \$400 to \$2,500 depending on whether the model is manual or electric (these dollar amounts represent out-of-pocket cost, prior to any insurance coverage). While Ashley's parents cite the potential for discomfort caused by the straps of a wheelchair or lift, there are many models of patient lift which are designed like a hammock or sling and do not have straps that cross the user's chest.

may elect for their daughter,” and that the removal of Ashley’s uterus and breast buds made sense because she was unlikely to “engage in sexual activity at the present or in the near future under circumstances likely to result in pregnancy” (25, 27). In other words, the embodied confluence of Ashley’s age, gender, and disability meant that her medical rights could be violated without ethical concern since she was not predicted to become pregnant in the future. Under this rubric, Ashley’s breasts and uterus serve only two purposes: objects of sexual desire for some imagined, threatening future entity, and enablers for producing and rearing children. Because she was not expected to ever have sex, those organs were thus “unnecessary” and could be surgically removed. Similarly, in an article in *Clinical Ethics*, Stephen Edwards defended GAT with the explanation that human rights are “not inviolable. They can be overridden in situations where respecting such rights would risk compromising a person’s best interests” (40), further opining that “the parents’ motives seem genuine” and that “no compelling argument has emerged since the procedures took place to show they ran counter to her best interests” (41). Edwards’ argument in favor of GAT relies on the supposition that Ashley’s age and disability merit gratuitous medical interventions on her body, with or without her consent. What Ashley’s “best interests” are, or how they ought to be calculated, Edwards fails to convincingly elaborate. Indeed, the phrase “respecting such rights would risk compromising a person’s best interests” is speculative in that it imagines a future where respecting Ashley’s bodily integrity and rights leads to a negative outcome, presupposing that without intervention, her “best interests” will be compromised. Furthermore, Edwards’ position that “no compelling argument has emerged [...] to show [GAT] ran counter to her best interests” dismisses potential future harms (such as psychological distress, violation of dignity, or pain resulting from surgical procedures) as not compelling, speculatively foreclosing harms that might materialize from GAT.

While there was certainly no shortage of temporal synchrony defenders in the mid-aughts, many others maintained that the implementation of GAT posed irrevocably negative consequences for Ashley and likely for other disabled children. And just as GAT's proponents projected a future of widening asynchrony and crisis for Ashley and her family, its critics projected a different future: one in which Ashley's capacities might unfold in ways that medical intervention would foreclose. Kirschner et al. point out from a medicoscientific perspective that the assertion made by Ashley's parents and doctors about her mind being both infantile and static is not actually based in any empirical understanding of static encephalopathy. As they contend,

Being described as a girl with the mental age of an infant may unnecessarily limit expectations for the future and ignores Ashley's capacity for social and emotional development. Developmental skills and abilities of children with pervasive needs, in the absence of known progressive neurological disorders, can change with time, nurturance and stimulation. (Kirschner et al. 102)

In other words, since Ashley's impairment is not a progressive condition, these anti-GAT viewpoints rely on a different set of predictions for her future, where Ashley could experience some significant degree of cognitive development and might eventually be enabled to communicate her wants and needs through one method or another. This clash of competing futures hinges on fundamentally different assumptions about what disabled people are capable of knowing and feeling.

The pattern of rationalizing interventions based on unverifiable claims about the inner lives of disabled people is not new. Disability theorist Eva Kittay, contributing to an ethical debate about the Ashley Treatment, reminds us of that extensive history and its broader consequences for disabled populations:

The real supposition [...] is that severely cognitively disabled people will never know the difference—even though we cannot be sure this is true. And with that supposition, what else might we be able to do to this population? The long and gruesome history of abuses done to people with severe cognitive disabilities includes a litany of similar claims—that

they won't know the difference if a part of their brain is lobotomized, if they are deprived of clothing, if they are showered communally by being hosed down. Yet we have learned that once we stop supposing that they don't know the difference anyway, we learn how often they understood the treatment as mistreatment. (Wilfond et. al. 32)

The historical pattern Kittay identifies and warns about here finds its corollary in the temporal logic that underpins GAT. The supposition that we can safely intervene because of the assumption of another's unawareness is, in Ashley's case, license to develop a medical protocol designed to enforce temporal synchrony. That rationalization hinges on a specific and speculative projection of Ashley's future embodied experience. Alison Kafer provides an important insight about the logic of temporal synchrony in her analysis of GAT: in order to rationalize its use as a technology designed to stay the ostensibly widening gap between Ashley's mind and her body,

Ashley's parents and doctors had to hold her future body—her *imagined* future body—against her [...] Without intervention, the asynchrony between mind and body would only grow wider; Ashley's body would become more and more unbearable to her, to her parents, and to those encountering her in public. (48)

Because they could not accelerate the linear progressive development of Ashley's mind, her caregivers chose to arrest the development of her body to bring about what they understood to be a condition of temporal synchrony. As Kafer notes, their justification depends on speculations about Ashley's future that they frame as inevitabilities: a future marked only by the prospective discomforts and potential abuses of her developed and disabled body, never by her possibilities for pleasurable sensation.¹⁴ The PillowAngel blog performs this same speculative logic in both

¹⁴ Kafer writes, "missing from this discussion of Ashley's quality of life is the possibility of pleasure [...] it seems equally possible, however, that she would have experienced pleasure from those imagined large breasts: the sensation of her shirt moving against her skin, or of her skin moving against her sheets, or of her own arms brushing against her breasts. Even the tight chest straps holding her in her chair could have been sources of pleasure: perhaps she would enjoy the sensation of support, or take pleasure in the alternation between binding and release as she was moved in and out of her wheelchair. The inability or unwillingness to imagine these pleasures is a manifestation of cultural approaches to female sexuality and disability. It is seemingly inconceivable to imagine Ashley's body—her disabled female body—as the source of any sensation other than pain" (65). By explicitly imagining alternative, pleasurable sensations from Ashley's body-subject, Kafer critiques the ableist attitudes that infuse the medical and cultural discourse about disabled bodies as only capable of experiencing pain. She identifies this as a

its content and form by establishing a singular, authoritative narrative that attempts to deter alternative imaginings of Ashley's embodied experience.

Normative Development and Reproductive Futurism in Growth Attenuation Therapy

The medicoscientific concept of normative developmental schedules is a central mechanism enabling justification for the development and implementation of GAT. By mapping Ashley's predicted developmental trajectory against typical adolescent development, her parents and physicians were able to frame her anticipated growth as a future medical and social burden. Her body itself was constructed as the source of an inevitable problem because of its deviation from the temporal synchrony demanded by these standards. That logic positions medical intervention as a necessary preemptive measure to halt her progression and permanently fix her in a more manageable state for the benefit of her caregivers. The conclusions drawn about Ashley's cognitive development, and the subsequent medical interventions to enforce temporal synchrony, are shaped less by medicoscientific empiricism than by Western cultural attitudes about the temporality of the reproductive body.

The same year that Ashley's course of treatment was initiated, Lee Edelman posited his theory of "reproductive futurism," in which he identifies the figure of the Child as a rhetorical symbol that dictates the terms of all political discourse in the West and argues that appeals made on behalf of children are nearly impossible to refuse because "that Child represents the perpetual horizon of politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (2–3). A cultural logic is constructed where the promise of a future embodied by the figure of the Child makes protecting actual children an obligatory act to secure that desired future. Claudia Castañeda

systemic manifestation of how society desexualizes and dehumanizes disabled female bodies and renders them incapable of sites of pleasure, joy, or desire.

builds on Edelman's work by examining how the rhetorical Child figure maps onto the lives of real children. She argues that childhood is not a fixed or natural category but a dynamic construct reflecting broader social, cultural, and political concerns. To that end, she critiques traditional models that portray childhood as a linear progression toward a stable adult identity, claiming that contemporary theories of child development are based on two assumptions: that children possess the capacity for progressive change, and that such capacity manifests in "a particular bodily form" (Castañeda 4). As a result, Castañeda asserts, "the condition of childhood therefore finds its value in potentiality. At the same time, the form that the child's potentiality takes is consistently framed as a normative one, in relation to which failure is always possible" (4). In other words, children's validity is assessed per their potential to become "normal" adults according to a particular normative developmental schedule. When they are perceived as failing to adhere to that schedule, medical interventions are used to correct them into a condition of bodily or cognitive normativity. Jules Gill-Peterson extends this line of thinking by grounding it in the history of medicine, demonstrating that children's bodies, due to their plasticity, have been key sites of medical violence, with protection extended only to those conforming to naturalized norms (Gill-Peterson 4, 9). This insight reveals that the potentiality Castañeda describes is a biological and medical reality wherein the child's body is treated as raw material that can be guided into socially acceptable forms. The figure of the Child is therefore both a symbol of the future and a rationale for disciplining non-normative body-subjects in the present.

Ashley's case exemplifies these dynamics. Her parents framed her as a perpetual child in order to leverage the rhetoric of protection to initiate medical intervention, arguing they were best positioned to ensure her quality of life. This logic reflects Edelman's concern that reproductive futurism forecloses alternative political visions by positioning the Child's future as

the only conceivable horizon of meaning. Ashley's parents mobilize the type of symbolic logic that Edelman critiques; by framing Ashley as an eternal child who always needs protection, they invoke an ostensibly irrefutable moral imperative for medical intervention that forecloses any consideration of alternate approaches. For Edelman, the main issue with positioning the Child as the symbol of the future lies in its inherent heteronormativity, which he contends leaves any alternative kinship structures, communal relations, or differing political visions ultimately "unthinkable" (3). Among such political visions are alternative temporalities offered by disability theory, such as crip time,¹⁵ because, as Kafer reminds us, the Child is not just a heteronormative product but is also inherently abled, and disability often elicits a perceived threat to the future.

She writes,

Discourses of reproduction, generation, and inheritance are shot through with anxiety about disability. These sites of reproductive futurity demand a Child that both resembles the parents and exceeds them [...] The Child through whom legacies are passed down is, without doubt, able-bodied [and] able-minded. (Kafer 29)

Several years earlier, Robert McRuer likewise identified a connection between heteronormativity and disability. In *Crip Theory*, he contends that compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality are interdependent systems, which render deviance (e.g., homosexuality, disability) hypervisible by positioning heterosexual, abled bodies as the invisible default (McRuer 2). This matrix of norms is also shaped by race. As Habiba Ibrahim argues in her discussion of Emmett Till in *Black Age*, Black children have historically been "violently denied" (2) the protected status of childhood, their age rendered "contingent, malleable" (5): "no age or

¹⁵ "Crip time" offers an alternative relationship to normative time, acknowledging that impairments can necessitate temporal flexibility. As Ellen Samuels observes, "Crip time is time travel. Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings...The medical language of illness tries to reimpose the linear, speaking in terms of the chronic, the progressive, and the terminal, of relapses and stages. But we who occupy the bodies of crip time know that we are never linear, and we rage silently—or not so silently—at the calm straightforwardness of those who live in the sheltered space of normative time" (1).

life stage protects black people,” Ibrahim contends. “From the vantage point of what modern blackness signifies, which is exclusion from western humanity, the fallacy of innocence is laid bare” (Ibrahim 2). Indeed, In *Racial Innocence*, Robin Bernstein observes that “the connection between childhood and innocence is [...] historically located” (4); she reminds us that by the mid-nineteenth century, “sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment [...] This innocence was raced white” (4). The figure of the “eternal child” that Ashley’s parents invoke, in other words, is one which is already coded as white. Christopher Bell’s work in *Blackness and Disability*, which also invokes Till,¹⁶ reinforces this by acknowledging “the misrepresentations of black, disabled bodies and the missed opportunities to read how those bodies transform(ed) systems and culture” (3–4) and calling attention to how both whiteness and ability are centered as the unmarked norm. Reproductive futurism, then, is a phenomenon related to cultural expectations surrounding the temporality of the reproductive body, which is presumed to be heterosexual, abled, and white. Accordingly, in both its discursive and material iterations, the Child is always a product of past reproduction within a white, abled, and heterosexual matrix, and an entity anticipated to itself reproduce. These interdependent logics inform the medical rationale applied to Ashley, whose framing as a perpetual child is predicated on that racialized and ableist construction of innocence.

It was Ashley’s sexual development that became the primary target of intervention, making visible the ways in which reproductive futurism operates on body-subjects. The medical interventions were explicitly stated by her parents and doctors to be measures to prevent future

¹⁶ Bell points out that Till’s disability is often elided when people speak of his life; according to one account, Till was taught to whistle in order to relax his throat muscles to treat a speech impairment that he developed after being ill with polio (2). He argues that “the work of reading black and disabled bodies is not only recovery work [...] but work that requires a willingness to deconstruct the systems that would keep those bodies in separate spheres” (Bell 3).

discomfort and inconvenience associated with menstruation and breast growth, given her alleged permanent cognitive infancy. However, these procedures also functioned to preemptively eliminate the possibility of Ashley's participation in reproductive futurity. By surgically removing her uterus and breasts, Ashley's caregivers ensured that she could no longer be read as a subject whose disabled body might threaten the able-bodied, able-minded reproductive lineage that the figure of the Child is supposed to secure. The medical rationales applied to Ashley demonstrate how reproductive futurism operates materially by directly intervening in body-subjects deemed incapable of desired reproductive futures. In rendering Ashley incapable of reproduction, the contradiction that her developing body posed to the logic of reproductive futurism was supposedly resolved.

This logic operates across multiple registers; Ashley's uterus and breast buds were leveraged on interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels as both discursive and material tools for constructing and enforcing a set of shared sociocultural expectations that, at a given point in an individual's linear-progressive life trajectory, determine how their body and mind should function, with any deviations being either mitigated, corrected, or eliminated. The idea that the "age" of the body and mind must align invokes linearity as the prevailing temporal norm. Ashley's developing female body, according to that framework, did not match the alleged static condition of her cognitive development. Thus, she was subject to interventions designed to halt her physical growth and the anticipated progressive development of her secondary sex characteristics. Her caregivers insisted upon the unprovable¹⁷ assumption that her mind would remain in a permanent state of infancy, which in their estimation justified modifying Ashley's body to 'match' her mind as a means of correcting that perceived aberrance.

¹⁷ McDonald (2007); Pyne (2007); Hershey (2007); AAIDD (2007); Kirschner et al. (2007); Kittay (2011).

It is an insistence on the naturalness of linear-progressive time which enables its deployment in the medical context as an identificatory tool used to mark body-subjects like Ashley as deviant. Furthermore, the temporal logics of the normative developmental schedule necessitate a biologization of gender and sex,¹⁸ since an individual's linear-progressive life trajectory is typically marked by the development of primary sex organs and secondary sex characteristics.¹⁹ In Ashley's case, apprehension surrounding her developing female body was vital to constructing the rationale for her treatment: her parents cite bioethicist George Dvorsky, who, in an assessment of the Ashley treatment, claims, "The estrogen treatment is not what is grotesque here. Rather, it is the prospect of having a full-grown and fertile woman endowed with the mind of a baby" ("The Ashley Treatment" 12). Dvorsky's use of the word "grotesque" inadvertently evokes a cultural history in which disabled bodies (and, in particular, disabled female bodies) have been regarded as monstrous, from the freak shows of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that put disabled people on display as spectacles to the enforcement of "ugly laws" that sought to remove them from public view. To name Ashley's imagined future body grotesque marks her as requiring preemptive containment. Regarding Dvorsky's assessment, Alison Kafer observes that it is "Ashley's femaleness, or future femaleness, [which] rendered her atemporality particularly grotesque" to the people around her (49). Kafer's observation foregrounds how reproductive capacity becomes a marker for temporal deviance,

¹⁸ In "The Misuses of Biological Sex," Katrina Karkazis argues, "Biological definitions of sex are at odds with the understanding that sex involves multiple biological and social factors. They are also at odds with social scientific work that complicates the idea that sex is biological whereas gender is cultural; sex, as much as gender, is culturally contingent and produced" (1898). In Ashley's case, GAT is justified by her parents and physicians because her body fails to follow the culturally prescribed sequence of sexual development that has been framed as universal and inevitable.

¹⁹ For example, the event of puberty is usually associated with the development of secondary sex characteristics (hips, breasts, body hair, etc.) and the capacity to reproduce (menses), marking the beginning of a biological and social shift from "child" to "adult."

where Ashley's potential fertility coupled with her cognitive disability is constructed as a grotesque misalignment requiring correction.

A new materialist reading reveals what such a construction obscures, because it understands the problem at hand as emerging from specific intra-actions between Ashley and her environment. Put differently, Ashley's size and continued growth only become an excess in relation to a world built for normative, abled body-subjects. From this perspective the burden felt by her parents is a product of the ongoing relations between Ashley and an environment that is not designed or equipped to accommodate her. This reframing reveals the normative developmental schedule as a tool that obscures those kinds of relational dynamics. By focusing solely on the individual body's deviation from a typical developmental trajectory, the medicoscientific logic fails to consider how Ashley's environment might be reconfigured. A new materialist lens²⁰ enables the exposure of the temporal synchrony advocated for by Ashley's parents and doctors as a political and ethical choice that prioritizes bodily conformity to normative developmental schedules and elides the intra-active production of disability. It also provides the analytical tools for reading the PillowAngel blog as a material participant in the project of fixing Ashley in time and place.

²⁰ In Michael Feely's 2016 article "Disability Studies after the Ontological Turn," he makes the case that new materialism offers a useful lens for understanding the embodied experiences of disability. Feely contends that a new materialist approach to disability "allows us to combine the benefits of older poststructuralist theories—the ability to contest oppressive identity categories—with a thorough engagement with material reality and material embodiment" (864). Furthermore, Feely's work asserts that "it is perhaps most productive to think of affect and discourse as different but inextricably linked and mutually affecting. Doing this allows us to move beyond purely discursive accounts of disability and also to consider the importance of visceral experience, which may include pain" (872). Furthermore, in their 2023 article "A New-Materialist Reading of Disability," Susan Flynn and Michael Feely identify new materialism as "equipped to deal with the corporeality of impairment and the embodiment of self" (102), contending that "[ontology, the status of life and of the human] are central to the intersection of disability, senescence, and the life-course when viewed from a social justice perspective" (102). Flynn and Feely's frameworks allow for my argument that the logic of temporal synchrony imposed a specific, normative ontology of the human, where the corporeality of the body must align with a particular stage of selfhood, onto Ashley via medical and surgical intervention.

Constructing Fixity Through Form and Narrative

Alongside clinical rationales, the argument for intervening in Ashley's development was carefully constructed and disseminated through her parents' blog, *PillowAngel*. The blog functions as the central platform for this construction, aggregating articles written by Ashley's physicians, positively connotated interview transcripts, several digital photo albums of Ashley containing both family photos and medical imaging, and a comment section with affirming comments from other parents of severely disabled children who either sought GAT for their children or have a child on whom GAT had already been performed. The blog's content repeatedly and explicitly argues for fixing Ashley's body at a single, static point in the normative developmental schedule, aiming to create and maintain a state of permanent childlikeness. However, the blog's role in this project is not only rhetorical: its form as a material and narrative entity works to enact the stasis for which it advocates.

Typically, a personal blog is a space where someone speaks for themselves,²¹ but *PillowAngel* operates on a fundamentally different dynamic. Ashley's parents speak for her, and she is positioned as the object in their narrative rather than a subject in her own right. Through this narrative framing, her parents construct a closed account of Ashley's life and medical treatment, in which their decisions are presented as unequivocally ethical and necessary. The blog leaves no opening for changed minds or alternative perspectives;²² in doing so, it attempts

²¹ Rebecca Blood, "Weblogs: A History and Perspective," (2000).

²² As her parents state in "The Ashley Treatment," "It seems that [critics of GAT] are thinking of a child who is mostly normal or who might progress to approach normal" (11). As well, in one of the *PillowAngel* updates, they respond directly to disability scholars who comment on the unethicity of The Ashley Treatment. In the update dated 09 January 2007, they present three summaries of common arguments against GAT followed by their brief rebuttals for each:

- (1) "Parents stop the growth of their daughter ..." our daughter stopped growing mentally and intellectually years ago, when she was a few months old.
- (2) "Parents removed breasts so that daughter is not sexualized ..." her almond-sized breast buds (not breasts) were removed to prevent her breasts from growing uncomfortably large; we cited the non-sexualization as a side benefit.
- (3) Some articles fail to clarify up front that our daughter is severely disabled, in a small and extreme category of disability, leaving their audience with the image of a mildly disabled girl – which is what most people have a direct experience with – which would indeed make the Ashley Treatment shockingly inappropriate.

to exert control over how she is remembered and understood, constructing a past in which Ashley's developing body is framed as a burden and a future in which she is rendered static, small, and manageable. This attempt is embedded in the very structure of PillowAngel.

The blog's dated posts are organized in reverse chronological order (most recent updates first), which creates a permanent record that functions like a time capsule. It works to preserve a specific narrative about Ashley from a set of carefully curated moments, enshrining those as the definitive and permanent story of her life. The "updates" section, for example, reinforces an already-established stasis, offering only confirmation of her parents' original decision and its enduring correctness.²³ In this way, the PillowAngel blog actively works to fix the meaning of her life as well as Ashley herself; both are trapped within an interpretive framework that does not wish to permit revision or a future beyond what Ashley's parents have already written for her.

This archival logic extends to the visual economy of PillowAngel, which reifies its narrative project of fixity. The blog features a collection of photographs that capture Ashley as a small child, usually in bed, surrounded by the titular pillows and occasionally posed with family members. Its visual repetition constructs a curated image of Ashley; the viewer is presented with no alternative imagery that might suggest growth, aging, or change. PillowAngel's online

A few important things are happening in this passage: in the first rebuttal, their correction of breasts to "almond sized breast buds" minimizes what was removed and suggests that critics are imagining something more significant than what actually happened. In the second rebuttal, they reframe sexualization prevention as a "side benefit" in order to position it as incidental rather than a central motivation. And finally, their third argument—that criticism of GAT depends on imagining Ashley as "mildly disabled" and that if critics come to understand her as belonging to a "small/extreme category of disability" the treatment can only be seen as appropriate—functions to position any criticism of GAT as inherently a misunderstanding. Their aim with this update is to turn disagreement with GAT into evidence that critics are failing to actually understand Ashley's condition and are imagining her as more capable than she actually is. Their rebuttals reveal the extent to which the entire project of GAT relies on a particular construction of Ashley as so different from normal that the typical ethical frameworks don't apply anymore and she can be treated in ways that for anyone else would be unthinkable.

²³ In an update dated 31 December 2007, Ashley's parents write, "Ashley today weighs 63 pounds and is 53 inches (4' 5") tall, unchanged from a year ago when we stopped the estrogen therapy!" And, a few years later, in an update dated 12 January 2010, they note that "Ashley continues at a stable 65 pounds and 53 inches." As well, in the 2008 CNN interview transcript, her father remarks that "[GAT] has been successful in every expected way. Her recovery from surgery was quick and uneventful, the scars are barely visible. There have been no side effects to the estrogen therapy. Ashley did not grow in height or weight in the last year, she will always be flat-chested, and she will never suffer any menstrual pain, cramps, or bleeding!"

audience is therefore denied the imaginative space to conceive of Ashley as anything other than the successfully fixed perpetual child that GAT was designed to produce. In this way the materiality of the photographs themselves enacts the same logic as GAT: the medical interventions seek to capture Ashley's body at a single developmental moment and hold her there in perpetuity, and the blog's visual archive captures her image at that moment and puts it before viewers as the only possible representation. The photographs not only document the project of fixing Ashley but participate in that project.

PillowAngel's visual project is also perpetuated by the inequity in how photographic subjects are depicted. Throughout the three albums hosted by the blog, Ashley's face remains fully visible and is presented openly for public consumption, while her family's faces are nearly always either blurred or censored with black boxes.²⁴ That visual discrepancy enacts a power dynamic in which Ashley's parents position themselves and Ashley's siblings as protected subjects who retain their privacy and anonymity,²⁵ while Ashley herself is the perpetual object of the public gaze who is available for scrutiny without reciprocal protection. Her body and face are put forward as evidence for the ethical correctness of decisions made about her without her consent. The visual logic of PillowAngel thus reifies the larger project of the blog, where Ashley is placed in a position of absolute exposure and her parents retain the power to intervene without being fully accountable to the gaze they invite.

Just as the blog's visual elements deny Ashley agency, its central symbol works to deny her lively capacity for movement and change. The very name PillowAngel centers a material

²⁴ I have elected not to include a visual example in this chapter, in order to avoid repeating the same inequitable power dynamic perpetuated by Ashley's parents.

²⁵ Her father addresses their reasoning for keeping the identities of everyone but Ashley private: "When the story first broke in the pediatrics journal and sparked media controversy, we – Ashley's mom and I – realized that it was potentially a deeply controversial story. So, with three small children to care for, we chose the surest way to safeguard our family and decided to stay anonymous" (Pilkington).

object that is intended to support the project of stasis for Ashley but also invokes the specific theological metaphor of the angel. In Christian iconography, angels are usually depicted as static, unchanging beings that exist outside the realm of human growth or corporeal transformation. The blog discursively removes Ashley from the temporal world of becoming by framing her as an angel, denying her the capacity for change. Her pillows enforce this angelic stasis; in the context of the blog and its documentation of GAT, pillows are tools for positioning and immobilizing her body. As her parents explain, “we call her our Pillow Angel since she is so sweet and stays right where we place her—usually on a pillow” (1). Their description reveals the underlying presumption that Ashley’s sweetness is explicitly linked to her immobility and her compliance in staying “right where we place her.” But this raises the critical question of whether, without pillows, Ashley would move. The answer is that she likely would; the need for pillows as restraints implies that Ashley retains an innate capacity for movement that the pillows are used to suppress. They can be understood as materially holding Ashley in place and maintaining the static configuration that GAT was designed to preserve. This material condition finds its discursive counterpart in the blog’s narrative project, where its language and imagery portray Ashley in a static state of smallness and childlikeness. The pillow is both a literal instrument for physical stasis and the discursive center of a project that refuses Ashley any trajectory toward development or change. By interrogating the term “angel,” we come to understand how the project is about fixing Ashley’s identity in a realm where physical, developmental, or temporal movement is unthinkable.

The counterpart to the pillow’s material work can be found in the language PillowAngel uses to rationalize fixing Ashley in time. Her parents and physicians represent GAT as a medically necessary intervention to maintain her body in a permanently static configuration.

Every procedure performed on Ashley is framed as preempting futures that her parents have deemed undesirable and/or unmanageable. Their logic is consistently one of containment, where Ashley must be prevented from developing in ways she might otherwise do (e.g., menstruating, growing) because her bodily processes are understood as problems to be corrected rather than experiences to be accommodated. Through the language of preventative care PillowAngel constructs a framework in which fixing Ashley's body is rationalized as an ethical imperative, foreclosing any alternative imagining of what her life and body might have been allowed to become.

That discursive framework is made apparent on the "Interview" page of PillowAngel, where Ashley's father explicitly defines her identity in terms that justify the project of fixity. In the provided transcript of an interview by an anonymized interviewer for an "in-progress documentary," he states that "cognitively Ashley is approximately three months old. As such, her identity or self is a baby's needs for comfort, nurture, nourishment that she had and has and we hope will always have in abundance." Ashley's identity in this framing is entirely constructed around her cognitive assessment in a way that reduces her personhood to the needs of an infant and explicitly hopes that this condition will persist indefinitely. Ashley's supposed infantile state is regarded as aspirational and desirable. The hope that she will "always" remain at that cognitive level provides the ontological foundation for the medical interventions that follow. If Ashley's identity is already that of a baby, and her family hopes that will never change, then fixing her in a corresponding state of childlike physicality is viewed as fidelity to who Ashley really is. Any possibility that Ashley's sense of self might exceed what can be measured or reported by others, that her personhood might reside in something other than her cognitive capacity or that it might have something to do with her embodiment, is foreclosed from the outset.

That logic extends to how her relationship to identity is conceptualized. Consider how Ashley's father frames the relationship between Ashley's body and the category of womanhood later in the same interview, where he speculates that,

Physically, without [GAT], she would in all probability have matured into the typical body of a grown female human. However, her cognitive level would never enable her to become a woman. She profoundly and permanently lacks the intellect, agency, decision making, and all other mental aspects of womanhood due to her infant's brain and not to any bodily changes.

Ashley's father conceptually separates the physical body and the category of "womanhood," arguing that because Ashley will never possess the cognitive capacities associated with adult female personhood, her physical maturation is unnecessary and inappropriate. By his logic, womanhood is defined entirely through cognitive attributes (intellect, agency, decision making), and because Ashley is presumed to be incapable of these, her body must be prevented from reaching a condition that her mind cannot authentically inhabit. This framing legitimizes GAT as an intervention by suggesting that Ashley's "infant's brain" already constitutes a kind of developmental stasis; GAT merely extends its preexisting reality to Ashley's body by aligning her physical state with her cognitive state. The rationale is that a body can only be legitimately woman if it is accompanied by a particular set of cognitive capacities, and that Ashley, absent those capacities, should be prevented from following her own developmental trajectory.

The logic that separates Ashley from the category of womanhood provides the foundation for the specific interventions performed upon her. Prevailing assumptions about which bodies deserve to develop and which must be prevented from doing so are made explicit when Ashley's father turns to the question of her hysterectomy, about which he argues that,

[Hysterectomy] should be a decision focused on individual needs and individual circumstances, free of politics, ideology or philosophy. The aim was to spare Ashley pain, suffering, and other complications. It is a preventative measure. All other considerations take a back seat to what is in Ashley's interest to live as physically

comfortable as possible given her unique challenges and infant's inability to understand or endure and rationalize pain as temporary.

