

# Trans Bovine Politics: Furry Tranimacies in Cringe Economies (Ain't I Trans?)

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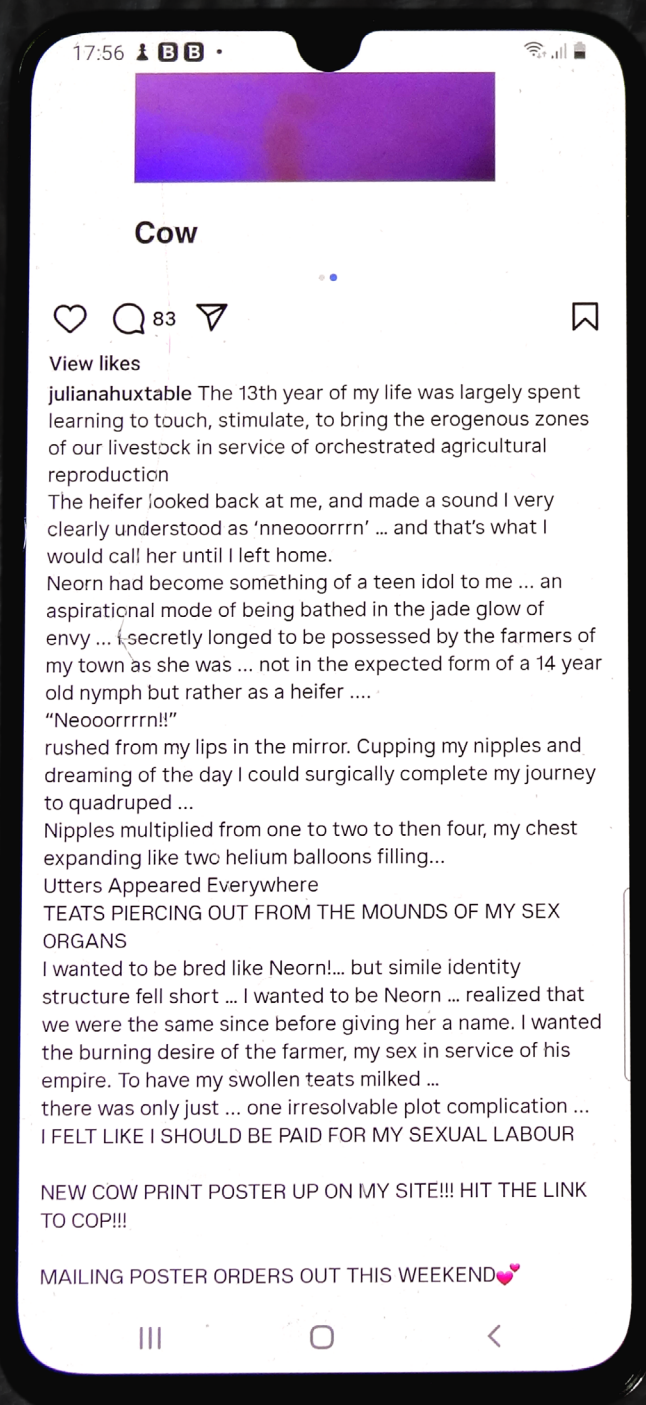
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Abstract:

A trans bovine politics is a politics of engaging and becoming with real-life transspecies actors in the ongoing project of constructing and discovering figures whose speech and behavior contest reified queer/feminist discourses. Primarily focusing on the interaction between historical and contemporary narratives of transgender and transspecies actors, this thesis explores and problematizes anxieties of conflation between the historically vulnerable and politically contested category of transgender with seemingly frivolous transspecies identities; especially for the latter's position within public visibility as *cringeworthy*. Applying the methodology of feminist figuration, I bind together several trans and transspecies accounts under the name *trans bovine*; and explore the possibilities the inhabitation of this intersectional figure affords in the expansion of queer knowledges and affective political strategies.

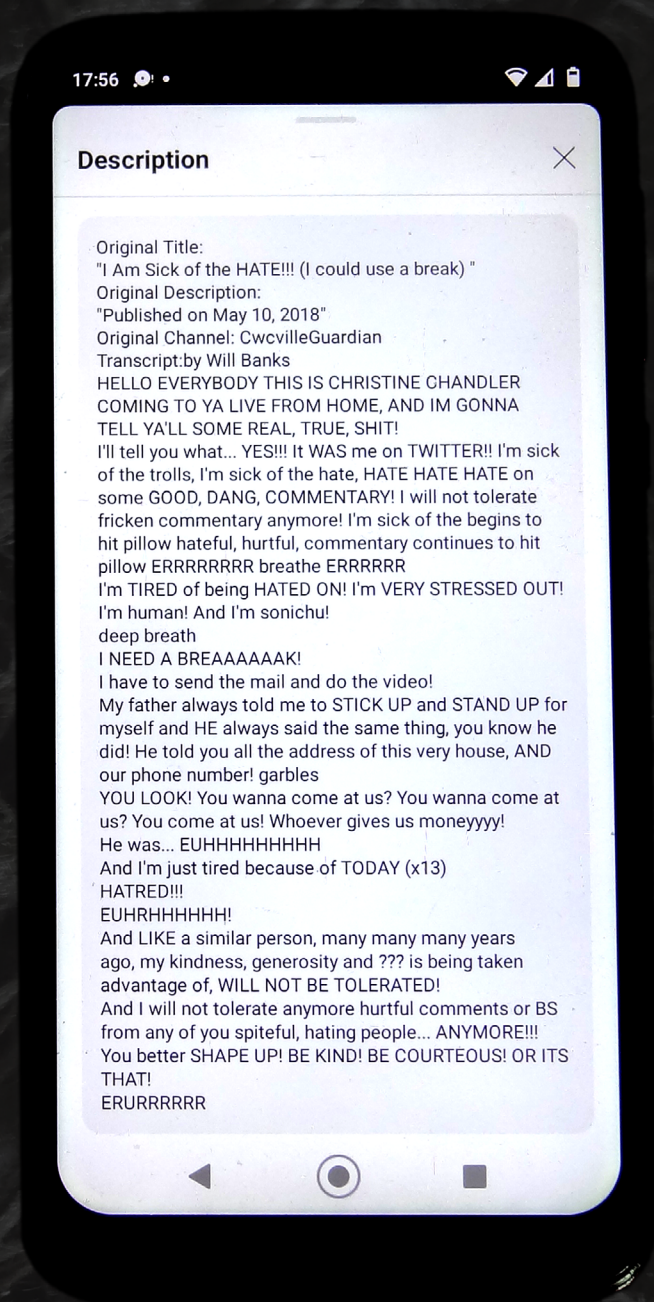
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Rotterdam, 23-06-2025



## COW-WOMAN

<sup>1</sup> Juliana Huxtable, untitled Instagram publicity post, November 18, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHvQqa-oW5r>



## LOLCOW

<sup>2</sup> Christine Weston Chandler, "2018 05 10 I Am Sick of the HATE! I could use a break," YouTube video, May 11, 2018, transcript by Will Banks. <https://youtu.be/Mk9EgslaZAw>

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Why a trans bovine politics*

I have prefaced this thesis by capturing two social media moments by Juliana Huxtable and Christine Chandler, two public figures from seemingly very different backgrounds, but who share a number of characteristics that have seen them struggling against systemic and perpetual devaluation of their desires as frivolous – grappling with common sense, normalcy, taboo, and their own hypervisibility. And here, in this encounter between me and their art, they do so as bovines, as cows.

I have titled this thesis a specifically *trans bovine* politics because it is impossible for me to think transgender without thinking transspecies – the transing of both having been demanded by my own body.<sup>3</sup> This trans politics is specifically *bovine* because transness has proven to be one of the main identifiers which can mark a person for *milking* as a possible *lolcow* – a term I will explore in detail in chapter 2, but which, for now, can briefly be described as a marker used to violently brand some of the most intensively documented, harassed, and othered people in the history of internet communities. Yet, while the trans bovine is expected to always stand at the ready to passively perform its duties to the industrial milk machine, it has also shown that it is perfectly capable of actively operating the milking equipment itself. In its moment of (hyper)visibility, it has been given the opportunity to ally itself with normative mainstream forces in an attempt to elevate itself above this vulnerability – to take up the role of the farmer so that it may escape the fate of the farmed. Specifically, transgender may attempt to distance itself from transspecies, as a strategy of survival in a hostile environment.

The last few sentences may well read as a cartoon-villain reduction of the complex production and maintenance of normativities in trans spaces. Yet, my thesis is inspired by this moment of visibility – this simultaneous existence of trans/transgender/transspecies actors both as real individuals, and as rhetorical devices wielded in a complex web of agendas – and precisely this has been what has spurred me on to draw the lolcow into trans *politics*. Throughout this thesis, I will

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<sup>3</sup> A note on terminology. Though the term *trans* (as both a noun and a verb) originated in transgender discourse and theory, the word has gradually become a broader umbrella term, not only for a variety of gender-nonconforming identities, but also encompassing any “movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place – rather than any particular destination or mode of transition” (Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, Seal Press, 2008, p.1). Several of the authors cited later in this text (Steinbock, Szczygielska, and Wagner; Weil; Kelley; Proctor; Hayward and Gossett; Wolf) have opted here for the arguably more precise term *trans\** (with asterisk). Except when citing these authors verbatim, I myself have opted for the more straightforward term *trans* (without asterisk). The two should be considered synonymous for the purposes of this thesis. Both terms also grapple with the possible inclusion of *transspecies*, which can mean either (1) a turn away from human-centric perspectives through inclusion of nonhuman ontologies, (2) a breaching of strict biological boundaries between species, or (3) the self-identification of individuals or communities, in any manner and to any degree, as part of a nonhuman animal species; this includes *therians* and arguably also *furries*, both of which I will be discussing more in detail later. Finally, since this thesis largely builds upon my own perspective, I will often be using the term *transgender* as shorthand for *transgender woman*.

develop the figures of the *cow-woman* (as envisioned by Huxtable) and the lolcow (as exemplified by Chandler) as two modes of existence which will allow me to isolate and make apparent certain qualities of bovine living and (re)production, as situated in the context of a humanist, human-centered history. Of special interest to my thesis are those expressions of transspecies embodiment whose affects and behaviors are widely seen as frivolous, as unworthy of visibility, as an embarrassment – in other words, as *cringe*. My aim is to sit uncomfortably with precisely these figures, and to ask what they may have to offer to trans thinking.

### ***Research question and sub-questions***

As such, I have formulated the following research question:

*What is the current position and possible contribution of cringe transspecies/transgender actors within broader trans discourse and theory, considering their frictions with transnormativity<sup>4</sup> and their status as targets of ridicule and harassment?*

Which can be broken down into three sub-questions:

In chapter 1, “The cow-woman”, I will mainly be exploring sub-question #1:

*What are the normative forces at play which co-produce the shared sites of subjugation between transgender and transspecies actors? And how may explorations of trans bovine figures work to bring these sites and forces of subjugation into sharper focus?*

In chapter 2, “The lolcow”, I will mainly be exploring sub-question #2:

*To what extent does the weaponization of cringe and/or transspecies actors against transgender rights rely on the uncritical adoption of a notion that transspecies actors should be considered unworthy of having a stake in visual politics of embodiment? And to what degree is this perceived unworthiness derived from a politics which is genuinely wary of possible frictions between transgender and transspecies visibility,*

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<sup>4</sup> I will elaborate on the term later, but for now, *transnormativity* indicates ways of being transgender that are deemed normatively acceptable and presentable to the world at large. Conversely, any trans person whose behavior and/or presentation are not perceived as transnormative will be considered an embarrassment to – even a possible threat to the safety of – the transgender community, because this person “makes us look bad” to the point of invalidating our vulnerable identity in the eyes of broader society. The origin of the term is hard to pinpoint; the earliest source I could find is Fred Joseph LeBlanc, who does not explicitly claim to have coined the term, but almost: “The discussion of essentialist identity, physical bodies, and conservatism in the transgender online community does suggest a privileging of certain articulations and practices, a normativity within the transgender identities: a transnormativity.” (Fred Joseph LeBlanc, “Unqueering Transgender? A Queer Geography of Transnormativity in Two Online Communities,” Master’s thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2010, p.90).

