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Acoso Visual: Staring Back at the State and Gender Conformity

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Acoso Visual: Staring Back at The State and Gender Conformity

Juan Luna

For Trans and Gender Nonconforming People of Color of the Past/Present/Future

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Part 1:
KLK

1. Introduction: From Santo Domingo to Dubai-

“On the hierarchy of harassment, staring is the least violent consequence for my gender nonconformity that I could hope for. And yet the experience of repeatedly being stared at has slowly mutated me into an alien” (2).

--- Vivek Shraya (2018), *I’m Afraid of Men*.

Skies were blue. Heat hugged the air in *la zona colonial*. I stepped off the *Caribe Tours* bus in Santo Domingo, and called a taxi on my phone. I waited on the side of the street for the taxi driver, Eriberto. Eriberto pulled up in a white honda. Eriberto was probably in his mid twenties and was wearing a white t-shirt, basketball shorts, and slides. His head sported a buzzcut and his face was clean from facial hair. Bachata flooded the car. As I got in he lowered the music and asked, “¿Pa donde vas?” (Where are you headed?) I was on my way to the office of TRANSSA (Trans Siempre Amigas)- one of the few Trans-centric organizations in the Dominican Republic. When I told him where I was headed he admitted to having never heard of the organization. He pressed, “What kind of organization is TRANSSA?” I only saw his eyes looking at me intensely through the rear-view mirror. My earrings slapped my neck as I explained, “TRANSSA is a Trans organization that works to protect, empower, and promote equity for Trans people in the Dominican Republic.” Eriberto was confused, “I didn’t know we had *that* here. . . but listen, the area that the organization is in *esta fuerte* (is dangerous). You should be careful there.” Eriberto continued to warn me how unsafe the area was, “especialmente for a Trans person” while watching me through his rear-view mirror. He was trying to understand me. Earrings? A beard? Long hair? Feminine mannerisms? A deep voice? *What* are they? Before dropping me off he put his number in my phone and told me to message him when I was ready to

leave. He said he would come and pick me up. I always hesitate trusting men, especially in taxis where I don't have control of where I am going, but I felt genuine concern for my safety coming from Eriberto.

I called Eriberto when I was done with my meeting, and asked him if he could take me to *Parque Colón*- a park named after Christopher Columbus in the tourist district of the colonial zone. Eriberto didn't ask me about my gender, but he continued to stare at me trying to figure it out. "What did you talk about in your interview?" It was obvious that Eriberto was interested in Trans/Gender Nonconformity. I told him that we discussed trans violence, but specifically *acoso visual*. His eyes fell off of me, and focused on the road instead. "Oh yeah, it's hard not to stare at people who are asking for attention. I don't know much about trans stuff, but I respect all people. I just don't understand why they have to be so loud." I didn't feel like engaging. My energy to explain and validate trans and gender nonconforming people was exhausted. I nodded and looked out the window instead. Eriberto dropped me off, wished me well, and reminded me that I could call him if I needed anything. Parque Colón is a beautiful town square filled with benches, birds, music, and a statue of Christopher Columbus standing above indigenous people. While interested in the park, I was more interested in visiting the first cathedral constructed in the new world, Basilica Cathedral of Santa María la Menor. I walked up to the giant stone structure which sits in Parque Colón. I paid the entrance fee outside, but as I approached the doors of the cathedral a security guard prohibited me from entering. "Your shorts are too short, you cannot enter the cathedral." I was confused. It was 92 degrees Fahrenheit outside, and my shorts almost reached my knees. I looked around at other people who were already inside the cathedral, and some people were inside with shorts shorter than mine. Some people had sandals on too. I wondered,

was this a matter of religious respect, or a matter of the security guard taking issue with my gender expression? “You need to find a way to lower your shorts, or make them longer. You have to take off those earrings too.” The security guard’s stare pierced through me. I began to sweat, and not because of the heat outside. I chose to sag my shorts, and took my earrings off. She smiled, “go ahead.” I perused the inside of the cathedral. Upon exiting, I stood in front of the security guard, hiked my shorts up, and put my earrings back on. With a fake smile I said, “Tenga un buen día” (Have a good day) and walked away. I felt her eyes on my neck when I walked away. As I left the cathedral and sat at a bench in Parque Colón I asked myself, how could Eriberto be so aware of the violence Trans/Gender Nonconforming (TGNC) folk face in the Dominican Republic, but not know that Trans* Dominicans are politically and strategically organizing? Why was *I* asked to modify my presentation so much for the security guard in order to gain access to the cathedral?

At the bench, I thought back to the other month when I was denied access to a club called *Dubai 2.0*. It was a similar scenario. I was with five friends, and we all dressed up to go out and have a nice night. Approaching the club I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. I tried my best to make myself small. I hid behind my friends as we filed into Dubai. Music poured out the doors, people crowded outside just talking or smoking, and two security guards watched people file in. My friends, all gender conforming cisgender women walked into the club with ease. The two security guards blocked the entrance from me with their arms. “You’re not going to let me in?” They didn’t respond. My friends stopped and turned around to see me having difficulty getting in. My friend Kris came back to confront the security guards, “Why aren’t you letting them in?” The security guards said nothing, and just pointed at my shorts. Lots of clubs in

Santiago have dress codes, but I looked around and saw several other bodies read as men with shorts on. Truly, I was butching it up for others. I didn't want to be stared at that night. I didn't want to feel the heaviness of other's eyes on my shoulders, so I hid myself, or at least I tried my best to. My efforts were fruitless. I was excluded from entering the club because I was read as Queer and Gender Nonconforming. Some may say that I'm not following dress code, but I saw other people there with shorts on. These dress codes are specifically excluding non-heteronormative and gender nonconforming people from entering the club in the first place, or forcing them to conform to some classed heteronormative standard.

I open this ethnography with stories of my experiences in the Dominican Republic to situate readers in a conversation of Trans/Gender Nonconformity on the Eastern side of the island of Hispaniola. It's apparent from my stories that Eriberto and the security guards were aware of my gender nonconformity. Eriberto, despite not knowing the Trans* community, was aware of the violence that they face, and the security guards knew how to spot my gender nonconformity and restrict my access to certain places specifically because of it. This ethnography, while examining the violence that Trans and Gender nonconforming people face, aims only to analyze what Vivek Shraya describes as "the least violent consequence" for her gender nonconformity- the stare, or *acoso visual*. While looking at the violence that Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk face in the Dominican Republic, my gaze, my analysis, are not focused primarily on the TGNC folk or their experiences. Instead, I'm looking at gender conformity, cisgender folk, and the state.

Rather than examining and othering the Trans/Gender Nonconforming individual, my ethnography attempts to examine gender nonconformity through processes of violence enacted

onto the Trans/Gender Nonconforming individual. Doing this allows me not to situate the Trans/Gender Nonconforming as the other and run the risk of pathologizing, eroticizing, exotifying, and sensationalizing the Trans/Gender Nonconforming experience, or defining these identities in a narrow manner. In contrast, my approach affords me the opportunity to understand how individuals who claim these identities are othered by larger cisheteronormative systems. My ethnography allows gender to be expansive and subjective, by not seeking to understand or define different gender identities. Many Trans/Gender Nonconforming individuals internalize the violence they receive, and believe it to be normal. This research pushes against that notion to expose how the violence we face as Trans/Gender Nonconforming individuals is a product of the colonial project of statehood, not something “normal” that should be a part of the Trans/Gender Nonconforming experience. My ethnography will supply voices where there are silences, and provide an explanation for a form of harassment that affects Trans and Gender Nonconforming individuals in their daily lives.

This research is deeply personal. But what form of anthropology isn't? Anthropology that does not connect to personhood is faulty. I do not aim, as the anthropology of gender and sexuality has historically done, to exoticize and fetishize the marginal. Rather, I aim to interrogate the center. Flip the script. This is not a “bottom-up” analysis because I refuse to believe that Trans and Gender Non-conforming People of color are at the bottom of anything. TGNC folk are the inspiration of the cisgender heterosexual world. TGNC folk are integral to the stories of the cisgender heterosexual world. We, TGNC folk, are the blue-prints for the cisgender heterosexual world. We have just been erased. I aim to write us back in. I read Queer/Trans and Gender Nonconforming and of Color as the norm, and the violence we face as the Other.

Queer/Trans and Gender Nonconforming People of Color are experiencing a genocide, globally. I repeat: Queer/Trans and Gender Nonconforming People of Color are experiencing a genocide, globally. Allow this text to be a window into that genocide. From dead names to dead people, we are forgotten- the targets of necroviolence (Mbembe 2019). We are stripped of our autonomy before ever receiving it- assigned _____ at birth. We are told “fuck me” and “you asked for it.” Stares. Slurs. Slain.

The discipline of anthropology discusses systems of power and violence in such an abstract manner that we- anthropologists/ethnographers- can forget the material reality of the people facing the violence we interrogate. These material realities are not new concepts or anthropological vocabulary terms. These are lives. These are murders. These are rituals of colonization. Of whiteness. Of anthropology. This text is (de)constructive. This text is true. This text is real. This text is personal. This is for us, TGNC folk of Color. Think of this research as speaking to two different audiences at the same time. Yes, my research will provide a possible theoretical understanding to the violence Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk face, but my primary intention is to allow Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk to see that we are not deserving of the violence that we face. We have been pushed into the margins by societies created in our opposition. I hope this text can hold TGNC individuals. I hope this text reminds all TGNC individuals of the brilliance we encapsulate.