Her parents are attempting to position the hysterectomy as existing beyond political or ethical contestation, and to frame it as a neutral medical decision that is driven by Ashley's individual needs. Her father's invocation of "politics, ideology, or philosophy" as things to be excluded from consideration functions to dismiss any potential critics as motivated by abstract concerns that have no place in the real-world decisions being made about Ashley. But his statement is itself ideological, relying on assumptions about what constitutes Ashley's best interests and about the legitimacy of preemptively removing healthy organs to prevent possible future sensations. Especially significant is his framing of Ashley's "inability to understand or endure and rationalize pain as temporary," which leverages her cognitive condition as a justification for eliminating any bodily experience that might require interpretation or endurance. Because Ashley cannot "rationalize pain as temporary," she has to be protected from the very possibility of experiencing it, even if the pain being prevented is speculative while the pain of and following surgical intervention is guaranteed. The decision is presented as medical pragmatism even as it relies on an underlying claim about which body-subjects deserve to experience the full range of human physicality and which must be kept from the unpredictability of development.

The refusal to consider Ashley's capability for sensations aside from suffering²⁶ is apparent in the way her parents rationalize the removal of her uterus and breast buds. In their

²⁶ As Kafer argues, "missing from this discussion of Ashley's quality of life is the possibility of pleasure; how might the Treatment have foreclosed upon a range of potential sites and sources of pleasure? [...] It seems equally possible, however, that she would have experienced pleasure from those imagined large breasts: the sensation of her shirt moving against her skin, or of her skin moving against her sheets, or of her own arms brushing against her breasts. Even the tight chest straps holding her in her chair could have been sources of pleasure: perhaps she would enjoy the sensation of support, or take pleasure in the alternation between binding and release as she was moved in and out of her wheelchair" (65) And, she adds that, "the inability or unwillingness to imagine these pleasures is a manifestation of cultural approaches to female sexuality and disability. It is seemingly inconceivable to imagine Ashley's body—her disabled female body—as the source of any sensation other than pain. We have few tools for recognizing female sexuality, particularly disabled female sexuality, as positive; nor can we recognize the potential for a self-generated and self-directed sexuality" (Kafer 65).

self-published article posted to PillowAngel called “The ‘Ashley Treatment’: for a Better Quality of Life,” they write that,

The Hysterectomy involved removing Ashley’s two inch pencil sized uterus but keeping her ovaries to maintain her hormonal cycle and the generation of her natural hormones. Ashley has no need for her uterus since she will not be bearing children. Hysterectomy prevents the discomfort, cramps and bleeding that are so commonly associated with the menstrual cycle. (10)

The minimization of Ashley’s uterus continues the rhetorical strategy of rendering body parts insignificant and therefore easily dispensable. The notion that Ashley won’t need her uterus is applied based only on its reproductive function. This ignores the role of her uterus in Ashley’s embodied experience of herself; that it is hers, and part of her. The decision to keep her ovaries while removing her uterus works to eliminate the visible evidence of menstruation that would require management and interpretation. Ashley will still experience hormonal shifts and still have a cycle, but her parents will not have to contend with the physical evidence of her mature female body. The intervention manages not only Ashley’s body, then, but the whole family’s relationship with it. Likewise, her parents argue, “Ashley has no need for developed breasts since she will not breast feed and their presence would only be a source of discomfort to her...Before the surgery Ashley had already exhibited sensitivity in her breasts” (10). The same logic is applied here as to her uterus: because they will not serve a particular reproductive function, they are unnecessary and any potential discomfort they might cause is sufficient reason to preemptively remove them. The mention of Ashley’s breast sensitivity works to position the breast bud removal as addressing an already-present problem. But that framing ignores the possibility that breast sensitivity might be a normal part of development, that discomfort might be temporary or manageable, and that removing her breasts is an extreme intervention that would rarely be justified for an abled child, not to mention that breast sensitivity could initiate

pleasurable sensations for her. The assumption that Ashley should not be exposed to the normal discomforts of development reveals an underlying anxiety on the part of her parents about her inability to communicate or interpret her own experiences. Because she cannot tell them what she feels or wants, their response is to eliminate as many variables as possible and to make her body as static and predictable as they imagine her mind to be.

The anxiety that drives the removal of Ashley's uterus and breast buds also shapes how her parents narrate the temporality of GAT. In a 2012 interview with *The Guardian* several years after GAT was concluded for Ashley, her father describes the treatments as having

accelerated Ashley's puberty rather than inhibit it. In girls, puberty is caused by a surge of estrogen; the Ashley treatment added estrogen so that Ashley's growth would conclude at an earlier age and a smaller size. Today at 14, Ashley is still an infant cognitively, as she was at birth and five years ago. (Pilkington)

Importantly, GAT is portrayed by his response as an intervention that simply accelerates puberty's conclusion, rather than one that prevents it entirely. Puberty is allowed to happen, just faster, so that its end point arrives earlier and Ashley's body is preserved at a more manageable size. The rhetorical effect is to normalize GAT as a small adjustment in timing rather than a fundamental disruption of bodily development. The repetitive juxtaposition in the final sentence—"Today at 14, Ashley is still an infant cognitively, as she was at birth and five years ago"—positions GAT as bringing Ashley's body into alignment with her mind's already established fixity. And having established her mind as fixed, her father's later descriptions work to reinforce that fixity through a list of what Ashley cannot do: he asserts that "Ashley is still an infant cognitively. She cannot talk, although she vocalizes, as she did five years ago. She does not track and follow with her eyes, point at or grip a toy. Her capability level is essentially that of a newborn's. In all medical probability, Ashley will never develop beyond early infancy level." This catalogue of her perceived incapacities establishes the grounds on which Ashley's parents'

decisions rely. Her father is presenting evidence that Ashley exists outside the bounds of normative development, and that her “capability level” will never change. Notably, there is no account of what Ashley can do or of how she might express herself or relate to the world on her own terms: her “vocalizations,” for instance, are mentioned only in the context of dismissing them as not constituting meaningful speech. The medical probability that Ashley will “never develop,” because development is defined so narrowly, forecloses the possibility of any other kind of growth or change. She is fixed in place both by GAT and by the language that is used to describe her, which refuses alternative interpretations of her capacities to relate to the world around her.

Indeed, the rhetorical strategies used in PillowAngel’s one-slide summary of The Ashley Treatment reveal how language participates in the project of fixing Ashley. By referring to Ashley’s breast buds as “almond size glands” and her uterus as “tiny,” her parents minimize these organs, rendering them insignificant and therefore not worth preserving. The clinical terminology on the slide works to strip Ashley’s body parts of their significance and reduce them to biological tissues with no connection to identity or embodied experience. The phrase “avoid sexualization toward caregiver” is particularly revealing of some of the anxieties underpinning GAT. The concern that Ashley might be sexualized by caregivers implicitly acknowledges the vulnerability inherent in her dependence on others for intimate care, but the solution offered by her parents and doctors is to alter her body to make it less legible as sexually mature, instead of ensuring that caregivers are trustworthy and that systems of accountability are in place.²⁷ The clinical language that minimizes Ashley’s body parts, and the anxiety about sexualization that

²⁷ Ironically, Ashley’s parents repeatedly state that GAT was designed to limit caregiving to themselves and other immediate family members, ensuring that no one else would need to be entrusted with her body. In “The ‘Ashley Treatment’: for a Better Quality of Life,” they write, “other than her Mom and Dad the only additional caregivers entrusted to Ashley’s care are her two Grandmothers, who find Ashley’s weight even more difficult to manage. We tried hard and found it impossible to find qualified, trustworthy, and affordable care providers” (8).

underlies it, are part of a consistent rhetorical framework for understanding Ashley's body as a site of problems to be mitigated or corrected.

The culmination of that rhetorical project appears in the article's conclusion, where Ashley's parents describe themselves as "very fortunate that Ashley is a healthy child, outside her abnormal mental development, and is in a stable condition" (12). This brief statement encapsulates the paradoxical logic underlying the entire GAT project: Ashley is described as healthy despite the extensive medical and surgical interventions, and her condition is described as stable precisely because those interventions have supposedly succeeded in halting her development. The phrase "outside her abnormal mental development" positions her cognitive condition as the single deviation from an otherwise healthy state. The family counts themselves "fortunate" that Ashley's body has proven amenable to the project of fixing her in place, and that she has remained stable. But that framing depends on an understanding of fortune that only allows for a body that submits to intervention and that remains exactly where it is placed. A different understanding of Ashley, which reveals the impossibility of the stasis they have claimed to have achieved, becomes possible when we read against the grain of her parents' narrative.

Material Agency and the Failure of Fixity

A feminist new materialist reading of *PillowAngel* offers a counternarrative to the project of stasis that Ashley's parents and physicians have so carefully constructed to rationalize GAT. This theoretical framework begins from the premise that matter is not inert or passive but is itself always becoming, always in relation, and always exceeding the categories we impose upon it. From that perspective, a body-subject cannot actually be fixed or static.²⁸ Ashley's continued

²⁸ Eva Kittay writes of her daughter, who was also diagnosed with static encephalopathy, "Like Ashley, Sesha is so loving and easy to love that her impossible-to-articulate sweetness and emotional openness make it tempting to call her an 'angel.' Still, we refrain. To love Sesha as she is, we must accept that, unlike an angel, she has a body that grows and ages" (Wilfond et al. 32).

existence constitutes a form of material agency that constantly escapes and exceeds the perpetual child label that has been imposed on her. Even as the blog works to fix her in language and image, her body persists in its own agency in ways that no amount of narrative control can fully contain.

Feminist new materialism also insists on the fundamental relationality of all body-subjects: rather than discrete or self-contained individuals we are deeply entangled with our material environments, with which we are in constant interchange.²⁹ Ashley is no exception. She is entangled with the pillows that hold her in place, the caregivers who move and position her, the medical technologies that interact with and alter her physicality, the social attitudes about disability that shape how her life is understood, and the material realities of menstruation and breast development that her caregivers worked so hard to foreclose. These entanglements persist regardless of PillowAngel's attempts to fix her meaning; they constantly produce new relations, possibilities, and ways of being that exceed staticity. A disability studies perspective further enriches this by challenging the mind/body dualism that underpins so much of the rationale for GAT (that Ashley's mind can be separated from her developing body and that the former should determine the fate of the latter). The concept of the bodymind³⁰ insists on their inextricability from one another and suggests that Ashley's personhood is fundamentally embodied. Ashley herself is a site of being and becoming. Thinking with Donna Haraway,³¹ we might understand

These words call for an embodied, process-based ethics of care. The very possibility of loving Sessa is located in the acceptance of her constant becoming. To "refrain" from calling Sessa an angel is to accept her full humanity as inseparable from her bodily existence.

²⁹ Barad (2007); Bennett (2010); Alaimo (2010); Mitchell, Antebi, and Snyder (2019).

³⁰ In her 2011 book *Mad at School*, Margaret Price coined the term "bodymind" to emphasize the interdependent relationship between the body and mind. In a later article, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," she states that bodymind is designed to acknowledge that "mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two" (Price 269). The term has since become significant to disability theory and to disability justice movements.

³¹ As Haraway asserts in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, "Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines" (11) She continues on to state that her "cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent

Ashley (and all body-subjects) to be a kind of cyborg body-subject; not in the sense of being part machine, but in the sense of being entangled with technologies, interventions, and discourses that reshape what a body-subject can be and do. Ashley, despite (or maybe even because of) the interventions performed upon her, exceeds the categorization of perpetual child by continuing to live, be, and relate in ways that no blog post or medical documentation can fully capture or control.

Indeed, PillowAngel's own form and content betray the project that it is trying to advance. There are plenty of cracks in the narrative through which Ashley's agential and dynamic materiality escapes her parents' framing. She exceeds the blog's attempts to contain her, paradoxically, through its own testimony. A blog is not actually a static form: it is a living document that can be edited and updated, which, in the case of PillowAngel, Ashley's parents continue to do. Even as the reverse chronological structure of the blog's updates insists that nothing has changed,³² it also records the procession of time. The fact that there is something to report reveals a temporality that the narrative of fixity can't completely suppress. The blog is therefore a kind of monument to the project of stopping time, even as its material form as an ongoing, accumulating archive testifies to time's forward movement. And Ashley's body continues to exist in time and register the passing years, even if her development can't be classified as normative.

PillowAngel's reverse chronological structure represents Ashley's parents' attempt to impose a static timeline, yet the body-subject they describe refuses to stay within its bounds. Consider, for example, how their own account of Ashley's daily existence undermines the logic

fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (14) and notes that "sex, sexuality, and reproduction are central actors in hi-tech myth systems structuring our imaginations of personal and social possibility" (44).

³² e.g., the repeated posts recording that her height and weight remain basically the same over the course of the years since GAT was completed.

that they use to rationalize GAT. In “‘The Ashley Treatment’: For a Better Quality of Life,” her parents observe that

Ashley is alert and aware of her environment; she startles easily. She constantly moves her arms and kicks her legs. Sometimes she seems to be watching TV intently. She loves music and often gets in celebration mode of vocalizing, kicking, and choreographing/conducting with her hands when she connects with a song (Andrea Bocelli is her favorite – we call him her boyfriend). She rarely makes eye-contact even when it is clear that she is aware of a person’s presence next to her. Ashley goes to school in a classroom for special needs children, which provides her with daily bus trips, activities customized for her, and a high level of attention by her teachers and therapists.
(1)

This description inadvertently reveals the agentic materiality their project of fixity seeks to contain. Ashley is not passive or inert but is instead “alert and aware” and constantly in motion. She responds to music through “vocalizing, kicking, and choreographing [...] when she connects with a song,” a bodily engagement with sound that testifies to her capacity for affective response and sensory pleasure. In other words, this description demonstrates that Ashley is always in process and always becoming in relation with her environment. She connects with and bodily responds to Bocelli’s music; in that way, she is revealed to be in a state of ongoing intra-action with her world. The fact that she “startles easily” reveals a bodymind that is open to its environment, responsive to stimuli, capable of both affecting and being affected. Despite all narrative and material attempts to fix her in place and time, Ashley continues to respond and relate.

What emerges from the descriptions of her daily existence is a body-subject whose personhood is inseparable from her material capacity to register and respond to the world. In his interview with *The Guardian*, for instance, Ashley’s father maintains that “what is meaningful to [Ashley] is to be able to enjoy those things she can enjoy: being with family, hearing music, cuddling. Ashley shows enjoyment for being included in family activities. She kicks her legs and

orchestrates her arms, she makes little happy sounds, her face radiates with smiles” (Pilkington). This is Ashley in process, expressing herself through the concrete materiality of kicking, smiling, cuddling, vocalizing. Her capacity for being affected and affecting others in return testifies to an agency that PillowAngel’s narrative fails to contain. Ashley’s is a body that undeniably registers and responds to the material conditions of its existence.

The logic of growth attenuation depends on a particular understanding of Ashley’s body as static and immobile, which her parents’ own account paradoxically unsettles. Ashley’s father contends that

Ashley is not mobile. She cannot walk, crawl, or scoot. Her smaller size allows her caregivers, mostly her parents and her grandparents, to move her frequently throughout the day, repositioning her to prevent bedsores and to aid circulation. We carry her or wheel her to keep her with us in the house, go on walks, get fresh air, and so on. (Pilkington)

The insistence on her immobility is undercut by his description of all the movement that characterizes her daily life. Ashley is carried, wheeled, etc., actions that position her in space and time. That she must be moved “frequently throughout the day” testifies to her body’s material existence as something that requires ongoing interaction and that cannot be perpetually still. It is precisely because Ashley is alive, and because she is always in process rather than static, that this constant attention is necessary. The daily labor of lifting, carrying, wheeling, and repositioning evinces a body-subject that exceeds any attempt at fixity. From a new materialist perspective, the care practices Ashley’s father describes are forms of intra-action that position her as continually becoming in relation to her caregivers and environment, always requiring response and always exceeding the fixed position. Rather than the static object GAT presumes, Ashley is a being in living process that, as her father inadvertently reveals later in the interview, continues to advance: “we’d love for Ashley to be able to do more,” he admits. “The kind of developments

that we've observed with her along the years include: being able to hold her head up, stick her thumb in her mouth, and touch her hair behind her ear. These were big milestones for her and very exciting developments for us" (Pilkington). This is yet another point at which his descriptions of Ashley contradict the narrative of fixity; in this instance, he is documenting actual change in her capacities over time. That developments can be observed and milestones can be reached means that Ashley is responsive to her own material possibilities. Even her father's stated desire that Ashley "be able to do more" concedes a future horizon of possibility and a sense that her capacities might continue to unfold in ways that cannot be fully predicted or controlled. In other words, Ashley keeps becoming.

This becoming is enacted daily through Ashley's relational presence within her family. Her parents' description of Ashley's role in her family undermines the project of fixing her in place by revealing her as a dynamic presence who actively shapes her relational environment:

Ashley brings a lot of love to our family and is a bonding factor in our relationship. She has a sweet demeanor and often smiles and expresses delight when we visit with her, we think she recognizes us but can't be sure. She has a younger sister and brother. We constantly feel the desire to visit her room (her favorite place with special lights and colorful displays) or have her company, wanting to be in her aura of positive energy. We're often gathered around her holding her hand, thus sensing a powerful connection with her pure,³³ innocent and angelic spirit. As often as we can we give her position changes and back rubs, sweet talk her, move her to social and engaging places, and manage her entertainment setting (music or TV). In return she inspires abundant love in our hearts, so effortlessly; she is such a blessing in our life! (3)

Ashley is described as someone who "brings love," "inspires abundant love," and creates an "aura of positive energy" that draws her family to her. The language of reciprocity ("in return")

³³ "Pure" in this passage carries ideological weight. First, it functions within a constellation of descriptors (innocent, angelic, sweet) that construct Ashley as outside of ordinary human development and work to preserve her in a perpetual infancy that rationalizes medical interventions designed to keep her body aligned with that perceived state. Secondly, the attribution of purity also evokes a eugenic trope that Ashley's value lies in what she gives to others (bonding, abundant love, blessings) rather than in her own personhood, rendering her worth contingent on those. And, importantly, "pure" can be read against Dvorsky's later assessment of Ashley's potential future body as "grotesque," where purity designates the static, controlled child's body, while grotesqueness designates the fertile, adult female body. That pure/grotesque binary has been historically used to rationalize the sterilization and medical control of disabled people whose bodies' capacities to exceed the categories imposed upon them are read as a threat to the social order.

positions Ashley as an agent in her own right whose presence and demeanor actively affect those around her, shaping their desires and drawing them into relation with her. The family gathers around her, holds her hand, rubs her back, speaks to her, moves her around; all of these are forms of intra-action that mean Ashley is an active participant in ongoing relational dynamics. They are not static conditions but ongoing processes that the framing of fixity is unable to contain. Even her parents' uncertainty about whether she recognizes them testifies to the sense that there is more to Ashley than can be captured or known.

And Ashley's relational becoming is not limited to the affective bonds she creates; it extends to the most quotidian material interactions of her daily care. For instance, in an interview with *CNN* in 2008, Ashley's parents note that "on an hourly basis we give her a position change and prop her back on her pillow; we make sure she is well covered and pull her shirt down to cover her tummy; we wipe her drool, etc. Also there are diaper changes, tube feedings, dressing, bathing, teeth cleaning, stretching, entertainment, etc." A new materialist reading of this description sees Ashley as requiring continuous intra-action with her caregivers. The fact that she has to be "propped back on her pillow" hourly reveals that she does not simply stay where she is placed; her body moves and requires repositioning. The pillow, even as it is portrayed as a symbol of her "sweetness" and angelic fixity, is actually a site of repeated intervention and a material object that must be constantly re-engaged as Ashley exceeds her initial placement. Indeed, the pillow actually demonstrates the impossibility of the fixity it is supposed to represent. Her parents' description of her, that "she is so sweet and stays right where we place her—usually on a pillow" (1), does the opposite of what it intends. The fact that Ashley must be placed on a pillow by her caregivers reveals her agentic participation in a complex material assemblage. Placement is an act that must be done and done again, because Ashley is alive and processual

and requires ongoing acts of care. The pillow, instead of being a site of fixity, can be understood as a locus of repeated intra-action: an agentic material object that mediates the ongoing relation between Ashley and the labor of her caregivers. Its failure to contain her mirrors a deeper instability within the entire project of GAT.

That instability emerges in Ashley's physicians' own acknowledgements of what they do not and cannot know; they admit in documents attached to the blog that that GAT was "a novel, untested medical intervention" and they could "only speculate" about what its effects would be. These moments of uncertainty reveal the impossibility of the stasis project from within its own rationale. Drs. Gunther and Diekema admit they are proceeding without precedent and without knowledge of outcomes or total certainty about what will happen. Their acknowledgement of uncertainty is an acknowledgement of the fundamental unpredictability of body-subjects: one cannot fix a body-subject because body-subjects are ultimately unfixable. They are always becoming in ways that evade prediction and control. The blog, for all its attempts to construct a narrative of successful fixity, actually functions as a window into an ongoing process that exceeds such a narrative.

Toward a Feminist New Materialist Politics of Disability

PillowAngel presents itself as a record of parental love and a caring attempt to secure Ashley's future comfort and dignity. But beneath that framing lies the more troubling logic of a desire for temporal control over a body-subject that has been deemed asynchronous and therefore in need of management. Ashley's parents sought to arrest her development because her continued growth threatened to exceed the boundaries of a manageable life within their existing structures of care, not because she was suffering. The interventions they pursued functioned as an attempt to halt Ashley in time by rendering her body static, small, and therefore perpetually

manipulable. Interrogating this desire for temporal control necessitates a theoretical framework capable of accounting for the material complexity which it fails to acknowledge.

A feminist new materialist approach to Ashley's case requires that we think beyond individualizing and medicalized frameworks. From that perspective Ashley is a continually-becoming assemblage that is perpetually reconfigured through her intra-actions with other body-subjects, medical technologies, caregiving practices, social understandings of disability, political policies, natural and synthetic hormones, and built environments. This means acknowledging that Ashley's experience of her own life is co-constituted by non-human actants. It also requires that we shift our political imagination from the project of creating more easily controlled bodies to the project of creating better-equipped environments. In other words, if the problem identified in PillowAngel is Ashley's intra-action with a world that is unsuitable to accommodate her needs, the solution ought to be reconfiguring that world rather than medically altering her body. Ashley's father argues that "no amount of resources can replace the direct benefits to Ashley that [GAT] provides" (Pilkington). That assertion forecloses any alternative approaches to supporting Ashley in that it treats resource scarcity as an unchangeable fact rather than a failure of social and political will. The medical model of disability, as applied here, erases the ability to imagine structural and environmental accommodations for Ashley and her family. Ashley's own material agency, her knowledge and trajectory, and the possibility that her adult body might simply be a different way of being are elided by this perspective. Any genuine calculation of benefits or best interests ought to reckon with what has been foreclosed for Ashley as well as what has been achieved for her through the application of GAT, and must also ask why the effort invested in managing her body, and in encouraging other parents of disabled children to pursue GAT, was not directed at changing the external conditions of her life.

For disabled people, a politics of matter means an affirmative commitment to bodily difference in all its unpredictability, combined with a recognition of our relationality with the non-human world. The disability framework of the bodymind makes this inseparability clear, in that it reminds us that the body and the subject who inhabits it are a single, integrated reality; the notion of mind/body dualism is a fiction that functionally excludes those whose embodiments diverge from an imagined norm. This insight resonates with new materialism, which shifts attention from the isolated and self-contained subject to the complex entanglements of mind, body, and environment. Building on that convergence, a politics of matter insists on evaluating whole material assemblages rather than individuals. Such a politics would reject the arguments that position disabled body-subjects as in need of correction or cure, asking instead that we trade “quality of life” measurements for assessments of the flourishing of entire material assemblages.

Chapter 2

Unsettling Normative Development Through Trans Teen Life-Writing

Following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, the Reagan Era's promotion of conservative values and the rise of the religious right in the 80s and 90s, and escalating during the first Trump presidency, the aptly-named "culture war" seemingly occupies the forefront of contemporary American consciousness. Ongoing political conflicts pertaining to cultural values, embodied identities, and social norms reflect a broader struggle between liberal movements advocating for "diversity, equity, and inclusion" and conservative factions pressing for returns to tradition, a paradoxical individualism that requires ceding control of one's bodily autonomy to the government, and the advancement of white cultural heritage. The "culture war" has increasingly centered on debates surrounding gender identity with a marked recent rise in legislative efforts targeting trans individuals.¹

One such effort, Tennessee's Senate Bill 1, entitled "Prohibition on Medical Procedures Performed on Minors Related to Sexual Identity," enacts a blanket ban on gender-affirming care for transgender and genderqueer minors including puberty blockers, hormone therapies, and surgeries,² citing concerns about their long-term effects and the appropriateness of such treatments. After it was enacted in early 2023, the federal government sued Tennessee on equal

¹Analyzing these two legal texts within the current legal and political landscape during Trump's second term presents a unique temporal challenge: an attempt to capture the political, cultural, and bodily significance of a single fixed moment in an ongoing and rapidly evolving legal battlefield. The temporality of my analysis is shaped by the continuous introduction, and acceleration, of new anti-trans legislation at local, state, and national levels: during the initial draft of this chapter in Jan-March 2025, per the Trans Legislation Tracker, forty anti-trans bills have passed in the United States, with over 700 anti-trans bills pending at the national level and hundreds more active. My analysis of these texts is situated within this continually unfolding trajectory.

²A 2022 article in the *Tennessee Lookout* cites a letter from Dr. C. Wright Pinson, Deputy CEO and Chief Health Systems Officer at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, which states that the hospital's Transgender Health Clinic had performed an average of fewer than five gender-affirming surgeries for minors, none genital procedures. A corroborating CNN article confirms that the average was indeed fewer than five per year, none genital, none performed on minors under the age of sixteen, and all with parental consent, after extensive consultation with medical professionals and at least one year of social transition.

protection grounds, arguing that SB1 discriminates based on sex; a district court ruled in their favor, temporarily halting enforcement of the bill. However, the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the district court's ruling, concluding that Tennessee had a "rational basis" for enacting the law. Subsequently brought before the Supreme Court, arguments for *United States v. Skrametti* were heard on December 6, 2024, and on June 18, 2025, SCOTUS issued its decision to uphold SB1.

The passage of SB1, and the Biden administration's subsequent legal challenge, exemplify how state-level restrictions on gender-affirming care are key flashpoints in the ongoing "culture war" over trans rights and the role of government in personal healthcare decisions. SB1, taking effect in July of 2023, prohibits gender-affirming care including puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and surgeries for trans minors while allowing those same treatments for cisgender minors. As well, SB1 criminalizes healthcare providers who offer gender-affirming care to trans minors and mandates that trans minors currently receiving such care have their treatment discontinued by March of 2024. SB1's authors and proponents contend that the bill's purpose is to protect children from irreversible medical interventions, claiming that the state has a legitimate and compelling interest in preserving the capacity of minors to "develop into adults who can create children of their own."

In opposition, the United States submitted a brief to the Supreme Court in January of 2024 arguing that the Court should block SB1 on the grounds that it violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The responding brief argues that SB1 unlawfully discriminates on the basis of sex and transgender status by denying trans and genderqueer minors medical care that the bill continues to make available to their cisgender peers. The brief also

alleges that SB1 disregards established medical consensuses about the efficacy of gender-affirming care, and that a ban causes undue harm to affected youth.

In part, *U.S. v. Skrametti* hinges on the Court’s interpretation of whether transgender minors ought to be categorized as a “quasi-suspect class”: a legal term referring to any group of individuals that—while not considered as severely discriminated against as a “suspect class” like a racialized group—receives a heightened level of judicial scrutiny when laws differentiate based on their membership in that group, usually requiring the government to demonstrate a substantial relationship to an important government interest to justify the classification.³ Put simply, “quasi-suspect classes,” while not subject to the strictest possible judicial scrutiny, are still considered to have characteristics which warrant more careful review of laws that differentiate based on them before those laws can be enacted. What class is assigned to trans minors determines which of the three judicial review tests used to evaluate the constitutionality of laws—rational-basis review,⁴ intermediate scrutiny,⁵ or strict scrutiny⁶—should be applied to SB1. The plaintiffs argue for intermediate scrutiny on the basis that transgender identity demonstrably falls under the “quasi-suspect” categorization; the defendants argue that rational-basis review is sufficient and transgender identity is a “non-suspect class.”⁷

³ The marker “quasi-suspect class” is usually applied to gender and to citizenship status.

⁴ Rational-basis review, for which the defendants argue, is the default standard of review for most constitutional questions and the most lenient of the three judicial review tests. Rational-basis review usually applies to either economic regulations or non-suspect classifications; it requires that a law has a legitimate government interest, and that the means used to achieve that interest are rationally related.

⁵ Intermediate scrutiny, for which the plaintiffs argue, is the middle ground between the rational-basis test and the strict scrutiny test. It is typically used to review laws that employ quasi-suspect classifications. To pass the test, a law must be shown to further an important government interest, and to do so by means that are substantially related to that interest.

⁶ Strict scrutiny, the most demanding judicial review test, is used when a law affects fundamental rights or involves suspect classifications like race or religion. To pass this test, a law must be shown to serve a compelling governmental interest, be narrowly tailored to achieve that goal, and be the least restrictive means available.

⁷ On October 17, 2025, I attended a panel discussion titled “Transgender and the Law” hosted by the Simpson Center at the University of Washington, Seattle. One panelist, Kara Ingelhart (a Clinical Assistant Professor of Law at Northwestern and a contributor to *Skrametti*) noted that SCOTUS did not determine in their ruling on *U.S. v. Skrametti* whether discrimination on the basis of transgender status counts as sex discrimination: that determination is still on the table. Ingelhart explained that Tennessee ended up arguing that SB1 was not sex discrimination but was, rather, a form of distinction based on medical diagnosis and age, which means rational basis scrutiny ought to apply rather than intermediate scrutiny. The case will return to trial courts.

The legal framing of transgender identity in *U.S. v. Skrametti* not only determines the appropriate level of judicial scrutiny but also points to the temporal dimensions embedded in both legislative language and legal reasoning. SB1 is crafted with a specific temporal focus that emphasizes the perceived irreversibility of gender-affirming treatments juxtaposed against the supposedly transient nature of youth identity and decision-making. Conversely, the U.S. brief focalizes the more difficult, expensive, or inaccessible, future medical reversibility of puberty and the potential psychological harms puberty's bodily changes may visit upon trans and genderqueer kids weighed against the temporariness of puberty blockers.