Later writers use the term without citing a source, for example C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (cited later in this text) or Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco (cited later in this text). Austin Johnson calls transnormativity a “new concept” but also provides no sources (Austin Johnson, “Transnormativity: A New Concept and Its Validation through Documentary Film About Transgender Men,” in: *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 86, Issue 4, November 2016, pp.465-491).

*rather than from a visceral disgust with actual transspecies affects, behaviors, and desires?*

In chapter 3, “The trans bovine”, I will mainly be exploring sub-question #3:

*What kinds of new languages and behaviors may specifically cringe transspecies expressions offer to especially trans discourse and theory? And to what extent is the capacity of transspecies actors to contribute to trans discourse and theory reliant on their access to a highly informed understanding of said literature? In other words, is the sheer act of existing, creating and otherwise marking the world as a transspecies actor, sufficient to further confuse the boundaries and subjugations which trans literature seeks to disrupt?*

### **Methodology: feminist figuration**

The main methodology through which I will be approaching these transspecies actors – cringe and otherwise – will be that of feminist figuration, as I have learned from Donna Haraway<sup>5</sup> and Rosi Braidotti.<sup>6</sup> Feminist figuration can be understood as “a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallogocentric vision of the subject [...] a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity,”<sup>7</sup> by means of “performative images that can be inhabited,”<sup>8</sup> which thus allow us “to elaborate alternative accounts, to learn to think differently about the subject, to invent new frameworks, new images, new modes of thought.”<sup>9</sup> For feminist figuration, the aim is to destabilize those processes which enable the forming and maintenance of a generic (by default white, male, industrialized, moneyed) kind of humanity, by presenting non-generic feminist figures of humanity as counterproposals. Typically these figurations are based on / inspired by / called into life by inspiring actors – “ecstatic speakers”<sup>10</sup> – who approach being human in a manner which, indeed, looks quite different from the more generic shape(s) of humanity. Furthermore, these figurations urge for the adoption of new perspectives within feminist thought, as a way of addressing a perceived crisis within feminism’s *own* discourses, insofar as these have proven unable to lift us out of – or have even been complicit in – “our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> (a) Donna Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, Routledge, 1997. (b) Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” in: *Socialist Review*, Vol. 80, 1985, pp.65-107. Later republished as a chapter of *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, 1991, pp.149-181.

<sup>6</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, Columbia University Press, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p.1.

<sup>8</sup> Haraway, *Modest-Witness*, p.11.

<sup>9</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Donna Haraway, “Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Ar’n’t) I a Woman and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape,” in: *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan Scott, Routledge, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86.

### *Relevance to and engagement with ongoing queer/feminist discourse*

Considering that feminist figuration is to be my main methodology, the philosophical relevance of this thesis lies in an assessment of the value of my proposed trans bovine figure to ongoing queer/feminist academic theories and discourses. I ask how this trans bovine figure, as a transspecies/transgender figuration which allows us to inhabit this uneasy relationship between trans and animal, might destabilize present discourses around the academic and real-life expansion of the category of *trans* to include transspecies. As a side note, and at the risk of seeming frivolous, or being quoted out of context in a way that might cast doubt on the sincerity of my project: I hope to sell you these trans bovines above the present market price, as rich, pregnant, fat sites of a very transgender/transspecies production and reproduction. I hope for these heifer-women<sup>12</sup> to fight for me – as idols which may take on and convey my frustration and broad dysphoria with the trans state of things, as digital bodily maps which may chart where the multifaceted trans desires I experience and encounter have been channeled into a singular, almost pre-identified, process of becoming.

### *Thesis overview*

The cow-woman and the lolcow are thus the transspecies figures through which I will be seeking out answers to my research sub-questions. In the first chapter, I will deploy the figure of the cow-woman, as brought into the world by artist Juliana Huxtable<sup>13</sup> and subsequently researched by scholar Lillian Wolf,<sup>14</sup> in order to address my first sub-question and to provide the reader with a blueprint of how transspecies figurations might be used to open up trans thought. Among the key works and concepts I will be exploring and applying here are Donna Haraway's own feminist figure of the cyborg,<sup>15</sup> as well as various writings on the nonhuman turn by authors such as Lindsay Kelley<sup>16</sup> and Mel Chen,<sup>17</sup> who emphasize and corroborate a need to animate nonhuman actors in thinking across gendered spaces. I will also be applying Wolf's analysis of the cow-woman as a figure capable of revealing to us how our own affects as trans people may open up new modes of living, but also how these modes of living risk placing us in league with regressive transnormative forces, as described by C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn in an essay titled "Trans

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<sup>12</sup> A heifer is a young cow, usually (but not exclusively) one who has not yet given birth to a calf.

<sup>13</sup> Juliana Huxtable and Reena Spauldings Fine Art, *Juliana Huxtable: Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back*, 2019. <https://www.reenaspauldings.com/images3/JHfile2.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Lillian Wolf, "Juliana Huxtable's Cow-Woman; or, A Black Trans Femme Route Toward Pleasure," in: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 10, Nrs. 3-4, 2023, pp. 247-264.

<sup>15</sup> Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs."

<sup>16</sup> Lindsay Kelley, "Tranimals," in: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 1, Nrs. 1-2 ("Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies"), eds. Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, May 2014, pp.226-228.

<sup>17</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Duke University Press, 2012, p.13.

Necropolitics.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, I will explore how Huxtable’s own comments on her artwork, for example in a conversation with Bella Spratley,<sup>19</sup> may propose a somewhat diverging, but nonetheless additive read of the cow-woman as a satirical commentary on trans representational politics.

In the second chapter I will focus particularly on the phenomenon of the lolcow, mainly as encountered on specialized online forums dedicated to the harassment and obsessive documentation of individuals branded as such. The real-life people, the ecstatic speakers embodying the lolcow figuration are (individually) Christine Chandler, and (collectively) furry/therian communities.<sup>20</sup> Beyond their status as lolcows, furies/therians and Chandler have in common that their transness is both unclear and a matter of contention for transnormative politics. Not only has their speech, art, and otherwise strikingly non-normative behavior been weaponized to destabilize trans rights, it is also unclear whether such individuals and groups can meaningfully challenge reified trans discourses. Addressing specifically my second sub-question, I will explore the mechanics of ridicule in virtual environments as described by Alice E. Marwick’s model of “Morally Motivated Networked Harassment”<sup>21</sup> and Kesji Take et al.’s additive proposal of “Continuous Narrative Escalation,”<sup>22</sup> as well as various analyses of the broader phenomenon of cringe by Katherine Anne Schell,<sup>23</sup> Melissa Dahl<sup>24</sup> and Natalie Wynn.<sup>25</sup> Here I will argue for a conceptualization of cringe as a mutable property which invests trans discourse, and show how the construction of this affect is highly significant to trans thought and practice.

In the third chapter, addressing my third sub-question, I will argue that the real-life transspecies actors tragically branded as lolcows may, indeed, act as feminist figurations that meaningfully contribute to trans discourse: not in the dehumanized and farmed image of the lolcow, but in the transcendent figure of the trans bovine. With this new figure I will emphasize in the same breath these actors’ claims to cross-species ontologies, a disidentification with their fungible production of a

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<sup>18</sup> C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” in: *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, Routledge, 2013, pp.66-76.

<sup>19</sup> Juliana Huxtable and Bella Spratley, “Play with Truth” (interview), in: *METAL*, No. 43, spring/summer 2020. <https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/juliana-huxtable>

<sup>20</sup> The term *furies* refers to a global subculture with an interest in self-expression as anthropomorphic, often cartoon-like animals, expressed for example through graphical online personas (*fursonas*) and real-life costumes (*fursuits*). *Therians* are individuals who in some way (psychologically, spiritually, socially, philosophically or even physically) identify as a nonhuman animal.

<sup>21</sup> Alice E. Marwick, “Morally Motivated Networked Harassment as Normative Reinforcement,” in: *Social Media+Society*, April-June 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Kesji Take, Victoria Zhong, Chris Geeng, Emmi Bevensee, Damon McCoy and Rachel Greenstadt, “Stoking the Flames: Understanding Escalation in an Online Harassment Community,” in: *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol. 8, Issue CSCW1, 2024, pp.1-23.

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Anne Schell, “Rhetorical New Materialism, Queers, and Cringe,” Master’s thesis, University of South Carolina, 2023. <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/7241>

<sup>24</sup> Melissa Dahl, *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, Penguin, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Natalie Wynn, “Cringe | ContraPoints,” YouTube video, May 10, 2020. <https://youtu.be/vRBsaJPkt2Q>

spectacle of cruelty, and the possibilities within connective transversal language shared between transgender and transspecies. Rather than shy away from the disarticulation which these bovines have suffered, I will be emphasizing how a specifically furry/therian praxis, despite (and perhaps through) the involuntary employment of furies/therians as trans lolcows, reconfigures trans possibilities for identification and connection. Drawing upon previous research on therians, particularly by Devin Proctor<sup>26</sup> and Jay Johnston,<sup>27</sup> I will argue that these (and other) putatively trans actors, who identify with and yearn for impossible physicalities which are nonetheless inhabited in virtual and fictional environments, have problematized progressive inclinations to view the efficacy of a figure within visibility politics as the only salient metric for cross-identification within feminist thought. In this context, I will be assessing the possibility of a pluralization of knowledge, as new figurative models enter in productive tension with existing feminist figurations. Building upon earlier writings by Donna Haraway<sup>28</sup> and my thesis supervisor Katrine Smiet,<sup>29</sup> I will be juxtaposing the phrase *Ain't I a woman?*, attributed to African-American civil rights activist Sojourner Truth, to the therian question *Ain't I an animal?* – especially insofar as these identificatory claims intersect with transgender appeals to womanhood in the tradition of Sojourner Truth. A trans bovine politics argues not for a resolution of these tensions. Rather, I will be exploring how such an encounter with trans bovines includes the capacity for a more intensive engagement with these tensions – and thus a genuine politics.

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<sup>26</sup> Devin Proctor, "On Being Non-Human: Otherkin Identification and Virtual Space," Ph.D. thesis, George Washington University, 2019.

[https://scholarspace.library.gwu.edu/concern/gw\\_etds/hx11xf91d](https://scholarspace.library.gwu.edu/concern/gw_etds/hx11xf91d)

<sup>27</sup> Jay Johnston, "On having a furry soul: transpecies identity and ontological indeterminacy in Otherkin subcultures," in: *Animal Death*, eds. Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, Sydney University Press, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Haraway, "Ecce Homo."

<sup>29</sup> Katrine Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality: Traveling Truths in Feminist Scholarship*, Routledge, 2021.

# 1. THE COW-WOMAN

## The cow-woman: introduction

In this chapter, I will be laying the groundwork for my figuration of the trans bovine, by studying a transspecies figure that has been crafted and inhabited by an actor highly cognizant of the philosophical themes relevant to such a transspecies crossing – and through whom I will elaborate on the possibilities offered by such a figure in confounding those dichotomies and hierarchies with which transspecies literature is in tension.

### *Juliana Huxtable's cow-woman*

Juliana Huxtable, a Black transgender multidisciplinary artist, enacts a *becoming with*<sup>30</sup> bovine as a strikingly intentional zoomorphic visual-affective practice. One of the two texts with which I have prefaced this thesis was spoken by Huxtable in a video as part of her exhibition “Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back.”<sup>31</sup> The exhibition’s artworks and statements take us along the transspecies journey of a character we only ever come to know as the “cow-woman.” Through surgical procedures, the once-human farmhand girl has developed bovine skin blotches and increased milk production capacities, then a bovine udder, then finally a fresh set of hooves – all the while dreaming of the day when she might become similarly subsumed into the agro-sexual empire of cattle farming as her teen idol “Neorn.” The cow-woman also reminisces about how, as a still-human teenager, she was charged with the task of sexually stimulating Neorn, in order to prepare the heifer for artificial insemination – an act which soon led her to fantasize about being sexually desired and handled in a similar way by her colleagues in the context of animal husbandry.

The cow-woman shares this world of myth with fellow batlike-3-times-post-op<sup>32</sup> transgressors of the species divide, as well as a host of critics and allies. Through fictional all-caps gutter-press headlines (also part of the exhibition) we see her find purchase in – to name but a few examples – the heterosexual matrices of zoophile sentiments of men’s rights activists (“‘FEMALES ARE FEMALES!’ ZOOPHILE PORNOGRAPHER DEFENDS CROSS-SPECIES HETEROSEXUALITY, GAINS SUPPORT FROM MEN’S RIGHTS GROUPS”), corroborated by the cow-woman herself (“GENETICALLY MODIFIED ‘COW WOMAN’ ATTACKS TRANS ACTIVISTS: ‘I MAY BE PART COW, BUT I AM A BIOLOGICAL FEMALE!’”), while imaginary yet

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<sup>30</sup> “If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism, then we know that becoming is always becoming *with* – in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake.” Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p.244.