My research speaks back to the historical silencing of TGNC voices in the Dominican Republic. Throughout all of my research I have not been able to find an ethnography or history of/about TGNC folk living in the Dominican Republic. There is literature on LGBTQIA+ folk of the Dominican diaspora (e.g. Decena 2011, Horn 2008) or Queer subjectivities in sex

work/tourism (e.g. Brennan 2004, Kempadoo 1999, Padilla 2007), but there seems to only recently be a growing literature on the everyday experiences of LGBTQIA+ identifying individuals living in the Dominican Republic (e.g. Dixa 2018a, Dixa 2018b, Horn 2010, Horn 2018, Hutchinson 2016, Quinn 2018). There is also a substantial literature on the construction of national identities in Latin America and the Caribbean (Bell 1981, Decena 2011, García-Peña 2016, Goldman 2008, Sagás 2000, Vega 2007), but these tend to lack an analysis of the ways in which gender as a social construct is part of the fiber of (post-)colonial statecraft. Many scholars (e.g. Kulick 1998, Valentine 2007) have focused on the construction of identities and the violence Trans/Gender Nonconforming individuals face as part of the experience of these identities. By contrast, I aim to examine the stare as a particular form of violence that Trans/Gender Nonconforming people face to better understand hegemonic power structures and how they marginalize Trans and Gender Nonconforming individuals. This ethnography situates itself with decolonial texts to interrogate and provide nuance to the phenomenon of the violent stare Trans and Gender Nonconforming folk experience called *acoso visual*.

I have split this ethnography into three parts: part 1, *KLK*; part 2, *Un Corito Sano*; and part 3, *Ya tu sabes*. *KLK* is a common way people in the Dominican Republic text each other to say “¿Qué lo que?” (Hey, what’s up?). I use this section to introduce my research, explain my methodology, and provide a historical context of the Dominican Republic. In other words, I tell you *qué lo que* (what’s up) with the present day Dominican Republic.

Un corito sano is a saying that means a small party without alcohol or paraphernalia. The saying was popularized by a music video, and is usually used as a sarcastic joke at parties to say that people are having a wholesome get-together when in reality they are having a huge party full

of alcohol and hookah. I call part 2 *Un Corito Sano* because I want to poke fun at the “wholesome nature” of civility and the “order” that a colonial past and white supremacist present force upon the people of the Dominican Republic. I make apparent that there is nothing wholesome or orderly that comes from colonization or white supremacy. In this section, I dive deep into topics of *acoso* visual, racialized gender, and white supremacy in order to finally discuss my own theorization for Trans violence- Cis-sensitivity. I focus my gaze on the cisheteronormative world with a transfeminist lens to better understand *acoso* visual, and where the violence that Trans folk experience comes from rather than just attributing it to transphobia and going no further.

‘Ya tu sabes’ is a common phrase in Spanish that directly translates to “You already know” but many in the Dominican Republic use it at the end of conversations to indicate that the conversation is over. I use the *Ya tu Sabes* section to conclude this ethnography. In this section I write directly to my cisgender readers, and to my TGNC readers about what I hope they will gain from this ethnography.

Overall, this ethnography is different from others because while being about Trans/Gender Nonconformity I am primarily examining the cisgender heterosexual world and the implications of cissexism. While this ethnography is located in the Dominican Republic, I believe these ideas and concepts can be applied to most any other place in the world that has a colonial past. As I mentioned before, I hope this can act as a window into the genocide that TGNC folk of color, especially Black TGNC folk, are experiencing worldwide.

2. Methodology

As an anthropologist, one should always be aware of their positionality in whatever setting they are in. Theorizing positionality is an important aspect of anthropological field work because one's positionality affects how others interact with them. For anthropologists, this means that field work and empirical research is dependent on our varying identities, how others perceive us, and how we navigate through the world. As I maneuvered through the Dominican Republic I had to consider how people were gendering, racing, and classing me, while also taking into account how I understood myself in these interactions.

I chose to do my ethnographic research in the Dominican Republic because of the experiences I had in the Dominican Republic while studying abroad there for four months. After receiving funding and IRB approval to return to the Dominican Republic and conduct my ethnographic research, I was there for one month. In that one month period, I conducted ten semi-structured recorded interviews, and participant observation with two trans women throughout my time there. I was the only person with access to the recordings and field notes. Recordings were transferred from my phone to a USB drive, and all individuals were provided a pseudonym unless they held/hold an official position for an organization.

Reflexivity

I am a Latinx-Caribbean. My families come from Cuba and Peru, so I was already accustomed to Spanish Caribbean accents, and different cultural customs within Latin America. My Spanish has a neutral accent that can't quite be placed within a specific region of Latin America. I am an ethnically ambiguous and racialized individual in the Dominican Republic. I have loose curly and coiled hair, and *piel más clara* (lighter skin). While in the Dominican

Republic people did not consider that I was not Dominican until they didn't hear a Dominican accent come out of my mouth. Sometimes people thought that I was Arab.

What is important to note, however, is that I have a US passport. I was never in a situation where I had to identify myself with my US passport, but if officials approached me I could showcase my US passport and most likely be safe from anything. This is important to note because Trans-feminine subjects are often profiled by police/military officials and harrassed, or attacked. I would most likely have been afforded the privilege of safety if a situation like that arose while in the Dominican Republic. It is also important to note that it was very easy for me to engage with Trans folk, and specifically other trans-feminine people because I was just understood as "another one of the girls." They'd often tell me that I should shave and start taking hormones to grow breasts, but I explained to them that I was happy with how I was presenting.

At the time of conducting my field work, I was 21 years old, and looked fairly young. It was difficult sometimes to talk to older individuals, or work with different organizations because they thought that I was too young to be doing the work that I was doing. Being a student served to make it more difficult at times to enter certain spaces. It is because of this that I got connected to most of my contacts through TRANSSA.

Due to my clothing style and the area that I lived in, people would consider me as being part of a middle/upper class of individuals in the Dominican Republic. This apparent class status also served to protect me and provided me greater safety and authority at times.

Why semi-autoethnography?-

Autobiographical writing has been a feminist tool in Western literature since the 70s (Fariña and Suárez 1994: 322-323). My ethnography is written in a semi-autoethnographic format as a way to more clearly explain experiences of transgressing gender norms. This ethnography comes from the experiences of being Trans/Gender Nonconforming, and I wanted to be able to explain how those experiences were felt through me. Although I am not Dominican, the experiences of *acoso visual* were shared between me and most of my interlocutors. I wanted to be able to explain how this violence is experienced.

Most of my fieldwork was conducted through participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. I worked with TRANSSA to get connected with other trans folk in the Santiago area. Most of the people I interacted with were trans-feminine because they are the primary population that seeks assistance from TRANSSA. Trans-masculine folk don't face the same kind of stigma as trans-feminine folk in the Dominican Republic, and so they have less of a presence in the groups that I was interacting with. Whenever I conducted interviews, I paid the individuals for their time and knowledge, and purposefully told them that they were the experts, and always deserved to be compensated for their knowledge. The amount that I paid individuals was 20 USD. I would have provided more, but lacked the funding to do so. My decolonial theory informs my praxis, and I wanted to redistribute funds from wealthy institutions into the hands of people who are (in)directly marginalized by those same institutions. The experiences in this text are shared with many other TGNC folk across the Dominican Republic.

3. History

A history of the island of Hispaniola shows that the Dominican Republic can be understood as a colonial project where violence can be cultural - focusing on the destruction of Indigenous and African cosmologies - and materializes in the killing and erasure of Indigenous and Black, Queer/Trans people from the island of Hispaniola (Chasteen 2011; García-Peña 2016; San Miguel 2005; Vega 2007). I have split Dominican history into three sections that lead to the present: colonization, US occupation, and Trujillo dictatorship. I have chosen these three eras to better organize, and more strategically view the construction of gender norms, and the reproductions of colonial violence that stem from these time periods as well. The colonial era (1493-1844) provides us with a history of slavery and the destruction of an entire indigenous population. It also provides us with the framework for modern conceptions of governance and order. The era of US occupation (1916-1924) problematizes the ways in which the Dominican Republic maneuvers, or doesn't maneuver, on the international stage. US occupation is another colonial reproduction of violence that aims to bring 'civility' to the island of Hispaniola. The Trujillo dictatorship (1930-1961) can be understood as a direct extension of US occupation, but I will detail the ways in which Trujillo builds upon US tactics to further construct 'The Dominican' and masculinity in the republic. Finally, I arrive at the present day which is informed by this 500 year old history where violence against Black, Queer, Trans/Gender Nonconforming people is still being normalized.

Colonial History-

My survey of the colonial history of the island of Hispaniola, focuses on the following key topics: La Isabela, the decimation of Taino people, transculturation between the Spanish colonizers and enslaved African peoples, and the imposition of spanish “order.”

There is a famous rhyming phrase that children recite to remember when the new world was ‘discovered’: “Columbus sailed the ocean blue in fourteen hundred ninety two.” While the timeline of this rhyme holds up, it should also be noted that at this time, the Portuguese are building the foundation of the institution that will support, construct, and haunt the new world for more than 300 years- the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade (Maxwell 1992: 8). It is important to ground Columbus stumbling upon the island of Quisqueya, or Haiti (these are the island’s indigenous names), in greater geopolitical processes at the time to highlight the complex entanglements Quisqueya was caught in.