Legal arguments about access to gender-affirming care for minors, regardless of the position they take, rely on normative developmental schedules. Such schedules are leveraged in legal arguments like *US v. Skrametti*, where adherence to or deviation from a prescribed developmental schedule is used to determine whether or to what extent an adolescent may access gender-affirming care. Despite their ostensible oppositions, SB1 and the responding U.S. brief which sought to overturn the ban each ground their legal arguments on universally-applied notions of linear-progressive normative development; they use similar and sometimes identical temporal language in rationalizing whether or not minors ought to have a right to access gender-affirming care, each making the case that those whose bodies and minds deviate from prescribed developmental norms will experience disproportionately negative impacts. Most of these claims revolve around the developmental milestone of puberty, with SB1 citing a compelling state interest in “encouraging minors to appreciate their sex, particularly as they undergo puberty” (section m) whereas the brief asserts that no drugs or surgical interventions are utilized prior to puberty, and that “once puberty commences, the permanent physical changes that occur can cause ‘extreme distress’” (6). Essentially, where SB1 represents gender-affirming care as a

catastrophic and irreversible interruption of normative childhood development, the brief argues that puberty can exacerbate the experience of gender dysphoria, which in turn interrupts a child's overall normative development by negatively impacting their psychological well-being. That neither document departs from dominating notions of normative development poses its own series of problems: among them, that prescriptive normativity in the law elides the experiences of anyone who deviates from the norm; that adherence to universally-applied developmental norms creates the conditions for pathologizing gender diversity and expression⁸ and for rationalizing stricter government control over individual autonomy; and that the linear-progressive developmental model assumes the inherent correctness of developmental milestones which adhere to cisheteronorms, implying the incorrectness and consequent need for correction of individuals who deviate.⁹

This chapter's critique of SB1 and the responding U.S. brief's reliance on normative developmental schedules invites a closer look at how such frameworks are experienced and contested by those whose lives and identities deviate from normative timelines: in this case, transgender minors. I contend that the somatic, affective, and temporal dimensions of memoir offer a counterpoint to those of prevailing legal narratives, particularly in the autobiographical accounts of trans teenagers, where nonlinear embodied and affective experiences of gender and selfhood complicate normative developmental schedules. In this chapter, I argue that where medical and legal texts function to materialize and prescribe rigid, linear, developmental chronologies, *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* expose the failure points of normative developmental schedules, even despite their surface-level capitulation to the medical

⁸ The inclusion of Gender Identity Disorder in the *DSM*, for example.

⁹ Neither the bill nor the responding brief meaningfully account for people who fall outside of the desire to "pass" as cisgender, for instance.

model of transition. They do so through their temporal language and affective descriptions, which reveal nonlinear experiences of bodily becoming such as positive affects that precede the completion of medical transition or negative affects that persist even after reaching particular transition milestones.

The sociopolitical stakes of this argument are exigent in the current political moment. Many feminist, queer, trans, and disabled scholars critique the supposed objectivity of medical science and the law,¹⁰ and this chapter continues that work by insisting upon trans people as the authorities on their own experience. The central conflict of legal arguments about whether minors should have access to gender-affirming care is actually between competing temporalities that determine whose humanity is recognized. Both sides of the argument for or against gender-affirming care for trans adolescents rely on a linear progressive schedule of normative development; to deviate from that prescribed timeline is to be rendered unintelligible to the legal system, which can only recognize as human a life that conforms to its narrow, progressive narrative of development. In a political climate that seeks to rigidly define and regulate trans existence, especially for adolescents, my argument presses for the legibility of complex trans lives that are full of messiness, doubt, and non-linearity. The normative developmental model is wielded by medical and legal institutions to gatekeep access to care; exposing that schedule as a fiction which cannot contain the complexity of lived experience means to challenge the developmental milestones leveraged to govern access to care.

An examination of SB1 and the responding brief demonstrates how temporal language leveraged by political actors materializes and prescribes a stage-based, linear-progressive,

¹⁰ Haraway (1988); Martin (1991, 1992); Harding (1986, 1991); Roberts (1997, 2011); Washington (2006); Fausto-Sterling (1992, 2000, 2012); Ehrenreich and English (1978); Clarke (1998); Kafer (2013); Martin, Myers, and Viseu (2015); MacKinnon, (2007).

normative developmental schedule; and my analysis of *Some Assembly Required* and *Rethinking Normal* presents a range of potential alternatives to normative conceptions of adolescent development constructed, prescribed, and reified by the law. This opens up liberatory possibilities for using personal narrative to destabilize linear-progressive models of development, centering embodied narratives in legal discourse,¹¹ critiquing the degree of institutional control governing individual autonomy, and rethinking temporality in the law, among others.¹² The ways in which temporality is embedded in the language of both legal texts and trans memoir—and how the texts themselves can be characterized in relation to time—provides insight into how they intra-actively¹³ shape discursive and somatic temporalities. SB1 and the responding brief create and impose rigid boundaries on trans lives, while trans teen memoirs expose the permeability and plasticity of those boundaries, demonstrating the mutual constitution of bodies, time, and discourse in the production of trans identities.

My argument's scholarly significance is in its revelation of trans life-writing as a site of temporal negotiation where even dominant narratives contain temporalities that do not capitulate to normative developmental schedules. This is not to say that transness is inherently revolutionary or anti-normative, but my argument shows how trans life-writing can

¹¹ In other words, the prioritization of somatic lived experiences over abstract universalizations of normative development.

¹² At the same time some liberatory possibilities are opened up, others are foreclosed. Firstly, because the law governs large and diverse populations, it usually requires generalization, so total reliance on individual narrative could inadvertently prevent broader structural analyses and/or policy proposals that address inequities. Second, trans memoir might unintentionally reinforce dominating norms, such as the need to justify trans identities through narratives of inevitability or medicalization. Third, whether or not SB1 is enacted, memoir isn't necessarily enough to address systemic challenges in accessing gender-affirming care or even cultural stigmas applied to trans people. Finally, even if trans memoirs disrupt linear-progressive timelines, their chronological structure and focus on transitioning milestones can work to reify the linear-progressive developmental trajectories they want to resist, foreclosing possibilities for imagining alternatives.

¹³ In *Meeting The Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad crafts an "agential realist ontology" that "refuses the representationalist fixation on words and things and the problematic of the nature of their relationship, advocating instead a *relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, property, and meanings are differently enacted* [...] and specific material phenomena. Later, she writes, "the primary ontological units are not 'things' but phenomena—dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world. And the primary semantic units are not 'words' but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted [...]. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurations of the world" (Barad 141). In sum, "intra-active" refers to the ways in which actants in a complicated and always-emerging network of interrelation co-produce one another.

simultaneously reify and undermine normative frameworks like the medical model of transition. In doing so, I test out a more nuanced and pragmatic model for analyzing trans cultural production: one that shifts the critical focus from judging a narrative's overall compliance with the medical model of transition to examining the micro-level, often contradictory, ways that embodied experience inevitably exceeds the normative frameworks it appears to inhabit.

The chapter begins by outlining the ongoing scholarly conversations in and across queer, trans, feminist, and disability studies about alternative and non-linear temporalities and situating myself in relation to them. Next, I close-read SB1 and the responding U.S. brief in order to demonstrate how despite their surface-level opposition, the temporal language of both texts reifies the linear-progressive normative developmental schedule in a way that ultimately de-animates transgender minors. Then, I turn to past and present conversations in the field of trans studies about the possibilities and drawbacks of trans life-writing, arguing for the usefulness of mainstream trans memoir for understanding formations of, and divergences from, normative time. And finally, through an against-the-grain close-reading of *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required*, I position trans life-writing as a potential site for countering the linear-progressive normative developmental models prescribed in clinical and legal texts.

Queer, Trans, and Disabled Approaches to Temporality

Before beginning my textual analyses, I want to acknowledge their reliance on the growing body of existing work produced by queer, trans, and disability theorists who offer an array of perspectives about time that emphasize nonlinearity, precarity, and fluidity in relation to gender and bodily development. Prominent thinkers across these disciplines problematize “chrononormativity,” a term coined by Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds* to describe the sociocultural imposition of linear, reproductive schedules of life that organize bodies and desires

toward capitalist and heteronormative ends (3). In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer expands this framework by linking it to “curative time,” the demand that disabled bodies aspire to a future of cure or normalization (20). Indeed, normative temporalities manifest in the marking of queer, trans, and disabled bodies as deviant and in the timelines of intervention imposed upon them.¹⁴ In opposition to these, several scholars posit alternative temporal models that operate outside of prescribed normative developmental schedules. Halberstam’s concept of “queer time,” for instance, explores lives lived in subcultural spaces beyond heteronormative life stages; this stands in tension with Edelman’s radical refusal of futurity, but aligns with Muñoz’s more optimistic “queer futurity” oriented toward potentiality.¹⁵

Scholars who focus specifically on trans experiences demonstrate how gender transitions complicate fixed developmental models; for example, Kadji Amin argues in “Temporality” that “transgender lives may require...the ability to represent and to inhabit temporal, gendered, and conceptual discontinuities” (220). The medicalized body is understood to be a key site where gendered temporalities are continuously enacted and reconfigured, rather than a passive object of treatment.¹⁶ Together, these critiques reveal that time is a political force that naturalizes certain life courses while marking others as deviant, and they reframe deviance as a form of resistance to the very frameworks that govern bodily legibility. Underlying these challenges to chrononormativity is the shared conviction that the non-normative body itself is a critical site for rethinking temporality.

The link between corporeal process and temporal disruption is made especially clear in Eva Hayward’s essay “More Lessons from a Starfish,” which reconceptualizes bodies as

¹⁴ Kafer (2013); Clare (2017); Gill-Peterson (2018).

¹⁵ Halberstam (2005); Edelman (2004); Muñoz (2009).

¹⁶ Currah (2022); Hayward (2008).

dynamic entities whose very becoming confounds linear narratives. Hayward examines how non-normative bodies experience intensified medicalization, while at the same time they resist normativity through alternative relationships to time; she calls for an understanding of bodies as dynamic, relational, and constantly in the process of becoming, challenging traditional narratives of linearity and coherence in identity (67). Hayward writes of the transformative and destabilizing power of the prefix “trans-,”

Trans-, a prefix related with across, beyond, through (into another state or place), does the now-familiar work of suggesting the unclassifiable. To be trans is to be transcending or surpassing particular impositions whether empirical, rhetorical, or aesthetic... Trans is meant to disturb purification practices; the well defined is confounded at multiple material and semiotic levels. Psychical and corporeal experiences are blended. For example, gender and the embodiment of gender are contingencies that may hold for a moment then fall away into another set of relationships. (181)

In other words, transness is not just an identity but an ongoing, relational process of becoming that resists fixed categorizations. The phrase “psychical and corporeal experiences are blended,” for instance, rejects the idea of a mind-body dualism and complements the concept of the “bodymind” popularized in disability theory. And the phrase “confounded at multiple material and semiotic levels” resonates with disability theory’s critique of language as a limiting structure,¹⁷ suggesting that embodiment is materially unpredictable and resistant to total representation. To describe gender as a “contingency” aligns with an interpretation of materiality as continually-emergent that views bodies and identities as relational and reconfigurable entities.

¹⁷ A number of disabled writers and disability theorists write about how corporeal experience exceeds the capacity of language to capture it: in *On Being Ill*, Virginia Woolf discusses the “poverty of the language” to describe the bodily experience of illness, asserting that “incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, moreso perhaps than the upright will allow” (21). And in *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes of pain that “...its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is” (5). Pain per this description is a subjective, individual experience, fundamentally unable to be shared with anyone else and which language will never be sufficient to communicate. In her essay “The Pain Scale,” Eula Biss echoes this sentiment in some ways as she recounts her own experience with chronic pain, writing, “the sensations of my own body may be the only subject on which I am qualified to claim expertise. Sad and terrible, then, how little I know. ‘How do you feel?’ the doctor asks, and I cannot answer” (70). She also acknowledges that “pain is commonly described as [both] a ‘sensory and emotional experience’” (Biss 74).

This understanding of transness as a confounding process informs my methodological premise: that trans lives/bodies and trans narratives are co-constitutive, each actively shaping and being shaped by the other. The narrative is not a report of a pre-existing bodily reality; instead, the act of narration exerts a material force that organizes experience, even as the body's own non-linear becoming strains against and complicates that narrative structure. Hayward's theorization of transness can be used to explain why the ostensibly linear narratives of mainstream trans life-writing are punctuated by moments where the body's own non-linear temporality contradicts the surface-level chronology.

If transness is fundamentally a “contingent” and “confounding” process, then we can expect to find evidence of alternative temporalities within even the most conventional transition narratives. Thus, where much of the theory about alternative temporalities critiques the imposition of normative development from the outside, what I hope to add to that body of scholarship is the capacity to complicate the linear before-and-after transition narrative from the inside. I want to focus on the micro-level embodied and affective experiences of time in mainstream trans life-writing. I am less interested in naming a particular kind of alternative time than in thinking about how such temporalities are produced in the intra-action¹⁸ of body, affect, and discourse. I demonstrate through my reading of *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* that non-linear temporality is constitutive of transition, even when that experience is narratively framed within a seemingly linear-progressive model, and even when the trans subject strives for normality. Legal and medical understandings of transition elide how even within the clinical framework, alternative temporalities can emerge through the embodied experience of

¹⁸ Barad (2007); Bennett (2010). Unlike interaction, which assumes separate things coming together, “intra-action” posits that things only become distinct through their encounters with one another, and they always change each other in the continual, ongoing process.

transition. Attending that is essential for understanding transition as a complex and continual process of becoming, and allows us to challenge the normative/anti-normative binary where trans narratives are understood as only either compliant or resistant. Mainstream trans life-writing is neither a total refusal of normative time nor a total capitulation to it: instead, conflicting temporalities coexist in a single body and life course. Before exploring this, however, it is necessary to examine the normative temporal schemas that legal texts governing gender-affirming care materialize and impose; these frameworks establish the very developmental timelines that trans life-writing navigates and internally complicates.

The Functions of Temporal Language in Tennessee’s SB1 and the Responding U.S. Brief

Generally speaking, laws represent society’s effort to construct, shape, and navigate time through governance.¹⁹ Legal texts are temporal artifacts designed to bridge past, present, and future: they simultaneously reflect a society’s past historical norms and values, codify them in the present, and shape what’s to come. Laws both construct normative temporality and operate according to it; normative assumptions about time are practically innate to the law since laws are often manufactured to organize and regulate human behavior at a broad scale. Thus their

¹⁹ I come to this particular understanding based on the work Carol Greenhouse and Alison LaCroix have produced on the relationships between the law/legal judgement and cultural conceptions of time. Greenhouse discusses the competition between linear and cyclical time in Western culture (1638) as well as the relationship between temporality and the legal system, claiming about the latter that the law uses specific temporal frameworks to legitimize its authority and influence: “temporality and legality are conceptually fused in the West through their mutual implications of a total order in relation to which social life acquires meaning” (1631), she identifies as her central thesis. Her work demonstrates that time can never be “socially neutral” (Greenhouse 1633), and that the law is embedded in and shaped by cultural understandings of time, history, and morality, which in turn contribute to its authority and acceptance in society. Several decades later, LaCroix examines how historical narratives and temporal frameworks are used to assert legal and political authority, especially in the context of constitutional law. She argues that “temporal imperialism” (1) —basically, the imposition of a particular interpretation of history or chronology—shapes debates about legal precedent, national identity, and the legitimacy of governmental power. She discusses how temporal rhetoric is employed to justify ideological positions, usually presenting one particular interpretation of history as authoritative while silencing alternative perspectives. LaCroix concludes that “the [Supreme] Court’s institutional commitment to continuity exists in tension with its general doctrinal commitment to precedent. Occasionally, the Court engages in intense scrutiny of the temporal effect of its decisions, and these moments demonstrate the complex causal and rhetorical relationship between the Court’s institutional continuity on one hand, and its power to create doctrinal discontinuity on the other hand” (12)—in other words, SCOTUS is always inhabiting a tension between the narrative of preserving continuity and creating “doctrinal discontinuity” by creating, reversing, or reinterpreting precedents. This tension is directly applicable to the issue of trans adolescents’ access to gender-affirming care, although that issue isn’t mentioned in LaCroix’s piece.

language usually conveys a sense of timelessness, or of universal applicability across large populations. But, perhaps paradoxically, laws are subject to the evolving attitudes and material conditions of society and as such often require reinterpretation, amendment, or repeal. And universal applicability doesn't so much indicate the neutrality of a law as it exposes laws to be mechanisms for constructing and organizing time to define and control bodily experiences in a society. The temporal language used in legal texts and the temporalities of their enactment and enforcement materialize time within the body, in turn shaping how individuals move through the world. In SB1 and the responding brief, trans and genderqueer children's bodies are the primary subjects of the law, which determines what adolescent bodies are allowed to do and be, and how they may interact with others.

On the surface, temporal language in the litigation surrounding SB1 articulates opposing constructions of, and political agendas related to, developmental time and gender. But ultimately both the bill and the responding brief manufacture and reify normative developmental schedules through discursive and material functions: they write normative temporality onto adolescent bodies, and they materialize temporality through the felt experiences they cite or initiate. Indeed, all laws are somatic in character: to write a law, to read a law, or to be governed by a law are all embodied materializations of time and temporality. So time itself is a relational phenomenon co-constituted by the discursive practices of the law and the materiality of bodies. SB1, the U.S. brief, trans adolescents, and the collection of objects, institutions, procedures, affects, and attitudes surrounding these things—whether operating in concert, tension, or conflict—are actants in a complex and dynamic assemblage that materializes time. Through analysis of both legal texts, I identify four central temporal themes they leverage: appeals to tradition, reifications

of normative developmental timelines, future-oriented justifications,²⁰ and temporal gender legibility.²¹

Appeals to Tradition

Appeals to tradition in law materialize time in the body both by imposing historical norms onto embodied subjects, and by shaping how bodies are understood through legal discourse. And as they relate to laws governing gender-affirming care, rhetorical appeals to tradition often rely on past social attitudes about sex and gender in order to justify the validity of, and necessity for, such laws. In the case of SB1, such appeals construct gender roles as timeless and therefore exempt to questioning, while framing challenges to traditional norms as threatening or unnatural. The presence of gendered temporal language in the bill works to construct gender as permanently fixed. Words and phrases such as “immutable,” “irreversible,” “[minors] lack the maturity [to make decisions about their gender identity],” and “asserted” identity, among others, privilege binary and cisheteronormative understandings of gender through the erasure or marginalization of trans, nonbinary, or genderqueer identities, which were either omitted from Western legal frameworks until relatively recently or remain elided presently.²²

While SB1 discursively reiterates past social and cultural attitudes related to sex and gender, implicitly rather than explicitly making the appeal to tradition, many of the collection of supporting documents submitted to SCOTUS by the defendants in October of 2024 are far less subtle. For example, an amicus brief submitted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and

²⁰ In other words, speculations about the future which are used to rationalize policy decisions in the present.

²¹ Meaning the degree to which an individual’s gender identity or expression is recognized and validated within the legal system and the ways in which that identity is tied up in normative assumptions about the linearity of time and human development.

²² What’s missing is as important as what’s present; for example, SB1 uses neither “trans” nor “transgender” even once.

the Tennessee Catholic Conference claims that “this teaching [that gender affirming care is immoral] arises from longstanding beliefs about the human person (beliefs that, in fact, predate the Catholic Church itself), which are accessible to human reason as well as divinely revealed...” (2-3). The invocation of “longstanding” beliefs that “predate the Catholic Church” presumes that because such beliefs about sex and gender have endured for a long time, they must continue to hold authority. And the Brief for the State of Texas’ summary of arguments declares that “treatment of adolescent onset gender dysphoria is a developing field. The prohibited treatments are experimental...” (2). In other words, because gender-affirming care was unavailable to minors with gender dysphoria in the past, its development and application should not be allowed now. Yet another amicus brief on behalf of the defendants attests, “since the founding, the States have enacted health-and-welfare laws. Doing so falls within the heart of their police power. That’s why, time and again, this Court has recognized the deference due... All the more so when a law involves areas of medical uncertainty or endeavors to protect children” (*Brief of Kentucky* 2). The phrasing “since the founding” implies that because states have historically had the authority to govern health and welfare law, that power should remain unquestioned. And the document implies that historical justifications about protecting children should remain valid without critically assessing whether new and developing medical knowledge could justify a different approach. But there is one set of appeals to tradition among the submitted amici curiae that, in my estimation, reveals the true underlying fear instigating SB1’s enactment. A brief submitted by the Scholars of Philosophy, Theology, Law, Politics, History, Literature and the Sciences states in its opening summary of arguments that,

Both of these arguments [the U.S. brief’s two central claims about sex discrimination and that transgender status should be recognized as a quasi-suspect class] [...] presuppose a dubious, fragmented understanding of the meaning of personhood, one that denatures sex and introduces an element of arbitrariness into the natural and organic relationship

between the sexually dimorphic body and the personal subject. Followed to its logical conclusion, this understanding of personhood will effectively obscure the perennial reality of men and women—or in this case, boys and girls—and therefore also the natural relations of mother and father, son and daughter, sister and brother, and so forth. (3)

This is a short but revealing section: its fallacious appeals²³ abet claims that sex is dimorphic, gender is binary, and family roles are fixed, without meaningfully engaging the multitude of existing arguments that challenge those assumptions. Its repeated insistence on what is “natural”—the naturalness of biologically determined sex, the “perennial reality” of binary gender, and the “natural relations” within family units—reveals the actual anxiety underpinning SB1: that allowing minors access to gender-affirming care could destabilize social conceptions about the traditional family unit. The brief’s repeated appeals to what is “natural” invoke not only a biologically deterministic view of sex and gender, but also a particular temporality that is static, linear, and reproductive. Its authors construct a temporal order grounded in fixedness and repetition: boys always become men, girls always become women, and through those roles they fulfill predetermined social functions via family relations. Nature in this formulation is not just a biological given but a temporal script that denies any possibility for divergence; fixation on what is “natural” is not only about preserving binary gender categories but about preserving a particular future where children grow into adults who fulfill socially legible roles within a cisheteronormative reproductive order. Relatedly, in regards to the “legitimate, substantial, and compelling interest[s]” listed in section m of SB1, perhaps the most significant is the intimation that the state has a vested interest in “protecting the ability of minors to develop into adults who can create children of their own.” This position adheres to the framework of reproductive

²³ Appeal to tradition, slippery slope fallacy

futurism,²⁴ in which an adolescent's²⁵ imagined future reproductive potential is fashioned as a public interest that the state must intervene to maintain. That the state's interest in reproductive potential is identified by SB1 to be "substantial" and "compelling" denotes fears that a future where diverse gender identities are recognized by the legal system portends the dissolution of the cisheteronormative traditional family structure.²⁶ Gender-affirming care is framed as an unnatural intervention that forecloses the possibility of a "normal" adult future; but that concern reveals itself to be less about protecting minors than about disciplining the body into a form that can reliably reproduce normative time.

On the other hand, the first sentence of the U.S. brief—"for decades, transgender adolescents suffering from gender dysphoria have received medical treatment including puberty blockers and hormone therapy" (2)—likewise makes an appeal to tradition in the interest of the plaintiffs: that because trans adolescents have received gender-affirming care in the past, they should continue to be able to access it in the present. But unlike SB1 and its attendant amici curiae, the U.S. brief and its associated documents primarily rely on both medical and psychological studies as well as experiential testimony to complicate traditional ideas about developmental sex and gender. Despite this, in its attempt to make gender-affirming care accessible to trans and genderqueer youth, the U.S. brief frames gender identity recognition as an

²⁴ Edelman (2004).

²⁵ But not all adolescents: the state's concern for "future reproductive potential" is not applied universally. The imagined future where an adolescent becomes a reproductive adult has historically been reserved for some bodies and not others. It is selectively extended to bodies that align with cisheteronormative, able-bodied, middle-and upper-class, and white ideals of futurity; poor, disabled, racialized, and queer youth have long been subject to practices of coerced sterilization, institutionalization, and other forms of reproductive control. In other words, the state's anxiety about preserving fertility is leveraged as a tactic for preserving a particular social order in which certain bodies are expected to reproduce the norm and others are managed as risks to that norm.

²⁶ There's an argument to be made that this "substantial and compelling interest" derives from reproductive futurism being very much about the creation and maintenance of a labor class under capitalism; the idea of SB1 being that to destabilize the traditional family structure by medically transitioning means to invite the potential for lower birth rates, in turn meaning a future dearth of laborers.

essential part of a normative developmental schedule in a way that could belie the lived experiences of trans adolescents.

In their effort to challenge rigid distinctions between cis and transgender developmental trajectories, some arguments in the *amici curiae* supporting the plaintiff draw on a logic of equivalence: that both cis and trans minors require interventions to align their bodies with their internal sense of self. One such articulation appears in a brief submitted by Experts on Gender Affirming Care, who argue that

both cisgender and transgender minors require gender-affirming care [...] In this respect, cisgender minors are similarly situated to transgender minors. The bodies of cisgender minors with [unwelcome buildup or underdevelopment of breast tissue, atypically high-pitched voices, unwelcome growth of facial and body hair, problems with menstruation, etc.] do not conform with their internal sense of gender; so too for transgender minors. (2-3)

Here, Mandy Coles et al. engage in a strategic appeal to tradition by invoking the established norms of pediatric medicine and traditional developmental expectations, even while explicitly trying to destabilize traditional distinctions between cis and trans adolescence. Their statement assumes that all minors have a gender identity that can be misaligned with bodily development, and that medical intervention is a legitimate means of correcting that misalignment. In doing so they reinforce the traditional assumption that healthy development requires coherence between body and identity, and that medical institutions are the appropriate authorities to determine that coherence. On the surface, the statement complicates traditional binaries that presume cisgender development is inherently balanced and transgender development is inherently anomalous; however, the comparison also carries the risk of reinscribing a vision of gender identity that must unfold in sync with developmental milestones. It relies on an essentialist logic that might foreclose the possibilities for the same gender variance it seeks to defend.

Likewise, a brief submitted in support of the plaintiff by the American Psychological Association offers a well-intentioned appeal to tradition in defense of gender-affirming care for adolescents, seeking to reframe trans and genderqueer identities as longstanding rather than modern anomalies. In their summary of argument, they write:

Diversity in gender identity and gender expression is a part of the human experience. Throughout history, there have always been children and adolescents who we now recognize as transgender, gender diverse, and nonbinary. The health care community's understanding of what it means to be transgender has advanced greatly over the past century. It is now understood and widely accepted within the medical and mental health communities that an incongruence between one's sex and gender in and of itself implies no impairment in a person's judgment, mental health, or general social or vocational capabilities [...] gender-affirming care is the accepted protocol for treating gender dysphoria [...] multiple peer-reviewed studies have shown that an overwhelming number of adolescents with gender dysphoria who receive medications for pubertal suppression and/or hormone therapy are at less risk for anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, or self-harm. (6-9)

In a move to preempt claims that trans and genderqueer identities are new or abnormal phenomena, the APA makes several appeals to tradition. The first is historical: “there have always been” gender-diverse children. The second is to medical consensus and institutional tradition, legitimizing gender-affirming care by situating it within norms of science and medicine and emphasizing what’s “widely accepted” within those communities. The third is to existing developmental norms, implying the value of gender-affirming care is in its capacity to enable children to become healthy and productive adults. Ultimately, while the APA’s brief resists some traditional assumptions, it simultaneously reinscribes gender identity recognition into a normative developmental logic, valuing gender-affirming care for its capacity to support the successful development of the normative adult subject. That framework pathologizes gender dysphoria, regarding it as a treatable condition within a teleological model of wellness: if medically managed during adolescence, gender dysphoria can be cured to ensure that minors reach their appropriate “social or vocational” adult potential.

Several experiential testimonies are collated in a supporting brief submitted by Families with Transgender Children. The first of those is that of the parents of Jenny Jones, who detail their experience with Jenny's gender dysphoria before and after accessing gender-affirming care:

When Jenny was around 12 years old, her parents noticed that she began crying herself to sleep every night. During this period, Jenny also began engaging in self-harm through cutting. Her parents were concerned, and sought out mental health counseling for Jenny, where she was diagnosed with depression. Each night, when Gail tucked Jenny into bed, she would have long conversations with Jenny, in which she encouraged her to share her feelings. One night, Jenny told Gail that she did not feel like a boy [...] Jenny's parents did not rush to seek out medical intervention for Jenny; they approached her treatment carefully. After a few months, Jenny and her family visited Jenny's pediatrician for her annual checkup, and Gail asked Jenny if Jenny was comfortable discussing her gender identity. Jenny was, and informed her doctor [...] A year later, at her next annual check-up with her pediatrician, Jenny explained that she was still experiencing gender dysphoria [...] Several months later, Jenny had her first appointment with the gender clinic. There, Jenny received a formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria, and had a consultation with an endocrinologist for over an hour, who explained the risks associated with puberty blockers and hormones. She also underwent numerous tests to ensure that she was at the correct stage of adolescence for gender-affirming medical care, which included blood work and a bone scan, and Jenny spoke with a social worker and a nurse. The family carefully considered all of the information they received at the clinic, and eventually decided that the best course of action for Jenny at that time was to begin taking puberty blockers [...]. (6-9)

The Jones family's account includes several appeals to tradition. It centers the nuclear family through a narrative of caring parents who listen to their child and voices concerns about family splitting. It also appeals to the authority of medical institutions through references to diagnosis, testing, and specialist consultation, which legitimizes the authority of those institutions and is also meant to reassure the Court that gender-affirming care is performed with appropriate caution. As well, it reinforces a narrative of cure, where gender dysphoria is resolved through gradual medical and psychological support.