<sup>31</sup> Huxtable and Spauldings, *Interfertility Industrial Complex*. A transcript of the section of the video which I have quoted was also featured on the artist’s Instagram page, alongside one of the paintings from the exhibition (Huxtable, untitled Instagram publicity post).

<sup>32</sup> Besides the cow-woman, Huxtable’s exhibition features other fantastical creatures including a bat-woman; also, the poetic press release for the exhibition includes the line “VAGINOPLASTY 3 TIMES” (Huxtable and Spauldings, *Interfertility Industrial Complex*).

plausible feminists warn us of the danger the cow-woman would pose to intersectional feminism (“‘PLEASE STOP’ – FEMINISTS PLEAD WITH COW IDENTIFIED YOUTUBER TO LEAVE INTERSECTIONALITY ALONE”).<sup>33</sup>

### *Donna Haraway's cyborg*

I can think of at least one real-life feminist who may instead urge us to explore the cow-woman further. As Donna Haraway wrote in her 1985 essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,”<sup>34</sup> by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the separation between human and animal was no longer found to be anyway near as convincing as previously believed, as we learned more about nonhuman animal languages, mental events and social behaviors.<sup>35</sup> This border so breached, Haraway invited us to contest the productions of meaning set in motion by this increased closeness of humanity to animality. This unstable dichotomy is one of the potentialities of Haraway’s “cyborg” figuration, which “appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed.”<sup>36</sup>

I present Huxtable’s cow-woman to you as one such cyborg which “signal[s] disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling”<sup>37</sup> between Huxtable and the heifer who inspired her. The human/animal separation is but the first of three dichotomies breached by Haraway’s cyborg figure. The second is the boundary between the organic and the machinic – a boundary contested through such domains as modern medicine, as it implants its synthetic/prosthetic machines in ever more intimate contact with our bodies; contested through the increased agency which we must start ascribing to these and other machines as they become more and more autonomous.<sup>38</sup> The third dichotomy breached by the cyborg is that between the physical and the virtual: knowledge, power, and writing were always deeply interconnected, but now our microelectronic devices respond infinitely faster than we ever could to our shared stimuli in their own approach to infinitesimality, linking us to fresh repertoires of signals, forever altering our meaning-making practices.<sup>39</sup> Our digital infrastructure is coupled directly to our affect, to our biology. Every child with a smartphone in their hands is a cyborg. And as feminists, we have no choice but to engage with this relentless cyborg reality, “through theory and practice addressed to the social relations of science and technology, including crucially the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations. The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Huxtable and Spauldings, *Interfertility Industrial Complex*.

<sup>34</sup> Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.151-152.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.163.

Over the course of this thesis, we will see that the cow-woman indeed does not limit herself to a transgression of human/animal boundaries, but in fact exists and functions as a cyborg in breach of all three dichotomies. Cyborgs such as Huxtable's may thus allow us to inhabit "social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."<sup>41</sup> Yet, it would be a mistake to think of cyborgs as benign figures acting solely towards the advent of a more beautiful, complete, and holistic cosmos, considering how their "pleasurably tight coupling[s]" have just as readily been enlisted in the most oppressive of war machineries,<sup>42</sup> or in the problematization of humanist narratives which hitherto functioned as effective rhetorical strategies towards largely progressive means.

## Transnormativity

Already four decades ago, Donna Haraway saw in the cyborg – with precisely its embrace of these contradictory manifestations of self – the ability to rewrite what counts as woman's experience.<sup>43</sup> A cyborg reality contests any kind of naturalized telos. *Female* no longer has an obvious root in biology,<sup>44</sup> but must instead be read as a "highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices."<sup>45</sup> Gender does not fare much better, as another of the dubious achievements, alongside race and class, "forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism."<sup>46</sup> Transgender identity, likewise, loses its appeal to any clear *born this way* validation. Some of its most effective historical pathological narratives, especially those which called upon similarities between being born with the *wrong body parts* and being born with somatic afflictions such as auto-immune diseases or missing limbs – a perspective which was to no small degree popularized through Dutch transgender care<sup>47</sup> – have since fallen out of favor. Without such rhetorical strategies which naturalize the transgender body, transness becomes naked to politics, vulnerable to unsympathetic interpretations of its constructed cyborg nature.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>44</sup> More recent regressive political and judicial developments notwithstanding, for example the April 2025 ruling by the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom that "the words 'sex', 'woman' and 'man' [...] mean (and were always intended to mean) biological sex, biological woman and biological man," further specifying that "[a]lthough the word 'biological' does not appear in [the] definition, the ordinary meaning of those plain and unambiguous words corresponds with the biological characteristics that make an individual a man or a woman. These are assumed to be self-explanatory and to require no further explanation. Men and women are on the face of the definition only differentiated as a grouping by the biology they share with their group." Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, "JUDGMENT For Women Scotland Ltd (Appellant) v The Scottish Ministers (Respondent)," 2025. [https://supremecourt.uk/uploads/uksc\\_2024\\_0042\\_judgment\\_aea6c48cee.pdf](https://supremecourt.uk/uploads/uksc_2024_0042_judgment_aea6c48cee.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>47</sup> Alex Bakker, *Een halve eeuw transgenderzorg aan de VU*, Boom uitgevers, 2020, pp. 48-56.

One such interpretation, as Jay Prosser pointed out in his book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, is the routine dismissal of transsexuality by trans-exclusionary feminist authors such as June L. Reich “as retrogressively conformist,”<sup>48</sup> usually on the grounds that “it works to stabilize the old sex/gender system by insisting on the dominant correspondence between gender desire and biological sex.”<sup>49</sup> Prosser also describes how authors such as Janice Raymond (who penned the transphobic classic *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*) have constructed a historical account in which “the transsexual is the gender-stereotypical construct (and support) of a patriarchal medical establishment,”<sup>50</sup> thus reducing transsexual<sup>51</sup> experience to what Dwight Billings and Thomas Urban have described as “a socially constructed reality which only exists in and through medical practice” that “reflects and extends late-capitalist logics of reification and commodification, while simultaneously reaffirming traditional male and female gender roles.”<sup>52</sup> Arguments like these revolve around a supposed naturalistic objectification of sex organs as referential to some “true” state of man/womanhood (i.e. “I finally feel like a woman after gender reassignment surgery”). Transsexuality here is made equivalent to the invention and subsequent institutionalization of endocrinological practices starting in the 1920s and 1930s, and of plastic surgeries after the Second World War. This account of transsexuals as initially gender-disturbed individuals who have taken the bait of the medical establishment removes any agency with which they may encounter somatic bodily modifications.<sup>53</sup> Finally, Prosser draws attention to how such a reduction of the transsexual to medical practice paves the way for everyday discrimination against that which is perceived as unnatural, and thus for how transphobia hinges on this focus on the supposed constructedness of transgender subjects.<sup>54</sup>

C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, in their 2013 essay “Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” similarly argue that “The discursive construction of the transgender body – and particularly the transgender body of color – as unnatural creates the precise moment where we as scholars, critics, and activists might apprehend a biopolitics of everyday life.”<sup>55</sup> This recognition of the manner in which transgender women are thus folded into biopolitical production comes paired with a critical perspective on the

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<sup>48</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Columbia University Press, 1998, p.14.

<sup>49</sup> June L. Reich, “Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo,” in: *Discourse*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1992, p.121.

<sup>50</sup> Prosser, *Second Skins*, p.7.

<sup>51</sup> Here, and at one point later in the text, I will be using the somewhat deprecated term *transsexual* rather than *transgender* for the sake of consistency with the authors I am quoting. For the purposes of this thesis, the two terms may otherwise be considered as synonymous.

<sup>52</sup> Dwight Billings and Thomas Urban, “The Socio-Medical Construction of Transsexualism: An Interpretation and Critique,” in: *Social Problems*, Vol. 29, Issue 3, February 1982, p.266, reprinted in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, eds. Richard Ekins and Dave King, Routledge, 1996, pp.99-117.

<sup>53</sup> Prosser, *Second Skins*, p.8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>55</sup> Snorton and Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics,” p.68.

construction of the transnormative subject. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco, in the introduction to the reader *Queer Necropolitics* hold that “While trans people of colour in particular are still waiting for allies, the rise of the transnormative subject – with its universalized trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility and self-actualization – must also be interrogated in its convergences with biomedical, neoliberal, racist and imperialist projects.”<sup>56</sup> Their account of this transnormative subject builds upon the earlier notion of homonormativity, described by Lisa Duggan as a “new neoliberal sexual politics”<sup>57</sup> of self-sabotaging effective gay constituencies in favor of a depoliticized gay consumption culture. This new gay politics lost much of its efficacy in its material, organizational and communal capacities, instead opting for modes of support which were more formal and rhetorical. What makes this turn *normative* is that it has lost its reach of support over queers from all walks of life in favor of “an increasingly narrow gay, moneyed elite.”<sup>58</sup> The gender non-conformity found in the transgender subject was deemed suitable by both women’s and gay liberation assimilation projects as an Other to distance themselves from.<sup>59</sup> We have thus been direct victims of a homonormativity as well as an exclusionist feminism, both of which saw in us imposters attempting infiltration. Yet, at the same time, we remain rooted in a variety of gay and feminist political discourses, whose “uneven institutionalization”<sup>60</sup> has co-produced this normative trans subject.<sup>61</sup>

## From transnormativity to transspecies necropolitics

### *Terrible grounds: the zoo and the farm*

A critique of necropolitical transnormativity attunes us to the dystopia of a trans emancipation built at the expense of other queer lives<sup>62</sup> – and how a reliance on narratives of victimhood may end up making invisible the contradictory interests of those exhibiting non-normative gendered behavior. Donna Haraway: “Cyborg feminists have to argue that ‘we’ do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole. Innocence, and the corollary insistence on victimhood

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<sup>56</sup> Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco, “Introduction,” in: *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco, Routledge, 2014, p.4.

<sup>57</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Beacon Press, 2012, p.50.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>59</sup> Snorton and Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics,” p.67.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>61</sup> Snorton and Haritaworn also find a specifically transnormative and necropolitical practice in how (lethal) violence against the most vulnerable queer people – Black transgender women – has been instrumentalized to push for hate crime legislation. The formulation and enforcement of these measures, the authors argue, play upon stereotypes of vulnerability and weakness within targeted communities, thus “contribut[ing] to a broader biopolitical imperative to manage poor people and people of color by channeling them into a massive carceral project, a ‘prison industrial complex’,” (Snorton and Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics,” p.68) in the end benefiting only those queer and trans people already belonging to the “white citizenry” (*Ibid.*, p.66) while placing poor and non-white trans women in an even closer proximity to institutions which enable their suffering and punish their non-normative gendered behavior.

<sup>62</sup> Or: “where queer vitalities become cannibalistic on the disposing and abandonment of others.” (Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco, “Introduction,” p.2).

as the only ground for insight, has done enough damage.”<sup>63</sup> Snorton and Haritaworn’s is not the only account of transnormativity, as captivity/death/suffering are not the only logics of domination under which trans people exist. But it is where we will start: on the farm.

In their essay “Impossibility of *That*,” Eva Hayward and Che Gossett<sup>64</sup> invite us to visit the zoo as described in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* by literary author Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>65</sup> The zoo functions as a “terrible grounds,”<sup>66</sup> and “the primal scene of conquest, of nation building, and of state power,”<sup>67</sup> a carceral collection space in which we, as exploring colonizers, confine beings we have ripped from their locales, attributing to them new purpose at the same time as we name them. The modern industrial farm, much like the zoo, repurposes living creatures such as bovines as it taxonomically carves them up as milk cows, meat cows or breeding bulls. On the farm, however, there are generally no children present for whom the conditions of this prison must be made palatable. Unseen systemic domination, capture and death instead become synonymous with human well-being. The industrial farm thus constitutes not only a terrible grounds, but indeed a nonhuman variety of the human “death-worlds” described by Achille Mbembe in his 2003 essay “Necropolitics” – “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.”<sup>68</sup>

### ***Tranimacies: animacy hierarchy and the nonhuman turn***

Juliana Huxtable’s exhibition “Interfertility Industrial Complex” has been described by Lillian Wolf as a critical engagement with transspecies reproduction and categorizations of human/nonhuman,<sup>69</sup> achieved through an exploration of “a context of captivity and reproduction that is shared between fertile bovines and Black trans femmes.”<sup>70</sup> Such analyses juxtaposing trans and animal have gained traction in recent years following the *nonhuman turn*, an increased and multi-faceted interest since 2013 in nonhuman ontologies within philosophy and social sciences.<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>63</sup> Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” p.158.