In 1494 the first town, La Isabela, was created by Spanish colonizers in the new world. La Isabela is understood as a project where flaws are expected (Deagan and Cruxent 2002). Trial and error is how La Isabela functioned, but it also allowed for the exploration of the land and Taino peoples. La Isabela provided a blueprint for future colonial projects and settlements. La Isabela showcases what is important to the construction of a Spanish colonial state: religion, governance, and order. La Isabela housed the first christian church ever constructed in the new world. Overlooking the ocean was Columbus’s home. The city was organized in squares (Deagan and Cruxent 2002, Chasteen 2011: 11-42). La Isabela did not last very long. Spanish colonizers fell sick with scurvy and decided to relocate to another part of the island which is now present-day Santo Domingo. While the brutality of Spaniards against the Tainos aided in the

Taino's destruction, it was primarily diseases that wiped out the Tainos as was the case in much of Latin America (Chasteen 2011: 27).

Due to a dwindling free labor force from the Tainos, Spaniards brought enslaved Africans to the island of Hispaniola in 1502 (Vega 2007: 38). The Spanish quickly abandoned their post in the Dominican Republic to seek riches elsewhere in the new world, and did not really utilize the island of Hispaniola as a means of extracting resources. This allowed for greater mixing amongst the enslaved African peoples and Spanish colonizers that remained. As Vega (2007) points out though, "Education and evangelization aided in the socio-cultural genocide of the Taino and African peoples" (Vega 2007: 39). European colonizers needed to justify their conquest and they did this through the demonization of Native and African peoples and cultures. Criminalizing, disappearing peoples' cosmologies as less than, witchcraft, or make-believe, and by creating hierarchies of knowledge based around western/white rationality, Spaniards were able to justify their colonial missions as providing the 'backwards' Native and African civility.

Establishing borders between barbarism and civility was part of the colonial project of Latin America, and the Dominican Republic was not an exception to this ideology. "The very racial composition of the country was seen as a factor limiting material progress and the advancement of 'civilization' - civilization, naturally, of European origin" (San Miguel 2005: 23). This 'civilizing mission' away from 'barbarism' was promoted by the social and intellectual elite, and further perpetuated throughout Dominican History and especially in Trujillo's dictatorship, as a cisnormative, heteronormative, anti-Black, patriarchal mission.

US Occupation 1916-1924

An important thing to understand about Dominican history is that it is inseparable from Haitian history because both countries share the same island. Dominican and Haitian histories should stop being viewed as separate, individual entities. Rather, these histories could be analyzed as interconnected through colonial and imperial projects and imaginaries from the global north. The US occupied the entire island of Hispaniola in the early 1900s. First taking over Haiti in 1915 to restore “order” after their president had been killed, and later the Dominican Republic in 1916 to prevent Germany from using the Dominican Republic as a base during WWI. While in charge of the island, the United States purposefully destabilized Haiti to increase Dominican-Haitian tensions, promote anti-Blackness, demonize Afro-religious practices, and define the Haitian-Dominican border.

García-Peña (2016) postulates that borders on the island of Hispaniola are constructed through the process of “bordering” or othering. While I will more clearly define bordering in the following chapter when I discuss language and categorizations, for the moment it is important to note that bordering was a central dynamic of the US occupation. The mission of the marines was to “civilize” Hispaniola and bring “order” to the island’s inhabitants. Informed by the racist, unilineal evolutionary ideas behind civility, the marines would attack afro-religiospiritual practices and those who practiced them (García-Peña 2016: 72-77). “The confiscation of drums and the punishing of drummers was a common practice of the occupying marines in their efforts to “civilize” Hispaniola, and a response to their fear of Blackness” (García-Peña 2016: 61). Dominicans against US occupation were not necessarily accepting of Afro-religiosity either because it was associated with Blackness, causing non-Black Dominicans to construct a border

away from it. This in turn increased anti-Haitian sentiment because Blackness had been equated with Haitian identity rather than Dominican identity. “The definition of ‘Dominican’ became ‘not Haitian’”(San Miguel 2005: 39). The US was intentional in increasing racial tensions between Haitians and Dominicans by rewriting the Haitian constitution to allow private ownership of Haitian land. This allowed business interests to purchase Haitian land, which in effect created an impoverished class of Haitians that sought employment on Dominican Republic sugar plantations through a “US established Hispaniola labor program that imported Haitian laborers for cane cutting...” (García-Peña 2016: 77). As a consequence:

“US-centric ideas about race, gender, sexuality, religion, exoticism, the US military intervention contributed to the disenfranchisement of black Dominican women and the persecution of people who practiced Afro-cultural and afro-religious traditions. This legacy was continued under Trujillo during his thirty-one-year dictatorship, and persisted throughout the twentieth century” (García-Peña 2016: 91).

The United States, while occupying the Dominican Republic also took part in a “demasculinization” project (Peguero 2004: 38; Vega 2007: 219-220). US Marines would demasculinize Dominican men by forcing them to give up their guns which were culturally understood as a sign of manhood. This project affected the conceptions of manhood and masculinity in the Dominican Republic. Later Trujillo used this demasculinized Dominican Republic to redefine masculinity for the Dominican man.

Trujillo Dictatorship (1930-1961)-

The United States institutionalized the Dominican army which provided Trujillo with the tools to ascend to the position of president/dictator of the Dominican Republic in 1930 (Peguero 2004: 67-74). While in power, Trujillo created a military dictatorship. He used the previously

enforced lack of access to gun ownership, as an incentive for Dominican men to retrieve their manhood once again (Peguero 2004: 83). Constructing Masculinity, “Trujillo created an image of presidential power that broke with the previous respectable liberal model; it was based instead on an underclass mestizo style of *hombria* or manliness forged through personal risk taking, bravado, and sexual aggression” (Derby 2009: 174).

Trujillo, while constructing a very specific model of normative manhood, also constructed race for the Dominican man. For Trujillo, the Dominican man was lighter skinned, Christian, and extremely punctual (San Miguel 2005; Peguero 2004; Derby 2009). Trujillo became the face of Dominicanidad. “The tyrant, hyperbolized, was seen as the very embodiment of the nation. According to Andrés L. Mateo, the Trujillo era was the only time in Dominican history when power turned to culture to gain legitimacy” (San Miguel 2005: 3). While Trujillo became the embodiment of the island, he also had a job of transmitting that embodiment across the island. He did this by the use of the army, also known as *La Guardia*. “... One may argue that *La Guardia* reflected the cultural values of society and transmitted the cultural ethos of the military into society” (Peguero 2004: 41).

A Trans History of the Dominican Republic-

The preceding discussion offers a brief and condensed history of the Dominican Republic. Here let me contextualize Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk within these historical processes. The Queer and Trans histories of the island, as far as I am aware, are not written in any academic texts. I compiled these histories by speaking to/with Queer and Trans folk on the island. This section may be factually incorrect, but it is also important to understand how Queer

and Trans folk are constructing their narratives in the Dominican Republic. What follows is a compilation drawn from all the individuals I spoke with, and constitutes as their collective narrative of Trans history in the Dominican Republic.

The Trans movement in the Dominican Republic- Trans icons- began to come out during the era of the Trujillo dictatorship. That's what we remember.

Paco Escribano was a comedian- he was a homosexual- and with the popularizing of television we see characters like Paco. Gay characters created to be comedians. Usually these men would dress as women.

Then in the 1980s we began to see more men who dressed as women. They did not refer to themselves as Transgender though. "Trans" didn't really gain popularity until the 90s. At the time they were just gay, because that was really the only word people had to describe themselves, but even that term wasn't used. These people would call themselves "maricones." The terms "gay" or "homosexual" weren't really popularized yet. In the late 1980s, early 90s, we see a movement rise in gay and trans clubs where travestis would do drag performances. They would do these extravagant drag performances, reenacting different artists, and would emulate cisgender artists. Out of these clubs we see the rise of gay and trans communities. Discrimination at this time was present, but not well documented, so it was invisible.

#

The following is a more institutionalized history of different organizations that worked for the development of the LGBTQ+ community in the Dominican Republic.

In the 80s the organization Amigos Siempre Amigos- an organization of/for gay men- was created. In this organization, there were transformistas who noticed a high prevalence of HIV

infection rates in other trans people. So, at the start of the 90s- when organizations focusing on HIV/AIDS were being made- we also see the creation and growth of Trans organizations. First, we see Cotravin in 2004, and then we see TRANSSA in 2006. Trans organizations have been the organizations that visibilized the Trans identity, and the issues that Trans people face. TRANSSA has recorded the different kinds of violence that Trans people face, hate crimes committed against trans people, and, most importantly, empowered the Trans community. Trans organizations have helped Trans people understand their rights, and educated people on the diversity within the Trans identity. TRANSSA uses different articles written in the constitution to fight for and empower the Trans community to live their life authentically.

Today, TRANSSA is the main Trans organization in the Dominican Republic and has groups in Santiago, Puerto Plata, Monte Plata, and San Cristobal. There are smaller support groups throughout the island like Trans Este Podemos Avanzar (TEPA) who works with Trans communities on the Eastern side of the country in places like La Romana, Alta Gracia, and Higüey. Through the work of organizations like TRANSSA and TEPA comes, in 2012, the Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de Grupos Vulnerabilizados. This organization worked to record different forms of human rights violations as forms of violence, but looked at how different social factors affected these forms of violence. So, Trans Women who died in an HIV/AIDS related case, were considered as part of a system of violence. In 2016, the Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de Personas Trans was created to formalize and amplify the knowledge of different forms of trans violence.

Today Trans people, but specifically Trans women, are pushed into survival sex work. They are harassed by people on the streets, law enforcement, and even within families. We

understand this all as a system of violence against us, and we are fighting for our rights to live just like anybody else here.