On one hand, the Jones family's account works to complicate traditional views of sex, gender, and normative development through their sympathetic and normalizing account of their daughter's experience. At the same time, though, the story reinscribes a normative

developmental timeline that elides the nonlinear and varied experience of many trans and genderqueer youth; Jenny's experience is expressed in a careful linear sequence of parental concern, psychiatric evaluation, pediatric evaluation, formal diagnosis, the undergoing of "numerous tests," and then medical intervention, between all of which are intentional delays.

This narrative constructs gender-affirming care as a developmental milestone that can only occur after the child has passed through a series of institutional vettings. Gender identity is disciplined into a linear and medicalized arc of becoming, where Jenny's transness is made legible because it lines up with the expectations of medical management and "appropriate" timing. While narratives like this one are perhaps necessary in a legal climate that demands demonstrations of gender-affirming care's safety and legitimacy, they still risk marginalizing trans and genderqueer adolescents whose lives unfold in less conventional ways. The tension here mirrors a broader one in trans advocacy: the need to communicate experiences in ways legal and medical institutions will recognize, while also remaining critical of the frameworks those institutions construct and impose.

References to Normative Developmental Schedules

Generally, in relation to laws that target trans minors, the presence of temporal language reflects dominant cultural assumptions about when and how young people are capable of making sex- and gender-related decisions. Both the bill and the brief make a case that those whose bodies and minds deviate from prescribed developmental norms will experience disproportionately negative impacts. In doing so, they manufacture and reify normative developmental schedules in ways that disregard trans and genderqueer minors' experiences of gendered becoming.

SB1 leverages those arguments to create artificial delay or effective prevention to gender-affirming care. Cisgender identities are implicitly framed as default and stable, while transgender identities are fashioned as experimental or temporary during childhood and adolescence.

Conversely, the U.S. brief uses temporal language to posit gender identity recognition as an important part of adolescent psychological development, not only in regards to “social transition” (14) but also in relation to gender-affirming care, citing consensus in the medical and psychological fields that trans adolescents “are ‘very unlikely’ to ‘subsequently identify’ as their sex assigned at birth” and concluding that in “appropriate cases” gender-affirming care is “medically necessary” (4).

Importantly, most of these claims revolve around the biotemporal event of puberty, with SB1 citing a compelling state interest in “encouraging minors to appreciate their sex, particularly as they undergo puberty (section m), whereas the brief asserts that no drugs or surgical interventions are utilized prior to puberty (6), and that “once puberty commences, the permanent physical changes that occur can cause ‘extreme distress’” (6). Essentially, where SB1 represents gender-affirming care as a catastrophic and irreversible interruption of normative childhood development, the brief argues that puberty can exacerbate the experience of gender dysphoria, which in turn interrupts a child’s psychological well-being and overall normative development.

Puberty blockers are presented in the brief as a medical solution to gender dysphoria because they “pause” (5) what the brief considers “irreversible” (39, 41) physical changes²⁷ that might cause long-term harm to a minor’s mental health. In that way, puberty blockers are framed as a “necessary” (6, 18, 31) treatment meant to guarantee a minor’s continued psychological and social development in a way that aligns with their gender identity. As well, since puberty

²⁷ e.g., voice deepening, breast development, body hair, etc.

blockers are considered a “reversible” (5) treatment in that if they are stopped, puberty will resume, the brief implies that pausing puberty leaves normative developmental possibilities open rather than foreclosing them. In other words, puberty blockers and other hormonal treatments are not regarded by the plaintiffs as deviations from normal developmental progression but rather as something that enables a minor’s capacity to achieve a healthy linear-progressive developmental path from childhood to adulthood.

The brief thus positions puberty as a normative developmental milestone, while also framing delay of puberty as a medically necessary treatment for gender dysphoria—one which paradoxically enables trans kids’ normative linear-progressive development rather than interrupting or damaging it. Puberty is viewed as plastic, a biotemporal event for which the timing can be negotiated in order to maintain some particular vision of healthy development. SB1’s approach, on the other hand, is a much more inflexible model advocating a singular and linear progression of time where puberty is inevitable, necessary, and tied to biological sex. SB1’s model of adolescent development rejects alternative embodied temporalities because those complicate the association of puberty with “natural” growth.

So the responding brief’s paradox—the argument that delaying puberty actually preserves normative development instead of disrupting it—exposes an existing cultural anxiety about the idea that developmental timelines related to puberty are contingent on external factors rather than natural and fixed. SB1’s underlying goal isn’t just about banning medical interventions for trans minors but also about enforcing one specific vision of time, where any deviation from the normative developmental schedule is considered inherently harmful. The idea that puberty can be delayed in a way which preserves normative development suggests that what we assume to be

natural or inevitable might actually be capable of de- or re-construction in ways that unsettle normative developmental time.

Future-Oriented Justifications

Future-oriented language in these legal texts invokes a version of what Alison Kafer names “anticipatory time” (38-9) where gender-affirming care is framed within a particular vision of a minor’s future. In both bill and brief, future-oriented language constructs a narrative about transness, according to whichever vision, as needing governmental control and legal regulation. The legal arguments of *U.S. v. Skrametti* frame their proposed courses of action for dealing with adolescent gender dysphoria as either necessary for positive social change or as cautionary responses to perceived cultural destabilization. Either approach uses a speculative linear trajectory to influence legal decision-making. SB1 invokes temporal language to predict negative outcomes if trans children receive hormonal treatment; the responding brief invokes temporal language to predict negative outcomes if trans children are deprived of hormonal treatment. While I have already addressed some of these arguments in terms of the ways in which they rely on appeals to tradition, they simultaneously operate through speculative claims about the future, using imagined outcomes to legitimize the prescription of present interventions.

Consider, for example, language like “unknown long-term consequences,” “regret,” “harm(s/ful),” or “risk(s/y).” In the text of SB1, this kind of language serves to criticize gender-affirming practices as unproven or dangerous, insisting that a comprehensive ban is necessary to prevent speculative harm. Page one, section b, of the bill purports that “the legislature finds it likely that not all harmful effects associated with these types of medical procedures when performed on a minor are yet fully known,” continuing on to claim that gender-affirming care is “experimental in nature” and “not supported by high-quality, long-term medical studies.” The

phrase “not...yet fully known” invokes imagined future effects of puberty blockers and other hormonal treatments in order to position gender-affirming care as a threat to both the present and future stability and safety of children. SB1’s justifications rely on exclusively negative connotations; “harm” as a preface to the bill’s discussion of potential effects means that there is no room in its language for a positively connotated “unknown future effect.”

The responding U.S. brief, however, uses practically identical language about consequences, harms, and risks to posit the opposite: that gender-affirming care for minors is life-saving rather than harmful, and that preventing access to such care presents the true risk for trans and genderqueer youth. The plaintiffs insist that gender-affirming care is medically necessary in order to prevent the occurrence of future mental, emotional, and psychological distress, warning that SB1 fails to take into account “how necessary such care may be in an individual case or the potential consequences of withholding care” (49). The brief’s future-oriented language works to convey the severity and exigency of speculative harms which will result from either interrupting, delaying, or banning gender-affirming care. In response to SB1’s assertions that gender-affirming care is unsubstantiated by long-term medical studies, the brief attempts to establish its predictions of the future as non-speculative and grounded in medical/psychological knowledge through the citation of studies and anecdotal accounts related to depression, self-harm, and suicidality in trans and genderqueer youth, as opposed to the “unknown harms” framing of SB1.

The language of SB1 cultivates a heightened affect of urgency, framing gender-affirming care as an escalating crisis demanding immediate legislative intervention. In section f of SB1 its authors contend that “such medical procedures²⁸ are being performed on and administered to

²⁸ Per SB1: altering a minor’s hormonal balance, removing sex organs, or otherwise changing physical appearance through medical or surgical treatment.

minors [in Tennessee] with rapidly increasing frequency.”²⁹ This phrasing manufactures a sense of both discursive and somatic immediacy and alarm based on the implication that, in the future, there will be more and more instances of gender-affirming care unless a ban is enacted as soon as possible. Worth noting as well is the phrasing in section c on the same page, where SB1 contends that “medical procedures [related to gender-affirming care] are not consistent with professional medical standards *when the medical procedures are performed for the purpose of enabling a minor to identify with, or live as, a purported identity inconsistent with the minor’s sex...*” (emphasis mine). In other words, SB1 argues that while these kinds of medical procedures portend inevitable future harm for trans minors, they are perfectly “consistent with professional medical standards” if and when they are performed on cisgender minors (it is this framing to which the brief points in order to demonstrate SB1’s failure to pass judicial scrutiny tests on the basis of sex discrimination).

Like SB1, the responding U.S. brief generates a sense of urgency: “the evidence shows that individuals who experience sustained gender dysphoria as adolescents are highly likely to persist in their transgender identity in adulthood. For such individuals, postponing gender-affirming care will likely be more painful, more costly, and less effective” (38). Such temporal framing positions a blanket ban as an imminent threat to the wellbeing of trans and genderqueer youth, and creates an imperative for both overturning SB1 and codifying minor access to gender-affirming care in the law. It emphasizes the possibility of lasting effects (and their potential

²⁹ It is worth noting that the removal of minors’ sex organs is not something which has actually occurred, and that the negative connotations SB1 works to apply to gender-affirming care are at least partially based on blatant falsehoods about what kinds of medical procedures are, or have recently been, offered to minors. A July 2024 study conducted at Harvard and published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* concluded, using a limited national dataset related to gender-affirming surgeries, that “there were no gender-affirming procedures conducted on TGD minors aged 12 years and younger, and procedures on TGD minors older than 12 were rare and almost entirely chest-related procedures. Additionally, when considering breast reductions among cisgender males and TGD people—a surgery that can be considered gender-affirming among both populations—most were performed on cisgender males” (Dai et. al 3).

severity) that restricting or banning gender-affirming care would have for minors' normative development and for their physical, psychological, and economic conditions.

By framing the future of trans minors in terms of potential harm—whether from medical transition or from prohibiting it—both SB1 and the responding brief work to legitimize state intervention in their medical decisions. SB1 employs phrasing such as “life-long consequences” and “life-altering consequences” in order to assert that gender-affirming care causes irreversible effects, projecting into the future potential risks such as “sterility,” “psychological harm,” or even simple “regret.” Those claims help shape the bill’s narrative that the state has a “legitimate, substantial, and compelling” (section m) obligation to ban gender-affirming care in order to protect minors’ future autonomy, health, and wellbeing. The future-oriented concern about minors “lack[ing] the maturity to fully understand and appreciate” the consequences of gender-affirming care (section g) imagines minors as not far enough along a linear-progressive developmental timeline to evaluate their own gender identity, and utilizes the potential for future regret as a rationale for the state to override personal autonomy related to medical care. On the other hand, the responding brief accuses SB1’s authors of “reject[ing] the medical consensus [that gender-affirming care is beneficial for trans minors] without engaging with the basis for that consensus or attempting to conduct its own weighing of the perceived risks against the countervailing benefits,” describing gender-affirming care as having “critical benefits in appropriate cases” (36). Particularly related to studies of depression and suicidality in trans minors, the brief’s insistence on gender-affirming care’s criticality alleges that gender identity recognition and affirmation are medically necessary to ensure healthy psychological and emotional development. The implication is that the longer gender-affirming care is denied to

minors, the greater the negative impact on their normative development, the worse speculative future consequences may be, and the more difficult eventual medical transition will become.

One specific form of future-oriented justification present in both SB1 and the brief is the concept of harm through delay; each text uses anticipatory language to reify prescriptive developmental timelines for adolescents and, as mentioned earlier, to ramp up the affect of urgency (of banning treatment on the one hand, and for initiating it on the other). This is yet another way time is materialized in the body: urgency is not just a rhetorical strategy that mobilizes pathos but an embodied sensation, so these legal texts have an inherent somatic characteristic.

SB1 takes the position that both time to mature and “long-term studies” are needed before gender-affirming care can be determined potentially safe for minors, which invokes temporal uncertainty to rationalize blanket restrictions amounting to a perpetual delay of treatment. The idea that “many of these procedures, when performed on a minor [...] are experimental in nature and not supported by high-quality, long-term medical studies” frames gender-affirming care as potentially harmful in ways that are yet to be revealed or understood. This framing instigates fear of the unknown in order to delay acceptance and approval of gender-affirming care based on an hypothetical future set of risks that have not yet materialized and are not guaranteed to. The phrasing “life-altering consequences” suggests that decisions made in the present will have irreversible long-term negative effects; in this sense, potential future regret is deployed as a rationale for an effective ban on gender-affirming care. Invocations of “regret” and “psychological harm” construct a narrative that future distress is not just a possible outcome of gender-affirming care, but a likely one. And calls for delay operate per the idea that because of those potential future unknowns and possible future regrets, it is safer to either outright ban or

heavily restrict gender-affirming care; delay rhetorically takes the form of a protective and preventative measure to ensure the safety of children and guarantee their capacity for future reproduction.

On the other hand, the plaintiffs, supported by culturally-legitimized medical organizations,³⁰ contend that delaying access to gender-affirming care creates immediate harm as well as lasting, lifelong consequences for trans minors, emphasizing the exigency of available, accessible treatment at specific developmental stages. They write that, once puberty commences, the permanent changes that occur can cause ‘extreme distress.’ Without appropriate treatment, adolescents with gender dysphoria are at risk of serious psychological and physical harm, including depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicidality (4),³¹ and “minor plaintiffs face irreparable harm absent an injunction ‘because progressing through adolescence untreated leads to daily anguish and makes adult treatment more complicated’” (15). Here, the U.S. brief asserts that ongoing negative consequences are inevitable if care is delayed or denied, and that those outcomes will not be able to be reversed in the future. References to self-harm and suicidality, especially accounts in the brief from the perspective of parents of trans kids who noted these in their children prior to initiating gender-affirming care, frame delays or bans as exponentially worsening the situation for minors, ramping up the future-oriented urgency to act. The brief crafts a narrative wherein the potential negative consequences of delay mean long-term effects on the normative milestones of adolescent physical, mental, and social development. Worth noting is that this particular argument makes similar suppositions to SB1 about the supposedly linear-progressive path of normative development for children; it

³⁰ The American Psychological Association and American Medical Association, for example, have both weighed in with writs of certiorari submitted on behalf of the plaintiffs.

³¹ Anecdotally, both Hill’s memoir and Andrews’ memoir detail suicidal ideation and multiple suicide attempts beginning at a young age: Hill in elementary school and middle school (51, 65-6), and Andrews in middle school (116-7).

emphasizes the importance of timely care, asserting that delays or denials interfere with children's normative development on multiple registers.

The U.S. brief argues that harm doesn't stop once gender-affirming treatment is halted or delayed, but rather continues to affect the minor; a narrative where the consequences of restricting gender-affirming care mean long-term effects on the mental and emotional development of children. "Left untreated, gender dysphoria can result in severe physical and psychological harms" (3), the brief claims, and, later, "puberty blockers allow adolescents with gender dysphoria to pause their endogenous puberty, thereby avoiding the heightened gender dysphoria and permanent physical changes that puberty would cause" (5). In this sense one delay solves the other: an immediate delay of puberty through gender-affirming care alleviates the potential future harms caused by a delay of treatment. The implication is that gender-affirming care is not only beneficial but actually necessary for normative, healthy adolescent development, insinuating that the window for optimal development (puberty) is narrow.

Temporal Gender Legibility

In the case of SB1 and the responding brief, legal recognition of gender is structured through normative timelines that are materialized through language; legal discourse produces and enforces a specific developmental trajectory, and the legal recognition of gender is contingent on whether an individual adheres to that prescribed trajectory. Each text constructs gendered adolescent bodies through time both medically and discursively; elective uses of medicine to initiate bodily changes are positioned either as unnecessary developmental disruptions or as a necessary means to circumvent developmental disruptions.

To understand how normative developmental trajectories can be enforced through legal language, I turn to Mel Chen's theorization of linguistic animacy. In "Language and Mattering

Humans," Chen elaborates their ideas about linguistic hierarchies privileging certain bodies and identities over others and discusses how such distinctions, realized through language, are “inextricably political” (55), determining who is recognized versus who is abjected. While Chen analyzes the language of insult, particularly as related to race and disability, their ideas are clearly applicable to laws targeting gender-affirming care. Legal texts, and legal discourse, claiming that trans adolescents lack the maturity to make medical decisions related to their gender identity construct minors as cognitively incapable of articulating their own identities, a state which is presumed not to resolve until adulthood. Thus, the state can rationalize its refusal to legitimize adolescent transgender identities through access to gender-affirming care. In terms of linguistically-produced hierarchies, the capacity to medically or surgically transition only gets recognized under an embodied temporal condition (adulthood) that lines up with dominant understandings of rationality and reproductive futurity. So, examining the text of the law through Chen's lens of linguistic animacy, where language reflects what a society values and what it allows to materially exist, SB1 de-animates trans kids,³² denies them autonomy, and perpetuates a cultural erasure of transness. And, albeit probably to a lesser degree, so does the U.S. brief since it is so quick to reassure the Court that surgical interventions only happen after a certain “appropriate” age and after previous nonsurgical interventions like social transitioning, hormones, and psychological evaluations have occurred.

Chen acknowledges that many linguists understand the animacy hierarchy as a grammatical ordering that ranks entities based on “lifeliness, sentience, ability, and

³² This raises the inevitable question: does SB1 only de-animate trans kids, or does it de-animate all minors? SB1 does allow for hormonal and surgical interventions for cisgender children. But whether that means cis kids actually have much more agency over their medical decision-making, or whether that allowance is just the flip side of the coin of disciplining bodies into certain gendered and sexed categories, is debatable. SB1 is doubtlessly designed as a targeted de-animation of trans minors, but arguably all minors are collateral damage since the bill frames children as objects of institutional control and makes them subject to gender policing. Cisgender minors likely have relative privilege within that framework as compared to transgender minors, but they are still caught up in having their autonomy reduced to fit state-enforced gender and sex norms.

mobility” (29), which shapes how language structures subject-object relations. In other words, linguists use the animacy hierarchy to explain grammatical patterns where certain entities are ranked higher than others based on their perceived degree of agency. But Chen argues that this hierarchy, rather than a neutral observation about the structure of language, is a political tool that reflects and reifies power structures; it is shaped by “Christian cosmologies, capitalism, and the colonial order of things” (30) and manifests biopolitical governance. Put differently, the animacy hierarchy doesn’t just shape language but also material realities—which lives are empowered and which are marginalized. Rather than viewing it as purely grammatical, they argue that the animacy hierarchy is “an ontology of affect” (Chen 30): it determines which entities can affect others and which are rendered passive. In sum, Chen contends that the animacy hierarchy is a product of historical power structures, that grammar is political and determines who or what has agency in a given social order, and that language can and does uphold systemic oppression. In the context of SB1, Chen’s framework helps reveal that laws restricting or banning gender-affirming care for minors are not neutral or designed to protect children, but rather are enforcements of a political hierarchy that denies trans youth full agency, affect, and legitimacy while upholding cisnormative, Christian, and capitalist biopolitics. Debates over gender-affirming care aren’t just medical, but ontological: they are about who counts as a person. The language of the bill de-animates trans youth by framing them as too young to know their own bodies and thus placing them lower on the animacy hierarchy than adults.

SB1 aims to produce a legal environment where the validation of gender identity and expression is contingent on the passage of time, individual maturity, and the development of social and medical consensus surrounding appropriate treatment for gendered bodies. The underlying assumption is that gender, and human development more generally, have to follow a

linear-progressive path to conformity with normative biological and social expectations. The temporal language of minors “lack[ing] the maturity” to make gender-based decisions calls attention to normative assumptions about developmental trajectory, where an individual has to reach a certain level of maturity before their gender identity can be fully affirmed or treated. Such language implicitly³³ positions gender identity as something that has to develop over time, and maintains that a minor’s identity can’t be fully validated until they have reached some particular developmental milestone (puberty, adulthood). Likewise, SB1’s mention of the “many individuals” who have expressed “regret” about transitioning casts doubt on the legitimacy of an adolescent’s present gender identity and expression. The implication is that the future will reveal gender-affirming care to be a mistake; this notion is key in framing gender identity as something that can’t be fully realized or validated until the future. Additionally, in SB1 gender identity and medical transition are rhetorically tied to normative assumptions about biological development and family and gender roles. The assertion of the state’s obligation toward “ensuring minors can develop into adults who can create children of their own,” and “appreciate their sex”³⁴ indicate that from the perspective of SB1, the state’s role is to guide minors toward a future that aligns with cultural norms of linear progressive biological development, and where gender is tied to biological sex.

The responding U.S. brief also links gender identity and expression to notions of normative developmental time. Unlike SB1, its position is that if gender identity and expression are affirmed and supported at the critical moment of puberty, then trans minors’ growth will

³³ And ironically or paradoxically, given their argument that gender is static and biologically determined.

³⁴ SB1’s demand that minors learn to “appreciate their sex” is state violence disguised as moral instruction. Forcing children to “appreciate their sex” is not just rhetorical; it is a biopolitical weapon that coerces cisnormativity linguistically and materially. SB1 positions trans and genderqueer adolescents as passive objects instead of self-determining subjects, assuming they lack the capacity to know their gender. This is an active erasure of child affect, assuming adolescents’ feelings about their gender are irrational, a phase, or inferior to the affects of adults who “know better.” To be made to “appreciate” one’s assigned sex means to disavow any other possibility; it is a violent demand for self-negation.

progress in line with social expectations of what constitutes normative development. Assurances made to the public that hormonal and surgical treatments are never used prior to the onset of puberty, and assertions that “once puberty commences, the permanent physical changes that occur can cause ‘extreme distress’” (14), invoke a temporal progression that associates gender-affirming care with specific developmental stages, assuming that puberty marks a critical point in the linear-progressive normative developmental schedule in which gender identity needs to be affirmed lest an adolescent suffer speculative future consequences. Those assurances also capitulate to the defendants’ notion that any medical intervention prior to the onset of puberty is inappropriate. The U.S. brief connects gender identity to this narrow window of adolescence, implying that failure to recognize minors’ gender during that short period will result in irreparable damage. This does identical rhetorical work to SB1 in that it both creates a sense of exigency for a solution and positions the state and the legal system as responsible for protecting children (in the brief’s case, protection through provision of care, whereas SB1 calls for protection through denial of care). There is a particular tension present in the responding brief: while it advocates for gender-affirming care for trans youth, in some sense resisting their de-animation under SB1, it does so by reifying normative developmental timelines, which inadvertently reinforces another layer of the animacy hierarchy. On one hand, the brief argues that trans children are deserving of medical autonomy, which boosts their animacy by recognizing their agency; it also counters SB1’s framing of trans kids as mistaken, confused, or manipulated. But, on the other hand, the brief relies on medicalized, developmentalist arguments that frame gender-affirming care as only appropriate for children who meet clinical criteria; it reinforces linear, stage-based developmental timelines with its framing of puberty blockers as a pause option allowing children to decide later; and it elides the experience of nonbinary and

genderqueer/fluid youth by positioning transness as only legitimate when it lines up with clinical diagnostic frameworks. In other words, where SB1 de-animates trans youth, the brief re-animates them conditionally, only if they fit into normative developmental paradigms. And both legal texts uphold the state's power to grant animacy—to decide who counts as human enough.

Ultimately, both the bill and brief construct trans adolescence as a site where access to gender-affirming care ought to be dictated by normative timelines of development, health, and rationality. Such reliance on temporal normativity constructs trans minors as subjects whose gender recognition is contingent on their ability to conform to the state-sanctioned timeline of maturity. The law, in other words, actively produces the conditions under which gender identity is either recognized or not. Viewed through Chen's framework of linguistic hierarchies, SB1's language relies on a dehumanizing logic that denies trans minors' feelings and capacity for self-recognition, and the U.S. brief, despite its advocacy for care, still upholds the broader legal discourse that ties gender recognition to a linear temporal framework. At its core, SB1 refuses to recognize trans adolescents as legitimate subjects, instead framing their gender identities as misguided and needing correction via enforced cisnormativity. The bill doesn't just regulate trans adolescence; rather, it denies its very possibility. In contrast, the U.S. brief acknowledges the legitimacy of trans adolescence, yet still relies on a normative developmental timeline that ties gender recognition to state-sanctioned ideals of linear maturation. Both texts construct trans adolescence as a site where access to gender-affirming care should be dictated by cisheteronormative standards of rational progression.

This temporal gatekeeping positions trans adolescents as subjects whose self-knowledge is always in doubt; their gender recognition hinges on conformity to a developmental schedule that is designed to elide them. SB1's language erases trans youth's existence while denying their

capacity for self-recognition, and the U.S. brief capitulates to the idea that transness should be rationally proven rather than being self-evident, despite its advocacy in favor of gender-affirming care. But if legal discourse constructs trans identity as something that must unfold along one particular timeline, trans teen memoirs offer a possible counterpoint to their temporal logics by emphasizing lived experience as a site of authority.

Finding Non-Linearity in the Before-and-After Frame of Trans Life-Writing

The theoretical understanding of transness as a confounding process exists in tension with the practical demands of trans life-writing. For some trans scholars, trans life-writing exists in a critical bind: it must employ chrononormative, linear narratives for its subjects to achieve legibility and access to care, even as the genre's potential lies in resisting those very frameworks.³⁵ Legal and medical texts are refracted and imposed onto trans narrative; a person's complex internal sense of self must be molded to fit pre-defined legal and medical categories if they want to be recognized or to access rights. In other words, medicine and the law only understand certain parts of the trans experience, and they dictate the essential plot points of the trans narrative: a legitimate trans life has to progress through diagnosis, social transition, and medical transition and must lead directly toward a fixed, binary outcome. For trans authors, the expectation that memoir ought to follow a chronological before-and-after structure creates pressure to present their lives in a way that aligns with dominating cultural expectations of linear-progressive transition, eliminating the potential to explicitly describe transness as a fluid, multidirectional experience. The vast majority of mainstream trans memoir therefore adheres to that neat before-and-after model of transition. Consequently, the political and formal constraints

³⁵ Stone (2006) p.229-30; Prosser (1998) p.4-5.

of the genre have come under scrutiny: scholars like Andrea Long Chu critique sensationalized arcs in trans memoir that obscure ordinary trans experience, while Kadji Amin directly challenges Jay Prosser's foundational theory that trans embodiment requires a coherent narrative.³⁶ Amin argues that forcing trans experiences into a neat, linear story inevitably requires leaving out or minimizing moments that don't fit medically or legally established structures, like contradictory feelings, or everyday experiences that don't contribute to an obvious sense of forward progress ("Temporality" 220). Trans narratives, in other words, are often chrononormative, which Amin points out not to negatively connote chrononormativity but rather to acknowledge the possibility that it can harm some trans people even as it empowers others (220). This is an important critique to consider in relation to Andrews' and Hill's memoirs, which do present a linear model of transition.

However, chrononormative narratives are internally complicated by the very embodied experiences they seek to contain. To make this visible, my methodology employs a new materialist lens, inspired by Mel Chen's work on animacy, performing against-the-grain readings of mainstream trans life-writing. Chen's assertion that words "affect and effect," "pulse through bodies," and create "mis-coordinations" provides the theoretical foundation for my against-the-grain reading of trans life-writing.³⁷ If language is not merely descriptive but animating and agentic, then the linear, chrononormative narrative of mainstream trans memoir is not only a structure but a force that actively interacts with the body it describes. My methodology takes these "mis-coordinations" as its primary evidence. By closely reading the affective and embodied experiences in common milestones of the linear transition arc, I show how the

³⁶ Long Chu (2017) p. 144; Amin (2014) p. 219-20; Prosser (1998).

³⁷ Chen writes, "Words more than signify; they affect and effect. Whether read or heard, they complexly pulse through bodies (live or dead), rendering their effects in feeling and active response. They are a first level of animation, one in which we deeply linguistic creatures attached to our own language are caught, but not the last. Indeed, language is but one discourse among many in a cacophony of anti-, re-, and mis-coordinations between objects, things, and beings" (54).

materiality of transition can complicate its narration. These moments, rather than inconsistencies in the story of transition, are proof of Chen's "cacophony," where the lived body's non-linearity creates friction with the linear narrative structure attempting to contain it.

This method of examining textual mis-coordinations offers a direct response to a key intervention in the field of trans studies: Andrea Long Chu's call for a criticism attuned to the "slower, smaller" ways "ordinary life fails to measure up to the political analyses we thrust upon it" ("After Trans Studies" 113). While Long Chu is skeptical of new materialist theoretical frameworks,³⁸ I argue that such focus is precisely the tool needed for this project. Rather than judging a narrative as either normative or anti-normative, I examine how agentic forces like the affective pull of lingering dysphoria, the disruptive materiality of a continually changing body, or intra-action with objects like packers, hoodies, or binders create mis-coordinations within a text's linear arc. On the surface, both *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* do capitulate to the kind of sensationalized narrative Long Chu critiques. They are structured around key medical milestones like diagnosis, social transition, the first hormone shot, and top and bottom surgery, and they build toward the climax of a 'finished' self. My method is to seek out the mis-coordinations where feelings or physical details fail to align with that neat progressive arc. By attending to these quotidian failures and remainders, my analysis reveals how even memoirs that ostensibly capitulate to the "sensationalized" before-during-after transition

³⁸ In "After Trans Studies," Long Chu writes, "I will say, without reservations, that the new materialisms represent the worst possible direction for trans studies to go in. In trans studies, which is so poor in theory to begin with, new materialist-style work somehow manages to take up a disproportionate amount of space while also, quite frankly, not making a lick of sense [...] Is matter queer or is matter trans [for Barad]? Both, of course, because for her, like most people who claim to be working in trans studies, queer and trans are obviously synonyms" (111-12). In response to this critique, I want to clarify that my use of a new materialist framework does not claim matter to be inherently "queer" or "trans." Instead, I argue that new materialist theories provide a useful vocabulary for understanding the co-constitutive relationship between narrative and materiality. I think that concepts like intra-action are useful for understanding how the linear narrative of a memoir actively shapes the lived experience of a body, and, conversely, how the body's non-linear processes and materiality can complicate the same narrative that tries to neatly contain it. This approach moves beyond synonymizing "queer" and "trans" to examine the intra-actions between discursive frameworks and embodied trans experience.

narrative document an embodied reality of transition that consistently complicates the prescribed developmental schedules imposed upon trans life by clinical and legal texts.