<sup>64</sup> Eva Hayward and Che Gossett, “Impossibility of *That*,” in: *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, May 2017, eds. Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szczygielska and Anthony Clair Wagner, pp.15-24; republished in book form as *Tranimacies: Intimate Links Between Animal and Trans\* Studies*, eds. Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Preface to the 1957 Edition,” in: *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Penguin, 1974.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>67</sup> Hayward and Gossett, “Impossibility of *That*.”

<sup>68</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” transl. Libby Meintjes, in: *Public Culture*, Vol. 15, Issue 1, January 2003, p.40. Snorton and Haritaworn’s “Trans Necropolitics” (and the broader concept of “Queer Necropolitics” mobilized by Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco) have been explicitly framed by these authors and editors as extensions and applications of Mbembe’s original necropolitics, just as Mbembe here explicitly built upon Michel Foucault’s earlier concept of “biopolitics” (as introduced for example in “*Il faut défendre la société*”: *Cours au Collège de France, 1976*, Gallimard / Le Seuil, 1997).

<sup>69</sup> Wolf, “Juliana Huxtable’s Cow-Woman,” p.247.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.249.

<sup>71</sup> Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, “Has the Queer Ever Been Human,” in: *GLQ, A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 21, Nrs. 2-3. June, 2015, p.203.

nonhuman turn has correctly identified a problem within critical thinking as being dominated by human – and especially *humanist*, human-centric – thought; one of the major insights of this turn is Mel Chen’s critique and politicization of the *animacy hierarchy*, originally a term from the field of linguistics that “conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority.”<sup>72</sup> Works inspired by this politicization emphasize agency in nonhuman animals and even inanimate objects. Trans, animal, and the animacy hierarchy finally all come together in the neologism *Tranimacies*. Writing in the introduction to a 2021 reader of the same title, editors Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szczygielska and Anthony Clair Wagner state that “[w]ith *tranimacies* we seek to provide a specifically transgender informed and conceptually trans\* shaped commentary on the ‘animal turn’ in humanities” and ask: “what are the possible, imagined and visceral moments of intimacy between animal and trans studies today?”<sup>73</sup> *Tranimacies* also builds upon the earlier concept of the “tranimal,” a term coined by Lindsay Kelley that “articulates the labor and biocapital of crossspecies organisms. [...] Transdisciplinary in their pluralities, these indeterminate, disordered forms secrete traces across disciplines and pollute categories. [...] Trans- implies interchange between both gender expression and genetic expression (tranimals are said to ‘express’ their modifications). Their movement across categories [...] binds tranimals to other forms of trans- life, including humans.”<sup>74</sup>

This broader concept of trans explored by Kelley and the authors and editors of the *Tranimacies* reader thus denotes “experiences and practices that include beings in transition, bodily metamorphoses, relating to your body through substances like hormones, resistance to and transgression of clearly defined categories, falling out of a taxon, being folded into the bio-medical-industrial complex, being on display/exhibit, coming under a classificatory gaze, and having a stake in visual politics of embodiment.”<sup>75</sup> With this formulation alone, we can see how transgender people and transspecies actors such as the cow-woman may not be so far apart. *Tranimacies* has thus provided a key point of departure for my thesis, from where I set out to trace an account of the cow-woman as a cyborg breaching the human/animal and animal/machine dichotomies. The cow-woman’s transness in itself accounts for the various technological interventions into her biology, which slip into one another until you can’t tell where her parents ended their shift, and the surgeon and endocrinologist took over. Beyond being intimately connected to the industrial milking machinery, the everyday milk-cow is herself a heavily genetically engineered bio-machine, whose only purpose is a steady flow of milk. For cyborgs

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<sup>72</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, p.13.

<sup>73</sup> Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szczygielska and Anthony Clair Wagner, “Introduction: Thinking Linking,” in: *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, May 2017, eds. Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, pp.1-10; republished in book form as *Tranimacies: Intimate Links Between Animal and Trans\* Studies*, eds. Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Kelley, “Tranimals,” p.226.

<sup>75</sup> Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, “Introduction: Thinking Linking.”

and/or transanimals, however, the deconstruction of hierarchies achieved by revealing to us the animacy of nonhuman animals and even the inorganic is only half the battle. Transanimal feminist figurations are more than allegoric works of *fiction* between transgender and animal, they are crucially works of *friction*. As Dana Luciano and Mel Chen wrote, the nonhuman turn does not proclaim that human and nonhuman, upon closer inspection, will cease to exist. Rather, it asks “how these categories rub on, and against, each other, generating friction and leakage. And it is also to ask about other forms, other worlds, other ways of being that might emerge from the transmaterial affections [...] When the ‘sub-human, in-human, non-human’ queer actively connects with the other-than-human, what might that connection spawn?”<sup>76</sup>

## **Necropolitical reproduction**

### ***Cattle and chattel: the captive maternal, reproductive labor, and sensual desire***

For Lillian Wolf, the tension which the cow-woman makes visible resides in a dual recognition of pleasure as both a driving force for new modes of existence, and as an emotion easily instrumentalized toward complicity in exploitative systems of reproductive labor. To lay the groundwork for this analysis, Wolf first explores the analogy between cattle and chattel, seeing both the milk cow and the enslaved woman – here remembering Huxtable’s background as a Black American trans woman – as a “reproductive laborer”<sup>77</sup> who cannot but participate in the production of offspring that will continue to generate revenue for their masters – a perspective that becomes more complicated as soon as the cow-woman opens her mouth and lets out a pleasurable “neornnnnnn.” Though Wolf understands the agency of the cow-woman as being continually violated, she also sees her “derive a complicated pleasure from the violating desire of her captor” – still, “Neither Huxtable nor [Wolf] are interested in asking whether pleasure exists or is possible in the historical context of the Middle Passage and enslavement.”<sup>78</sup> Wolf then takes us to “the present moment of anti-Blackness,”<sup>79</sup> to those everyday death worlds of “the mundane and normalized violence of racism and gender normativity, the market, and the prison-industrial complex”<sup>80</sup> as spaces which “might be better critiqued and challenged through a critical lens of pleasurable feeling.”<sup>81</sup> The role of the reproductive laborer – and in the case of enslavement, of the “captive maternal”<sup>82</sup> – is not strictly synonymous with biological procreation. The maternal role expands from rearing children to raising and nurturing them, as well as being “invested in the

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<sup>76</sup> Luciano and Chen, “Has the Queer Ever Been Human,” p.186.

<sup>77</sup> Wolf, “Juliana Huxtable’s Cow-Woman,” p.252.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.252.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.252.

<sup>80</sup> Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco, “Queer Necropolitics” (abstract), in: *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Wolf, “Juliana Huxtable’s Cow-Woman,” p.252.

<sup>82</sup> Joy James, “The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and the Captive Maternal,” in: *Carceral Notebooks 12: Challenging the Punitive Society*, eds. Perry Zurn, Andrew Dilts and Bernard E. Harcourt, Harcourt, 2016, pp.253-296. Cited by Wolf in “Juliana Huxtable’s Cow-Woman.”

reproduction of relationships and stability in their family and community units.”<sup>83</sup> This extension of notions of reproductive labor is precisely what the titular “Interfertility” insists on. The farmer is performing reproductive labor when they artificially inseminate their heifers. By caring for the cow through sensual touch and the use of lube, the farmer reduces stress in the cow’s reproductive system. In the context of modern animal husbandry, milk-cow fertility is no longer an intra-bovine affair, nor a purely biological matter. Calves are the offspring of cyborg parentage, mechanic and transspecies.

We do remain with one question though: where are the calves? When does the cow-woman engage in the promised titular “Snatching Back” of her offspring? She is never with child, no hybrid babies are taken from her, her non-quadruped imaginations feature a flat belly, and those imaginations featuring fuller bovine bodies are focused on anal excretions rather than childbirth. What then could possibly be stopping the cow-woman from scaling the highest rock she can find and displaying her reclaimed prize for all to see? The answer lies in the cow-woman’s (absent?) womb and (ambiguously featured) neovagina, which Wolf describes as “presumably barren and bring[ing] no promise of eventual offspring, no embodied economic futurity – but it is not a dead end – rather, it is an opening for thinking about pleasure rather than procreation as the basis of reproduction and creating sutured relations with other femme reproductive laborers.”<sup>84</sup> Notice here a crucial similarity between cow-woman and transgender woman. We must conclude, as Lillian Wolf (almost) does, that the calf does not refer to a baby cow, but rather to the sum total of “the reproductive labor which transfeminine bodies undertake which exceed bioreproducibility.”<sup>85</sup> When the cow-woman insists that she must be paid for her labor, she is referring to sex work more than to biological reproduction. Yet, for Wolf, the various ways in which women are dominated in reproductive economies are not fundamentally different in the case of trans women. And so this extension of reproduction beyond birth allows for the simultaneous entry of (infertile) trans women into matrices of care *as well as* the sex labor market.

The cow-woman makes it clear that her desire to be bred like Neorn is what has led her into this economy of reproduction, and why this desire in the context of animal husbandry may be a complicated one. It is also clear to us how desire in trans women might lead us to perform reproductive labor. But what is not so explicit in Wolf’s text is exactly why transgender performing of reproductive labor might be a *bad* thing sometimes. To substantiate her read, to learn how affect in trans feminine subjects might lead them to partake in reproductive economies, and how this in turn might lead to the production of transnormativity, I turn to Aren Z. Aizura’s contribution to the 2014 reader *Queer Necropolitics*.<sup>86</sup> For Aizura, reproduction is not only the

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<sup>83</sup> Wolf, “Juliana Huxtable’s Cow-Woman,” p.254.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.256.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.255-256.

<sup>86</sup> Aren Z. Aizura, “Trans Feminine Value, Racialized Others and the Limits of Necropolitics,” in: *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco, Routledge, 2014.

maintenance of a biological line of productive workers. Rather, economies of queer/trans reproductive labor – especially sex work – are implicated in the production of a specifically trans-deviant, heavily sexualized Other against which a transnormative subject may be constituted. Regardless of any possible sensual desire, it is first and foremost a much more mundane desire for economic survival that leads trans feminine subjects into these reproductive economies which see value in their non-normative sexualities and performances of gender. The cow-woman’s reproductive labor then constitutes not only the direct sexual labor extracted by the farmers, but also the imagery and narratives which spring from her non-normative body. And it is precisely in these narratives and images that we find the cow-woman breaching the cyborg’s third dichotomy – between the physical and the virtual – but it is also where the cow-woman herself struggles directly under constrictive interpretations of her unconventional desires.

### **The cow-woman as a satire of visibility politics**

Lillian Wolf provides us with a read of the cow-woman rooted specifically in the cow-woman’s perspective of her farm, her own “terrible grounds”:<sup>87</sup> “understanding pleasure as complicated, never separate from a relation of power, resists the romanticization of the body and allows for a shifting, multifocal view into what justice might look like.”<sup>88</sup> I hold that such an understanding of the relevant terrible grounds is of critical importance for cyborg figurations, as these must make “an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” while also accounting “for responsibility in their construction.”<sup>89</sup> Yet, Donna Haraway also warns that wariness of our past – and potential future – missteps might end up distracting us from “the confusing task of making partial, real connection,”<sup>90</sup> and she reminds us that “illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential.”<sup>91</sup>

This task of making connections, specifically with non-normative agents, is crucial to the method of feminist figuration. In a recent interview, Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju asked Juliana Huxtable how she generally feels about self-portraiture, and how she landed on the use of these “interspecies avatars.”<sup>92</sup> The answers to these questions are, for Huxtable, connected. One of the pitfalls of figurative art,<sup>93</sup> she says, is that it can potentially trap the artist into a role of diplomat for the marginalities on display, “particularly figuration that [...] rests on the representation of someone’s bodies as

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<sup>87</sup> Borges, “Preface to the 1957 Edition.”