Part 2:
Un Corito Sano

4. Language and Categorizations

“If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.” - Audre Lorde (1982), “Learning from the 60s” Speech for Malcolm X weekend at Harvard University

Language and categories, especially as they pertain to gender identities, are important. In Latin America there exists a multitude of gender identities. Although colonization may have you think otherwise, Latin America has a wide array of gender identities ranging from women, men, travestis, transformistas, the muxe in Mexico, the machi in Chile, and many more. Categories outside of man and woman have been erased/hidden/invalidated by white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy as a way to uphold and maintain its hegemony and unquestioned normalcy. This chapter is both an analysis and an explanation of the different gender categories in the Dominican Republic and why I am not talking about any of them in particular in this ethnography.

As Susan Stryker (2008) explains in *Transgender History*, “Transgender” as a term, and category, is fairly new and its definition is still being constructed. Before scholars began taking on Transgender studies in the midst of third wave feminism in the 1990s, medical disciplines (surgery, psychiatry) had already been defining, pathologizing, and medicalizing transgender bodies. Doctors like Harry Benjamin, who published *The Transsexual phenomenon* (1969), paved the way for bringing Trans folk higher quality and affirming healthcare. Although well intentioned, psychiatrists, and physicians like Harry Benjamin not only pathologized Trans and Gender Nonconforming individuals, they standardized/medicalized what it means to be part of certain categories. Suddenly, Transgender/Transsexual people had to follow rigid guidelines in

order to be considered Transgender/Transsexual. Transgender/Transsexual identity had to constantly be proven with gender and body dysphoria, and by upholding white cisheteropatriarchal images of manhood and womanhood. An example of the latter is presented in Skidmore's (2011) arguments about Christine Jorgensen: "white transwomen were able to articulate transsexuality as an acceptable subject position through an embodiment of the norms of white womanhood, most notably domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality" (Skidmore 2011: 271). Relating Transgender/Transsexual identity to whiteness and cisnormative understandings of gender has caused problems for Trans and gender variant people of color, especially those in or from the global south. For example, Jarrín (2016) explains how the hegemony of western medicine, and anglophone discourses around transsexuality delegitimize gender identities outside the binary structure of gender in Brazil. The standardization, medicalization, and pathologization of Transgender categories, especially in a western context, does not translate well to Latin American gender categories outside of cis man and cis woman. The Dominican Republic, as will be demonstrated, is another good example of the ways in which Eurocentric discourse around gender does not translate well culturally or linguistically.

Genders in the Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic, like any other place in the world, is full of genders. Genders that wear beards. Genders that wear dresses. Genders that wear beards and dresses. There is beauty in this diversity. However, a white supremacist patriarchal vision created by a violent past of colonization, US imperialism, and dictatorship attempts to rigidly control all the genders I just described.

As I walked around *El Monumento*- a monument Trujillo ordered to have built during his dictatorship as a monument to peace- in Santiago de Los Caballeros I saw a variety of genders. Bearded bodies adorned with freshly lined up facial hair, wrapped in black loafers, and hugged by skinny jeans and a button up. Bodies with long haired heads balanced by earrings on both ears, pants sitting on wide hips, and deep red lipstick accentuating lips. Dembow played over the distant sound of *motoconchos* making their way through the busy streets of Santiago at 5PM. I watched the genders around me pass by. What would it mean for us to be liberated from gender? Where the bearded bodies don't *have to* be men, and the bodies with wide hips don't *have to* be women. Where these bodies have the autonomy to choose and change their gender(s) as they please without fearing for their lives. Not a world without gender, but a world liberated from the confines of the gender binary and its limitations, liberated from language and categories that perhaps cannot encompass their gender.

Imagine.

There are many in the Dominican Republic who do not find this difficult to imagine. There are, always have been, and will continue to be, people who transgress and (re)imagine the gender binary. In the Dominican Republic, Women of cis and trans(gender/sexual) experience, along with travestis have been paving the way for (re)imagining the gender binary. This begins with the disruption of the idea of gender being binary in the first place. TRANSSA fights for people who can be described as, or would describe themselves within, the category of Travesti, Transsexual, and Transgender. As an organization, TRANSSA understands the expansiveness of these three identities, and the complexities of navigating gender under a white supremacist gender binary system. TRANSSA does not define the travesti, transsexual, and transgender

categories on their website because standardizing the categories may exclude someone who identifies as one of the categories, but maybe wouldn't define their gender the way TRANSSA would on their website. Rather than provide limitations to these categories, TRANSSA just claims to support people within those categories.

Language often fails us (read: everyone), and we are incapable of articulating fully what we feel is/are our identity/identities. In the case of my research, Travesti, Transsexual, and Transgender are just some of the terms with which people choose to define themselves. It is the language that they have been provided, and it is how they have been taught to explain their identities. I choose not to theorize what makes these identities because I do not want to pathologize or standardize these categories. Rather, I prefer these identities/categories to be understood through their varied individual definitions. These identities don't have to be distinct from one another, nor should they all be conflated as the same thing, or seen as a continuum where manhood or womanhood is the end goal. These identities are subjective. Following the example TRANSSA has provided, I will not define categories. Actually, I will try my best to expand them. Throughout this text I will not use specific gender identities like Travesti, Transsexual, or Transgender unless someone has self-identified themselves to me. Instead, I will use Trans/Gender Nonconforming (TGNC) to fully encompass all who transgress the rules of the gender binary. Trans/Gender Nonconforming are terms more widely used in western contexts, and most people in the Dominican Republic would not readily define themselves as gender nonconforming. I am not using these terms to impose a western identity, rather I am hoping to encompass and allow as many people as possible to be seen through my analysis. Trans, as it should be understood in this text, shares definitions with that of Susan Stryker's (2008)

definition of “Transgender” in *Transgender History*, “... people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender” (Stryker 2008: 1). I add Gender Nonconforming because some trans identities are gender nonconforming, but mainly because there are many cisgender people who also transgress the gender binary. Gender nonconformity is not exclusive to transness. I do not want to generalize this to just Trans folk, so I use Gender Nonconforming to capture any and all people who transgress gender norms, regardless of whether they identify under the Trans and Cis umbrellas.

In this way I am critiquing Don Kulick’s (1998) work with Travestis in Brazil in which by trying to better understand what makes someone a Travesti he eroticizes, and exotifies the construction of the travesti identity itself. Kulick (1998) offers a deep-dive into a particular experience of being travesti, he reifies an experience of violence towards trans folk in latin américa. I also contradict David Valentine’s (2007) idea of the importance of articulating and parsing out local gender categories. My ethnography allows these categories to exist subjectively, accepts and acknowledges their existence as relational to the individual interlocutors I work with. Much of the literature on gender variance in Latin America situates categories such as travesti, transsexual, and transgender as supporting statecraft because of their supposed allegiance to gender conformity. I reject this idea as it relies on a binary system that valorizes cisgender womanhood/manhood and implicates non-cisgender identities in attempting to replicate cisgender womanhood/manhood. Instead, I understand these categories as having the potential to exist simultaneously inside and outside of the binary bioessentialist colonial gender systems, and are therefore transgressive to the colonial state apparatus. This theoretical approach

allows me to situate my ethnography in relation to other decolonial, Latin American literature that relates conformity to the mission of the colonial nation-state (Moraña et. al 2008, Goldman 2008).

Language of Acoso Visual-

In my time in the Dominican Republic walking through streets, befriending other Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk, and going to TRANSSA, one thing remained true, people always stared at me/us. I always felt weird having to explain this stare to non-TGNC folk. “Nobody is staring at you,” is a common response from cisgender heteronormative people when you let them know that you feel eyes on you. However, the stare is real, and it is powerful. I did not at the time have the language to explain this stare and it caused me a lot of stress. As I spoke with Christian King, a self-identified Travesti and the executive director of TRANSSA, I told her about this stare that I was experiencing and she nodded and told me, “Trans people, and especially Trans Women, often stay home because of the *acoso visual* they experience.” Before meeting Christian, I had no words to describe what I and the rest of our Trans and Gender Nonconforming siblings were experiencing. I called it *The Stare*, but as soon as she said *acoso visual* I felt relieved. There was a name for what I was experiencing and feeling.

A quick google search of *acoso visual* didn’t get me very far. I had never heard the term before, and I was hoping to see what other people and scholars potentially had to say about *acoso visual*. All searches for the term were fruitless. I could not connect the term to any specific region in Latin America either. This leads me to believe that perhaps “*acoso visual*” is a term specific to Trans/Gender Nonconforming experience in the Dominican Republic, but I’d also like

to note that I have had similar experiences in my time in other countries outside of the Dominican Republic.

Acoso visual is an action with many processes behind it. A literal translation is visual harassment. However, this is not the same type of visual harassment understood in a workplace environment where someone showcases sexually explicit images or obscenities. Rather, acoso visual speaks to being stared at until you feel uncomfortable. Literally, being harassed by stares. Whether an individual is at a church, or trying to get into a club, or anywhere really, colonial order, through acoso visual, is implicated in everyday interactions that are simultaneously threats of violence and violent in themselves

Acoso visual has multiple functions. It functions to differentiate between the normative and non-normative, regulates colonial orders, is a vehicle for further violence, and is a form of violence in itself. Acoso visual differentiating between the normative and non-normative and regulating colonial orders can be understood through García-Peña's (2016) theory of "bordering." Bordering is a social process of othering that is informed by a racist, colonial past that simultaneously constructs "the Dominican" and "the other"/non-Dominican through subjective understandings of Dominicanidad. Dominicanidad can be understood as being Dominican, or the state of being Dominican.