The Functions of Temporal Structure and Language in Trans Teen Life-Writing

Both *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* recount the author's childhood dysphoria followed by their social and medical transition. The books, initially proposed as a single co-authored text, were instead published as a partnered set by Simon & Schuster in September of 2014.³⁹ The memoirs were produced on a shorter publication schedule in order to capitalize on the media attention Hill and Andrews had garnered from appearances on 20/20 and in *Huffington Post* in the summer of 2013, when they were dating.⁴⁰ In the United States, 2014 marked a significant cultural shift in conversations about transness, especially in terms of positively connotated pop-culture representation: that May, *TIME Magazine* proclaimed 2014 the "Transgender Tipping Point" (Steinmetz). At the time, media representations mostly adhered to before-and-after binary transition narratives, where stories were typically simplified into the "trapped in the wrong body" metaphor and tended to culminate in medical transition. Trans people were beginning to have more of a public platform, especially on social media, but most mainstream accounts of trans minors were mediated through adults. Medically, the gender-affirming care model was becoming the established professional consensus; that model was based on standards of care which emphasized first social transition, then puberty blockers, then hormone therapy, and finally surgical intervention (Carswell et. al. 649-56). Legal conversations of the time centered on social transition, such as changing gender markers on legal documents, using chosen names, restroom access, and whether insurance should cover transition-related care.

³⁹ Pavao (2014); *Simon & Schuster* (2014).

⁴⁰ Pavao (2014); Sieczkowski (2013).

This moment preceded today's political backlash against gender-affirming care for trans adolescents. In that context, *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* are important textual archives to consider because they functioned as early arguments to medically and culturally legitimize access to gender-affirming care for adolescents at a time where the general public was just becoming aware of the issue. They embodied the linear before-and-after transition narrative for a mainstream audience, and, crucially, are first-person accounts by trans teenagers rather than secondhand, mediated narratives. Paired together, they are a cultural text of the gender-affirming care model in its ascendance, through which we see how Hill and Andrews articulated their own experiences in relation to prevailing cultural and medical scripts about gender transition. An analysis of their form, structure, and language reveals that in several ways, these texts engage with somatic lived experiences in potential challenge to the abstract universalizations of developmental schedule inscribed on trans and genderqueer adolescent bodies by the arguments in the case.

By structuring memory through the lens of the present, memoir turns self-narration into an active process of corporeal reconfiguration; and it has a palimpsestic temporality because of the simultaneous presence, brought forth through the act of composing, of past and present selves. The kind of reflection required of memoir is an active engagement with memory shaped by the author's perspective at the time of its writing; in other words, memoir is always a kind of embodied revision of experience and self-perception that challenges the notion of time as only forward-moving. In that way, memoir is a site where temporality can be negotiated and where possibilities open up for disrupting prescribed developmental schedules. Time in the memoir can be understood as a complex and agentic force full of pauses, delays, and backward and forward movement. In trans memoir, time is simultaneously external and structural (organized through

medical appointments and legal or social recognition) and internal and embodied (remembered and felt nonlinearly as dysphoria and euphoria while the gendered self continually becomes).

Adolescence is often framed as a time of becoming, where identity is unformed and waiting for adulthood to grant it legitimacy. For a trans teenager to write a memoir both disrupts the assumption that adolescents lack the depth or experience to narrate their own lives, and challenges the legal and medical systems that demand trans youth wait until adulthood for recognition or validation. While legal texts like SB1 and the U.S. brief impose rigid linear timelines for when and how gender can be acknowledged, a trans teen writing their life in real-time asserts that their selfhood is already complete, even as it continues to evolve. As well, the trans teen memoir is a space where embodied knowledge is authoritative; one's own perception of their body and identity is the primary text. This opens up the possibility for the memoir as a reclamation of agency over narrative, time, and corporeality. The trans teen memoir, in other words, is a re-animation of the trans adolescent.

As a literary form, the structure of memoir acts as a temporal framework that manufactures a sense of progression. In works like Hill's and Andrews', the texts' division primarily into chronological chapters might risk reifying a normative developmental arc that positions transition as an endpoint instead of an ongoing process of emergence. Or, paradoxically, those divisions could call attention to key moments of gendered experience or self-recognition that complicate the notion of a linear-progressive trajectory toward a fixed gender identity. Both memoirs are structured chronologically; still, when read against their chronological structure, each text demonstrates how transition is more than a chronological series of events—it is an ongoing relational reconfiguration of past anticipations, present realities, and future possibilities. Both memoirs use chronological structure superficially, but close reading

reveals how transition disrupts linear time by blending past, present, and future into a nonlinear bodily experience. Hill and Andrews show that transition isn't a neat progression but a continuous negotiation of identity across time. In this way, the memoirs reveal that trans embodiment complexly intra-acts with normative temporal frameworks, a dynamic that calls attention to the somatic temporality of memoir—the way time is felt rather than measured, and how lived, bodily experiences disrupt linear time by merging memory, physical change, and imagined future possibilities into the immediacy of embodiment.

Reading for Nonlinearity in Trans Teen Life-Writing

The linear-progressive structures of *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* (childhood to adulthood, dysphoria to euphoria, one binary gender to another) replicate the medicalized transition arc Amin critiques as a regulatory fiction. Yet reading them only in that way would miss their moments of subversion. To locate these moments, I turn to Mel Y. Chen's work in *Animacies*, which provides a lens for understanding how language acts as a material force. Their analysis of Michael Silverstein's animacy hierarchy reveals how language sorts the world, granting more "life," agency, and value to some entities over others (Chen 25-30). As noted earlier in this chapter, Chen contends that this hierarchy is a political tool: language can animate a subject, granting it legitimacy, or de-animate it, framing it as passive, inert, or less than human (29-30). And they argue that words are not neutral descriptors but vibrant entities that "affect and effect" (Chen 54). Understood through that lens, the standardized transition narrative is a script that people feel they must follow, and therefore actively creates the experience it describes. A trans narrator writing about their life might therefore emphasize certain parts of their experience and downplay or leave out others in order for their transition to be perceived as legitimate. This isn't to say that trans narrators are lying, but rather that they are

compelled to make their experience legible to others using the only available script. The standardized narrative acts as a force that guides a memoirist's decisions, self-perception, and how they present their body and their history to the world. It is precisely at the points where this narrative force fails, however, that the memoirs become most revealing.

These points of failure manifest in the disjunctures between photos and text,⁴¹ in the descriptions of complexly embodied experience, and in the feelings of dysphoria that resurface after moments of euphoria, where the two memoirs document a lived temporality that complicates the simple before-and-after narrative. Transition is revealed to be an ongoing and recursive process instead of a singular event with easily-identifiable beginning and endpoints. These tensions between form and content, and between medicalized legibility and embodied experience, make the trans memoir a site of temporal struggle where the act of composing becomes a way of negotiating time: past selves can be reconfigured through present narration. To read them critically means to witness how their authors both reify and resist the linear narratives demanded by medical and legal institutions. I want to note that I am not making the claim that *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* (or trans life-writing in general) are innately radical or intentionally anti-normative. Their surface-level adherence to the before-and-after model of transition is precisely what makes my reading against-the-grain. Rather than looking for an overt rejection of norms, I want to understand how complexities, frictions, and failure points emerge within the normative developmental frameworks prescribed by the law,

⁴¹ The photographs included in *Rethinking Normal* and *Some Assembly Required* function as contested temporal markers: material artifacts that both document and disrupt the linear narratives often imposed on trans lives. Rather than as neutral evidence, we might regard these images as curated fragments of memory, staging moments of selfhood that either, or both, contradict or collude with the authors' lived experiences. For instance, a childhood photo might misgender Hill or Andrews in its original context, yet its inclusion in the memoir could reclaim it as part of their becoming. In that sense, these photos are touchstones that instigate both remembering and revision. Unlike medical or legal documents, which tend to freeze trans adolescents into static developmental categories, these photos retain some ambiguity: they are sites of both dys- and euphoria, proof of transformation, and testimonies to selves that are multiple and simultaneous. Their presence in the memoirs has the potential to refuse the reduction of trans adolescence to abstract timelines.

particularly in moments where experiences of transness do not align with prevailing legal and medical narratives. I seek out such mis-coordinations among five of the common benchmarks of the trans narrative arc: dysphoria, discovery, social transition, medical transition, and post-surgical euphoria.

Dysphoria

The typical trans memoir often presents dysphoria as a diagnostic milestone that initiates the linear narrative of transition, offering proof of the clear and persistent distress required for both medical legibility and a coherent transition arc. Gender dysphoria is generally understood as a cognitive sense of mismatch between one's internal sense of self and one's assigned gender, which is also experienced as a sense of distress related to a feeling of wrongness with one's physical body.⁴² Hill's earliest description of experiencing gender dysphoria seems to fit this understanding on the surface, with its confident insistence on knowing something was wrong, even if she didn't know what, precisely, it was:

When you're a toddler, you don't think about gender or sex. They aren't even concepts you fully understand. But from around the age of two, I knew that something with my body was off. I couldn't explain why, but I was certain that my penis was not supposed to be there. I would see my mom get out of the bath. I would notice her vagina and think, *Well, maybe mine will grow into that when I'm older.* I remember going to her, tugging on my genitals, and saying, "Mom, I want this off." [...] for me it was more than discomfort. It was a profound alienation from my body that I had no idea how to articulate. (36-7)

⁴² The DSM-5 was initiated in May of 2013, around the same time as Hill and Andrews were beginning to garner public interest. It defines gender dysphoria thusly: "as a general descriptive term [gender dysphoria] refers to the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one's experienced or expressed gender and one's assigned gender. However, it is more specifically defined when used as a diagnostic category. It does not refer to distress related to stigma, a distinct although possibly co-occurring source of distress. Transgender refers to the broad spectrum of individuals whose gender identity is different from their birth-assigned gender," and later clarifies that, "Individuals with gender dysphoria have a marked incongruence between the gender to which they have been assigned (usually based on phenotypic sex at birth, referred to as birth-assigned gender) and their experienced/expressed gender. This discrepancy is the core component of the diagnosis. There must also be evidence of distress about this incongruence." ("Gender Dysphoria," 511-13).

While conventional models of gender development suggest children gradually acquire gendered knowledge through socialization, Hill's experience challenges that in its description of the innate and bodily experience of dysphoria that precedes her conceptual understanding of gender.

Assuming her penis might naturally grow into a vagina over time could be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile her embodiment with normative developmental expectations—an attempt that ultimately fails, however, and results in the sensation of alienation from her body. At any rate, this passage positions Hill within the legible origin story of the initially-dysphoric trans subject who “always knew” she was trans, a key benchmark for diagnostic and social validity. Hill explicitly recalls knowing “something [...] was off” from a very young age and expressing a direct desire for genital alteration, which aligns neatly with the medical model that seeks clear, early signs of gender dysphoria.

But the embodied and affective experience she describes complicates that medicalized legibility. Rather than a clear declaration of being a girl, she expresses a “profound alienation” that she “had no idea how to articulate.” Friction emerges between the neat retrospective medical diagnosis and the messy, forward-looking, and naive reality of a child's consciousness, which operates on intuition (that her current bodily state is not right) and fantasy (that her penis will eventually grow into a vagina) rather than a politically or medically legible analysis. Hill's childhood experience is filled with a somatic certainty that is both undeniable and inexpressible within the frameworks available to her. The same narrative that grants her legibility as “actually trans” is built on the foundation of an embodied reality that troubles it.

Tension between a legible medical narrative and a more chaotic bodily reality is likewise illustrated in *Some Assembly Required*, where the expectation of eventual female puberty creates a similar crisis for Andrews. Where Hill's early childhood dysphoria centers on the desire for a

penis, Andrews' narrative reveals how the anticipated development of his pubertal body provoked a distinct yet equally profound form of somatic alienation. He articulates his experience as a young child when his mother explains that he will eventually menstruate:

Blood pouring out of your body was not natural as far as I was concerned. *Especially* down there. And if it was something that was supposed to happen to girls, then it definitely wasn't supposed to happen to me. But I was still too young to know what that thought actually meant. It wasn't that I hated having a vagina. I just wanted a penis...it had been pretty easy up until that point to pretend that my vagina just wasn't there. But now that I knew what it had in store for me, I wanted nothing to do with it. (40)

Like Hill's account, this passage captures a pivotal medical benchmark of dysphoria, a moment in the linear trans narrative arc that is often recounted as a crisis of "wrong" secondary sex characteristics. Still, Andrews' experience is somatically and cognitively complicated. That he didn't "[hate] having a vagina," but instead "just wanted a penis," is a nuanced bodily experience that challenges the medical expectation of persistent unambiguous distress with one's primary sex characteristics. Andrews' embodied reality is not necessarily one of constant dysphoria, but of manageability: the capacity to pretend his vagina "just wasn't there." When his mother explains periods to him, she introduces a materiality (eventual menstruation) that is perceived as inevitable and forces on Andrews a sudden crisis of legibility.

Ultimately, for both Hill and Andrews, the linear medical model of dysphoria fails to capture how their feelings have a dynamic, non-linear relationship to their bodies; they shift, contradict themselves, and recur in unpredictable ways based on context, time, and experience. But the transition narrative itself acts as a material force that organizes these feelings into the coherent, linear plot demanded for recognition and legitimacy. The before-and-after transition arc imposes a chronological order onto experiences that are fundamentally not aligned with that timeline; in doing so, the memoir's form actively shapes the temporality of the story, and a tension emerges between the messy and recursive time of lived experience and the neat

progressive time of the transition narrative. If the benchmark of dysphoria is defined by anticipation of an inevitable bodily future that induces negative affect, then the subsequent narrative milestone—the moment of discovery—promises an euphoric resolution. Yet that moment of recognition is often fraught with its own set of affective complications.

The Moment of Discovery

Following the benchmark of dysphoria, the linear transition arc constructs a second important milestone: a singular moment of discovery that provides a sense of relief, a self-diagnosis, and a clear path forward. Yet, as with dysphoria, both texts immediately complicate this prescribed affective script by revealing the discovery of a trans identity to be a site of intense and often contradictory emotions. Andrews recounts one particular moment where self-recognition is felt with immediacy in his body; in discovering a YouTube video of a teenager in the process of transition, he experienced an euphoric moment of understanding: “He was who I wanted to be. He was who I *was* [...] It’s hard to describe what it actually felt like [...] I felt like I was floating. I was bursting with new information, *priceless* information that finally explained everything that was wrong with me” (88-9). This moment of recognition radically reorients Andrews’ sense of self in an instant: encountering the video both explains for Andrews his past dysphoria and opens up the possibility for him to imagine a different future than he’d previously anticipated. His descriptive language (“floating,” “bursting”) highlights the embodied nature of that revelation: the moment of discovery is a visceral affective shift that restructures his relationship to gendered identity. But the euphoric feeling is fleeting, and almost immediately gives way to persisting dysphoria: “suddenly my depression came crashing back onto my shoulders. The task at hand seemed impossible [...] I’d finally discovered a truth about myself, but instead of it setting me free, I realized that things were actually probably about to get a whole

lot worse” (90). The initial euphoric moment of recognition, where a confusing past is explained and a coherent future becomes imaginable, is a foundational point of legibility for both the memoirist and the medical institution which requires a clear and causative narrative of trans identity. However, Andrews immediately undermines the linearity of the narrative with his reversion into dysphoria. This is another point of mis-coordination within the normative developmental timeline: the linear model suggests a gradual progression from dysphoria to euphoria, but Andrews moves back and forth between the two affects. Even in Andrews’ quintessential “aha” moment, a feeling of dissatisfaction actively persists. This is an experience of temporality that medical and legal frameworks are poorly equipped to handle: instead of a simple, legible move from dysphoria to euphoria, the two sensations represent a field of active and relational forces that compete with one another.

The fraught and non-linear affective terrain of discovery and self-diagnosis in both texts demonstrates that even as discovery offers a new lens through which to understand the past, it simultaneously creates a new set of anxieties about the future. Those anxieties become apparent in the next narrative benchmark: social transition. There, the private self must be negotiated through public signifiers before a minor may access medical transition.

Social Transition

In the linear transition arc of mainstream trans life-writing, one might be inclined to interpret social transition as a positive set of events and practices that resolve social discomfort and bring one closer to a coherent, stable self. But, when read closely, there are instances where ostensibly positively-connotated moments of social transition are tinged with dysphoric feelings. For example, Andrews’ description of his first short haircut in *Some Assembly Required* conveys coexisting sensations of liberation and dissatisfaction:

The high-pitched shearing sound was just like I'd always imagined, and as soon as the chunk of hair was separated from my body, I felt my head drift upward, as if there were helium balloons tied to my ears. While my hair had been pulled back, I had seen my true, short-haired self in the mirror, and I felt a slight twinge of disappointment when the remaining strands fell back down around and settled on the tops of my shoulders. But the lightness felt incredible, and I shook my head back and forth a few times to get used to it. (99)

While the overall tone of this passage evokes a positive sense of progression, Andrews' account still gets at the nonlinear, contradictory interplay of dysphoria and euphoria during social transition. The shearing sound and weightless feelings he describes evoke the bodily sensations attending liberation from gendered constraints; but the "twinge of disappointment" at his remaining hair reminds us that dysphoria still lingers as a bodily sensation. That duality reveals the somatic complexity of transition: the body is a site of where relief and unease paradoxically coexist. Through the lens of Chen's animacy theory, the "twinge" and the lingering dysphoria can be understood as actively agential participants in the ongoing animation of trans embodiment, persistently complicating any linear narrative of before-and-after. Andrews' experience embodies transition as a series of negotiations, where satisfaction and desire are simultaneously present.

Earlier in the text, Andrews recounts another aspect of social transition: his experiences with packing, which elicit a fraught somatic and affective response for him. The packer offers euphoric affirmation through weight and presence—"it's literally better than nothing," Andrews writes (145)—but it also underscores for him the absence of "real" anatomy, layering his sense of satisfaction with that dysphoric reminder. Even in affirmative moments, the body's perceived limitations persist: Andrews notes how packing "required a bit of arrangement first [...] if there were any risk at all of my dick falling off in front of other men, I'd rather not" (145-6), exposing the precariousness of passing and a visceral anxiety about prosthetic failure. Like Hill's failed

hope that her penis might one day grow into a vagina, Andrews' packing is another iteration of the set of tensions within the linear transition arc where the body is both a site of potential and of persistent feelings of inadequacy. These moments in the everyday experience of transition reveal how even acts of gender affirmation can hover between euphoria and dysphoria, as the body becomes through a process of trial, error, and partial resolution instead of a neat linear progression.

Persistent non-linearity, where dysphoria and euphoria coexist at the very milestones meant to resolve the former, is a mis-coordination with the neat narrative arc of transition. On one hand, the before-during-after framings of transition reify it as a linear, medicalized process where an individual progresses from one binary gender to the other. But, on the other hand, those same shifts in embodied selfhood conflict with prescribed developmental timelines because of the nonlinearity of gendered experience, where even after meeting certain transitional milestones feelings of dysphoria persist in uneven ways. Hill, for example, describes her experience developing small breasts during puberty and the accompanying conflicted feelings of simultaneous validation and abnormality (78-9). Puberty both affirms and disrupts her gendered expectations; while breast development provides her with a momentary sensation of rightness, it also marks her body as anomalous within binary frameworks of sex development. As a result, she talks about wearing a large "hiding hoodie" to cover her developing body, a commonly-expressed experience for trans adolescents, and one that is echoed in Andrews' memoir too. As both texts demonstrate, even within the prescribed scripts of puberty or medical transition the lived experience of embodiment remains complex and nonlinear.

Medical Transition

The medical milestone of hormone therapy is often framed in transition narratives as the definitive biological start of transition. Yet Hill's and Andrews' experiences with the medical institution as they begin hormone therapy show how this path to legibility is neither as straightforward nor as entirely affirming as the surface structure of the mainstream trans arc presents it. Instead it is fraught with unexpected biological ambiguities and institutional elisions. For example, Hill discusses an instance just prior to being prescribed hormones, where her doctor orders a chromosome test because of her "small breast growth and other feminine characteristics like curves and barely any facial hair" (118). She continues on to note that subsequent medical exam results also indicated the likelihood that she was intersexed. But she declined further testing because, "frankly, at that point in time I didn't care what I technically was. I had been a boy my entire life, and all I cared about was becoming a girl as fast as possible" (121). The medical investigation into her chromosomal makeup epitomizes how clinical understandings of puberty inscribe time on the body, with unexpected physical changes prompting institutional attempts to categorize Hill within existing biological taxonomies. Andrews encounters a similar moment when his doctor notes that his low testosterone levels could have qualified him for hormone therapy earlier:

"Well," [the doctor] said. "Turns out you didn't even need a letter from your therapist."
 "What do you mean?" I asked.
 "All women have a normal amount of testosterone in their system. You have almost none.
 You could have been on at least some testosterone ages ago."
 I would have been upset, if I hadn't already been so excited to start. I even let slide the fact that he had just referred to me as a woman. Still, it was weird. (154)

Andrews' affective reaction captures the paradox of navigating a system that simultaneously pathologizes and validates trans bodies: even when medicine affirms his needs, it does so both

arbitrarily and through misgendering. The phrase “still, it was weird” evokes the dissonant feeling of receiving medical validation through that pathologizing and misgendering framework. There is a sense of cognitive and emotional whiplash in having his identity both affirmed and denied. The weirdness is the somatic and affective residue of that contradiction. Access to medical transition, in many cases, has less to do with one’s realized and recognized sense of self and more to do with arbitrary biological status; that correct treatment results from a diagnosis other than gender dysphoria exemplifies a failure point in the medical model of transition. And like the earlier fantasy of swapping body parts, Hill’s rejection of diagnostic scrutiny and Andrews’ incidental qualification for care exposes the inadequacy of binary frameworks to contain the messy, nonlinear realities of trans embodiment.

Even after successfully accessing hormones, there are still moments to be found in the process of medical transition where the body’s changes are experienced as partial or unpredictable. We can see this in Andrews’ account of his voice cracking just a few days after beginning a regimen of testosterone, when he experiences a moment in which his body publicly signals its incomplete transformation:

“So, are YOU excitEEEEd about...,” I started to ask, but I slapped my hands over my mouth, mortified at the weird goat bleat that had just erupted from me. My voice had suddenly dropped three octaves and then scrambled up another four—it sounded like a record scratching. I froze, eyes wide, with my hands still covering my mouth [...] But I was suddenly a little thrilled inside. It was all happening—just one more step to becoming the person I was meant to be. (155-6)

The lived experience of a desired change, in this instance, is messier than the neat linear narrative of “becoming the person I was meant to be” suggests. Andrews’ cracking voice is a chaotic moment of partial change. This somatic event produces a mis-coordination between his intention to speak and his body’s actual output, which causes him to experience a negative affect: embarrassment. But that same bodily failure is also the source of his “thrill,” since it is a tangible

sign that the hormones are working to actively change his body. The cracking of his voice is thus both a dysphoric rupture of social composure and an euphoric affirmation of medical progress.

The path to one's desired self is paved with these paradoxical moments. And even after successfully navigating these hurdles and accessing surgical treatment, new complications arise almost immediately; the very bodily changes sought as a resolution to gender dysphoria can themselves initiate chaotic or unpredictable experiences. We see this in the texts where the euphoric feeling of finally aligning one's body with one's identity is still punctuated by the bodily realities of recovery or the strangeness of a new corporeal state.

Post-Surgical Euphoria

The euphoria of a post-surgical felt sense of bodily alignment is often depicted as the culminating milestone of the transition arc, where dysphoria is completely resolved by successful gender-affirming surgery. However, these moments are often complicated by tension between the exhilaration of “finally” becoming oneself and the lingering echoes of dysphoria. Consider this instance where Hill articulates her body's capacity for euphoric release in a moment after her social and medical transition were complete:

I had an experience I can only describe as spiritual [...] before I knew it, I was crying. I felt flushed with emotion all over my body, almost dizzy. I closed my eyes and felt this overwhelming sense that I was being hugged and that everything was going to be okay [...] overall, I just stopped being angry. (128-9)

Where she describes dysphoria as an overwhelming sense of pressure early in the memoir (64, 85), euphoria is experienced here as an embrace: a tactile sensation of being held. This contrast is key; the dysphoric pressure is a constricting force, whereas the “hug” is a somatic affirmation. Critically, her euphoric moment also reconfigures time: the “dizziness” Hill describes suggests that the sensation of the hug is not just spatial but temporal, an embodied present that dissolves

the earlier sense of time as suffocating. Dysphoria compresses the self under the demand to conform. It is unwelcome because it can't be shrugged off: the body itself becomes the source of confinement. In contrast, the euphoric hug is an active, affirming presence; where dysphoria constricts, euphoria envelops, and where the weight of dysphoria is isolating, the hug evokes connection. This intensely somatic post-surgical epiphany indicates that transition is not solely discursive; rather than understanding it as just a social or medical process, ongoing transition is felt as a bodily sense of relief and a renegotiation of temporality where the body, once a site of temporal dread, becomes a site where past pain and present release coexist.

Hill's epiphany, however, represents only one facet of post-surgical time. Read against the grain, post-surgical embodiment can be understood not as a clean break from past dysphoria, but as a layered temporal experience where an euphoric sense of bodily alignment coexists with the lingering dysphoric sense of bodily alienation. When Hill reflects that she "finally [has] the right part down there" (6), her emphasis on "finally" speaks to the ways in which surgery is both an endpoint and a continuation of temporal and somatic negotiation, where past negative affects are succeeded, but not necessarily replaced, by an embodied sense of affirmation. "Finally" calls attention to transition's complicated embedding in time; Hill's past negative affects do not disappear post-surgery but instead shape the significance of the euphoric moment. Similarly, Andrews' first time seeing his post-surgical chest captures this duality:

As the nurse unwound the wrap, I glanced down. My nipples were scabbed over and there were still incisions healing from where the tubes had gone into my pits, but other than that it was perfect. It was like looking down the sheer side of a cliff [...] I was finally looking at myself—the person I always saw when I closed my eyes. I was wearing my soul on my skin for the first time in my life. (209)

The imagery Andrews uses of the "sheer cliff" could be interpreted literally as a simile for a flat chest perceived from above, but it might also be somatically understood as capturing the

exhilaration of bodily becoming. The scabbed nipples and healing incisions testify to the body's material history—and to the incompleteness of transition, complicating the “finished” body narrative—even as the “perfect” flat plane of his chest is a realization of Andrews' long anticipated future. When Andrews declares he is “wearing [his] soul on [his] skin for the first time,” he understands gender-affirming surgery not as the creation of a new body but the unveiling of an already-present self. This revelation is paradoxically simultaneous with the material evidence of the body's alteration.

And within these profound moments of somatic revelation exist trans embodiment's non-linear reality, where, for both Hill and Andrews, the moment of post-surgical gender euphoria doesn't necessarily erase the lingering presence of dysphoria. For instance, as Hill notes, “even though I passed as a girl, and had for a while, I still experienced severe bouts of gender dysphoria—anxiety with how I looked and discomfort with my body” (15). The ongoing tension between felt gender and lived experience reveals that gender euphoria is a condition in flux, where neither social affirmation nor medical intervention fully protect someone against the resurgence of somatic alienation. Lingering dysphoria is not a static remainder, but an animating force that actively persists within and interacts with moments of euphoria, positioning trans embodiment within an assemblage of agential and often competing somatic relations. Trans embodiment, in other words, is a lived and ongoing negotiation of the self rather than a singular endpoint. So, taken together, these scenes demonstrate that post-surgical embodiment must be understood as an ongoing negotiation in which euphoria and dysphoria remain entangled. The two narratives ultimately insist that gendered becoming is recursive, affectively dense, and profoundly embodied.

Holding Contradiction in the Making of Trans Bodies

SB1 and the U.S. brief weaponize linearity as a tool of governance, de-animating trans adolescents and reducing their lived experiences to a series of state-approved and institutionally managed checkpoints. SB1 treats trans youth as bodies to be regulated rather than selves to be listened to, dismissing the somatic knowledge of gender euphoria; the U.S. brief, while ostensibly supportive of trans minors, still capitulates to this temporal violence by accepting the state's terms of legibility. To acknowledge the messiness and nonlinearity of trans time would undermine their claims to authority. Against the normative developmental frameworks prescribed by these legal texts, trans life-writing asserts that the body is the first and final authority on its own becoming.

Still, in a trans studies context that valorizes the explicitly anti-normative, Hill and Andrews might be read as “bad subjects” because of their desire for legibility and normative belonging. But, as Long Chu contends, “the desire for the norm consists, in terms of its lived content, in nonnormative attempts at normativity [...] The most powerful intervention scholars working in trans studies can make [...] is to defend the claim that transness requires that we understand, as we never have before, what it means to be attached to a norm—by desire, by habit, by survival” (“After Trans Studies” 107-8). In that context, Hill's acknowledgement that, “for me [...] it was this passing, the way I was finally being seen by others, that mattered the most,”⁽⁶⁾ demonstrates that seeking normality does not necessarily mean uncritical conformity, but instead can be understood as a “nonnormative attempt at normativity” where the pursuit of normativity is itself a trans act that “rethinks normal.” Even as Hill asserts the authority of her lived experience as a trans woman—“my life experience [...] has been a transgender experience” (121)—her narrative confirms that gendered embodiment exists in an overlap between somatic

self-knowledge and institutional and social legibility. To my mind, it is precisely their refusal of the anti-normative imperative that makes these two texts critically interesting; it grounds the discussion in the messy, often contradictory realities of embodied life. One of those contradictory realities is that mainstream trans life-writing both capitulates to and complicates the linear transition arc.