<sup>88</sup> Wolf, “Juliana Huxtable’s Cow-Woman,” p.261.

<sup>89</sup> Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” p.150.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>92</sup> Juliana Huxtable and Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju, “Artist Talk: Unleash Your Imagination: Journey Into the Unknown with Juliana Huxtable,” YouTube Video, Dec 17, 2024, 10:22. <https://youtu.be/vUUsBB0tkjw>

<sup>93</sup> In the context of visual art, the term *figuration* denotes artworks (particularly paintings, drawings and sculptures) that represent real-world objects, including humans, animals and machines; the opposite of figurative art is abstract art.

something that's inherently virtuous,"<sup>94</sup> art that gets caught in a wave of anti-identity politics sentiments, that needs to exactly tiptoe this line of criticality, to please a variety of agendas and sentiments in the art world. For Huxtable this is not only exhausting for the artist, but there is also a limit to the effectiveness of such focus on representational strategies. In an earlier interview with Bella Spratley, Huxtable said: "*Snatch the Calf Back*, for me, was a lot of things [...] about visibility economy and identity politics and being in an era in which so many things are being read through the context of visibility [...] it is assumed visibility is the same as the shifting of political, economic and cultural resources."<sup>95</sup>

### ***The cow-woman as a human/nonhuman cyborg: dancing on terrible grounds***

The way Huxtable hopes to get out of this minefield of frameworks is through intersection of the human and the nonhuman, through forms of media which overlay her and her models with that of anthropomorphized animal imagery, through artistic mythological morphings that craft new imaginary beings, hybrids, cyborgs – so that the “intersection of the human and the non-human, even just as a [...] conceptual space” possibly “sidesteps the kind of overwrought nature of the frameworks that people engage [with] portraiture and especially self-portraiture.”<sup>96</sup>

Huxtable here is especially interested in this human/nonhuman intersection, where it:

Historically, politically and culturally appears in discourse countering same-sex rights – as if same-sex marriage would lead to bestiality. Or, if you let men identify as women, or women identify as men, then you might as well let anyone identify as an animal, as a dolphin or a tarantula. So, I asked myself, what is at work in the anxiety surrounding that? Also, activist resistance to conservative ways of thinking for the inclusion of identity rights inspired me. The encounter between human and animal became an interesting way for me to think about the limit of the representational matrix. What are the contours and hard boundaries of what we think of as physical and worthy of visibility?<sup>97</sup>

With this in mind, I argue that we should not be so hasty to frame the engagement of the cow-woman with the milk industrial complex as mere complicity in real or imagined modes of power. She gives us no reason to believe that she does not surrender herself willingly, on her own terms: industrial sex becomes visible in her rejection of innocence and her reciprocation, artificial insemination becomes an expensive dildo with real ejaculation lubricant. She finds intimacy with industry and distribution, and she affirms their virility in a manner that a full human could not have grasped – beyond merely calling attention to plantations or cattle farms as terrible grounds. Huxtable opens up our thinking on this industry as deeply sexual in nature, by rejecting her status as a pure victim of mass carceral species rape. Instead, to have fun and be willing to fuck on terrible grounds. To dance on terrible grounds, and to invite others to join in the dancing and fucking. To form intricately informed

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<sup>94</sup> Huxtable and Ilupeju, “Artist Talk,” 11:41.

<sup>95</sup> Huxtable and Spratley, “Play with Truth.”

<sup>96</sup> Huxtable and Ilupeju, “Artist Talk,” 13:32.

<sup>97</sup> Huxtable and Spratley, “Play with Truth.”

intimacies between trans and animal, as joyous survival amidst terror, as a complex negotiation of affects which the cow-woman is ready to engage.<sup>98</sup> The terrible grounds that I concern myself with here, rather, is the matrix of representation which the cow-woman enters – how the cow-woman’s cyborg status *does not matter at all* once the politics of representation gets its hands on it – how she is immediately folded into existing dichotomies of biology, sex and gender – how she comes to act as a claim to normalcy for straight zoophiles – how mere representation ends up trapping her in what Haraway called “the manic compulsion to name the Enemy”<sup>99</sup> – and finally, how the name of that enemy ends up becoming that of a presumed sister in suffering: transgender. In this satirical read I see Huxtable find coalition with similar cyborg creatures of text, flesh, and synthetic fur. Transspecies beings who resist necropolitical analysis, yet have a vested stake in a visual politics of embodiment which does not treat them kindly.

## **Facetious furies: from the litter box hoax to anti-furry legislation**

By: Gerdes H.B. No. 4814

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT

relating to the display of and allowance for nonhuman behaviors in Texas schools.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF TEXAS:

SECTION 1. This bill may be referred to as the Forbidding Unlawful Representation of Roleplaying in Education or F.U.R.R.I.E.S Act.<sup>100</sup>

This proposed legislation, filed on March 13, 2025 by Stan Gerdes, member of the Texas House of Representatives (Republican), would ban any nonhuman behaviors, ranging from barking, to wearing artificial tails or ears, to “using a litter box for the passing of stool, urine, or other human byproducts” or anything else which deviates from “behaviors or accessories typically displayed by a member of the homo sapiens species.” The specific mention of litter boxes perpetuates a hoax that has been endlessly circulating in North-American right-wing spheres, and frequently regurgitated by government officials eager to drum up moral panic.<sup>101</sup> The litter box

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<sup>98</sup> Much as the transgender subject knowingly – even, one hopes, joyfully – steps into a role fraught with danger.

<sup>99</sup> Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” p.151.

<sup>100</sup> Stan Gerdes, “A BILL TO BE ENTITLED: AN ACT relating to the display of and allowance for non-human behaviors in Texas schools,” 2025.

<https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/89R/billtext/pdf/HB048141.pdf>

<sup>101</sup> As just one example, Minnesota Republican State Senator (and candidate for Governor) Scott Jensen mused: “Why are we telling elementary kids that they get to choose their gender this week?”

hoax has been criticized and debunked by numerous columnists and essayists as an indirect slippery-slope attack on transgender people, expressed in the form of outrage that “apparently refusing to play along with the kitty delusion is tantamount to ‘misgendering’ a student confused about their gender.”<sup>102</sup> That furies are little more than casual roadkill on the highway of bigotry is further evidenced by the relative lack of anti-furry legislation, as H.B. 4814 seems to be only the second anti-furry bill proposed in the United States.<sup>103</sup> By contrast, at the time of writing, 101 anti-trans bills have not only been proposed, but passed and signed into law.<sup>104</sup> One of the main angles taken in debunking the litter box hoax has been to disentangle furry from transgender. Gail De Vos, writing on the pervasiveness with which these litter box claims have dug their claws into political discourse, even outside of conservative circles, thus notes the nonsensicality of conflating the transgender community with furry culture, arguing that “Furries don’t identify as animals; they identify with animals.”<sup>105</sup>

## The cow-woman: conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have grappled with my first research sub-question through the figure of the cow-woman, exploring how such a transanimal figure may help reveal the shared subjugations at the intersection of trans and animal studies. To this end I have introduced the notion of transnormativity, especially in its intersection with necropolitics, showing how normative modes and narratives of queerness and transness are weaponized toward the othering of queers who fall outside of these modes and narratives. Next, I have introduced the notion of transimacies to ask how transgender and transspecies might fit together within such sites of (necropolitical) subjugation. Following Lillian Wolf’s account, the transspecies cow-woman reveals possible tensions which can arise in the pursuit of sensual trans desires, as trans people are placed in reproductive labor economies. Building on this account, I have argued that the cow-woman likewise reveals normative tensions between

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Why do we have litter boxes in some of the school districts so kids can pee in them, because they identify as a furry? We’ve lost our minds. We’ve lost our minds.” (Scott Jensen, quoted by Andrew Kaczynski, “Minnesota GOP nominee for governor claimed kids are using litter boxes in schools – it’s an internet hoax,” CNN, October 3, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/03/politics/scott-jennings-minnesota-schools-cat-litter-box>. See also: Arturo Garci, “GOP Gubernatorial Hopefuls Regurgitate ‘Students Identifying as Cats’ Smear,” Truth or Fiction, 2022. <https://www.truthorfiction.com/scott-jensen-heidi-ganahl-furries/>)

<sup>102</sup> Gail De Vos, “Furries in Canadian Schools and Beyond,” in: *Contemporary Legend*, Series 4, Vol.2, June 2024, p.4. <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/cl/article/view/38421>

<sup>103</sup> As far as I can ascertain through online research, the only other bill proposed at time of writing is the earlier Oklahoma House Bill 3084, introduced in 2024 by state representative Humphrey (Republican): Justin J.J. Humphrey, “An Act relating to schools; prohibiting certain students from participating in school curriculum or activities; [...] providing for removal of the student by animal control services [...],” Oklahoma State Legislature, 2024.

<https://www.oklegislature.gov/BillInfo.aspx?Bill=hb3084&Session=2400>

<sup>104</sup> Trans Legislation Tracker, “2025 anti-trans bills tracker.”

<https://translegislation.com/bills/2025/passed>

<sup>105</sup> De Vos, “Furries in Canadian Schools and Beyond,” p.1.

transgender and transspecies actors when they both enter economies of visibility, legibility, and legitimacy.

Over the course of the next two chapters I will explore how entry into these economies by the real-life figures of furrries and therians may be included in trans thinking and writing. I will argue for a trans bovine politics that considers transanimal desires and the image of the furry/therian as intimately entangled concerns. I will draw attention to the economies of ridicule in which the image of the furry/therian circulates, and ask how this image interacts with normative notions of transness. With furrries/therians I will investigate those “contours and hard boundaries of what we think of as physical and worthy of visibility”<sup>106</sup> revealed and problematized by my next bovine, the lolcow.

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<sup>106</sup> Huxtable and Spratley, “Play with Truth.”

## 2. THE LOLCOW

Laughter is the compromise attitude man adopts when confronted by something whose appearance repels him, but which at the same time does not strike him as particularly grave.

– Georges Bataille<sup>107</sup>

### The lolcow: introduction

In this chapter, I will be analyzing the figure of the lolcow; highlighting the mechanics of labeling something or someone as cringe, whether in specialized online harassment communities, or more broadly in mainstream online culture; exploring how this labeling interfaces with transnormative politics; and asking to what degree the interplay between cringe and transnormativity further reinforces harassment against trans(-adjacent) groups and individuals. I will also be examining to what extent transnormative politics may be motivated by feelings of visceral disgust, rather than by genuine concerns for transgender well-being.

Originating on online forums in the early 2000s, the word *lolcow* is generally understood as “a derogatory slang term used to describe an individual who is deemed highly exploitable and therefore susceptible to [harassment] due to their display of gullible behavior online.”<sup>108</sup> This exploitability would be due to the target’s perceived eccentricities and willingness to serve as a virtual *milk cow* (or better still, *cash cow*) endlessly producing outrageous content, thus generating a potentially infinite stream of entertainment or *lols*.<sup>109</sup> Any emotional outbursts, regrettable decisions, or otherwise vulnerable moments are preserved forever online. Lolcows are thus actors whose very existence is so laughably off-kilter from the rest of us that pretty much any behavior they exhibit, once marked, can be milked as a near endless stream of revenue. For harassers of the lolcow this revenue is in the first place social: clicks, likes, and engagement on forums which constitute a space for a series of negative interactions that perpetuate the status of non-normative individuals as laughing stocks. With a big enough audience, such engagement may even turn to monetary revenue. By the mid-2010s, the term *lolcow* had become closely associated with the online forum Kiwi Farms, which Kesji Take et al. have described as a platform specifically designed to facilitate the harassment of individuals and communities, often resulting in the website being forced offline by authorities or service providers.<sup>110</sup> Besides the aptly named Kiwi Farms, the lolcow’s “terrible

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<sup>107</sup> Georges Bataille, “Madame Edwarda,” originally published in French (Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1956), transl. Austryn Wainhouse, in: *Evergreen Review*, Vol.8, No.34, December 1964.