Acoso visual is one mode through which bordering can take place. By understanding Acoso visual as a form of bordering I argue that acoso visual is always drawing on a historicized, trans-national and geopolitically informed understanding of race/class/gender distinctions. So, the racialized, poor, and Gender Nonconforming body is harder to recognize as "normative" or "conforming" to the colonial project of statecraft. Therefore, I argue that acoso visual is a

violent process rooted in historical and colonial legacies, and forms of physical, structural, and militarized violence that removes the Trans/Gender Nonconforming individual from Dominicanidad.

Marcia Ochoa (2008) writes in “Perverse Citizenship” of the ways in which Transformistas are denied their citizenship as Venezuelans because they are denied their rights by the general public and law enforcement officials. She writes of her experience witnessing five Venezuelan national guardsmen taking two transformistas under a bridge in silence. Ochoa is surprised that the transformistas are in custody, and she and her “outreach companion” stand frozen as the guardsmen and transformistas walk by. They cannot see or hear anything that is happening, which can either be a good or bad sign. One of the guardsmen who stayed behind spotted them and Ochoa and her outreach companion left the scene for safety reasons, but Ochoa writes, “These things happen because there are silences in which they can happen- people who are not subjects of rights are regularly subject to violations of their integrity as human beings and citizens” (Ochoa 2008: 155). Similarly, Don Kulick (1998) discusses the ways in which Brazilian travestis are also denied their citizenship/humanity by law enforcement officials, often beaten by cops, or forced to fight each other. In both cases, the Trans and Gender Nonconforming individuals were denied their rights as citizens, and were not allowed to communicate injustices out of fear that they would face worse forms of violence. While these two cases do not point to *acoso visual* as the primary engagement of violence, they do show how the process of “bordering” works to deprive the Trans and Gender Nonconforming individuals of their substantive citizenship and denied access to their rights and humanity.

Kulick (1998) says, “In most cities, travestis are so discriminated against that many of them avoid venturing out onto the street during the day. They are regularly the victims of violent police brutality and random assassinations” (Kulick 1998: 7). In the Dominican Republic, *acoso visual*, according to Christian King, pushes Trans and Gender Nonconforming feminine folk into the margins of society quite literally. Discomfort from the *acoso visual* makes some Trans and Gender Nonconforming folk stay home during the day time and come out only at night, usually to work as sex workers. Thus, the effects of *acoso visual* can be felt even when a stare is not present. The violence of the stare simultaneously others Trans/Gender Nonconforming individuals, even as it is also a vehicle for further violence, and a form of violence on its own.

Acoso visual removes, invisibilizes, and paradoxically hypervisibilizes Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk from society. What I mean by this is that Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk being pushed into their homes, or policed out of their gender expression and into one that conforms with cisnormative societal expectations, works to invisibilize Trans/Gender Nonconformity from Dominicanidad, and simultaneously hypervisibilizes the Trans/Gender Nonconforming individuals who do still choose to express their gender despite the violence they may receive. Hiding gender expression can be mentally, physically, and spiritually unhealthy for many Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk, so we are pushed into a predicament where we must negotiate with ourselves: how much of myself do I show the world before I am harmed? Am I ready to be stared at, yelled at, spat at, punched, killed?

These communicative effects, what I call the “language” of *acoso visual*, are always present in the Dominican Republic, quietly boisterous. What I mean by quietly boisterous is that

the communicative effects of *acoso visual* are accomplished silently yet are produced from and produce such loud anxieties. It is a language solely based on stares, or the feeling of being stared at, or the fear of potentially being stared at. As I walked around *El Monumento* looking at all the genders around me, I realized that they were staring right back at my own gender. Their stares suffocated. I felt hypervisible. I sat down at a bench, so as not to draw too much attention to myself. Why did their stare induce anxiety in me? I sat at the bench looking at nothing on my phone, but watched from the periphery of my eye as everyone who passed by looked at me, a spectacle. One man tripped on a step as he was making his way up the stairs. A couple of women passed by and started talking about my hair. I was the center of attention at *El Monumento*. Isn't it interesting how at the largest structure in the city- a monument for peace- that was created by a tyrannical white supremacist dictator, *I* was the center of attention? *Acoso Visual* expresses and illuminates Cisheteronormative fears. *Acoso visual* reveals hegemonic anxieties of and about potential. Anxieties about multiplicity. Anxieties about authenticity. And those fears and anxieties, while they trigger the violence of *acoso visual*, also suggest that at some level I/we, TGNC folk, hold all the power.

5. Racialized Gender

“My mother had escaped El Generalissimo’s soldiers, leaving her own mother behind. From the Haitian side of the river, she could still see the soldiers chopping up her mother’s body and throwing it into the river along with many others.”

---Edwidge Danticat, *“Krik? Krak!”* (1996)

In 1937, dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered the killing of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, in a massacre called *El Corte* (The cutting) or *Masacre Perejil*. “By the time *El Corte* was finished, Trujillo’s men had the blood of at least 15,000 Haitians on their hands... Other estimates compiled by the Dominican historian Bernardo Vega were as high as 35,000” (Wucker 1999: 50-51). *El Corte*, known to most scholars as The Haitian Massacre, was initiated because of anti-Black racism, and anti-Haitianism. In an effort to strengthen the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Trujillo ordered the massacre of Haitians (many of whom were ethnically Haitian, and Dominican citizens) against the desires of the people living in the bicultural border towns.

“On 2 October 1937, during a dance in Trujillo’s honor in Dajabón, Trujillo proclaimed, “For some months, I have traveled and traversed the frontier in every sense of the word. I have seen, investigated, and inquired about the needs of the population. To the Dominicans who were complaining of the depredations by Haitians living among them, thefts of cattle, provisions, fruits, etc., and were thus prevented from enjoying in peace the products of their labor, I have responded, ‘I will fix this.’ And we have already begun to remedy the situation. Three hundred Haitians are now dead in Bánica. This remedy will continue.” (Turtis 2002: 613)

Trujillo's rationalization for the massacre "misrepresented the massacre as stemming from local conflicts between Dominicans and Haitians in the frontier" (Turtis 2002: 613). This massacre employed Trujillo's army to standardize, define, and police Dominicanidad. In the bicultural regions of the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, stricter ideas of what it meant to be Dominican were enforced to border ethnically Haitian individuals and remove them from the conception of Dominicanidad, and, ultimately, violently kill them. As history surrounding this massacre has it, Dominican soldiers put people in the border towns to the test by asking them to say the word *perejil*, along with other words with 'r'. The pronunciation of the 'r' would decipher if one was ethnically Dominican, or ethnically Haitian. Anybody who *looked* Haitian was targeted, and put to the test. Indistinguishable from one another, however, many Dominicans and Haitians were separated by troops by forcing ethnic Dominicans to tell where ethnic Haitians lived, and killing the ethnic Haitians in their homes.

I open this chapter with this slice of history to situate us in a discussion surrounding racialized gender, Dominican citizenship, and Dominicanidad. This part of Dominican-Haitian history is a direct example of the way bordering can be used to exclude groups of people from formal and cultural citizenship. As mentioned, *acoso visual* is a form of bordering that racializes and genders individuals, and although I cannot say for certain that *acoso visual* was used to border individuals out of Dominicanidad at this point in history, the Haitian Massacre was a pivotal moment in Dominican-Haitian history that further defined what it meant to be Dominican. In the remainder of this chapter I will explain racialized gender as a product of white supremacy. I will use an interaction with a cisgender, gender-conforming man named José to develop my argument for the ways in which *acoso visual* is used to acknowledge racialization

and gender nonconformity, and also enter a conversation about necro-politics as it relates to a racialized gender order. Finally, I will explain the cultural significance of racialized gender in the Dominican Republic and what this cultural significance means for Dominican culture and citizenship. This chapter is necessary to have a deeper conversation later on in this ethnography surrounding cisnormativity, and the tensions that arise when cisnormative structures confront Trans/Gender nonconformity and non-whiteness.

Race and Gender-

In order to discuss and define racialized gender understanding how the social constructions of race and gender were formed must be understood first, specifically in the Dominican Republic. I would like to clarify that these social constructions are rooted in a large and complex history that I cannot tackle in this chapter alone. For the sake of this text I am focusing on a colonial history, and the construction of the nation-state that is the Dominican Republic to better discuss racialized gender in a Dominican context.

Lugones (2007) quotes Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* by saying,

“For centuries, the uncertain continents- Africa, the Americas, Asia- were figured in European lore as libidinally eroticized. Travelers’ tales abounded with visions of the monstrous sexuality of far-off lands, where, as legend had it, men sported gigantic penises and women consorted with apes, feminized men’s breasts flowed with milk and militarized women lopped theirs off” (McClintock cited by Lugones 2007: 204-205).

Much like this explanation provided by Maria Lugones that exposes the ways in which people of the colonized world were characterized, fantasized, and dreamt about by Europeans as

Intersex, overly sexualized, Queer, Trans beings. Juana Maria Rodriguez (2014) reveals her understanding of her racialized gender when she says, “Our racialized excess is already read as queer, outside the norms of what is useful or productive” (Rodriguez 2014: 2). These understandings reveal the ways in which racialized individuals are gendered and sexualized as others within the white hegemonic colonial order. The “monstrous sexuality” of the ‘undiscovered’ racialized world provided a sexual fantasy that Europeans were allowed to seek and play out through the process of colonization. Colonizers, specifically European men (but also women), used colonization as a way to live out these fantasies with men who “sported gigantic penises” and women who “consorted with apes.” The construction of the colonial state was the playground for Europeans to live out their eroticized fantasies of rape and domination. The order of the colonial state mirrored these fantasies of domination by imposing “regulation,” and “civility” on the “racialized excess” of the “savage” Native/African.