At the heart of that linear transition arc is a set of temporal expectations that shape how trans embodiment is regulated, narrated, and understood. And temporal constructs materialize in trans lives with profound consequence, from institutional recognition, to regulations regarding gender-affirming care, to the crafting of personal narratives about identity. They reveal time not as a neutral backdrop but as an animating force that governs bodily legibility. Reading mainstream trans life-writing against the grain to expose alternative temporalities is important to understand both because normative chronologies pose material obstacles to gender-affirming care, and because the prescriptive timelines of the law fail to account for the embodied experiences of gendered becoming felt by trans and genderqueer adolescents.

Trans adolescent life-writing counters the de-animating tendencies of medical and legal discourse by reasserting the felt, embodied experiences that those institutions routinely abstract away. Through the lens of Chen's animacy hierarchy framework, prevailing medical, legal, and political discourse de-animates trans adolescents, treating them as abstract subjects within a debate rather than as living, feeling beings. Re-animation works through the memoir form itself, which sometimes challenges the linear-progressive structure it seems to uphold; close reading uncovers how the everyday materiality of the body constantly complicates the memoir's ostensibly straightforward before-and-after transition arc. Nonlinear, embodied moments are not

exceptions but rather an inherent part of gendered becoming. In documenting this fluid, felt temporality, the memoirs insist on the authority of ordinary embodied experiences.

Because legal and narrative genres exert real force in producing the possibilities of trans embodiment, they must be understood as actants within larger discursive and material systems. They don't just represent bodies; they participate in determining what bodies can be. And they produce experiences of time that are shaped by culture and by institutions, but also by individual somaticity. These genres, more than just linguistic constructs, are actants with material agency within complex, dynamic, and plastic discursive and material assemblages. That agency lies not just in their influence in shaping public discourse and policy, but also in the way they manifest in lived experiences, and in the possibilities they either produce or foreclose for trans people. Consequently arises the need for legal frameworks that recognize gender as an embodied experience transcending prescriptive biological boundaries.

Chapter 3

Corporeal Excession: Reading the Maternal Body in *Nightbitch*

“This must be what it means to be an animal, to look at another and say, I am so much that other thing that we are part of one another. Here is my skin. Here yours. Beneath the moon, we pile inside the warm cave, becoming one creature to save our warmth. We breathe together and dream together.”

– Rachel Yoder, *Nightbitch* (2021)

In the contemporary United States, women’s bodies are often the locus of the escalating culture war over gender. On one front, the systemic dismantling of reproductive rights enforces a biopolitical mandate that reduces women’s personhood to reproductive potential;¹ on another, a pervasive moral panic targets any expression of gender nonconformity and trans existence, weaponizing biological essentialism to reinforce an immutably binary view of the body.² At the center of these legal and cultural conflicts lies a shared ideological project: the construction and enforcement of a normative reproductive life script, in which value is assigned to bodies based on their adherence to a predictable schedule of cisheterosexual reproductive usefulness.

¹ At the time of this chapter’s writing, an unprecedented rollback of women’s reproductive rights is taking place. Following the 2022 overturn of *Roe v. Wade* (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Org*), there has been a proliferation of near-total abortion bans in states such as Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Texas, as well as state refusals to use state Medicaid funding for abortions and the implementation of mandatory waiting periods. In May of 2026, *State of Louisiana v. U.S. FDA*, a case concerned with banning mifepristone by mail, continues to work its way through the courts and will likely be heard by SCOTUS. Funding restrictions like the Hyde Amendment prevent federal funds like Medicaid from being used for abortions, with few exceptions, and a patchwork of state laws have arisen as part of efforts to make birth control, IVF, and other healthcare inaccessible.

² We are presently witnessing a marked rise in anti-trans legislation, from bans on gender-affirming care for minors (*U.S. v. Skrmetti*), to trans bans in the NCAA, K-college sports (*Gaines v. NCAA*; *Little v. Hecox*), and Olympics, to bathroom restrictions (Montana’s HB 121, Idaho’s HB 264, etc.), to restrictions on ID documentation (Trump’s Executive Order 14168) to genital checks on children accused of being trans (the ironically-named *Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act of 2023*; HB 1041) and policies seeking to force-detransition incarcerated people (*Keohane v. Dixon*). Alongside this series of legal attacks on trans and gender nonconforming individuals, the recently-released NSPM-7, a national security directive signed by President Trump on September 25, 2025, as Ken Klippenstein notes, instructs Joint Terrorism Task Forces to “thwart organizations and individuals espousing the domestic terrorism indicators” (“Trump’s NSPM-7 Alarms Law Firms”) including “extremism on...gender” and “hostility toward those who hold traditional American views on family, religion, and morality” (NSPM-7, section 1).

The maternal body, in particular, becomes trapped within this logic; its meaning and purpose is derived from its capacity to bear and nurture children, the “ultimate job of creation” after which there seems to be “nothing left” (Yoder 24). This ideology is frequently expressed through right-wing discourse that explicitly frames women’s primary social value through reproductive capacity. Such rhetoric directly contributes to the reification of a normative reproductive life script by casting white motherhood as both a patriotic and spiritual duty. Contemporary manifestations of this discourse are especially visible on digital platforms where influencers perform a fetishized³ and aesthetically curated version of domesticity. For instance, consider the online publication *Evie Magazine*: Brittany Hugoboom, *Evie*’s co-founder, is quoted in a 2025 *New York Times* article asserting that “[‘girlboss feminism’] encourages women to be ‘just like men’ [...] Instead, [Hugoboom] believes faith, family, and love, not ‘casual sex, careerism, or ideological activism,’ supply the greatest satisfaction” (Baker). And, as the same article later notes, *Evie* has direct ties to billionaire Peter Thiel, who shares the Hugoboom’s beliefs that “declining birthrates pose a threat to economic growth and societal well-being” (Baker). The ideological convergence between media influence and billionaire-backed pronatalism is further exemplified via the online “tradwife” movement, driven by influencers like Hannah Neeleman and Estee Williams.⁴ Their performances function as a recruitment for

³ Kathryn Jezer-Morton argues that much of social media’s tradwife content is sexual in nature, particularly on TikTok, where “tradwives go much harder on the ideology *and* on the smutty side — the overwrought Christian hashtags, the fetish dresses and cinched aprons, the milky-white cleavage — while actually showing us much less of the life itself” (“Is Tradwife Content Dangerous?”). Jezer-Morton later quotes journalist Max Read as speculating that “‘the people who are driving the circulation of this stuff are men’ [...] ‘Maybe it’s a different version of the e-girl phenomenon or the OnlyFans phenomenon.’”

⁴ Neeleman is a Utah-based influencer and mother of eight behind the popular social media brand Ballerina Farm, who documents her life on a pastoral farm. Her content both explicitly advocates for patriarchy and packages domestic labor and motherhood as personal, aesthetic choices; it also naturalizes a lifestyle that is impossible for most women to replicate, because Neeleman is married to the son of a billionaire. Her aesthetic allows viewers to absorb traditional gender ideology as aspirational rather than coercive, and it romanticizes maternal abnegation as natural, fulfilling, and inherently feminine. Williams, though not as prominent as Neeleman, is a Virginia-based influencer who explicitly identifies herself as a “tradwife” and advocates for traditional marriages where the husband provides financially and the wife is responsible for managing the home and producing and raising children. Williams explicitly frames the tradwife role as a political counter to feminism, and her content, like Neeleman’s, normalizes the conditions of precarity that enable the state’s erosion of women’s rights to autonomy.

stay-at-home motherhood in order to reconsolidate traditional gender roles, by encouraging women to prioritize childbearing and homemaking.

The tradwife phenomenon resurrects the “mommy wars” of the 1980s by pitting stay-at-home mothers against working mothers (Jezer-Morton) but intensifies that conflict through social media’s capacity to amplify maternal guilt and the pressure to perform an idealized version of the self-sacrificing, “good” mother. It is crucial to note that the idealized tradwife is almost exclusively white; scholars have already called attention to the ways in which the valorization of white reproduction operates as a central tenet of the alt-right movement.⁵ The sociopolitical significance of tradwife content lies in its strategic repackaging of coercion as empowerment, effectively using lifestyle branding to hide the violence of the normative reproductive life script behind pastoral imagery. It is against this political and ideological backdrop that Rachel Yoder’s fabulist novel *Nightbitch* emerges as a counter to the dominating cultural construction of the maternal body as self-abnegating reproductive vessel by instead staging it as a mode of transformation and becoming.

Nightbitch follows an unnamed mother, who, after abandoning her successful career as an artist to become a stay-at-home-mom, becomes convinced that she is transforming into a dog by night. As she struggles with the mundanity and isolation of her role as a homemaker, she begins to experience bodily changes like hirsutism, sharper teeth, heightened smell, the growth of a tail, and cravings for raw meat. The novel’s descriptions of those bodily changes blur the line between the real and the fantastic. And the mother engages in instinctive acts of violence both small and spectacular, from chasing squirrels to gutting the household cat with a knife and using her teeth to jerk its carcass around. Yoder frames the mother’s transformation into *Nightbitch* as

⁵ Minna Stern (2019); Labanieh (2025).

a series of visceral rebellions against the erasure of self that normative maternal scripts entail; the mother eventually resumes her artistic practice via an interactive performance that incorporates the sensory and affective experiences of motherhood.

This chapter argues that a new materialist reading of *Nightbitch* reveals how the tools of feminist fabulation can be leveraged to reconfigure the body-subject as an agentic, more-than-human assemblage that exceeds the bounds of normative maternal programs, particularly by reclaiming creation as a capacity that extends beyond reproduction. By thinking the maternal body-subject as always already exceeding the singular identity and purpose imposed upon it by the logic of reproductive futurism, I aim to shift the understanding of maternity from a socially-determined role whose sole purpose and identity is reproduction and mothering to a set of corporeal acts that constantly generate new potential forms of being. This allows for a reinterpretation of the mother's bodily changes as agentic insubordinations against a cultural system that views women mainly as reproductive utilities. A new materialist lens resolves the apparent mutual exclusivity between biological reproduction and artistic creation, framing them instead as responsive forms of material production that emerge from the same creative self. In other words, *Nightbitch* reveals how the maternal body-subject perpetually becomes into a new mode of being that defies its singular categorization as mother by reclaiming its entire existence as a site of creativity.

To reframe the maternal body-subject in such a way logically necessitates the theoretical and methodological moves that follow. Understanding bodily rebellion as more than just a metaphor in this novel requires a new materialist lens, which views bodies as dynamic assemblages of agentic forces that are actively engaged in the process of becoming. I therefore turn to feminist fabulation as a useful narrative mode: its capacity for speculation and for the

materialization of metaphor opens space for imagining different ways of being, including ways of maternal creation that are not subordinated to biological reproduction. This methodological framework enables the close reading that demonstrates my core claim in this chapter, which is that by analyzing *Nightbitch* through a new materialist lens, the mother's corporeal transformations are revealed to be agentic acts of excession that ultimately reposition art as a bodily, material practice.

In short: I start by thinking normative developmental schedules as tools for reifying and enforcing the dominant social order of reproductive futurism, with attention to how this order attempts to limit maternal creation to the single permissible act of childbearing. Next, I establish a new materialist view of the maternal body as a dynamic collection of interacting forces that have agency and are actively engaged in a perpetual process of becoming, a framework that allows us to understand biological reproduction and artistic creation as connected forms of material production. Then, I turn to a discussion about feminist fabulation as a mode of critical speculation, positing *Nightbitch* as a contemporary model of that sociopolitical function. After that, I close-read and analyze some of *Nightbitch*'s descriptions of artistic expression, bodily transformation, and the felt experiences of motherhood through a new materialist lens in order to demonstrate how the mother's bodily changes are material, agentic acts of excession. This analysis will trace the arc through which the mother bodily reclaims creation: from her early art of dead animals which remain separate from herself, through the corporeal transformations that make her own flesh the site of creative emergence, to her final installation where her own living, animal body performs maternity and artistic creation as entangled material practices. And lastly, I complicate that analysis by remarking on the ways in which *Nightbitch*'s presumed whiteness

obscures racialized animalization and discussing the possible pitfalls of thinking about dogness as a universally-available mode of empowerment for women.

At intersections of feminist new materialism, queer theory, disability theory, and Black studies, my analysis will explore how the mother's transformation into *Nightbitch* demonstrates the material vibrancy of bodies that inevitably complicate the social scripts imposed upon them. The mother becoming dog is a trans-corporeal⁶ event that challenges the categories of the human and the maternal, offering a vision of motherhood as a generative mode of being. Her final art installation insists that the maternal body remain a site of creation on its own terms, making art not instead of being a mother, or only as a mother, but as a self for whom creation exceeds any single act or identity. In substantiating this, I assert the agency and significance of the maternal body outside of reproductive utility. My reading of *Nightbitch* offers an understanding of maternity and artistic production as mutually animating forces, and models a critical approach that acknowledges the capacity of bodies to resist the social meanings imposed upon them. This work also intervenes in the ongoing culture war regarding gender by demonstrating that the cisgender female body is not a stable biological fact; in other words, I refute the fiction of a natural, fixed, socially-determined body.

⁶ Trans-corporeality, a concept put forward by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures*, is a theoretical framework that counters the notion of the body as a discrete and autonomous entity by arguing that the self is always co-constituted by its material and discursive environments. Alaimo writes of trans-corporeality that it is a state "in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human-world," and that "trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that *trans* indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures [...] and other actors" (2). In other words, trans-corporeality is a porous interconnection between the human body and nonhuman world that is characterized by constant movement and exchange across boundaries. Through that lens, the mother's transformation into a dog is less a fantastical break from reality than a literalization of the "porous interconnection" where the "unpredictable actions" of her perimenopausal body dissolve the discrete boundary of the autonomous human self.

The Maternal Role Under Reproductive Futurism

Contemporary Western society is organized around the compulsory sociopolitical order of what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism.” As Edelman describes it, reproductive futurism organizes society around the symbolic figure of the Child, demanding that all political actions and identities be justified by how they serve that future (3). And, as numerous scholars have noted, the future toward which reproductive futurism gestures is implicitly white.⁷ The Child whose protection justifies political action is imagined as a white child, and the future it secures is a white future. This racial specificity is foundational to the framework, because the reproduction of whiteness has been central to the project of nation-building (Weinbaum 5–6). That project sustains a patriarchal order that assigns women a specific and subordinate role as biological vessels through which its reproductive future is secured, and which turns “all aspects of the private domestic sphere” into “objects of state regulation” (Wallach 80). That regulatory impulse demands that white women’s reproductive labor is not just tasked with producing children but also with reproducing whiteness (Aanerud 27). Within the dominant social order, a woman’s value and meaning are determined by her capacity to bear and raise children,⁸ which delegitimizes alternative paths to creation and purpose. Its patriarchal orientation means that the mandate of reproductive futurism is most strictly applied to women, whose bodies and life trajectories become contested sites for a future-oriented politics. And its white supremacist orientation means that this mandate is unevenly distributed across racialized bodies.

Reproductive futurism relies on normative developmental schedules to reify and enforce its demands,⁹ transforming the ideological responsibility toward the Child into measurable and

⁷ Muñoz (2007); Keeling (2007); Evans (2014); Sieranski (2018).

⁸ Bamberger (1974); Hays (1996).

⁹ As Ina Batzke asserts, “normative hierarchy has always accompanied the reproductive citizen in the United States; even new, arguably liberating inventions in the field of reproductive technologies cannot change these inherent power dynamics” (444). And, in her analysis of Edelman, Alexis Lothian interprets *No Future* as arguing that “forward-looking temporalities are by

enforceable scripts for individual lives. As Elizabeth Freeman theorizes, social institutions impose chrononormativity,¹⁰ a prescribed life course that organizes individual human bodies toward maximum productivity (3) and, in this context, particular reproductive outcomes. Women who deviate from that prescription, whether by delaying or refusing childbearing or by creating outside of the reproductive framework, are pathologized within a social order that measures female value against one particular schedule of reproductive achievement (Letherby 10).

It is important to note as well that the role assigned to women under reproductive futurism does not conclude with childbirth; motherhood is a lifelong mitigation strategy designed to extend a woman's social utility indefinitely through the continued enforcement of developmental norms (Schmidt et al. 63). Put differently, once she has given birth to children, her responsibility is to guide them through their prescribed developmental schedule. A mother, in other words, becomes the primary agent for perpetuating the same cycle that regulates her life, and her own timeline is subordinated to facilitating and managing her child(ren)'s progression.

Under this rubric, the only permissible kind of creation for women is biological and social reproduction that unfolds according to the prescribed developmental timeline. To create otherwise represents a threat to the dominant social order, because such creation operates outside of its core logic: that a woman's purpose, and her duty to ensure the future, is to make children. When a woman channels her creative energy into any form of production not oriented toward the Child, she is taking her labor away from the reproductive economy and devoting it to a future that the dominant order does not recognize as legitimate. The suppression of female creativity outside of reproductive chrononormativity is therefore a necessary function of a society built on

definition part of a normative model that grinds out the same social relations over and over again while pretending to advocate progressive change" (8).

¹⁰ In *Time Binds*, Freeman defines "chrononormativity" as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" and "a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (3).

reproductive futurism. As feminist scholars on speculative fiction such as Alexis Lothian, Sherryl Vint, and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor have shown, imagining alternative futures, including those that reorganize or even eliminate biological reproduction as we know it, is a form of resistance in that it imagines different temporalities.¹¹ Creation that originates from the maternal body but is not oriented toward the Child disturbs the dominant temporal order;¹² when a mother makes art from her own embodied creative impulses, her body produces meaning that exceeds reproductive utility.¹³

This is not to suggest that mothers who conform to reproductive expectations are willingly complicit in their own subordination; I want to be clear that even though being a mother, perhaps even one who quits a career to raise children, does, in many ways, reify reproductive futurism, my analyses in this chapter are not intended to condemn mothering as any kind of personal or political failing. Conformity to the dominant social order is often a condition of surviving within it. And yet, the process of materializing creative work alongside and beyond reproduction has the capacity to destabilize that social order: in performing acts of independent transformation, the body reminds us that there exists a social identity and a mode of creation in which it is possible to operate beyond the demand of the figure of the Child. This interpretation provides a useful analytical lens for works like *Nightbitch*, in which case the mother's bodily

¹¹ Lothian (2018); Vint and Buran (2022); Wagner-Lawlor (2024).

¹² Bruna Shapira has argued that “it’s not mothering that is incompatible with artmaking but prevailing narratives defining women, caregiving, and artistic expression,” putting together an exhibition of art made by mothers that “showcases the rhythms of mothering — the interrupted, fragmented focus, the nap-length studio time, the lack of resources, the time that both drags on and moves frantically — and how this rhythm unfolds into creative practice” (“Fruits of Labor”). That rhythm resonates with Patrice DiQuinzio’s analysis of the writings of poet Sue Silvermarie, in which DiQuinzio acknowledges the ways in which “the motherbond [...] enables an unproblematic shifting among subject positions and a movement among temporalities” (224). In other words, the “motherbond” enables artistic creation that is not temporally locked into linearity. The supposed natural fit between womanhood and child-centered linear time is a social narrative; art generated by the maternal body can disturb the assumption that mothers’ time and bodies belong entirely to the future-oriented project of the child.

¹³ In “CREATING: Artistic Making Between Intellectual Creation and Biological Procreation,” Jordan Troeller discusses how artists who foreground their maternal identities “[challenge] the long-standing prohibition against the maternal as a site of biological and intellectual creation” (21), concluding that “the more interesting question for the arts is to ask how [artistic illustrations by mothers] might operate as agents, reshaping categories of knowledge” and calling for questions of the mother as other to be “grappled not abstractly but as mediated through the work of art” (27).

transformation would be read as a rebellion of the body-subject against the gendered social mores that isolate her and attempt to stifle her creative capacity; it is a channeling of her energy into self-creation that is perhaps not separate from, but complementary to, or moving beyond, biological reproduction.

In *Nightbitch*, the mother channels the felt tension between reproductive duty and creative self-actualization into a fantasy during her pregnancy, where she imagines the artistic potential in her forthcoming childbirth:

The mother fantasized about staging the birth of her child as an artistic happening. Could she set up a glass-sided pool in a studio where the audience might watch while she pushed the child from her body during a stoic water birth? Or perhaps she could give birth in a medical theater at the hospital, one of those rooms used for teaching where students sat up above in rows to watch [...] she tabled the idea, and then the baby came, and then the idea was lost for good. (23-4)

The mother wants to reclaim the act of reproduction from the privatized, medicalized context in which it usually happens. By imagining birth as performance art, she expresses her desire to transform biological reproduction into an act of creative self-definition, and to make her body's labor visible through creation. That the idea is "lost for good" after she has her son speaks to the extinguishing of creative possibility that reproductive futurism demands. The mother who creates art must surrender to she whose primary purpose it is to facilitate the child's development. This forfeiture is material and economic, not just ideological. The mother cannot sustain her artistic career because the demands of full time childcare are incompatible with the temporal structure of professional life. There is no affordable daycare, and the evening hours required for events like gallery openings or studio time are when caregiving responsibilities intensify and institutional support becomes less available. The capitalist organization of time and labor forecloses the mother's ability to inhabit both roles. Under these conditions, surrendering her job is the rational response to her material circumstances. The loss of her artistic vision, in other words, is a

structural inevitability that ensures her body's creative energies are redirected exclusively toward the Child, and by extension the reproduction of the social order. In the case of a white mother, this redirection both sustains the patriarchal family norm and secures the reproduction of whiteness through the orderly transmission of domestic values and racial identity. Her conscription into full time motherhood could, in such a case, be read as a mechanism of racial reproduction that forecloses the possibility of her body generating meaning outside the logic of white futurity. This makes exigent a framework that refuses the binary between artistic and biological creation.

The tension between her artistic impulses and her prescribed reproductive role necessitates a consideration of the maternal body itself as an agentic material assemblage capable of generating meanings and transformations that exceed the logic of the Child. It is here that the new materialist lens offers generative potential for thinking biological reproduction and artistic creation as continuous expressions of the body's capacity to generate and to transform, rather than as mutually exclusive. New materialism's attention to the agency of matter itself provides a framework for understanding how the maternal body that gives birth and the maternal body that makes art are manifestations of the same generative capacity to bring something new into the world. Reproductive futurism depends on maintaining a clear distinction between these modes of creation, valuing one and suppressing the other. But that distinction is constructed, and the materiality of the maternal body retains the capacity to trouble it.

The Maternal Body as Agentic Material Assemblage

If reproductive futurism requires that white women's bodies function primarily as vessels for ensuring the future of the Child, then the maternal body that transcends, transforms, or refuses that function is a site of political possibility. Reading the maternal body through feminist

new materialism reveals it as an active, agentic assemblage that is capable of generating meanings and transformations that exceed the logic of reproductive futurism. Where the dominant social order requires a body in complete service to reproduction, the new materialist lens sees a body that is in constant intra-action with biological, social, and environmental factors, and whose potential for change is an infinite capacity for expressing its material creativity. We are, in other words, capable of being attuned to the ways in which the body-subject asserts its own desires and its own abilities for meaning-making, and that attunement allows for us to recognize that the maternal body's transformations are themselves forms of communication and becoming that the dominating social order is unable to completely suppress.

The attempt to suppress the maternal body is made apparent in *Nightbitch* through a conversation with the mother's own mother, where there occurs an intergenerational transfer of dominant reproductive ideology. As her mother reminds her, "since you are a woman, [childbirth and childrearing] is your lot in life, your work, to do what's hard, what's unspeakably painful, and then to keep this covenant of silence" (Yoder 80-1). This model refuses to consider motherhood in any positive or beneficial way beyond its reproductive utility, which elides any potential liberatory narratives like the emergence of new forms of bodily autonomy or self-knowledge, or openings for identity beyond reproduction and maternity. Embedded in her mother's statement is the cultural requirement that women endure the pain of motherhood uncomplainingly, without articulating the experience, and without allowing that suffering to transform into anything but quiet acceptance. The "covenant of silence" is a mechanism of containment ensuring that the sensations and struggles of the maternal body remain unshared and therefore politically inert. By framing motherhood as a trial to be endured silently, the possibility

is foreclosed that the maternal body might have something to communicate, become, or create beyond its prescribed reproductive function.

But, reframed through the lens of feminist new materialism, the maternal body can be understood as embracing a model of dynamic, ongoing transformation. Drawing from Karen Barad's agential realism¹⁴ and Jane Bennett's understanding of vital materialism,¹⁵ the maternal body is a dynamic and agentic assemblage in and through which biological and environmental forces constantly intra-act. This perspective frames the body as an active participant in the process of becoming. In its state of continual flux, the body asserts its own material agency through non-linguistic modes of communication.¹⁶ The physical changes of maternal embodiment can therefore be reimagined as vibrant material phenomena.

This view is augmented by Samantha Frost's theory of the "biocultural creature." Frost argues against the understanding of matter as a passive and fixed object upon which culture acts (31). Instead, she posits that humans are biocultural¹⁷ creatures for whom "all these [material, social, and symbolic] dimensions of the medium in which creatures are cultured are important to take into account" (Frost 4). From this perspective, the maternal body is neither purely biological nor purely cultural construct: it is a biocultural process in which somatic changes are one part of

¹⁴ In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad defines "agential realism" as "an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond the well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism" (26). In other words, nothing exists independently and things only come into being through their relations. To observe or measure something is to participate in creating what is real, which means that agency, ethics, and existence are always entangled and their relations are always in flux.

¹⁵ Bennett understands "vital materialism" as a philosophical and political project that attributes agency and "thing-power" (xvi) to nonhuman matter; she draws from Deleuze and Guattari's "material vitalism" (Bennett x), from which she adopts and modifies the concept of the assemblage and creates her concept of vitality, which is the idea that nonhuman and inanimate things are also "quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of their own" (Bennett viii).

¹⁶ A number of disabled writers and disability theorists (Woolf, Scarry, Biss, and more) write about how corporeal experience exceeds the capacity of language to capture it.

¹⁷ Frost writes, "I settle on the term 'biocultural' as a descriptor for humans because I want to create a conceptual binding or a constraint such that we can no longer disavow what has been most vehemently disavowed—our biological, organismic, living animality. And rather than using a term like 'human animal' to capture this, I think 'biocultural' encapsulates the mutual constitution of body and environment, of biology and habitat that has been so central to the challenge to the category of the human" (4).

how a body comes to be within a specific social and temporal order. The physical changes initiated in part by motherhood are the body's biocultural logic manifesting as a material negotiation between a mother's desire for creation and self-articulation, and the social scripts that seek to suppress those impulses as inappropriate to the maternal role.

That embodied state of ongoing negotiation exemplifies Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, "in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (2). The maternal body is a trans-corporeal site where bodily changes, hormonal variance, affective shifts, external environmental factors, and sociocultural discourses constantly interact and exchange across its boundaries. Alaimo's framework reminds us that such "movement across human and more-than-human flesh" (12) is an active and often unpredictable material process, meaning the body is an assemblage of temporarily converging forces rather than a stable and discrete entity. By locating value in the body's inherent power to transform and adapt, instead of its reproductive utility or adherence to prescribed maternal scripts, a feminist new materialist framework challenges the logic of self-abnegation embedded in the dominant model of motherhood. The maternal assemblage becomes a site of ongoing reconfiguration, opening up the possibility to recognize motherhood as a stage for material renegotiation where the matter of the body enacts its own possibilities for meaning and becoming.

This material negotiation is made apparent in *Nightbitch* during one of the mother's reflections on childbirth and its aftermath:

She can be a body and instinct and urge. She can be hunger and rage, thirst and fear, nothing more. She can revert to a pure, throbbing state. She had that freedom when she gave birth, had screamed and shat and sworn and would have killed had she needed to [...] she had followed her body. What else was there to follow? If she could not be part of the world of ambition and money and careers, she wanted to leave it behind entirely and recede into the wildness of her deepest dreams, of her corporeal yearning. (83-4)

Consider the fundamentally embodied experience of childbirth as described by the mother above, where birth is an intra-action of many forces. The mother “can be a body and instinct and urge”: childbirth is the dynamic space where the physical matter of the body and the non-physical matter of instinct are inextricably entangled and co-constitute the event. The birthing mother’s experience of self expands beyond the matter of her body. That she had “screamed and shat and sworn” reveals her body’s capacity to affect the material reality of the hospital room, and in turn to be affected by it and by all of the corporeal sensations of birthgiving. Her body is a response to and a shaper of the event; she is both affecting the birth process and being affected by it, to the point of being transformed. The reconfiguration is demonstrated in the final line of the fantasy: the experience of birth where she was purely a body and instinct has changed her understanding of herself. The mother’s recollection of that relational and permeable state is juxtaposed with the “world of ambition and money and careers,” and her desire to “recede into the wildness” is a desire to return to that state of relational emergence where “corporeal yearning” can negate the social script imposed upon her. Birthing is something she was, not something she did: she became a temporary assemblage of body, instinct, and environment, which was an experience that permanently altered the boundary between her physical self and the world. The mother’s desire to re-enter a state of corporeal yearning is what links the event of birth to artistic creation in the novel. If birthing was something she was, then her return to making art becomes a method of intentionally re-entering that transformative state. Where childbirth permanently altered the boundary between her body and the world, her creative work becomes the ongoing practice of exploring and expressing its permeability. Her art is an intentional return to the body’s wildness. The raw, relational energy of birthgiving is channeled into a tangible form that can exist in and push back against the social world.