<sup>108</sup> Know Your Meme, “Lolcow,” n.d. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lolcow>

<sup>109</sup> “LOL is an abbreviation for ‘laugh out loud,’ ‘laughing out loud’ or sometimes ‘lots of laughs,’ used in messages to convey laughter. Since its first use online in the 1980s as a slang term, LOL has become one of the most popular abbreviations on the web and is common knowledge among most internet users.” Source: Know Your Meme, “Lol,” n.d. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lol>

<sup>110</sup> Take et al., “Stoking the Flames,” p.3.

grounds”<sup>111</sup> include more widely known platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, 4chan, Twitter, or any other loosely moderated user-based forum. Individuals branded as lolcows have been the victims of some of the most extreme, extensive, and systematic bullying practices ever seen on the internet. Once pegged as a target, lolcows are harassed, stalked, publicly exposed, and on a handful of occasions driven to suicide, which some of Kiwi Farms’ members openly state as one of their goals.<sup>112</sup>

### ***Christine Chandler: the lolcow of lolcows***

Christine Chandler, more widely known as Chris-Chan, an autistic trans woman and the second speaker I introduced at the very beginning of this thesis, is widely regarded as “the victim of what is quite possibly the longest running and most obsessive Internet trolling saga of all time. She’s the lolcow of lolcows.”<sup>113</sup> Despite her status as arguably one of the most intensively documented people alive,<sup>114</sup> in her infamy Chandler has found herself within a veritable disinformation vacuum,<sup>115</sup> to the degree that the most reliable biography I could find is by video essayist Natalie Wynn, more commonly known by the name of her YouTube channel ContraPoints:

They began tormenting her by creating pornographic parodies of Sonichu,<sup>116</sup> posting candid photos of her, et cetera. Chandler reacted to the trolls, which of course encouraged them more, and the harassment escalated and escalated. They hacked her accounts, or tricked her into giving out passwords, they posted all her emails online. They showed up in person and photographed her house. They called her parents posing as friends, psychiatrists, journalists, employers, in order to extract as much information about her as possible. [...] For all the information they gathered, the trolls created a Wiki [...] devoted to the obsessive compiling of all Chris-Chan data. It includes a detailed diagram of her bedroom, entire articles about all members of her immediate and extended family, pages of psychiatric records she was tricked into sending them, and that’s only the beginning [...] Two female trolls actually went on real-life dates with Chris-Chan, of course secretly wearing wires to record their conversations. Others pretended to be her Internet girlfriends so they could solicit and post nudes and masturbation videos. The absolute low point came when some trolls encouraged a 13-year-old boy to pose as a 19-year-old girl and have phone sex with Chris-Chan and record it. In other

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<sup>111</sup> Borges, “Preface to the 1957 Edition.”

<sup>112</sup> Kevin Veale, *Gaming the Dynamics of Online Harassment*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp.87-106.

<sup>113</sup> Wynn, “Cringe,” 31:32.

<sup>114</sup> “In their more grandiose moods, the Christorians have speculated that Chris-Chan is the most documented life in all human history.” Wynn, “Cringe,” 35:25.

<sup>115</sup> Notably, there is no Wikipedia page on her. Apparently, such a page would only act as a magnet for further harassment, to an extent that would outweigh the value of any verifiable information on Chandler. (HaileJones et al., “Chris-Chan,” Wikipedia, 2023,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Teahouse/Questions/Archive\\_1199#Chris-Chan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Teahouse/Questions/Archive_1199#Chris-Chan)); others (squid7012 et al., “Who is the most famous person who (as of Sept. 2024) does not have their own Wikipedia page?,” Reddit, 2024,

[www.reddit.com/r/wikipedia/comments/1fg2xik/who\\_is\\_the\\_most\\_famous\\_person\\_who\\_as\\_of\\_sept\\_2024](http://www.reddit.com/r/wikipedia/comments/1fg2xik/who_is_the_most_famous_person_who_as_of_sept_2024)) have speculated that Chandler may be one of the most famous people alive without a Wikipedia page.

<sup>116</sup> Earlier in the video, Wynn introduced Chandler’s “comic-book series Sonichu, a childishly drawn hybrid of Sonic and Pikachu.” Wynn, “Cringe,” 33:09.

words, they groomed a child to deceive an autistic person into performing sex acts for their entertainment.<sup>117</sup>

Though Chandler is in all likelihood the most extreme and infamous example, the term *lolcow* can be more generally applied to a wide range of modes and intensities of harassment. Staple figures in YouTube “cringe compilations,” for example, also function as lolcows; in some cases, an entire subculture may together comprise a single co-operated lolcow.<sup>118</sup> On Kiwi Farms, the landing page currently lists eleven main subforums which point users to the hottest harassment nexuses. Among these we find of course “Christian [sic] Weston Chandler” (with more than 697,000 posts in ca. 3,700 threads at time of writing), as well as a variety of group categories including “Animal Control” (referring to furies and therians, 380,000 messages in 354 threads) and “Stinkditch” (referring to trans women, more than 1,000,000 messages in 331 threads).

## The farm cringe complex

### *The limits of figuration*

I have begun this chapter by presenting the lolcow as a victim of othering and harassment. My purpose, however, is not merely to show that there is some person or community on the periphery of our discourses who we may compassionately wish to include – someone who may be slightly, or significantly, weirder than us, but who can still connect with our stories and should be supported by sharing in our resources, technologies, and protection mechanisms. Though this is certainly a driving force in my writing, what I really want to ask of the lolcow – keeping in mind my research question and sub-questions – is whether this figuration may provide us with some novel insight into trans discourses. Can the lolcow, in its bovine qualities, connect us in some way to the experience of being milked – just as Lillian Wolf inquires about the cow-woman? Might the actors branded as lolcows be considered “ecstatic speakers?”<sup>119</sup> And the figure of the lolcow thus a *feminist* figure? Just as we saw with Juliana Huxtable and the cow-woman? Such questions start, as they did with the cow-woman, on the farm.

The lolcow and the cow-woman bear striking similarities in the repurposing of their (re)productive capacities. For literal biological cattle, this repurposing occurs through the enslavement of its species. For online cringe figures, it is through their being milked for lols. Huxtable and her cow-woman, however, have feminist theory and their widely appraised art with which to navigate and even stage-manage these terrible grounds, whereas Chandler has only amateurishly drawn web comics and barely intelligible YouTube rants. Intriguingly, both Chandler and Huxtable are

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<sup>117</sup> Wynn, “Cringe,” 34:11, 35:57.

<sup>118</sup> Take et al., “Stoking the Flames,” p.3.

<sup>119</sup> Haraway, “Ecce Homo.”

transgender, but neither the cow-woman<sup>120</sup> nor the lolcow<sup>121</sup> are. In the case of the cow-woman this seems to be a deliberate action on the part of Huxtable, possibly choosing to have her figure be in tension with transgender communities. In the case of Chandler, the endless misgendering<sup>122</sup> which takes place on her terrible grounds is clearly *not* voluntary.

Even in this thesis, which will in all likelihood only be read by a handful of people, I hesitate to press on further with the work of figuration – to possibly render myself complicit in drawing further attention to the real, breathing, suffering individuals and communities that embody the trans(-adjacent) lolcow. This is because there is a violence to being read by actors who may not be fluent in the stylistic devices, disciplinary angles, and terminologies of feminist figuration, as Rosi Braidotti calls for us as feminists to be<sup>123</sup> – but who are nonetheless capable of exerting considerable moral power over the non-normative subjects described here.<sup>124</sup> By focusing on the irresistible figure of Chandler as the archetypal lolcow, I have already removed myself one step from the figuration of “my own” transgender furry/therian lolcow. Could I – indeed, should I – have instead selected one of many transgender furies/therians who can readily be found on the “Animal Control” bestiary of Kiwi Farms?

### ***Furries and therians: giving “real” trans people a bad name?***

I have already stated that individual members of furry and therian communities should be considered as ecstatic speakers, in service of such figurations as *furry* or *therian*. As I will further expand on in chapter 3, furry has been a human/animal, animal/machine, physical/virtual cyborg, even since before Donna Haraway forever reinscribed the term; and therian has been embodying an everyday form of transspecies since before the nonhuman turn. Also (and as I can attest to from personal experience), both communities have a proportionally massive transgender population.<sup>125</sup> For many transgender therians, including myself, transgender and transspecies are very difficult to read apart. We might, then, have something to add to transanimal thought. But there are some problems. Potential transanimals though we

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<sup>120</sup> At least, that is what the cow-woman herself seems to be telling us: “GENETICALLY MODIFIED ‘COW WOMAN’ ATTACKS TRANS ACTIVISTS: ‘I MAY BE PART COW, BUT I AM A BIOLOGICAL FEMALE!’” (Huxtable and Spauldings, *Interfertility Industrial Complex*).

<sup>121</sup> More precisely: though some lolcows are arguably or undisputedly transgender, most are not. Transness (and particularly, transness that is judged to be poorly executed) is but one of many vectors that mark one as a potential lolcow.

<sup>122</sup> In fact, Natalie Wynn seems to be one of a very few willing to take Chandler’s claim to transness at face value: see the block quote by Wynn in the next section: “Chandler is an autistic trans woman [but] I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone actually take her transition seriously.” (Wynn, “Cringe,” 31:56).

<sup>123</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p.36.

<sup>124</sup> Braidotti, for example in her figuration of the “nomadic subject,” is careful to avoid “romanticizing or appropriating the exotic, the ‘other’,” instead deliberately drawing upon her own nomadic experiences, her “own embodied genealogy.” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, pp.6-7).

<sup>125</sup> Kathleen Gerbasi, Elizabeth Fein, Courtney Plante, Stephen Reysen and Sharon Roberts, “Furries, therians and otherkin, oh my! What do all those words mean, anyway?,” in: *Furries among us 2: More essays on furries by furries*, ed. Thurston Howl, Thurston Howl Publications, 2017, p.168.

might be, stereotypical lolcows we already are. Our image is steeped in cringe, and more than that, specifically trans therians may do more harm than good in our attempts to interface with transgender. Blaire White, a highly visible, militantly conservative, and transnormatively transgender YouTube personality, neatly sums up the moral panic:

I don't like how all this stuff is called trans-species, transracial, trans-all-this-stuff, because it really does muddy the waters of what transgender is [...] my only beef is when they say that it's comparable to being transgender, or when people use this against transgender people. [...] Being a transsexual [...] entails a very real medical condition which is gender dysphoria [...] obviously, I am biologically male and I am a transsexual, but in the general society in the world I'm just some chick. [...] you can't just be a deer and just roll up on someone and start eating their grass. [...] because I felt like a lot of people on Twitter were trying to say: 'there goes trans people being crazy again!' [...] but I don't think it's because she's trans; I think it's because she thinks she's a deer. Right?<sup>126</sup>

Over the course of this thesis I have used the term *transnormative subject*. We might say that the transnormative subject, too, is a figuration and thus a fiction. In this case not a feminist one, but one employed by assimilative practices that barely require an ecstatic speaker to keep the whole fiction afloat<sup>127</sup> – yet, Blaire White is more than willing to fulfil that role. Her issue here is with transspecies actors who adopt a broader trans identity, which she fears may be conflated in some way with her own transsexuality, or even weaponized against transsexuals such as herself. White also points out one of the critical differences between transspecies and transgender – that there simply is no possibility of *passing*, i.e. of being perceived by the casual observer, through one's appearance and behavior, as belonging to the intended category. With some luck and effort, one might be able to pass as a man or a woman, but how can anyone born human ever hope to pass as a deer?

Returning to Christine Chandler: Chris-Chan is *almost* trans, *sometimes* trans, *temporarily* trans, perhaps even *definitely* trans if she had not achieved notoriety on Kiwi Farms: but most importantly, the fiction that is Chris-Chan was *poorly* transgender. Blaire White, in another video titled "I Am.. Disgusted. Chris Chan: 'Trans' Predator," elaborates:

Chris Chan, the subject of today's video, is... 'trans?' – and the reason I say... 'trans?' is because this person has self-identified as a tomgirl intersex female soul with a male body, a tranny cross-dresser, and a lesbian-identified male, not to mention this person's alleged transition consists of taint<sup>128</sup> piercings, wearing menstrual pads, taking medication to treat menopause (which is not recommended or useful for transition), cutting his own genitals with a box cutter at home because the internet told him to,

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<sup>126</sup> Blaire White, "No, You Can't Identify As A Deer (Trans-Species)," YouTube Video, May 26, 2020, 7:06. <https://youtu.be/ajpedaMw9sc>

<sup>127</sup> As we have seen in Snorton and Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics," as well as Aizura, "Trans Feminine Value."