According to Lugones (2007), “Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers” (Lugones 2007: 186). As seen in the legacy of gender imposition today, colonialism operated under a framework of sexual dimorphism and bioessentialism. Sexual dimorphism can be understood as the separation and opposition of two sexes, and bioessentialism as inherent biological traits attributed to these sexes. In other words, colonizers believed one’s sex/genitalia inherently predicted one’s subjectivities. European, colonial ideologies of gender and sex rely on bioessentialism to further push the ideology of sexual dimorphism, both of which are fallacies. In addition, the conflation of gender, sex, and body is part of a colonial project that erases race from

the picture. Thus, colonial gender was constructed for the maintenance of racism. Intersex and gender variant people challenged these understandings, and because of that frequently were tortured and killed by the colonizer (Chase 2002: 194, Elliot 2016, Vaid-Menon 2018). Bioessentialism, relying on sexual dimorphism, teaches us that people with penises are inherently masculine, aggressive, and leaders; while people with vulvas are inherently feminine, submissive, and small. These conceptions went against many Native and African cosmologies and conceptions of gender (Bacigalupo 2007, Horswell 2005, Lugones 2007, Oyěwùmí 1997, Vaid-Menon 2018).

Focusing on the history of the Dominican Republic as a colonial project shows the various ways in which gender has been (re)constructed in the Dominican Republic by the state. While the project of racialized gender has its roots in this internationalist colonial effort started by the Spanish, it took on new and locally specific forms during the twentieth century. Here the influence of the United States occupation was important; as was the racist dictatorial regime of Trujillo. Consequently, as Goldman (2008) describes in *Out of Bounds: Islands and the Demarcation of Identity in the Hispanic Caribbean*,

“Hispanic Caribbean self-fashioning offers a compelling case study of local specificity and national persistence in the face of increasing transnationalism, neoliberalism, and geopolitical restructuring. . . . Accordingly, however retrograde it may seem, the attachment to political borders persists. The nation therefore remains highly crucial as the primary space of subject formation even as its precise position is radically redefined in an increasingly globalized world” (Goldman 2008: 209).

The nation as a “primary space of subject formation” for Dominicans can be seen in García-Peña’s (2016) theory of bordering in which individuals construct borders for

dominicanidad through racist racial imaginaries where Blackness, equated to barbarism, is outside of the borders of dominicanidad and non-Blackness, equated with civility, is within the realm/borders of dominicanidad.

Referring to the US occupation of the island of Hispaniola, García-Peña (2016) states that US “marines successfully embodied the rhetoric of the white heterosexual nation they represented” (73). In this sense, the US has a sexuality, and so does the Dominican Republic and the goal of the United States’ occupation and the Trujillo Dictatorship was to continue the colonial mission of civilizing, which included, *heterosexualizing*, the racialized, perverse, hypersexualized, feminized nation-state of the Dominican Republic (García-Peña 2016, Lugones 2007, Peguero 2004, Vega 2007).

It is this history of Spanish colonization, US occupation and Trujillo’s military dictatorship that describes what Ferguson (2003) theorizes in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*.

“Basing the fundamental conditions of history upon heterosexual reproduction and designating capital as the disruption of heterosexual normativity . . . made the heteronormative subject the goal of liberal and radical practices. Under such a definition of history, political economy became an arena where heteronormative legitimation was the prize . . . As heteropatriarchy was universalized, it helped to constitute the state and the citizen’s universality” (Ferguson 2003: 10-12).

Therefore, the Dominican Republic must be understood as a white cisgender heterosexual, patriarchal state/project, and those with access to dominicanidad are understood to be cisgender heterosexual and patriarchal individuals. Racialized gender is a product of white supremacy. Racism, stemming from white supremacy, brings “order” to the “backwards”

racialized TGNC world through the co-construction of the self-sustaining, self-perpetuating, hierarchies that are race and gender which position cishetero whiteness at the top of the hierarchy, and positions racialized (especially Black) queer transness below. As Katzew (2004) states, "... classification was designed as a mechanism of social control" (Katzew 2004: 43). So, racialized gender, through these understandings, helps construct the state and the citizen, while the state helps legitimize racialized gender and the citizen.

Visualizing Necro-policy-

We took a *guagua* from Santiago to Puerto Plata. A family friend, Raquel, was visiting me for a few days in Santiago and wanted to join me in going to *La Isabela*, the place of the first settlement in the new world. The people working at the bus station told me it would take two hours to get there from Puerto Plata, and I had just received a text from my friend Félix saying that there is a *guagua* that goes directly from Santiago to La Isabela. At that point Raquel and I figured we could just have a nice day at the beach and I could go to La Isabela another day, so we ordered an uber to take us to Playa Dorada.

"José will get here in 5 minutes."

"Okay. I hope he hurries *porque hace un calor de madre*"

José pulled up next to Raquel and me by going against traffic on the opposite side of the road. We got in the silver toyota.

"¿Pa donde van?"

"Playa Dorada."

"Do you want me to take a special route to get there?"

"No it's okay, just follow the GPS please."

Raquel and I conversed in the back of the car while he drove. José heard our conversation and started asking us about our trip to La Isabela. I told him that I was a student of anthropology, and I was going to La Isabela as part of my research. Raquel began to ask him how much it would be to get there and he said he could take us. We canceled the uber ride and decided to have José take us to La Isabela instead.

José was your average Dominican man. He had his facial hair and the hair on his head lined up. He wore shades and a long sleeve button up shirt with a white undershirt. He had blue jeans and black loafers on. On our way to La Isabela we listened to the radio and an advertisement for a campaign for LGBTI+ legislation came on. The car was silent as the ad played. I knew deep in my bones that José was going to say something about the ad. The car remained silent for a few moments after the ad . . .

I think all that is okay. To each their own. Everybody stays in their own bubble and as long as you're not harming anybody I don't see what's wrong. The only thing I'm not okay with is men who dress as women. I'm okay with everything but that. Those men are violent. We have to protect our children from them. What would our kids think if they saw a man wearing women's clothes? That can mess them up, confuse them. They'd think it's ok to do that too. We can't have people like that in our society. That's just what I think though.

I laughed. Partially out of discomfort, and partially out of the irony of who he was making this commentary to. I introduce my interaction with José in order to talk about necropolitics, the biopolitics of disposability, and how these operate under racialized gender because necropolitics, especially as it relates to TGNC folk of color, is a response to racialized gender

from the white cis world. Necropolitics, and a politic of disposability, are tools that reinforce both race and gender, or racialized gender hierarchies.

Mbembe (2019) was the first scholar to conduct an in-depth analysis of necropolitics. To define how necropolitics/necropower works he says,

“Frantz Fanon describes the spatialization of colonial occupation in vivid terms. First and foremost, he argues, colonial occupation entails a division of space into compartments. It involves the setting of boundaries and internal frontiers epitomized by barracks and police stations; it is regulated by the language of pure force, immediate presence, and frequent and direct action; and it is premised on the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. But more important, this is how necropower operates . . . to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not.”
(Mbembe 2019: 79-80)

As can be seen from my interaction with José, José is okay with everything but trans femininity. He places the trans feminine as a form of violence and barbarism. To José, the trans feminine subject should not belong in his society, they are understood to be *disposable*. What is interesting though, is that this is only the case when transness and gender nonconformity are visible or known.

Acoso visual is used as a way to acknowledge racialized gender nonconforming people and it is also an indicator of transgressing normativity. The use of bordering as a theoretical tool for understanding gender conformity and nonconformity works because it does not assume trans-ness or cis-ness, rather it assumes an individual's conformity to the standards of Dominicanidad, which are always upheld through a racialized gender system that places whiteness and cisnormativity at the top. As Enke (2012) shows,

“Cisgender privileges are surely most commonly conferred and achieved when the appearances of normative race, class, and ability are also achieved, along with a host of other normative mobilities. Scholars have shown that gender normativity is all but dependent on and reserved for whiteness, legal citizenship, and normative ability... Cisgender then necessarily plays out as a normatively racialized ally status confirming its privilege through association with whiteness, legality, and ability” (Enke 2012: 69-70).

This is played out with José. As long as José can't see what he understands to be a transgression of racialized gender norms, in this case, “a man in women's clothing”, he would not assume a transgression has taken place. This is to say that as long as transness is “invisible”, or in other words, the individual is “passing” cisnormative understandings of racialized gender, the cisnormative world is not stressed, thus *acoso visual* is not present.

One day I was making my way along *Avenida República de Argentina*. I had just bought some juice from *Bravo* and I was walking home with bags in my hands. Sweat bled down the sides of my face as I regretted not tying my hair up. Layers of curls trapped in heat from the blazing sun. Up ahead I spotted a group of three people, two (presumably) women and a man. I noticed that they were looking at me. The stare was strong, forceful, hot. This was *acoso visual*. Sweat from the heat of the sun mixed with sweat from the intensity of their stares. My long hair, short shorts, hairy legs, non-masculine strut, and my facial hair did not make sense to them. Or perhaps it made perfect sense to them. As I passed by they stopped talking and all stared at me. They waited for me to pass them for one of the women to advise me in a harsh tone “If you're trying to look like a woman you should shave!” The other woman joined in, “And brush your hair while you're at it *estás despeinado* (your hair is disheveled).” By now I am used to

commentary like this. You see, my feminine qualities require me to fit an idea of femininity/womanhood that is cisnormative: hairless, white. My racialized gender nonconformity did not meet the standards of cisgender as Enke (2012) details and so my body is read as disposable. The advice the women gave me can be read as a warning and an extension of *acoso* visual. Conform to the standards, *or else*. What interests me most is not the *or else* because I've read too many papers of the violence Trans-feminine folk face to not know what that *or else* could mean. Rather, I'm interested in examining what about my being upsets/charges/re-volts. What is my gender nonconformity truly challenging? What is my expression of personhood revealing to others about themselves? Part of the construction of cisnormativity is the construction of the state, including both of those bodies deemed important and valuable, and those that are disposable. Who has (more of) a right to citizenship? Who has (more of) a right to live?