Furthermore, the act of giving birth emerges relationally, and in doing so reveals the permeability of the body-world boundary. Its felt sensations are material reconfigurings of the mother's body; it is a dynamic system asserting its capacity to affect and to be affected. Birthgiving cannot necessarily be managed through institutional will, for instance: labor can and often does begin on its own, its pace dictated by a confluence of material forces that are not beholden to an institutionally-determined due date. And even if labor is induced, its induction can be understood as yet another actant introduced into the assemblage of birthgiving, intra-acting with both mother and fetus. As Alaimo might frame it, giving birth is a form of trans-corporeality where the boundaries between self and other, and between inside and outside, are radically destabilized. It exemplifies thing-power¹⁸ in that the matter of the body exerts the capacity to assert itself: the cervix dilates, the pelvis shifts, the uterine muscles contract, all collaborating in the birthgiving event. By "corporeal yearning," the mother means the body's own desires and its material drive toward creation and transformation. "Corporeal yearning" names the body's insistence on being felt; in and through its entanglement of biological, social, and environmental forces, childbirth is an actant that pushes back against both gendered expectations of somatic compliance and the fiction of bodily inarticulacy. Feminist new materialism, in other words, opens the door for perceiving the ways in which the body communicates itself in non-linguistic ways.

To recognize "corporeal yearning" as the mother's experience of her body's thing-power is not, however, to de-subjectify her; instead it is to reconceptualize agency itself. Moving away from a humanist model that locates agency solely in conscious will, and toward a new materialist

¹⁸ In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett defines "thing-power" as "the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" (xvi) and the "ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6).

one that understands agency as distributed and emergent, situates the mother's agency within a larger assemblage of forces. Within that assemblage, the mother remains a subject with will and experiences that are real and significant, yet she is not the only actant. To ignore the agency of the body is to diminish the fullness of the mother's own experience. Instead, attending to the body's corporeal yearning validates the mother's embodied experience over the authority of the medical institution. She is simultaneously body and subject; her agency is situated, embodied, and emerges from interrelation with the material forces of her biology and environment. The experience of childbirth is the being of that particular assemblage.

And to articulate the experience of being an assemblage requires a mode of storytelling that exceeds the realist conventions: feminist fabulation. The maternal body performs resistance to patriarchal and medicalized scripts, and feminist fabulation performs a parallel resistance in the realm of narrative. It is a literary mode that actively breaks from realist conventions to imagine bodily and social possibilities that exceed the confines of the given world. By employing the fantastic and the female grotesque, *Nightbitch* uses feminist fabulation as a critical tool for speculating on the kinds of agentic, non-linear modes of becoming that the mothering assemblage initiates, and materializing them in text.

Feminist Fabulation as a Mode of Critical Speculation

Scholarly discourse positions feminist fabulation as a politically exigent mode that uses the metaphoric logic of fantasy to dismantle patriarchal narrative structures and envision female subjectivity in new and different ways. Marleen Barr, who coined the term, pits feminist fabulation against traditional science fiction, contending that most women in the sci-fi literary sphere are not actually writing science fiction; instead, "female SF writers tell stories about women attempting to subdue cultural phenomena, the patriarchal 'meaning making machines'

which define ‘female’ as ‘inferior’” (187). Barr created the term to describe a metafictional speculative genre that is not science fiction, and that is “a specifically feminist corollary to Scholes’ ‘structural fabulation’” (188).¹⁹ She continues on to say that,

in terms of Scholes’ language, feminist fabulation modifies the tradition of speculative fiction with an awareness that patriarchy is a contrived system, a meaning-making machine which constructs and defines patriarchal fictions [...] as integral aspects of human culture [...] Woman has been forced to learn to live within patriarchal laws which define her as subhuman, offer her no purpose beyond serving men, and promise her no triumph as a human. Woman must make her own new values [...] feminist fabulation acts as a catalyst for the invention of feminist alternatives to patriarchal constructs which do not serve women well. (Barr 189)

Using Barr’s description of it, one might consider feminist fabulation a tool in the culture war. The genre is intentionally named to establish a critical genealogy following Suvin’s “cognitive estrangement” and Scholes’ “structural fabulation,” but also to mark its project as a fundamentally revisionist one: feminist fabulists subvert existing archives of female experience that construct and reify social norms, to expose and rewrite their misogyny. When Barr writes that patriarchy defines women as “subhuman” and “offers [us] no purpose beyond serving men,” she articulates the reproductive futurist script of which I aim to demonstrate that *Nightbitch* is a critique. In fact, Barr’s insistence that feminist fabulation actively dismantles patriarchal “meaning making machines” finds its literary enactment in *Nightbitch* at a moment when the mother’s husband refuses to empathize with her emotional reaction to the sense that she was being summoned to join a pack of neighborhood dogs:

Her intuition, her feelings didn't matter to him—they were *unbelievable*, in fact. That was the precise word—*unbelievable*—in the manner of tall tales, urban legends, folk remedies, aliens, mythical creatures rumored to roam the woods, and so her feelings were immediately discounted, even though she knew them to be the truest things in her human experience, a light to show the way. (Yoder 64)

¹⁹ Structural fabulation, a critical concept developed by Robert Scholes, is a mode of speculative fiction that uses futuristic or fantastical elements to construct a narrative framework whose central function is to explore the social consequences of a new/different reality. In Scholes’ conceptualization the fabulation is “structural” because it involves a “purposeful discontinuity” (43) which is the structural premise that generates and organizes the narrative world (41-4).

The mother situates her bodily and emotional knowledge within a genealogy of communicative forms that are typically delegitimized by patriarchal systems that privilege rationality. In this description of her feelings and her husband's reaction, the "tall tale" works as a repository for the kinds of embodied knowing that male authority labels "unbelievable." Feminist fabulation, in other words, reinfuses these genres with epistemological authority.²⁰ The mother's conviction that her feelings are "the truest things in her human experience" can be read as a rationale for the kind of speculative feminist revision that *Nightbitch* performs. That work depends, as Marina Warner observes, on the fantastical mechanic of wonder, about which she writes in her analysis of the fairy tale genre:

all the wonders that create the atmosphere of fairy tale disrupt the apprehensible world in order to open spaces for dreaming alternatives. The verb 'to wonder' communicates the receptive state of marvelling as well as the active desire to know, to inquire, and as such it defines very well at least two characteristics of the traditional fairy tale: pleasure in the fantastic, curiosity about the real. The dimension of wonder creates a huge theatre of possibility in the stories: anything can happen. (xvi)

Warner defines the core mechanism of the fairy tale (wonder, as both noun and verb) as a disruptive force: it has the capacity to rupture the "apprehensible world," which creates a conceptual space where different rules apply and new ways of being can be wondered about. Her emphasis on disruption and inquiry thus directly aligns with Rosemary Jackson's theorization of fantasy's critical function: its capacity to give form to the "unsaid" of a culture, literalizing the repressed affective and material realities of women,²¹ from rage to maternal abjection. I contend

²⁰ Similarly to magical realism, feminist fabulation challenges the epistemology of white Western rationality by refusing its terms altogether. It operates in the space where the "unbelievable," as the mother puts it, becomes epistemologically foundational; intuition and bodily knowledge carry their own evidentiary weight. These genres fundamentally question whose reality gets to count as "real," which reveals Western rationality as just one meaning-making tool among many.

²¹ Jackson writes, "The fantastic traces the unseen and unsaid of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (4). In other words, fantasy is a literary mode that makes the cultural unconscious visible to the reader. Applied to *Nightbitch*, the text is a revelation of a suppressed mode of being (expressed through the transformation into dog) that was always present. But, Jackson continues on to say, "Telling implies using the language of the dominant order and so accepting its norms, re-covering its dark areas. Since this excursion into disorder can only begin from a base within the dominant cultural order, literary fantasy is a telling index of the limits of that order. Its introduction of the 'unreal' is set against the category of the

that Warner's and Jackson's ideas are usefully applied to feminist fabulation because the genre has significant overlaps with fairy tale and fantasy: it uses similar imaginative mechanics and logics for feminist critique and re-visioning, and in doing so creates a "theatre of possibility" for women's subjectivity. A commonality of these genres is their capacity for altering patriarchal archetypes in order to expose the misogyny in our cultural stories;²² it is no coincidence that Yoder names her protagonist "the mother."

Thus the revelation of the "unsaid" functions as a mode of critical speculation. Feminist fabulation understands the fantastical as a means to interrogate and reimagine the patriarchal structures that shape gender roles and collective women's experience. It has the potential to transform negatively-connotated lived experiences of womanhood under patriarchy into narratives of transformation and power.²³ In the case of *Nightbitch*, the fantastical calls attention to the embodied and affective experiences of motherhood, homemaking, perimenopause, and the persisting creative drive. The mother's transformation dismantles fixed biological and social categorizations and unleashes repressed negative affects, turning the abject into a site of resistance and reclamation.

Importantly, feminist fabulation tends to focus on the domestic sphere, particularly spaces where women are, or feel, confined (García 3). Those spaces become sites of uncanniness, horror, and surreality, perhaps as a manifestation of psychological strain brought on by social abjection. The abject, a theoretical framework put forth by Julia Kristeva, is a condition

'real' - a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference" (Jackson 4). Here, she brings up a paradox inherent to fantasy literature: that it is always at least partially trapped by dominant culture even as it works toward subversion. To tell any story, she argues, one must use the shared vocabulary and concepts of the dominant culture, and by doing so one unavoidably reinforces its basic framework even if the story being told is rebellious. That isn't to say that subversive stories are useless, but to acknowledge that they are complexly entangled with the systems they are meant to critique.

²² As Warner writes, "fairy tale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas: women's care for children, the prevailing disregard for both groups [...] handed them fairy tales as a different kind of nursery, where they could set their own seedlings and plant out their own flowers" (Warner xix).

²³ e.g., Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* or Carmen María Machado's *Her Body and Other Stories*.

that represents a fundamental threat to the neat boundaries of identity, meaning, and social order; and it triggers somatic and affective horror because it reveals the constructedness of our symbolic world (4). As the mother thinks to herself: “how were mothers even a thing? How had they not been outlawed? They were divine, beyond horrifying” (Yoder 196). The concept of the abject helps us understand the power of feminist fabulation, which can position it as a site from which to critique and dismantle the cultural rules that seek to deny female rage and suppress female corporeality.

Nightbitch materializes the abject through the grotesque bodily experiences of the mother’s involuntary lycanthropy. Her alternate canine identity practically explodes from within her and disturbs the sanitized version of her domestic role as “the very picture of a mother, self-sacrificing and domestic, un-gripey, un-grumpy, refreshed even after unrefreshing nights of nonsleep, nursing the baby and rocking the baby and shushing the baby while her kind husband snored and slept or, actually, most of the time, was not even there” (Yoder 9). The mother’s journey throughout the novel is a sustained engagement with abjection; she indulges cravings for raw meat (76, 126–7), shits on her neighbor’s front lawn (89), kills rabbits and raccoons with her bare hands and her teeth. And rather than continuing to endure the abject as a horror to be feared and, if possible, expelled, she eventually reclaims it as a source of power and a new identity. In *Nightbitch*, one might consider motherhood a mode of abjection that exposes the instability of the category of woman manufactured by patriarchy; it reveals that the self-sacrificing, endlessly patient maternal figure is a fragile construction that requires constant labor to sustain. The mother’s bodily transformations muddy the boundary between human and nonhuman, moving women toward a place “where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2): specifically, the cultural

meaning tied to reproductive utility and the self-abnegating maternal ideal. This narrative reclaiming of abjection is central to the mode of feminist fabulation.

Feminist fabulation, particularly by deploying the “female grotesque,”²⁴ reclaims the abject as a site of challenge to patriarchal containment and its attendant normative developmental schedules. This narrative strategy challenges the very boundaries of the rational that have historically marginalized women’s knowledge and agency. Applying Donna Haraway’s work on the “cyborg” to feminist fabulation, we might say that it performs a world-building function, constructing speculative ontologies where hybridity and embodied becoming offer alternatives to oppressive social scripts.²⁵ Thus, the genre works as both a challenge to dominant narratives and a transformative tool for imagining alternate embodiments and temporalities.

In that way, feminist fabulation operates as a useful narrative vehicle for new materialism’s philosophical insistence on the agentic vibrancy of matter itself. It directly performs new materialism’s core tenet: that matter is an entangled, lively participant in shaping existence. *Nightbitch* is uniquely suited to reveal material agency because its human subject is co-constituted by the thing-power of her own flesh and her environment, which performs the intra-activity between body and world that new materialism describes. Reading *Nightbitch* through a new materialist lens shows how maternity involves an agentic recalibration where the body’s own matter rebels against the social script of reproductive self-sacrifice to become a

²⁴ In the introduction to *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, Mary Russo acknowledges an “uncanny, nonidentical resemblance between female and grotesque” (2), later writing that “the images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are objected from bodily canons of classical aesthetics...the grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with...the carnivalesque, and with social transformation” (8), an understanding that modifies Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorization of the grotesque and carnivalesque, in which, as Russo notes, “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world; ‘it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects’” (8). In Russo’s treatment, the “female grotesque” is a category for feminist cultural critique, and (similarly to Warner and Jackson) she theorizes it as a space of transgression and possibility for female subjects that exist outside of or in excess of patriarchal norms of femininity.

²⁵ In “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway writes that “from another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are...not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (15), especially in the context of the argument that “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women [...] Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (16).

different form of being entirely. The mother's transformation into dog form is a material reconfiguration that allows for new modes of perception, sensation, and creation; her thing-power is the mechanism through which artistic creation becomes once more possible for her.

A New Materialist Reading of *Nightbitch*

Nightbitch offers a counter-narrative to the conception of the maternal body as primarily valuable for its reproductive and childrearing utility through the ways in which its protagonist's body-subject rails against prescribed maternal scripts. In doing so, the novel dramatizes one of the central claims of feminist new materialism, which is that matter is itself an active, agentic participant in the ongoing process of becoming rather than inert substance awaiting cultural meaning. I select *Nightbitch* as an object of analysis because its central motif of becoming a dog offers a site for thinking through how agency operates through and as bodily transformation. A feminist new materialist reading of the novel emphasizes the agentic capacities of the nonhuman: where the mother's canines sharpen, when her rage explodes out of her, where her tail aches as it pushes through a cyst on her lower back, where new hair grows on her chin and shoulders and extra nipples appear on her stomach, we can read those bodily changes as reconfigurations of the boundaries between human and nonhuman that reveal the animal always already latent within the human, and/or the human as always already animal. These transformations are enacted through the specific materiality of the mother's body, which has been pushed to its limits by the demands of reproductive labor and domestic care work, and now insists on its own desires and its own ways of being.

Within the normative developmental schedule under reproductive futurism, a woman's creative capacity is understood to reach its zenith in the production of a child; after that, the maternal role is subordinated to the project of guiding the child toward their own reproductive

futurity. As the mother views herself after having her son, “He was her only project. She had done the ultimate job of creation, and now she had nothing left” (Yoder 24). *Nightbitch* demonstrates what it looks like when the normative script’s own logic is pushed to the breaking point. The mother, who has completely succumbed to the patriarchal demands of being a “self-sacrificing” (Yoder 9) stay at home mom, arrives at a state of such complete physical, mental, and emotional depletion that the normative maternal script can no longer contain her. The body-subject, having performed maternity to its absolute limit, eruptively rebels. To demonstrate this, I turn to passages in *Nightbitch* that foreground the agentic materiality of her transformation and its enmeshment with the larger material-discursive assemblage that reciprocally shapes her becoming.

Before the birth of her son, the mother’s artistic practice operated within a framework that tries, but is not quite able to, maintain clear boundaries between the human and nonhuman and between the artist and her artistic material. In her previous life as an artist, the mother worked with the remains of dead animals:

She took the broken bodies of deer, racoon, rabbits, coyotes, and stripped the rotting meat from the bones, cleaned and bleached the bones, sanded them and polished them, donning a full-body protective suit and monstrous gas mask to keep the bone dust from her clothes, her lungs. She hollowed the bones with jeweler tools, then plated the insides with gold or silver. When she could afford it, she inlaid gems. She went on to wander through the surrounding forests, identifying cherry and walnut and pine, cutting off branches, and then taking them to be cured. She smoothed and carved the wood, combined it with bones and metals and even some furs, taking these elements and creating the skeletons of new, mythical animals [...] yet now there was nothing. Not a single creative impulse inside her, no matter how she searched. (22-3)

Interestingly, this passage reveals an artist already engaged with the nonhuman world and working at the intersections of animal, mineral, and vegetable matter to create “new, mythical animals” that did not previously exist. There is already a blurring of boundaries where her art assembles living and nonliving materials into hybrid forms, which suggests that she has an

intuitive understanding about how categories are not fixed, and that they can possibly be refigured or recombined. Still, the passage reveals the limits of her understanding. She takes elaborate precautions “to keep the bone dust from her clothes, her lungs” and wears protective equipment to prevent the animal matter from perceptibly merging with her own body. She keeps animality safely at a distance, where it is available to be used for representation but not for bodily transformation. After childbirth, though, she loses even this limited capacity to engage with animality through artistic practice.

Still, even in her pre-maternal artistic life, there are hints of the mother’s desire to trouble the boundaries between living beings. She becomes obsessed with a particular form of boundary-blurring living art: “She read about a married couple who undertook extensive plastic surgery to look like each other [...] it was a lifelong project, not quite performance art but something more profound, the lines between their lives and their art erased. The mother became preoccupied with this idea—the idea of no boundaries” (23). Her fascination with the couple who eradicate the boundary between self and other anticipates her own later transformation. What is “more profound” about their project is that it is a material enactment of boundary erasure, through which their bodies are permanently altered. The “idea of no boundaries” that fascinates the mother is the possibility that the body itself is the medium and that transformation is an actual material fact instead of just a metaphor. Her preoccupation with this idea prior to her pregnancy suggests that her later dogness is the fulfillment of her artistic self, and the realization of a longing that her earlier creative practice could only approach from a safe distance behind protective equipment.

The novel embeds a metatext within itself, called *A Field Guide to Magical Women*, to which the mother refers in order to make sense of her experience. That metatext, written by a

fictional woman named Dr. Wanda White, functions as both meta-exposition and an actant in the mother's becoming, initially posing the questions: "*To what identities do women turn when those available to them fail? How do women expand their identities to encompass all parts of their being? How might women turn to the natural world to express their deepest longings and most primal fantasies?*" (Yoder 40). About the *Field Guide*, the mother notes that "it did feel as though the book was not a stagnant thing that existed but, rather, an entity unto itself that actually had things to say, and spoke, to her specifically" (45). For the mother, Nightbitch is the answer to the book's call for expression, and the manifestation of her maternal body taking up that call. The *Field Guide* and the mother's bodily matter are entangled in the production of a new ontological possibility, a trajectory that culminates, in the final few pages of the novel, with the mother's reflection that "Wanda White is not a person. Wanda White is a place at which a person finally arrives [...] Yes, she is here, at Wanda White, in anticipatory ecstasy, just before she ascends to whatever is beyond that darkness and that stage—invincibility or air, something" (231). The name "Wanda White," which the mother originally understood as the author of the *Field Guide*, is something else entirely here, a stage of becoming (and also a literal stage), the place a woman reaches after having moved through maternal depletion and the transformation into a dog. The *Field Guide* participates in the creation of magical women by giving them a language through which to understand themselves; that frame of creation is built into the structure of the novel, where the mother becomes Nightbitch by reading about women like herself, and in doing so, becomes the subject of *Nightbitch*, itself meant to be a kind of field guide for its audience.

That recursive structure enacts the new materialist insight that matter and meaning are mutually constitutive. The *Field Guide*, rather than interpreting a biological event that happens to

the mother, is actively participating in shaping what her body becomes and providing a discursive framework that channels her body's material transformation into something legible and able to be passed on to others through its narration. In other words, the *Field Guide* is part of the material assemblage of the mother's becoming. This new ontological possibility for motherhood has a novel orientation to normative gendered life scripts: it portends arrival at the edge of a transformation whose outcome and boundaries remain open. The mother doesn't know what comes next: "invincibility or air, something" is as precise as she can get. The uncertainty is the point. Reproductive futurism insists upon a closed future that has already been decided, whereas the future Nightbitch offers is yet unknown, and something the dominant order can't anticipate, which is the perpetual possibility for something new.

The openness of boundaries is made evident in the novel at a moment when the mother encounters a golden retriever who she perceives as trying to lead her somewhere outside her home. She wonders:

But where would I go? Where would a dog even want to take me? To her home? To a wide-open field full of supple green grass through which we could run and run and run, feeling the full power of our bodies, the blood careening through our muscles and fasciae, a place where our lungs would open and we could take into is the entirety of the sky, a place where there were no humans but just the throb and thrust of life, life, life? (61)

This moment enacts the feminist fabulist mechanic of wonder theorized by Warner, by rupturing the mother's "apprehensible world" and opening up a conceptual space where different rules might apply. The mother does not know where the dog would take her, but the act of wondering itself constitutes a disruption of the maternal script that would keep her tethered to home and child. To wonder, per Warner, is to entertain the possibility that the world could be otherwise; the mother's questions, maybe especially because they are unanswerable, perform that speculative function and disturb the given world long enough for an alternative to become

imaginable. This bit of contemplation enacts the boundary-collapse that feminist new materialism theorizes as the condition of all matter, where the human is always a temporary status within a condition of constant becoming, rather than a static and discrete form. Lungs inhale “the entirety of the sky”: the boundaries between organism and environment that Western ontologies take as given are revealed to be open and permeable, a site of the perpetual motion of a “throb and thrust of life, life, life.” The mother imagines entering an assemblage in which the distinctions between animal and human and self and world have become undone. Trans-corporeality is made visible through the body-subject’s ongoing material exchanges with the world it inhabits. And the novel makes it clear that the body-subject does not act alone.

The mother’s transformation cannot be reduced to an eruption from within a bounded individual. Instead, it is the somatic realization of an entire assemblage of forces that operate around and through her. “The Schedule” (43), for instance, as she calls the monotonous and repetitive motions of everyday maternal life, is an agent in its own right: a material-discursive apparatus that intra-acts with her body and produces specific physical effects, “[emptying] every single thought...from her head and [leaving] in its place only the physical sensations of exhaustion, a pain in her lower back, greasy hair, a bloated feeling from eating too many fish-shaped, sodium laden crackers” (43). Thought is not replaced by sensation but converted into it. The mental load of maternal and domestic labor deposits itself in her back, scalp, and gut. Even the cracker is an agent in this assemblage, in that its salt retains water in the mother’s body and its convenience is the condition for one more instance of maternal self-neglect. Every repetition of The Schedule leaves its trace in and through her body. And her husband is conspicuously absent from that Schedule. He sleeps while she nurses and travels while she manages their home. The unequal distribution of domestic and emotional labor is both contextual for and constitutive

of her transformation into Nightbitch, because her body cannot sustain the maternal performance indefinitely.

The mother's own articulation of her condition performs a similar insight. During the mundane and repetitive act of getting groceries, she observes: "I feel as though societal norms, gendered expectations, and the infuriating bluntness of biology have forced me to become this person even though I'm having a hard time parsing how, precisely, I arrived at this place. I am angry all the time" (53). The inability to "parse how, precisely, I arrived at this place" suggests that there is no autonomous subject; there is only the gradual, intra-active becoming of a body-subject shaped by biological, cultural, and social forces so thoroughly entangled that they can't be separated from one another. The "infuriating bluntness" of her biology is so because her body-subject amalgamates the forces applied to it. Anger is the somatic truth of that assemblage, and the catalyst that instigates her transformation into a dog.

That anger finds its corporeal realization in a moment of extreme exhaustion and stress when her son cries for the umpteenth time in one night, and her husband fails to help her locate his pacifier. Then, Nightbitch comes into being:

Gooooooo baaarg EEEeeeeep, she gargled, sleep-drunk, only half awake. She was trying to say something—Go back to sleep, perhaps—but instead the words came out in an undulating sweep of grunts and squeals, sounds she'd only ever heard [...] from her grandmother's husky as it begged at the door. She had never liked that dog, first because its eyes were blue—the eyes of the undead—and, moreover, because of the way it sounded, almost human. And now those same sounds slipped from her own mouth. (Yoder 7-8)

The mother's initial experience of her own transformation is mediated through the abject: what is expelled from the self but still threatens its borders from within. She immediately recognizes the sounds that initially emerge from her throat as belonging elsewhere, to her grandmother's husky with its voice that is especially perturbing because it is "almost human." The "grunts and squeals" provoke her horrifying discovery that she was always already Nightbitch. Her

childhood aversion to the husky was an aversion to a boundary that she sensed could be crossed and whose porosity she did not want to acknowledge. The abject in this scenario is the recognition that the distinction between human and animal was never secure, and that her own body is capable of communicating otherwise.

The fear of the abject consolidates around the mother's question: "who or what had been the source of that transformation? What *force* had brought Nightbitch into being?" (136). That question is not answerable in a framework that only locates agency in discrete human subjects. The mother did not decide to become dog, but there was also no single external force that imposed transformation onto her passive body. What the mother initially resists is indeterminism²⁶: her bodily transformation emerges from an assemblage of forces whose intra-actions exceed her control and even her comprehension. But what she resists, she nonetheless wants. At one point, a pack of domestic neighborhood dogs comes to collect her, "as she had both feared and hoped they would," and the mother notes "a sense that her body might leap forward and tumble down the steps and out into the night without first consulting her" (72). The tension between her body's agency and her own unwillingness in many ways drives the novel's central conflict, which is made particularly apparent in a moment when the mother, after playing dog with her son in public and giving into the urge to eat lunch without hands, realizes with mortification that patrons around the two of them have stopped what they're doing to watch: "it

²⁶ In "Agential Possibilities," Christian List identifies a "conflict between agency and determinism" where "deterministic laws of nature have been neither proved or ruled out by science" (464) and where "agential explanations come with a presupposition of genuine choices at the level of agency—and thus a form of indeterminism, which consists in the possibility of different future actions" (467). He ultimately proposes that there exists the potential for seeing "a change from determinism to indeterminism as we move from one level (say, that of fundamental physics) to another (say, that of agency)" (468). In the context of List's argument, indeterminism means the openness of the future from the perspective of the agent. In other words, agency brings its own indeterminism with it because the concepts we use to explain action can't function without allowing for the possibility that the agent could've done something else. The mother can't answer the question about what force brought Nightbitch into being because that question presupposes what List identifies as an agential level (where a discrete self makes choices between different possible futures). What the mother is resistant to is the way that her agency isn't identical to her conscious will: that her body is acting outside of her decision-making capacity.

was too horrifying, this loss of self-consciousness she had experienced, the overwhelming hunger that took her and drove her into some other state, in which only smell and taste and hunger mattered” (79). Although part of the “horror” is embarrassment that she was caught eating animalistically, the deeper horror for her is the experience of a “loss of self-consciousness” so complete that her sense of herself as a discrete and willing subject temporarily disappeared. The hunger “took her,” and “drove her into some other state”: that passive language indicates that the mother did not choose to enter the other state, but was taken there by a force she experienced as external to her will. But it is clear that the force is actually her own materiality asserting itself in a way that bypasses the mediating function of conscious decision-making. It is horrifying to the mother that her body has desires and capacities that operate independently of her self-conception, and that she can be moved by instinctive impulses. The “loss of self-consciousness” is the loss of the boundary between human/animal and decision/instinct that defines the liberal humanist subject.

The mother’s body acts without her decision or consent: “she didn’t want to be Nightbitch, wouldn’t have chosen it if she felt she did indeed have such a choice” (18). And yet initially her transition into a dog is both legible and deniable because its symptoms mirror so closely the somatic script of perimenopause. The new hair growth, aches and pains, cyst at the base of her back, etc. all belong to the recognizable lexicon of hormonal transition. The mother can initially deny her transformation, and her husband can fail to recognize it, because her body is performing exactly as a perimenopausal body does. Fur is just hirsutism, teeth are sharper from clenching, a cyst couldn’t possibly be a tail. The body-subject exploits the medicalizing framework that pathologizes perimenopause by turning it into an alibi. Its agency is not located

in the mother's conscious will: her body produces changes that she experiences as happening to her rather than performed intentionally by her.

The morning after Nightbitch comes into being, the mother admits to herself: "her anger, her bitterness, her coldness in that darkest part of the night surprised even her. She wanted to think she had become another person altogether the night before, but she knew the horrible truth, that Nightbitch had always been there, not even that far below the surface" (9). That the change "surprised even her" indicates that the mother's body is acting independently of her conscious will to produce the intensity of her emotions and affective sensations in that initial moment. The acknowledgement that "Nightbitch had always been there" is an argument that the agentic assemblage of her body has always been operating within and around her. Now, it refuses to let her continue performing the self-abnegating mother whose own desires and emotions are suppressed for the sake of domestic peace. Nightbitch is an emergence of what was always already present in the mother's being. In fact, the novel explicitly rebuts the biomedical discourse that would pathologize such an emergence via the mother's reflections on hysteria:

It wasn't hysteria if the claim one was hysterical about was true, if the systems of which one was a part were set up from the start to put women at a disadvantage. In fact, even though a loose historical definition of hysteria would indict the uterus and out-of-control female hormones, it was *these very things* that did not handicap women but elevated them, sharpening their minds, availing to them the realities of gender politics and honing critical thinking skills until razor-sharp. (Yoder 50)

Her rumination can be read as a kind of counterclaim against cultural and institutional dismissals of women's embodied knowledge as madness. The "uterus and out-of-control female hormones" are reclaimed here as the source of capacity and generative potential. The hormonal changes that biomedical discourse codes as dysregulation are instead understood as an embodied critical apparatus that exposes reproductive futurism as a regulatory fiction by calling attention to the "systems...set up from the start to put women at a disadvantage." The materiality that patriarchy

has used to rationalize women's exclusion from full subjectivity is actually the mechanism through which that exclusion can be revealed and challenged.