<sup>128</sup> Perineum.

claiming to be trans to, quote, to get more girls, and being the wife of the pokemon Mewtwo. So.<sup>129</sup>

Contrast this with the more sympathetic approach of another transgender YouTuber, Natalie Wynn:

Chandler is an autistic trans woman, and yes, I will be calling her by she/her pronouns, which I pause to explain because I don't think I've ever seen anyone actually take her transition seriously. Most people seem to regard it as simply another absurd symptom of her hilarious mental condition. In fact, a bunch of trans people will probably get real salty with me for making trans people look bad by including Chris-Chan in our, oh, our very prestigious and exclusive club. Oh please. Transsexualism is a deviant sexual identity [...] how did trannies get so snobbish? Look, is Chris-Chan really trans? I don't know, and I don't care. If Chris-Chan wants to be a woman, I for one support her journey. But it doesn't matter. The relevant thing about Chris-Chan is not Chris-Chan. It's the fact that for the last 13 years, nearly every aspect of her life has been obsessively archived online by thousands of voyeurs known as Christorians.<sup>130</sup>

These two accounts differ dramatically in their understanding of the *realness* of Chandler's transition, which was similarly a major point of contention in White's video on our transspecies figures. The drive to mock Chandler and other putatively trans actors seems to be connected to a sincere desire to protect the intelligibility of the category of transgender. A transnormative claim is thus being made here, and the lolcows' lack of adherence to this norm is a key vector of cringe – but to what extent can this normative claim, and indeed this cringe, be understood as the motivation for harassment?

## Methodologies of cringe and harassment

### *The affect of cringe: compassion and contempt*

The intersection between queer and cringe is a surprisingly little-explored phenomenon in academic literature<sup>131</sup> – currently, the most prominent analyses and taxonomies of cringe are found in pop psychology and YouTube video essays. Melissa Dahl, in her self-help book *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, begins by traditionally defining cringe as an “intense visceral reaction produced by an awkward moment.”<sup>132</sup> Beyond such basic emotional responses, however, cringe may be understood as one of many complex affective experiences by which we structure our imagination. Katherine Anne Schell, in her thesis “Rhetorical New Materialism, Queers, and Cringe” describes cringe as a “full, complex affective

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<sup>129</sup> Blaire White, “I Am.. Disgusted. Chris Chan: ‘Trans’ Predator,” YouTube Video, Aug 3, 2021, 0:42. <https://youtu.be/A8cpjispKV8A>

<sup>130</sup> Wynn, “Cringe,” 31:56.

<sup>131</sup> In stark contrast to the prominence in queer theory of the somewhat related concept of *shame*. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote in 2003: “for certain (‘queer’) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that [...] has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities.” (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, 2003, pp.64-65).

<sup>132</sup> Dahl, *Cringeworthy*, p.3.

phenomenon.”<sup>133</sup> As an affect, cringe can no longer be relegated to consistent, predictable emotional responses, but must be understood as a “flowing play of forces involving human and nonhuman subjects and objects,”<sup>134</sup> an embodied yet mutable response. And for queer people, such embodiments of cringe are no laughing matter. Schell writes that: “Queer people have often been considered cringy, which is part of why the phenomenon has such a nasty reputation in queer circles today; it is not uncommon, especially in online spaces, to see calls for the death of ‘cringe culture’ or claims that queer liberation can never be achieved so long as queer folks live in fear of cishetero contemptuous cringe.”<sup>135</sup> This “contemptuous cringe” – the first of two types of cringe defined by Dahl<sup>136</sup> – is precisely, according to Schell, what we encounter in online public shaming “cringe compilation” videos.<sup>137</sup> Which makes sense, considering that Dahl’s second category of cringe – “compassionate cringe” – is rooted in a sense of empathy, which is not a particularly strong basis for harassment.<sup>138</sup>

### ***Moral rationalizations for visceral disgust and normative harassment***

Alice E. Marwick, in her paper “Morally Motivated Networked Harassment as Normative Reinforcement” examines the sociological forces driving online harassment communities, beyond obvious matters of systemic bias and general visceral dislike: she indeed argues for an understanding of this kind of harassment as *morally motivated*.<sup>139</sup> Her two main arguments that are of interest to this thesis are, first, that such moral justification within online harassment communities usually takes the shape of an accusation, which in turn must describe a violation or a series of violations of a social norm – though at this point, the explicit motivation to bring this accusation forward may still be strongly rooted in personal bias, expressed through a variety of “attack vectors”<sup>140</sup> as characteristics of the accused. These attack vectors are often (though not always) “structural systems of misogyny, racism, homophobia, and transphobia, which determine the primary standards and norms by which people speaking in public are judged.”<sup>141</sup> Contemptuous cringe, I argue, can thus be understood as an embodied how-to guide that provides those experiencing it with viable attack vectors.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Schell, “Rhetorical New Materialism, Queers, and Cringe,” p.16.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., pp.12-13.

<sup>136</sup> Dahl, *Cringeworthy*.

<sup>137</sup> Schell, “Rhetorical New Materialism, Queers, and Cringe,” p.12.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>139</sup> Marwick, “Morally Motivated Networked Harassment as Normative Reinforcement,” p.1.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>142</sup> Natalie Wynn lists a number of characteristics which increase the risk of an individual being targeted by contemptuous cringe: “Deviancy, whether physical, mental, social, or sexual. A combination of passionate sincerity and amateurism. The perceived tendency to lack emotional composure. Obsessive interests in unconventional hobbies. Low social status. It’s pretty easy to wind up in the cringe category these days. If you add up all the groups on this list, I bet it includes most of the people watching this video.” (Wynn, “Cringe,” 17:16).

Second, Marwick argues that such moral claims may serve as a means by which people solidify their attachment to various communities, including how these groups themselves may signal who is part of the in-group, and who constitutes the out-group.<sup>143</sup> This concept may be useful for analyzing harassment targeted at lolcows. Yet, Blaire White neither calls for harassment, nor does she appear to be particularly outraged. She does, however, clearly display cringe. Within Marwick's framework, our ecstatic speaker Blaire White would be understood as an "amplifier," an actor who advertises accusatory discourses to a broader audience and so enables the pile-on effect found in online forum harassment. White's role in the spread of contempt would thus be quantitative in nature, networking the cringe content to new audiences. "Because amplifiers (highly followed nodes, in network terms) have so many viewers, they are able, consciously or not, to direct harassing behavior. It is often not the amplifiers themselves but those who follow them who engage in such behavior, making it difficult to ascertain responsibility."<sup>144</sup> Marwick holds that the networked audiences of these amplifiers are typically not affiliated, or only loosely so, with the initial sites of harassment.<sup>145</sup> Since Blaire White exists within a different network than that of Kiwi Farms, she does not necessarily operate with the same set of attack vectors. Indeed, White's experience of cringe may have a meaningfully different quality to it. Wynn<sup>146</sup> argues for a distinction between contemptuous *out-group* cringe and contemptuous *in-group* cringe. Crucially, in-group cringe is hypervigilant as to the manner in which individuals outside of one's in-group may be unable to distinguish between communities which share some distinguishing features, but remain meaningfully distinct. In queer and trans contexts, this is especially relevant considering the violence these communities may face. Thus, concern for public image (typically linked to a sense of physical security for transgender people), would in Marwick's system provide the moral justification for in-group harassment against non-normative trans behavior. Natalie Wynn points out that "a lot of the biggest [trans] creators on [YouTube] have channels that are basically devoted to exactly this type of cringe-reaction humilitainment."<sup>147</sup> Wynn reminds us in this context of the origins of Blaire White's channel, as cringe-reaction content regularly focusing on "transtrenders and crazy activists" who would ostensibly be "giving real trans people a bad name."<sup>148</sup> White's desire to signal to herself and to her audience that the cringeworthy individual is displaying behavior considered either abnormal, or at least a worrying trend, within her own circles, thus follows a mechanics of social belonging – which, in the case of online influencers, is in all likelihood directly linked to economic gain. Both Katherine Anne Schell and

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<sup>143</sup> Marwick, "Morally Motivated Networked Harassment as Normative Reinforcement," pp.3-4.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p.7. Here Marwick builds upon and cites earlier research by Rebecca Lewis, Alice E. Marwick and William Clyde Partin, "'We dissect stupidity and respond to it': Response videos and networked harassment on YouTube," in: *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 65, Issue 5, 2021, pp.735-756.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>146</sup> Wynn, "Cringe," 47:14.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 52:13. Wynn borrows the term "humilitainment" from Richard H. Smith, *The Joy of Pain: Schadenfreude and the Dark Side of Human Nature*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>148</sup> Wynn, "Cringe," 58:14.

Natalie Wynn have suggested, however, that a projection of trans in-group cringe onto broader society will in all likelihood grossly overestimate the degree to which cringe actors are actually responsible for exacerbating the precarious status of transgender communities,<sup>149</sup> and may even, counter-productively, lead to an increase in out-group contempt towards transgender people at large.<sup>150</sup>

### ***Escalation of harassment: in-group and out-group cringe***

Kesji Take et al., zooming in specifically on patterns of harassment on Kiwi Farms, focus less on the *function* of normativity in harassment, and more on the ongoing *creation* of normativity through harassment. Their model of “Continuous Narrative Escalation”<sup>151</sup> considers an actor such as Blaire White not merely as an amplifier external to the actual network of harassment, but as a node in a broader network, meaningfully adding to the narrative of harassment.<sup>152</sup> In her reaction to existing cringe content, White postulates and networks further moral justifications, which may have otherwise remained relatively contained within trans circles. Trans-specific in-group cringe thus meaningfully extends the possible repertoire for moral justifications beyond those typically linked to homophobia/transphobia, deploying further justifications which may be significantly more difficult to refute. Thus, Blaire White may make use of transnormative rhetorics of the kind described by C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn,<sup>153</sup> calling on the vulnerability of her own transgender body in the present political climate.

Charlie Markbreiter, in an essay titled “Other Trans People Make Me Dysphoric,” similarly suggests: “transness could only be mainstreamed into American life if trans people could also be partitioned into those who could be assimilated and those who couldn’t. In other words, those who were surplus, inconvenient, cringe.”<sup>154</sup> According to Markbreiter, labeling something cringy is “a deeply political claim”<sup>155</sup> of proclaiming who “deserves access to the social body and its rapidly shrinking resources.”<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, Take et al. suggest that the moral systems of a given community are highly flexible: when new moral justifications are constructed or imported, these may alter the social norms of the community moving forward.<sup>157</sup> One consequence of these more dynamic views on cringe and harassment is that we must consider in-group cringe and out-group cringe as being strongly informed by each other. On a more hopeful note, Markbreiter argues that “Since cringe operates as a form of social control, it can only be overcome collectively.”

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<sup>149</sup> Wynn, “Cringe,” 53:31.

<sup>150</sup> Schell, “Rhetorical New Materialism, Queers, and Cringe,” p.23.

<sup>151</sup> Take et al., “Stoking the Flames.”

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>153</sup> Snorton and Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics,” p.68.

<sup>154</sup> Charlie Markbreiter, “‘Other Trans People Make Me Dysphoric’: Trans Assimilation and Cringe,” *The New Inquiry*, March 1, 2022. <https://thenewinquiry.com/cringe/>

<sup>155</sup> Schell, “Rhetorical New Materialism, Queers, and Cringe,” p.14.

<sup>156</sup> Markbreiter, “‘Other Trans People Make Me Dysphoric’.”

<sup>157</sup> Take et al., “Stoking the Flames,” p.2.

## **The lolcow: conclusion**

Through an analysis of the figure of the lolcow, I have here addressed my second sub-question: can perceived frictions between transgender and transspecies actors be understood as mere rationalizations of socially induced cringe responses? By applying studies of online harassment forums to transnormative/transspecies-exclusionary narratives, it became clear that transnormative rhetoric can in and of itself reflect genuinely held beliefs. However, we must also note the potency of transnormative accusations as moral justifications for harassment (both within and outside specialized harassment communities), and how voicing such accusations might increase the status of the accusers within their own communities. Additionally, since in-group cringe is a constructed affective phenomenon, we should be wary of uncritically accepting the emotive aspect of cringe as a driver for trans politics – especially considering that the practices spawned by in-group cringe appear to be dubious in their political effectiveness, and are highly informed by the structural biases found in online harassment communities.