Citizenship-

As Hazel (2014) notes, "In the Dominican Republic, the human senses of touch, smell, hear, taste and, sight are called upon to mediate, evaluate, legitimate, and negotiate day-to-day encounters and occurrences. Dominicans negotiate their identity by establishing otherness through sensory markers." Trans/Gender Nonconforming Dominicans, othered for their gender expression/identity, are in constant question in the Dominican Republic. Although having formal citizenship, TGNC Dominicans face difficulties with accessing their substantive and cultural citizenships because of the ways that they transgress gender norms. Dominicans will question the

legitimacy of the Trans/Gender Nonconforming citizen's citizenship, and employ different tests to authenticate them. This can happen by asking TGNC folk for their *cedula* (ID), prompting them to speak (to see if they have a Dominican accent), or a plethora of other cultural litmus tests. Hazel's (2014) insight also shows how reliance on sight as a mode of othering is integral to *acoso* visual.

6. Cis-Sensitivity

In this Chapter I will delve into and more clearly define the workings of white supremacy as I understand them. I would like to clarify that for the sake of this project I am unable to fully examine white supremacy in all its complexities, but I will primarily focus on its role in creating hierarchies around White cisheteronormativity. I will draw from philosophical writers such as Heidegger, to better theorize white supremacy as well. A discussion of white supremacy is necessary as a means to better understand what I theorize in the following section as cis-sensitivity. To better lay out my theorization of cis-sensitivity I will use first hand experiences with aco visual to better illuminate the tensions with Transness and Gender Nonconformity that the Cisheteronormative world enacts.

White supremacy-

“There is no single view of blacks --or of any non-white group, for that matter--even within discrete European populations. Rather, non-European groups were forced into various philosophical, ideological, and practical schemes. Most important for our purposes is that all these schemes recognized degrees of humanity. Whether these connecting ladders ranked chunks of humanity on ontological, ethical, political, scientific, cultural, or simply pragmatic grounds, some humans were more so than others.”

--- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Silencing the Past” (1995)

Here Trouillot (1995) articulates the basis for how I understand white supremacy. White supremacy is not just a racialized gendered order, especially in Latin America where one’s

perceived race, class, and gender all combine to dictate one's (perceived) status. Instead, white supremacy is a structure that permeates and structures much of what is seen and understood in our world today. Capitalism, the gender binary, the sex binary, racial constructions, nation-states, the way our world operates and is legitimized through white supremacy. White supremacy is what created and legitimized the white cisheteropatriarchy which defined white cishetero men as the standard, or essence of human. The more distant one is from the category of white cishetero man identity the less "degree of humanity" one has.

My ideas here build on my discussion of racialized gender. Spanish speaking Latin American racial constructions were defined through *casta* systems- categorizing systems that attempted to describe every possible racial/ethnic mixture (katzsew 2004). The *casta* system was raced, gendered, and classed. At the very top of the pyramid-style system is the "pure" white Spaniard man. The *casta* system quite literally mapped/maps out "degrees of humanity." When considering a racialized gender order, this is how I understand white supremacy to work. I understand white supremacy working through a racialized gender order to posit the white cisgender heterosexual man as the essence of human. I want to clarify that white supremacy as a structure works in multiple ways, and this is just one of those ways.

I use the term essence to enter into a conversation with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger theorizes, among many other things, what it means *to be* in his influential text, *Being and Time* (1928). In *Being and Time* (1928) Heidegger assumes that humans are *thrown* into society. Within this society, humans *fall* into tasks occupying a state of *Dasein*, or being. The fundamental role of *Dasein* is *falling* into tasks. Humans get tasks from other humans which tell them how they should be behaving as humans. Having a technology and consumer

driven society, to Heidegger, makes it more simple for people to enter *falling*. The technology that humans have tell them exactly how to function in society. Technology gives humans their tasks. Fallingness is an important part of Dasein because it is a state of reproducing what is expected of humans. For Heidegger, in society there are the inauthentic and the authentic. The inauthentic do not challenge why humans do what they do. They do not challenge the possibilities of existence. The authentic, however, does challenge the “everydayness” of society. In other words, the authentic challenges why they must do the tasks that they do, and instead embrace the numerous possibilities of Dasein.

I use Heidegger because I believe he can provide a unique understanding to the normative and that which challenges the normative. I understand white supremacy as a structure and project aimed at destroying any body that is not a white cishetero man, while also forcefully socializing those bodies into emulating and believing the self-proclaimed superiority/normativity of white cishetero men. The human being in western/colonial/modern logics is best understood as a white man, while Black people, Indigenous people, and other People of Color are barbaric, savage, property. They are understood, under white supremacy, as sub-human. Thus, the project of white supremacy, in a search for order and totalitarian control, subjects people into order in an effort to make the sub-human *more* human through recreating the image of white men. I provide the casta system as an example because it posits the white man as the essence of human. While Heidegger isn't directly discussing white supremacy, I believe his way of understanding the essence of human, in a white supremacist context, could reveal tensions people have with transgressing socio-cultural norms. *Fallingness* is an important part of white supremacist Dasein because it is how it maintains its control and legitimizes itself. *You are to be this way, and you are to do these*

tasks because that is how things are supposed to be. Authenticity is the ability to imagine worlds and ways of being beyond fallingness. Thus, the authentic individuals are those who consciously challenge and question white supremacist structures.

In this case, I am using Heidegger's ideas to understand a specific cultural and historical moment in the Dominican Republic. As I showed in my earlier discussion of Racialized Gender, the Dominican Republic, as a nation-state- the place of subject formation- is trying its best to emulate a white cishetero man, and it extends those sentiments to its citizens.

“Latin American decolonial thinkers have critiqued Latin American states as ‘colonial nation-states’ that were constituted on the basis of ‘whiteness’ and reproduced colonial forms of racial subordination after independence... Contemporary decolonial thought... highlights Latin America’s reproduction of the dominant geopolitics of knowledge that casts European ideas as universal scientific ‘truth’” (Hooker 2017: 159).

The Dominican Republic, much like other ‘colonial nation-states’ positions white “European ideas as universal scientific ‘truth,’” and it is exactly these “truths” of white supremacist *being* that the authentic defy, and that unsettles the white cisheteronormative world. To consciously defy the white cisheteronormative world, is to be authentic. What happens, though, to the authentic? What happens when one revolts against a totalitarian project and structure?

Cis-Sensitivity-

“We are so powerful that we have to be disappeared because when we exist they can’t. When they see us, it calls into question their own insignificance. Because they look at us and they have to think “How am I so mediocre?” And that is why since the beginning of time Queer people have posed a threat to cishetero mediocrity. Because they look at us and our glamorous lives, our impossibly glamorous lives, the families we make, the genders we create, the intimacy we sustain- and they look at their unhappy marriages, their unhappy unions, their unhappy families, and they see our joy and they see their tragedy, and they have to disappear us.”

--- Alok Vaid-Menon, “why would I deny the world my beauty?”
IGTV (2020)

Alok Vaid-Menon, a Transfeminine writer, speaker, and performance artist of color, made this statement when discussing their beauty and how people question why they continue to choose to express their gender nonconformity. To Alok, the reason why people are violent to them is precisely because they are beautiful. Their beauty, and the beauty of other Queer/Trans/Gender Nonconforming people, exposes the possibilities of forms of existence outside of what the white cishetero patriarchal world has already prescribed. I would like to take this notion of beauty that Alok has posed, and, for the sake of this chapter, equate it to authenticity. Authenticity is beauty. So, what happens to the authentic? What happens when one revolts against the totalitarian structure and project that is white supremacy? Well, Alok already provided the answer- “They have to disappear us.”

The act of disappearing Trans and Gender Nonconforming people from the world is transphobic and a direct result of cis-sensitivity. I theorize that cis-sensitivity is the agitation cisgender (sexual orientation does not matter here), gender conforming people experience when confronted with the unlimited possibilities for existing that Trans/Gender Nonconformity suggests. Transphobia is an outward response to being cis-sensitive. Questioning gender is an inward response to being cis-sensitive. Cis-sensitivity, depending on how it is acted upon, has the potential to be violent, or not. Cis-sensitivity, is always culturally specific, but draws from white supremacy, and the positioning of white cishetero man as the essence of human. Part of the cultural specificity is the nation-state. Embedded in the idea of the national body

In the remainder of this chapter I will provide examples from my fieldwork to show how cis-sensitivity and acoso visual work to disappear Trans/Gender Nonconforming people from society.

Domingo is a 58 year old cisgender, gender conforming gay man. I met Domingo through Sammy, a friend I met last year while working on a photography project in Santiago. I messaged Domingo on whatsapp telling him I was on my way to his place. He sent back a voice note, “Ta bien. Aquí te espero.” (Okay. I’ll wait for you here.) I got out of the taxi and made my way into the apartment building. The security gates were open so I walked in. A bald, roughly five foot seven man was waiting for me downstairs.

“¿Juan?”

“Sí. ¿Domingo?”