That reevaluation of bodily possibility is affirmatively expressed in the mother's relation to her own flesh once she fully leans into to her dog self: "a fresh power animated her body, and she loved her body, loved being a body, and loved the boy, another body she had made" (75). The mother finally refuses the negative feelings about maternity that structure so much of the novel's early affect, and she experiences love of—and because of—the materiality of her body and its excesses. She loves being a body, not a subject who happens to inhabit a body. And she loves her son as "another body she had made," a claim that reimagines reproduction as one material event among others in a life of continuous bodily production, rather than the primary purpose for female existence. This reframing opens the possibility that creation does not have to end with childbirth: the body-subject that made a child can continue to make art and make itself. From this acknowledgement the mother begins to embrace forms of expression that are usually foreclosed by the maternal role, such as violent destruction and transgressing the connection between maternity and care upon which reproductive futurism insists. For example, after killing a wild rabbit, she reflects that "what she had needed all along—more than medical attention or psychotherapy, more than choosing happiness or adjusting her attitude—was to sink her sharp teeth into something living and bloody and feel its essence drain away until it was simply a rotting and unmoving thing" (90-1). What the mother needed was to act on the desire for violence, a desire that the normative maternal script either can't or won't acknowledge. The act of killing is understood as a material necessity, where she needed to experience herself as capable of destruction as well as creation. The "essence" that drains away is ostensibly the life of the rabbit, but maybe also the fiction that the mother only exists to nurture and serve. In killing,

her body affirms that it is also a taking body that can end life instead of making it. The abject is, in this case, something to be welcomed instead of feared.

The embrace of destruction and chaos becomes a mode of inviting creation, where her animal desire speaks through her non-linguistically:

It was her goal to make havoc, to leave a mess, to wrest from her form all the rage and sadness and insanity of those years since her son was born. She had been storing it all in the puckered dough of her thighs, the sad little paunch hanging around her middle. In the dark-brown circles she could not seem to get rid of that framed her eyes day and night. In the joints of her fingers, which had now begun to hurt whenever she was tired or angry or sad, which was always. (148)

Emotion is stored in, expressed through, and negotiated by the maternal body-subject's specific materiality. The mother's rage and sadness are carried in her flesh; her body has been accumulating the material weight of her emotional and domestic labor and accruing the costs of performing the maternal role. Havoc and mess are the products of a body-subject reclaiming its right to feel and to express. This dynamic finds probably its most extreme expression in a moment when the mother animalistically kills her pet cat:

She picked up a knife to cut...something, anything, turned to search for an apple or carrot or goddamn beef jerky, then stepped on the stupid cat [...] Nightbitch, of course, tripped, sprawled hard on the kitchen floor [...] Nightbitch's knee pulsed with pain, as did her haunch. Her eyes flared with silent rage as she lunged after the cat, caught her by her back legs, pulled her across the hardwood floor, and plunged the knife into her chest [...] Nightbitch growled in her chest as she bent to wrap her teeth around the nape of the cat's neck [...] a thick warmth spread down Nightbitch's chin and onto her chest, and in this ecstasy, she swung her head back and forth with even greater fervor, intestines and organs slapping her face and falling to the floor [...] She dropped the thing from her mouth into her hands and held it there, to sniff it and nudge it with her nose, examine it with an animal curiosity. To watch it and in this strange reverie stand still inside a gripping and extraordinary chaos. (152-3)

Importantly, the act of killing the cat is emergent rather than premeditated, arising from an assemblage of forces including her and her son's hunger, her frustration, the pain of tripping and falling, the cat's hovering and annoying presence, the knife already in her hand, and the absence

of her husband; agency is distributed across this assemblage and no single element is the sole cause of the cat's death. The mother also emphasizes the bodily sensations of the killing act, its wetness, "thick warmth," "ecstasy," and the "animal curiosity" with which she examines the result. These felt sensations are the ways in which the body-subject experiences itself through the intensity of its violent engagement with another body. And finally, the act concludes with stillness and "reverie" rather than guilt or horror (although that does come later, once her son witnesses the scene). There is no justification, in the moment, for the cat's killing; it is what happened when the assemblage of forces co-constituting Nightbitch encountered the assemblage of forces that co-constituted the cat in that particular time and circumstance. In resisting moralizing the cat's death, the novel insists that the body-subject's desires ought to be acknowledged even when they are disturbing. The refusal to provide moral closure demands readers sit with the discomfort of a body-subject that insists on its own messy and sometimes violent materiality.

This embrace of the abject culminates in the mother's explicit reevaluation of monstrosity, in which she poses the question to herself: "was being free to do what you needed and be who you wanted—truly free—monstrous? If so, it was not a wrong kind of monstrous, but a beautiful one. A way of being to celebrate rather than run from" (179). The mother finally embraces her own monstrosity in part because she recognizes that the patriarchal, medicalized model of female embodiment was a mechanism for securing her compliance with her own erasure. The discourse that would pathologize her transformation as hysteria, or at least as perimenopausal dysfunction, is revealed as a technology of control that tries to ensure the mother experiences her own becoming as illness instead of creative freedom. Nightbitch is her refusal to recede; Nightbitch demands acknowledgement, to be seen and to be felt. And because of this, the

mother's transformation constitutes a failure of the normative maternal script prescribed within a reproductive futurist society. She did everything right: married, had a child, sacrificed her career, performed the role of the good mother to the point of existential exhaustion. But she found that role unfulfilling and even artistically stifling, so much so that her body, pushed to its limit, rebelled against it. The normative maternal script failed because she followed it too well, to the point where the body-subject it was supposed to contain could no longer bear her own containment.

Her maternal body finds its ultimate expression in the mother's final art installation, which materializes the violence of childbirth and motherhood for a public audience:

This thing comes out of us, she would explain in interviews. It rips its way out of us, literally tears us in two, in a wash of great pain and blood and shit and piss. If the child does not enter into the world this way, then it is cut from us with a knife. The child is removed, and our organs are taken out as well, before being sewn back inside. It is perhaps the most violent experience a human can have aside from death itself. And this performance is meant to underscore the brutality and power and darkness of motherhood, for modern motherhood has been neutered and sanitized. We are at base animals, and to deny us either our animal nature or our dignity as humans is a crime against existence. Womanhood and motherhood are perhaps the most potent forces in human society, which of course men have been hasty to quash, for they are right to fear those forces. (237)

The mother refuses the softening of maternity and insists on the material reality of birth as “a wash of great pain and blood and shit and piss.” The body-subject in its messy materiality can't be reduced to the idealized maternal image that reproductive futurism requires of it. Instead, the mother's art insists that messiness is the truth of motherhood. Her performance forces before an audience what dominant culture works to medicalize and/or make invisible: that birth is violent, that through it the maternal body is torn and remade, and that creation and destruction are complements. Furthermore, she insists on the inseparability of animality and human dignity, that “to deny us either” is to deny our full material condition; both are claimed in the mother's final art installation to be dimensions of a single being. She refuses delineations between

human/animal, body/mind, mother/artist, articulating a vision of existence that new materialism has theorized, where the human is not a separate order of being but a temporary configuration of the same matter that constitutes all things. To deny maternal animality is to deny the materiality that makes life possible; to deny human dignity is to deny the capacity for meaning and creation that emerges from that materiality.

As well, violence is framed as coextensive with love; the child's first act is violence against the mother, but the mother loves the child "with the most powerful love known in this universe" (237). Love and violence are inextricably entangled, in other words, and they both emerge from the material encounter of childbirth. This particular entanglement is anathema to the "sanitized" discourse of motherhood, and a paradoxical truth about maternal embodiment that reproductive futurism is reluctant to acknowledge. And likewise, the mother's performance repositions artistic creation and biological reproduction as related instead of mutually exclusive. The mother who created a child also creates art about creating that child; creation continues, takes new forms, and does not end with the child's birth. Her performance therefore enacts the central claim of this chapter, that the maternal capacity for creation is not exhausted by reproduction but extends into other forms of material production that exceed the logic of reproductive futurism.

Nightbitch can thus be read as an account of the maternal body-subject as agentic, creative assemblage. And to read this novel with feminist new materialism generates the revelation that all bodies are assemblages, all matter has agency, and most boundaries are temporary and porous. This reading carries stakes beyond the literary: if maternity can be reimagined as an agentic reconfiguration of the body-subject, then the dominant medical and cultural understandings of its meaning fail. Feminist new materialism, applied to *Nightbitch*,

offers a new ontology of the mothering body-subject. Yet it is vitally important to note that this ontology is not universally available.

Nightbitch's Whiteness and the Elision of Racialized Animalization

The mother's race is never explicitly stated in *Nightbitch*, but the text consistently codes her as white through a series of subtle signifiers. She lives in a suburban neighborhood populated by mothers with names like Jen, Babs, and Poppy (103) who are described as having "blond" or "ombré" hair (108), and briefly involves herself with a multilevel marketing company²⁷ in which the other neighborhood mommies participate (187–96)—the herbal supplements are later used in her performance art (236). She also moves through the world with a degree of presumed innocence that is generally only secured by whiteness. For example, when she eats like a dog alongside her son in public, the responses she receives assume maternal devotion rather than indicate suspicion or censure:

The mother felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to find an older woman there [...]

What fun it is to have a boy! She said.

The mother laughed.

Ah yes, she said, so fun.

And what a mother you are, she added. What a wonderful mother! To have such fun with your child. I remember the days.

Oh, thank you, the mother said bashfully, somewhat amazed—this woman who was not chiding her but instead reveling and remembering. (79–80)

The older woman's response to the mother's dog-like behavior illustrates what critical race scholars have identified as the differential surveillance and discipline applied to maternal bodies

²⁷ According to 2022 data from the Direct Sellers Association, women make up two thirds of the people involved in MLMs, and of those women, 83% are white ("Direct Selling in the United States"). I read the MLM business in the novel, where fellow moms sell herbal energy supplements and other wellness items, to be a riff on Herbalife, the Los Angeles weight loss/energy supplement MLM company founded in the 1980s and still operational today. Furthermore, Mastrangelo and Longo have written about how MLMs indoctrinate women into what they call the "disinformation downline, a gendered pipeline for radicalization that encourages the new recruits to share what they "learned" with others" (2), and naming QAnon specifically, which is a racist and antisemitic American right-wing conspiracy theory.

along racial lines.²⁸ Where a white mother's messiness is interpreted as playful, harmless, and a signification of her devotion to her child's joy, a Black mother performing the same act in the same public space would probably encounter a very different interpretive frame. The hand on her shoulder would more likely be one of intervention than fondness. That the mother is "somewhat amazed" at the other woman's reaction suggests that she understands the extent to which she is transgressing a social norm; but her whiteness insulates that transgression from any consequence other than embarrassment. Such moments of grace are the unearned benefits of being read as a subject whose deviations from propriety are charming instead of threatening.

The mother, in other words, is designed as an everywoman whose universality is predicated on the invisibility of her whiteness.²⁹ As Toni Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark*, the construction of a universal American literary subject has depended on the elision of a racialized other against which that subject is defined,³⁰ and she maintains that "a criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12). Morrison's warning is particularly salient for a novel like *Nightbitch*, which courts a reading of maternal transformation as a broadly applicable feminist allegory. To read the mother as unracialized is to participate in the

²⁸ Roberts (1997, 2012, 2022); Bridges (2011); Goodwin (2020); Garcia-Hallett (2022).

²⁹ In "Looking into the Light," Maxime Cervulle asserts that, "insomuch as the term 'white' refers less to a colour than to a lack of colour, here racialisation resides in a somewhat paradoxical definition (Dyer, 2006: 45) where white people are understood as a social group which occupies a 'neutral' position in race relations. 'White' in this case denotes the norm from which deviations can be assessed; hence the polarisation of the visible between, on the one hand a group whose members embody universality, and on the other hand a multitude of other groups that are relegated to the particular" (xviii). She coins the term "hyper(in)visibility of whiteness" to "convey the idea that the unremarkable ... and unremarked ... invisibility of white people, the fact that they are not perceived as standing out in their whiteness, underpins white hegemony in [...] representation" (xviii).

³⁰ Morrison writes that "a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics [...] holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States [...] Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular 'Americanness' that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence." (4–5). In other words, Morrison argues that American literary criticism operates on a kind of foundational fiction where whiteness and Americanness are synonymous and Black presence is an incidental fact rather than a constitutive force. And, she insists, "in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse [...] the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (9–10). In other words, avoiding race in literary analysis works to preserve white subjectivity as universal.

logic that Morrisson critiques; the novel's silence on the mother's race perpetuates the operation of whiteness as an unmarked category. To restore race to the analysis is thus to make visible what the text's own universality depends on making invisible. And Morrison further contends that the presence of the racialized other in literature is

a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when American texts are not "about" Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation. (46–7)

This formulation is useful for understanding the figure of the dog in *Nightbitch*. The novel is not "about" race, and it features no significant characters of color that might trouble the mother's trajectory. But the "shadow" of racialized animality lingers; the dog is a figure whose meaning in the American literary and cultural imagination has been thoroughly shaped by the history of anti-Black racism. *Nightbitch*'s silence on that history is the mechanism that allows the mother's transformation to be read as liberatory rather than degrading. The shadow of the racialized animal is what makes her white dogness legible as freedom.

While a feminist new materialist reading reveals the mother's transformation as an agentic resistance against reproductive futurism's normative maternal scripts, it also requires complication through the frameworks of Black feminist and critical race theories in order to fully understand the scope of its sociopolitical stakes. Namely, a pitfall in lauding the mother's transformation into *Nightbitch* as an agentic means of moving beyond gendered social constraints and prescribed maternal scripts is the risk of universalizing dogness as an equally available or desirable form of refusal for all mothers. For the protagonist, embracing animality may easily represent a liberatory divestment from reproductive futurism's limiting categorization of motherhood. However, the freedom to move to and from animality is a privilege that is fundamentally attached to one's embodied social identity.

Who gets to choose animality as a mode of resistance, and for whom is animality violently imposed? To answer that question, one ought to recognize that the hierarchy of human over animal is a pillar of the modern world order: Sylvia Wynter's theory of the "coloniality of being" reminds us that this order is built on an "overrepresented" model of the human ("Man") who is defined against the "dysselected" (315-6) others relegated to nature or animality. This racialized hierarchy, which necessarily constructs a plastic and subhuman category for the other, is precisely what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson theorizes in *Becoming Human*. As she observes, the Western concept of the animal was uniquely racialized during the Enlightenment era; yet she argues that Black people were not completely excluded from the category of the human but instead were violently included as a subhuman form of plastic humanity that included animalization as one of its potential forms (Jackson 3).³¹ In that context, for a Black maternal subject to become animal might be less liberation than fulfillment of a violent racial logic of infinite malleability. The call to action resulting from *Nightbitch*, then, should not be for all mothers to embrace an inner dogness but for society to perceive, value, and politically accommodate becoming bodies.

One framework that articulates the consequences of the racialized reduction to flesh, but could offer a potential for resistance that emerges from within it, is Alexander Weheliye's concept of *habeas viscus*. Building on Hortense Spillers' foundational distinction wherein

³¹ Jackson writes, "prior scholarship has fundamentally misrecognized the logic behind the confluence of animality and racialization. I reinterpret Enlightenment thought not as black "exclusion" or "denied humanity" but rather as the violent imposition and appropriation—inclusion and recognition—of black(ened) humanity in the interest of plasticizing that very humanity, whereby "the animal" is one but not the only form blackness is thought to encompass. Plasticity is a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially 'everything and nothing' at the register of ontology" (3). In other words, Jackson argues that Blackness under Enlightenment thought was included in humanity as a plastic subhuman form which was a condition of being experimented on as "infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter"; in that understanding "the animal" is one manifestation of the plasticity imposed on Black people, where Blackness is produced as an ontological paradox ("everything and nothing").

slavery reduced Black people from subjects with a body to commodified flesh,³² Weheliye argues that this violent process also simultaneously creates a “fleshly surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality [of violent political domination]” (2). Within the extreme condition of social death, the flesh becomes a site of suffering but also one of resistance and “freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds” (2). In some ways, *Nightbitch* applies a structurally similar logic to the patriarchal commodification of the mothering body-subject. The systems of normative motherhood and reproductive futurism reduce her to a functional and passive object for social reproduction. Her transformation into a dog could be understood as the materialization of a rebellious “surplus” in that it is a force that disfigures the image of the perfect mother and reclaims the body-subject from the system that seeks to control it. Her discovery of the pack of fellow suburban mother/dogs could be read as oppressed communities forging solidarity and new social worlds within the conditions of their subjection.

But that kind of superficial application of *Habeas Viscus* to *Nightbitch* is both flawed and ethically unsound. Weheliye’s framework is built upon the specific historical condition of anti-Black violence within racial capitalism. The “flesh” is not universally applicable to other embodied social identities because it is a precise term for the condition of being rendered into sub-humanity or non-being through chattel slavery and its afterlives.³³ Wynter’s work clarifies that this process was central to establishing the modern “genre of the human” (266, 288). The

³² “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” p.67-8.

³³ This position is put forth by Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” which Weheliye acknowledges and modifies: “Building on Hortense Spillers’s distinction between body and flesh and the writ of habeas corpus, I use the phrase *habeas viscus*—“You shall have the flesh”—on the one hand, to signal how violent political domination activates a fleshly surplus that simultaneously sustains and disfigures said brutality, and, on the other hand, to reclaim the atrocity of flesh as a pivotal arena for the politics emanating from different traditions of the oppressed. The flesh, rather than displacing bare life or civil death, excavates the social (after)life of these categories: it represents racializing assemblages of subjection that can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds” (2).

mother's alienation, however intense that experience for her psychically and somatically, happens within a framework of white and class privilege, meaning her flesh is never under the same ontological threat. Equating the mother's sense of confinement in the domestic sphere to chattel slavery is an act of erasure that centers whiteness in a discourse designed to critique it. For the white mother, dogness can be liberatory because her whiteness has historically been constructed in opposition to that racialized animality within the colonial hierarchy of being. But as Black studies scholars like Fanon, Boisseron, Jackson, Bennett, and others have demonstrated, the animal is a category shaped by anti-Blackness.³⁴ In other words, especially within an American context, *Nightbitch*'s model of transformation as a reclamation of women's power is racially specific and more than likely non-transferable. Kyla Schuller and Jules Gill-Peterson, for example, argue that the agentic possibility of transformation is especially marked as white. In "Race, the State, and the Malleable Body," they maintain that:

A key feature of biopolitical plasticity is that it unevenly distributes the capacity of corporeal malleability. Thus plasticity, we argue, lies at the heart of the idea of race in the Western world. Plasticity functions as a key logic underpinning the modern notion of racial difference. Generally, organic plasticity is equated with potential itself and assigned to whiteness. Whiteness, in the specific case of plasticity, is equated with brimming potential and is protected and nurtured by the state. While the distribution of this capacity of plasticity need not be restricted to groups socially or politically recognized as white, it is routinely denied to the racialized, whose bodies are seen as rigid, inflexible, overly reactive, and insufficiently absorptive, contagions to the potential growth of the population. In the dominant Western racial imaginary, Blackness occupies the opposite pole of whiteness and is characterized by a quality of stolidity that at best can be pressed into a new shape, but never can self-transform. (2)

Their analysis of plasticity as a racialized capacity helps us understand why the mother's transformation in *Nightbitch* is legible as liberatory within a white imaginary while remaining foreclosed to racialized subjects. The novel's central premise that the maternal body-subject can self-transform and can exceed its prescribed social function depends on a conception of

³⁴ Fanon (1952); Boisseron (2018); Bennett (2020); Jackson (2020).

corporeal malleability that Western biopolitics has historically reserved for whiteness. The mother's capacity for self-directed transformation is precisely what Schuller and Gill-Peterson identify as the privileged attribute of white plasticity. Her transformation, however transgressive of gender norms, is ultimately a realization of the plasticity claimed as the exclusive property of whiteness. The "racial imaginary" that characterizes Blackness as incapable of self-transformation means that the premise of *Nightbitch*'s liberatory arc is structurally unavailable to the racialized subject. The feminist new materialist reading of the maternal body-subject as a site of agentic becoming has to also contend with the fact that agency is conceptualized through an unequal distribution of plasticity.

This critique does not invalidate the novel's feminist new materialist interpretation but instead asks that such an interpretation follow new materialism's own mandates for accountability. As Barad notes,

What often appears as separate entities (and separate sets of concerns) with sharp edges does not entail a relation of absolute exteriority at all [...] the relationship of the cultural and natural is a relation of "exteriority within." This is not a static relationality but a doing—the enactment of boundaries—that always entails constitutive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability. (135)

Barad is describing a foundational principle of agential realism: that instead of entities being pre-existing or separate, they are actually co-constituted through specific material-discursive practices. "Exteriority within" means that what we define as exterior is actually a necessary part of defining the interior. Put differently, the "exterior" is produced as such through the act of creating a boundary. Applying this concept to *Nightbitch* moves the analysis from a universalized feminist reading to a critically situated one, and explains why a responsible new materialist reading of the text has to account for race. The mother's transformation into a dog relies on the constitutive exclusion of a racial history where Blackness has been violently

animalized. Any reading of the text that would universalize becoming a dog as a mode of liberation for all women therefore needs nuancing.

New materialism fundamentally insists on the agency of matter and the body-subject's capacities to act and to exceed discursive capture. *Nightbitch* embodies these principles in that the maternal body-subject acts by forcing a transformation that rebels against gendered social scripts governing the meaning and purpose of motherhood. The value of this reading is its challenge to biological determinism: it shows the body-subject as an agentic site of generative and disruptive possibility. Yet the works of Wynter, Jackson, Weheliye, and Boisseron expose a potential elision in that feminist new materialist application. The matter of the body is never just matter, but is always already inscribed by the historical and ongoing material processes of racialization. A reading that stops at celebrating the body-subject's agentic materiality risks abstracting it from the colonality of being that assigns radically different agentic potential to different bodies. Therefore, a responsible feminist new materialist reading of *Nightbitch* must account for the historical matter of the dog as a racialized construct, and acknowledge the specific sociomaterial conditions that make the mother's particular corporeal rebellion imaginable and survivable.

The need for this analysis is most important regarding the novel's central figure: the dog. As scholars like Bénédicte Boisseron document, the animalization of Black people, and particularly comparisons to dogs, have been a central tool of racist ideology and somatic terror.³⁵

³⁵ In *Afro-Dog*, Boisseron remarks: "Valid or not, however, the slave-animal comparison cannot be ignored, if only because it reveals a long-standing trend in American and transatlantic consciousness to associate blackness with animality" (xi). And yet, as she continues on to say, "exposing the arbitrariness of divides—whether based on race, gender, or species—is the root of any resistance against discrimination and oppression...[but] replacing the human-animal divide with a debate about a race-animal divide that frames animal subjugation as analogous to black slavery is a perverted form of re compartmentalization where the black is once again removed from the human species" (Boisseron xiii). In other words, trying to fight anti-Blackness by comparing it to speciesism, while often well-intentioned, doesn't dismantle oppressive hierarchies but rather reconfines Black people to subhuman status.

Whereas for a white woman becoming a dog may represent a rebellious shedding of social constraints, for a Black woman, the same imagery may reactivate a history of violent dehumanization and racialized hyper-visibility.³⁶ *Nightbitch*, albeit probably unintentionally, is playing with an iconography that is both historically and presently a tool of anti-Blackness. The value of engaging with *Habeas Viscus* and other critical race scholarship is thus to use their critiques to precisely define the limits and specificity of the mother's corporeal rebellion. This analysis calls us to move away from understanding Yoder's novel as a universal allegory of women's oppression and toward viewing it as an exploration of a particular crisis within the dominant social group. There is an ethical imperative to read *Nightbitch* with nuance by recognizing its critiques of patriarchal motherhood and reproductive futurism while also pointing out that its imagining of liberation is infused with racial privileges that must be accounted for.

Toward a Situated Feminist New Materialism

This chapter has argued that a new materialist reading of *Nightbitch* offers a feminist fabulation of the maternal body-subject that allows us to reimagine motherhood as a vibrant, agentic assemblage rather than a stable and naturalized category. The mother's transformation into *Nightbitch* is a material-discursive circumstance that enacts a new ontological configuration (a hybrid being that collapses the rigid boundary between human and animal to reveal the maternal body-subject as a dynamic field of creative potentiality) in challenge to the directives of reproductive futurism, even as on the surface she acquiesces to the mothering role. The novel

³⁶ Boisseron notes that "Judith Butler was once asked what makes language hurtful. It is the exposure, the fact of being addressable, that is hurtful, she answered. Rankine says in *Citizen* that she always thought that racist language erases you, but, through Butler, she now understands that it makes you exposed and hypervisible. The racist language takes the measure of your addressability. Likewise, the animal-black analogy is not only a question of racial or species elision, but also one of (hyper-) visibility and addressability" (xix).

performs cultural critique through its use of the grotesque and fantastical to literalize the “unsaid” of maternal experience and reclaim it as a source of generative power.

However, as my analysis has also demonstrated, the liberatory narrative in *Nightbitch* is neither universally applicable nor politically innocent. The freedom for a white suburban mother, who is privileged enough to stay home with her child,³⁷ to inhabit dogness as a mode of resistance relies on the “constitutive exclusion” (Barad 135) of a history in which animalization has been a tool of coloniality and anti-Blackness. I have established that a responsible reading of the text, heeding Barad’s call for accountability regarding the constitutive exclusions of any enacted boundary, must therefore situate the mother’s bodily transformation within the specific material conditions of whiteness and class privilege that make it viable.

The ultimate impetus of *Nightbitch* according to my reading is less an invitation for all mothers to embrace an inner bitch than it is an exposure of a catch-22 where even as the body-subject enacts its capacity for agentic resistance against normative patriarchal scripts, that particular form of resistance is entangled with racialized histories that limit its liberatory scope. Therefore, the value of a situated feminist new materialist reading of *Nightbitch* lies in sharpening our understanding of the differential stakes of embodiment.

³⁷ A new materialist critique would also consider how the lack of affordable, universal childcare is one part of the material-discursive apparatus that intensifies the physical and affective labor of mothering and binds it more tightly to the individual body. By framing the nuclear family as the natural and ideal site for child-rearing, reproductive futurism obscures the collective and communal infrastructures that could otherwise distribute its demands instead of isolating the mother in the household. In *Nightbitch*, the mother’s isolation is a significant force driving her metamorphosis; her change into a dog emerges out of her body’s bearing the weight of domesticity within the privatized space of the nuclear familial home. My reading of the novel implies, therefore, that the solution to maternal exhaustion ought to be the material transformation of society to introduce new institutions and shared spaces to sustain both mother and child.

Coda

This dissertation began by asking what reproductive bodies can reveal to us about the limits of institutional power. In the preceding chapters, I have argued that reproductive bodies inevitably exceed the temporal, gendered, and material constraints imposed upon them by medical, legal, and social institutions, and demonstrated how the practice of close textual analysis can make legible how the body-subject continually becomes against and beyond the categories designed to capture it. By bringing the fields of feminist studies, queer and trans theory, disability studies, Black studies, and the medical humanities into conversation with new materialist frameworks, I have offered a close-reading methodology that attends to the body's material agency while neither acquiescing to biological essentialism nor disregarding the material realities of embodied difference. This approach has enabled me to read legal, medical, and literary texts as sites of biopolitical struggle where competing ontologies of the body vie for dominance. Feminist new materialist analysis, I have argued, is a practice uniquely equipped to identify the failure points in these institutional projects of bodily management, revealing the inevitable moments where the body-subject communicates itself in excess of the discursive scripts meant to contain it. This work thus contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to theorize bodily autonomy as a material capacity that is continuously enacted and renegotiated through intra-action with the converging and competing biological, institutional, discursive, and relational forces that constitute the conditions of embodied life.

The real-world stakes of this scholarly work are manifest in the post-*Dobbs* landscape from which this dissertation emerges and to which it responds. Proliferating legislation governing reproductive bodies are expressions of a biopolitical project to consolidate state power

over them through the legal codification of a white Christian nationalist vision of the human. That vision derives its present ideological force from the religious right's decades-long campaign to translate conservative evangelical doctrine into enforceable state policy, and it operates by stipulating which bodies may reproduce, under what conditions, and with what degree of recognized autonomy. My project abjures the terms of that biopolitical sorting by insisting on the legibility of corporeal agency that exceeds or refuses normative scripts.

Future research might turn to other archives that have yet to receive sustained attention through a new materialist lens attentive to the agency of the reproductive body-subject. This kind of reading could surely be applied to current and ongoing medical research about endometriosis, online mutual aid networks subverting abortion bans, subreddits like *r/sterilization*, *r/hysterectomy* or *r/childfree*, or television media like *19 Kids and Counting*. Such texts would undoubtedly benefit from a methodology that can read for bodily agency without erasing the material realities of impairment or the structural conditions of misogynist, racist, and ableist reproductive governance. That kind of reading would also necessitate grappling with the methodological challenge of reading for agency in documents oftentimes produced by the very institutions that enact bodily harm. No matter what direction, the task remains the same: to attend to the material agency of the body-subject, and to seek out the already-present possibilities for being otherwise.

What might reproductive futures organized by the principle of body-subject agency look like? Listening attentively to the body's non-linguistic modes of communication lets us imagine a future predicated on a broad and collectively held commitment to the capacity of the body-subject to register and convey its own needs, limits, and desires. That future portends the dismantling of the medico-legal normative apparatus, and replacing it with infrastructures of

support that honor the myriad different relationships bodies can and do have with time. Perhaps that would look like environments designed to accommodate those who proceed faster, slower, or otherwise move differently in relation to developmental normativity, with flexible and responsive care that takes its cues from the body-subject's unique cadences. Maybe it would look like gender transitions that follow a non-linear, non-medicalized arc, where embodiment is supported as a self-authored and self-authorizing practice of material and social becoming. And maybe it would look like an embrace of the village, creating care networks that refuse the nuclear family as the only legitimate site for reproduction and childrearing and instead are organized around distributed and collective relations of mutual support.

These are possibilities whose emergent forms are already legible in textual moments this dissertation has read. Such otherwise futures are possible if we work to dismantle the medico-legal architectures that assign personhood and protection according to a normative developmental script, building in its place an ethic grounded in what the body-subject communicates about its own needs and yearnings. The texts I have read in this dissertation afford us glimpses of these other kinds of arrangements. To take them seriously is to understand that the practice of reading for corporeal agency is a discipline of attention that prepares us to recognize and receive the world body-subjects are already making against the grain of the present.

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