He greeted me with a handshake and a kiss on the cheek. We made small talk as we climbed the stairs up to his third floor apartment. The way I met Domingo is interesting. He

reached out to me. Sammy had been discussing my photography project, and it came up that I am also an activist for the TLGBQI+ community. He said that he wanted to talk to me about my thoughts on *lenguaje inclusivo*. Inclusive language has been a contested topic across all of Spanish speaking Latin America. Many do not understand why people feel excluded from a language that is supposedly inclusive. But the thing about Domingo is that he didn't really have any questions about inclusive language. I explained to him why some people didn't feel included, or why some people felt like an after-thought with current language structures in Spanish, and he said he knew all of that. He was more interested in the primary people who fight for inclusive language- women, Trans and Gender Nonconforming folk. Domingo sipped on a coffee and proceeded to ask me why people had to be so excessive.

Men who wear lipstick and makeup . . . I've got nothing but compassion for them. And the truth is they [Cisgender/gender conforming people] feel threatened by men who do express themselves that way. It's like this can't be real. There's no way someone can be this much. It's so excessive. Why do they always have to be like that? It's almost like they're looking for attention.

I fought the urge to correct Domingo and tell him that he probably meant Travestis or Trans Women or Transformistas; I also wanted to explain how what he was saying fed into the violent, victim blaming idea that Trans and Gender Nonconforming people ask for the violence that they receive, and that people shouldn't be reduced to excessive, attention-seeking performers. But Domingo perfectly articulated his and other's cis-sensitivity. Trans/Gender Nonconformity is understood, to the white cisheteropatriarchal world, as a threat, a disturbance, a ripple within the everydayness because it forces individuals to question their own performance

within the everyday. As Cox (2015) explains, “Gender, like respectability, is about performances and readings of those performances. When someone is illegible to another through the lens of normative gender categories, this is disconcerting primarily for what it means for disturbing the first person’s understanding of his or her own Behavior, Presentation, and knowledge of self” (Cox 2015: 181).

I watched Domingo look down at his empty cup of coffee and contemplate.

You know. . . I wish I could do that. I wish I could wear makeup. I wish I could go outside like that, but I have to protect myself. Tengo envidia de ellos (I’m jealous of them). I’ve always been more feminine, but it was always something I hid from people. I had to protect myself. I’ve been assaulted three times here in Santiago. That’s partly why I don’t go out anymore. . . I was also always taking care of my mother- four years she had cancer- and on her death bed she finally told me she accepted and loved me for who I am. . . . And I always think back to that. I never told her that I’m gay, pero ella lo sabía (but she knew it). Mamis saben todo. I think I will die a liar. . .

Domingo started to cry. I offered a hug and he rejected it, wiping the tears from his eyes.

“Yo estoy bien.”(I’m okay.)

Domingo expressed a daily struggle for Queer/Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk. How much of myself do I show the world before I am harmed? Am I ready to be stared at, yelled at, spat at, punched, killed? These tensions that Queer/Trans/Gender Nonconforming people face are a direct result of the transphobic response to cis-sensitivity. In other words, transphobia, when enacted as a response to cis-sensitivity is not so much about the Trans/Gender Nonconforming individual as it is about the discomfort one experiences when one begins to

question the possibility of entering the non-normative. Authenticity is so scary. Authenticity is so powerful. Cis-sensitivity is not to be understood as a justification for transphobic violence, rather it should be understood as a way to understand where transphobic violence stems from- the *need* to disappear that which illuminates possibilities, potentialities, alternative worlds, and exposes the inauthentic life as one not of one's own creation, but rather a white supremacist one.

#

I was on my way to a *Café Santo Domingo* to meet up with Jenny and Perla. Perla is the point person for TRANSSA in Santiago, and she connects as many Trans* folk in Santiago to TRANSSA as she can. Perla identifies as a transformista and Jenny identifies as a Trans woman. As I was riding in a *concho*, packed in the car with 5 other people, I thought back to my conversation with Perla, a few days prior.

"I'm going to bring my friend to the interview with me, is that okay?" Perla asked.

"Of course!"

"You know we may not be going in women's clothing right? You know how it can be for us sometimes." The *concho* dropped me off a few blocks away from the *Café Santo Domingo*. Sweat began to accumulate on my back. As I walked up to the cafe, so did Perla and Jenny. We all hugged each other like we had known each other for years. A traditional kiss on cheeks was shared. We headed into the cafe, and as the three of us walked in together we realized that the world stopped. Every single eye in the Café was on us. Not one person spoke. Not one person clinked their fork against the plate while picking up a piece of cake or muffin. Everyone stared in silence. Jenny broke the silence, "Is anybody going to assist us?" Jenny must've found a way to restart the world because everyone went back to their prior conversations, a worker came to give

us menus, and only a few remained staring at us. As we walked to our seats, we could feel the energy in the air, the stares on the back of our heads. It was suffocating. Hostile. We sat down and before even looking at the menu we began to discuss how we all had had prior experiences where we “stopped the world” for just a moment. I stopped traffic. Jenny stopped two men from fighting with each other. Perla stopped a group of women at the park from continuing to laugh. Each case was an instance of *acoso visual*. I use my, Jenny, and Perla’s experiences with our power of “stopping time” to showcase how *acoso visual* is a direct result, of cis-sensitivity and the culturally and historically specific moment that is being in the Dominican Republic post-Trujillo as a Trans-feminine and gender nonconforming individual. The power that Trans and Gender nonconforming individuals have is not to stop time though. Trans and Gender Nonconforming people have the power to rupture the everyday. TGNC folk, and especially TGNC folk of Color have the ability to cause disturbances, in the best ways imaginable, to structures of white supremacy. The power TGNC folk hold is strong, so the world/nation-states/individuals try to disappear us. The hyper-visibility TGNC folk experience, often relegates them out of society, and many times through more violent processes than *acoso visual*.

I have purposefully refrained from including explicitly violent content and experiences because I want this text to be a window into the genocide that Queer, Trans and Gender Nonconforming folk of color are experiencing globally. I do not want to better understand the genocide. I want to better understand why there is a genocide in the first place. What power do Trans/Gender Nonconforming people have that makes us have to be disappeared? I believe cis-sensitivity answers that question and provides Trans/Gender Nonconforming folk with a

theoretical tool to resist transphobic accusations that we are the source of our own problem for living authentically.

Part 3:
Ya Tu Sabes

7. Notes To My Readers

In this chapter I want to talk to all of you. Not that I haven't been in dialogue with you throughout this entire book, but I just want to have a one-on-one conversation with you, my reader(s). Whatever world(s) you're living in, I hope you were able to find yourself somewhere in this text. Existing as a racialized, visibly Queer, Trans-feminine Gender Nonconforming individual was the fuel for this ethnography. Too often in my research did I find stories interrogating Trans folk. Too often in my experiences did I hear that TGNC folk's marginalization and the violence we face is a fault of our own. So, I want to take this moment to talk directly to you, about ALL of this.

To My Cisgender Readers-

"What if you were to challenge yourself every time you feel afraid of me--and all of us who are pushing against gendered expectations and restrictions? What if you cherished us as archetypes of realized potential? What if you were to surrender to sublime possibility--yours and mine? Might you then free me at last of my fear, and of your own?" (85).

--- Vivek Shraya (2018), *I'm Afraid of Men*

If you have class privilege are you donating directly to Black Trans folk? Are you volunteering at Trans orgs? Are you correcting people when they misgender Trans folk? Are you making sure your TGNC friends have a way to get from/to home safely? Do you have your pronouns in your email signature? Do you have your pronouns on your social media accounts?

Are you getting TGNC folk's pronouns correct? All of this, truly, is the bare minimum people not of TGNC experience should be doing, and you should not be applauded for doing so.

I hope you read my text and question how you may or may not stare at TGNC folk. I hope you question why you (if you do) feel some type of agitation when confronted with TGNC folk. I hope you question gender, and the gender that has been placed on you. A common question given to TGNC folk is, "When did you know about your gender?" And I often wonder the same for you. I want you to know that the same systems that oppress TGNC folk oppress you too. Don't limit yourself to what the world tells you you have to limit yourself to. In the same vain, don't limit others either. Do better.

To My TGNC Readers-

You are powerful, resilient, brilliant. Continue to shine.

I was tired of reading about our violence. Truthfully, that is why I wrote this ethnography. I was so tired of reading about the ways our bodies are scrutinized, destroyed, and disappeared in the plethora of creative, gruesome ways people have managed to do so. I was so tired of people interrogating the violence that Trans folk face without interrogating where that violence is coming from. Yes, white patriarchy, but who is wielding it? Who is using white patriarchy to destroy our creative forms of existence? Trans folk will, as scholars (Kulick 1996, Valentine 2007) point out, often ask people studying Trans communities to focus on the violence we face. That makes sense, we are being killed at extraordinary rates, especially Black Trans folk. But the focus was almost always specifically on the violence, not an interrogation into why

we face the violence we do. So, I wrote this text as something that stopped looking at the violence our community faces as an anomaly. It is our norm (although it shouldn't be, and that is a defect of our societies). So, this book places TGNC folk at the center. We are the center of the universe in this text, and we are looking out at the others- the cisgender folk. The violence we face is already understood in this text. So, with this ethnography, I hope you are seen. I hope you are held. I hope you know you are not alone. I hope you know that I know those stares come from others' insecurities and a transphobic history/present. I hope you know that others have walked/ are walking/ will walk the same path you do. I hope you know you are valid in whatever gender identity you claim for yourself. I hope you know you are valid no matter how you express your gender identity. I hope you know you are not the reason for the violence you experience. I hope you know I need you. I hope you know I love you. I hope you can carry these words with you as you move through the world. I hope you can build on the theories I have laid out, which are nowhere near perfect.

I hope you continue

To write

To theorize

To laugh

To create

To destroy

To scream

To riot

To protest

To live

To be.

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