### 3. THE TRANS BOVINE

#### The Trans Bovine: introduction

In the previous two chapters I have begun a process of juxtaposing the cow-woman, as an academically informed transanimal artwork, with popular cultural transspecies actors: lolcows, furies and therians. The cow-woman and the lolcow are both problematic figures, inhabiting unresolved tensions within queer discourse rather than attempting to arrive at any “cohesive political ideology.”<sup>158</sup> Although my analysis of the politics of Juliana Huxtable’s cow-woman eventually departs in many regards from that of Lillian Wolf,<sup>159</sup> our reasoning is largely the same. Further, where Wolf animated the cow-woman through the affect of sensual trans femme desire, I have animated the lolcow through the affect of cringe, with a particular focus on anxieties of transspecies identification.<sup>160</sup> These anxieties cannot be entirely explained by cringe, but a read of in-group cringe may provide a more holistic understanding of the affective processes involved in defining which kinds of transness are considered real and worth representation within trans discourse and queer scholarship. Stripped down to its bones, this is the exact definition of transnormativity. Understanding how we may be seduced into believing that such normativities are not only on the right side of trans history, but that they would also possess a more informed understanding of said history, may help us interrogate our own affective responses as we encounter possible queer feminist figures.

A less ambitious thesis could very well end here, with the conclusion that the lolcow and the cow-woman meaningfully add to academic trans theory by affording potentialities of re-opening feminist discourses. However, as Rosi Braidotti wrote, critique and deconstruction are but the first steps within feminist figuration: “feminist theory is not only a movement of critical opposition of the false universality of the subject, it is also the positive affirmation of women’s desire to affirm and enact different forms of subjectivity.”<sup>161</sup> Beyond revealing discursive short-circuits and rhetorical impasses, feminist figures teach us new languages and behaviors outside those of Enlightenment humanism. Thus, to provide a more philosophically relevant answer to my main research question, and more specifically my third sub-question, I wish to not only reveal how transnormativity intersects with cringe to subjugate those it excludes, but also what we may learn from *specifically* cringe transanimals *themselves*. To do so, this chapter will investigate the most cringe of claims made by especially therian transanimals: that they indeed *are* themselves non-human animals. I will ask what this claim, in and of itself, may add to trans and animal academic inquiry – a process which begins with a declaration: *Ecce bovo*.

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<sup>158</sup> Huxtable and Ilupeju, “Artist Talk,” 13:15.

<sup>159</sup> Wolf, “Juliana Huxtable’s Cow-Woman.”

<sup>160</sup> Huxtable and Spratley, “Play with Truth.”

<sup>161</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p.158.

## Ecce bovo

In the New Testament (John 19:5), Pontius Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd and proclaims “Ecce homo”: behold the man. There are varying interpretations of this gesture, but the most common one is that Pilate wished to have the crowd see Jesus as merely a man, not a god-king. “Ecce bovo” is also a nod to Donna Haraway’s seminal 1992 essay juxtaposing the figures of Jesus and Sojourner Truth; the full title of the essay, from which I am quoting extensively in this thesis, is “Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Ar’n’t) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape.”<sup>162</sup> It seems to me that an appeal similar to Pilate’s “Ecce homo” is made wherever furies and therians enter discourse: “Ecce bovo”<sup>163</sup> may thus be interpreted as “behold the foolish man who thinks himself to be cow; I have examined him, and I find no crime in him.” The lolcow is Jesus, the users posting on Kiwi Farms are the crowd outside the palace in Jerusalem, and the well-meaning progressives are Pilate. The picture is complete when Jesus / the lolcow is, regardless of the appeal to humanity made by Pilate / progressives, crucified.

Taking Blaire White up on her grievances,<sup>164</sup> and exploring the anxiety between transspecies and transgender as Huxtable does,<sup>165</sup> both require that we sit with those furry/therian figures who *do* claim their animal status. Furry and therian communities exist in and around each other, sometimes in tension, usually in symbiosis. One key difference between the two groups is that a therian directly identifies *with* or *as* a specific animal (usually an existing species found in nature) through their *theriotype*,<sup>166</sup> whereas for furies, identities are formed through the creation of personalized fictitious characters, *fursonas*, that are based in some way on animals, but take on much more cartoon-like shapes.<sup>167</sup> Where furies typically express a certain kinship to their fursonas and the animals these are based on, therians typically claim that they *are* indeed their theriotype species to some meaningful extent. How exactly this therian identification manifests may vary widely between individuals, as I will discuss momentarily. For now, my focus is on this cross-species claim to identity, the naming oneself animal. Haraway suggests that “the only route to a nongeneric humanity, for whom specificity – but emphatically not originality – is the key to connection, is through radical nominalism. We must take names and essences seriously enough to adopt such an ascetic stance about who we have been and might yet be.”<sup>168</sup> And so, I ask, what kind of potentialities are unlocked when we as academics take therians at their word? When we look at discursively crucified transspecies actors and exclaim “*behold* the cow who you see

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<sup>162</sup> Haraway, “Ecce Homo.”

<sup>163</sup> I have borrowed the noun *bovo* from the Catalan and Esperanto languages. The Esperanto word means “head of cattle” (an individual cow, bull, heifer, ox, etc.). The Catalan word means “fool” or “simpleton;” its etymology derives from the Latin “balbus,” meaning “stammering.”

<sup>164</sup> White, “No, You Can’t Identify As A Deer (Trans-Species).”

<sup>165</sup> Huxtable and Spauldings, *Interfertility Industrial Complex*.

<sup>166</sup> The species of animal that a therian identifies with.

<sup>167</sup> Proctor, “On Being Non-Human.”

<sup>168</sup> Haraway, “Ecce Homo,” p.88.

in the guise of man, I have examined it and find that it *is* indeed a cow!” When we, as Jay Johnston does, consider therians as actors who are “proposing (and living) a form of transpecies identity” that “undermines the categorical distinction of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ ”? <sup>169</sup> For transnormative subjects such as Blaire White, even attempting to genuinely address such questions would constitute a careless appropriation of transgender appeals to identity. Yet I will argue that an examination of the efficacy of such claims starts with a cross-analysis of a much earlier appeal: that of Sojourner Truth.

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<sup>169</sup> Johnston, “On having a furry soul,” p.297.

## Ain't I a woman?

Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best places – and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! ... I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me – and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it). and bear de lash as well and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear – and ain't I a woman?

– Sojourner Truth, speaking at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, 1851, transcribed 12 years later by Frances Dana Barker Gage, cited by Donna Haraway in "Ecce Homo."<sup>170</sup>

Sojourner Truth (ca.1797-1883) was a key figure in the movement for the abolition of slavery in the United States, and in later social issues including African-American civil rights, women's rights, and alcohol temperance. The specific words which Truth spoke in 1851 are highly contested. Other transcripts do not even include the question "Ain't I a woman?," though it is under this title that the speech is mostly known today. Donna Haraway nonetheless asks us: "Why does her *question* have more power for feminist theory 150 years later than any number of affirmative and declarative sentences? [...] For me, one answer to that question lies in Truth's power to figure a collective humanity without constructing the cosmic closure of the unmarked category."<sup>171</sup> This "unmarked category" refers to a humanity in the generic figure of "modern white patriarchal discourse,"<sup>172</sup> from which Sojourner Truth was automatically excluded "as a black female, a black woman."<sup>173</sup> But Truth was also excluded from the "discourses of (white) womanhood,"<sup>174</sup> a category further marked in and of itself, as constituting "the one who can never be a subject, who is plot space, matrix, ground, screen for the act of man."<sup>175</sup> Truth's Black femininity instead marked her as "female (animal, sexualized, and without rights), but not as woman."<sup>176</sup> Even as white women suffered under an unfreedom of forced reproductive labor in order to "give birth (unfreely) to the heirs of property,"<sup>177</sup> Black women suffered under a further unfreedom in which their forced reproductive labor had them give birth to children who, just like themselves, would not even inherit the status of human.<sup>178</sup> Though *woman* was thus not fully human either,<sup>179</sup> Truth's question could nevertheless work to introduce the radical specificities of her body, names and speech into this unmarked humanity through her appeal to the marked category of

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<sup>170</sup> Haraway, "Ecce Homo," pp.90-91.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p.93.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p.91.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p.93.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., pp.94-95.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., pp.94-95.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p.94.

woman.<sup>180</sup> Yet, even as Sojourner Truth demands recognition of her womanhood, she does not prescribe new boundaries for the category. Instead, by articulating precisely her differences from (white) womanhood, Truth was able to contest what it means to be a woman and a human.

### *Ain't I a fluctuating identity? The politics of instability, irony and contradiction*

When categories of identification are extended to actors previously denied that identification, there are two possible angles of critique. The first is the normative position, which holds that such an interrogation of categories will destabilize them beyond practical use – that by losing their specificity, these precious categories will collapse into relativism. Precisely this, Katrine Smiet argues, is one the reasons why trans-exclusionary feminists dread the inclusion of trans women into the category of woman, a move they believe would destabilize the previously biologically validated category to the point where it would become “impossible to name specific forms of gender oppression.”<sup>181</sup> From another perspective, Smiet reasons, there are concerns that any affirmation of categories such as womanhood will result in further stabilizing of the normative relations embedded in these categories. Denise Riley, for instance, argues that in the present day and age we would do well to move on from such reified categories, and instead place more emphasis on the changing nature of our identities, as she rewrites Sojourner Truth’s question to “Ain’t I a fluctuating identity?”<sup>182</sup> Smiet, however, maintains that affirmation and negation of the category of *woman* go hand in hand:

[Sojourner Truth’s] question itself, I argue, performs two key feminist moves: on the one hand, *critically interrogating*, and on the other hand, *critically affirming* the category of ‘woman.’ On the one hand, by questioning who is and who is not included in the category of ‘woman’ and exposing the norms that govern dominant understandings of womanhood, the question works to expose the ideological character of the category ‘woman’ itself. [...] On the other hand, the question itself does not perform a detached critique of the category ‘woman,’ but instead carries within it an investment in the very identity that is being questioned and interrogated. In the face of societal exclusion *from* this identity, a claim is made *to* this identity nevertheless.<sup>183</sup>

This insistence on inhabiting a category while simultaneously critiquing it is essential to the kind of feminist figurations which Haraway brings forward. It is what keeps Sojourner Truth’s claim from acting as a normative device (as we find in homonormativity/transnormativity) in any meaningful sense. It is similarly crucial to Haraway’s figuration of the cyborg, which begins with a call for more ironic rhetorical approaches to feminist praxis.<sup>184</sup> Irony, for Haraway, “is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>181</sup> Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, p.81.

<sup>182</sup> Denise Riley, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History*, Springer, 1988, p.1.

<sup>183</sup> Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, pp.70-71.

<sup>184</sup> Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” p.149.

incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method.”

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Transgender is just such an extraordinary ironic cyborg, insisting on its inhabitation of the category of woman while simultaneously dislodging it.<sup>186</sup> It is no surprise then that precisely these words of Sojourner Truth have been reiterated and reframed by trans activism. In an interview cited earlier in this thesis, Juliana Huxtable critiqued the idea that increased visibility of high-profile transgender individuals would have a meaningfully positive impact on the quality of transgender lives: “Like, if [Black transgender actress] Laverne Cox in a H&M campaign implies ‘that’s a win for all trans people,’ it is assumed visibility is the same as the shifting of political, economic and cultural resources.”<sup>187</sup> Smiet, approaching Cox from a different perspective than that of Huxtable, notes how Cox has deployed the figure of Sojourner Truth, one of the blueprint feminist figurations, to argue for her own trans visibility, “explicitly connect[ing] her own claim to womanhood to that of Truth, exclaiming: ‘I stand here in the tradition of Sojourner Truth – claiming my womanhood within a context which would often deny it’.”<sup>188</sup> For Smiet, it is by “voicing the question anew from her specific positionality as a black transgender woman [that] she adds a new layer and resonance to the question that could not be heard before.”<sup>189</sup> In doing so, the ironic tension between the “critical interrogation of woman, and on the other hand, the critical affirmation of woman”<sup>190</sup> is acknowledged once again. Smiet notes that readings of Sojourner Truth’s question as an intrinsically queer or trans statement, may lead themselves to be misunderstood as moving the focus away from Black feminism toward trans feminism<sup>191</sup> – see for example Eva Hayward and Che Gossett’s statement that a reframing of “Black feminism and black thought as always already trans have troubled the categories of binary gender and of medically assigned sex for their historical and contemporary violences.”<sup>192</sup> Smiet instead argues for an understanding of Truth’s question as containing “within it a critique and re-envisioning of the category of woman that opens the door [to] current trans interventions.”<sup>193</sup> What, then, if therians were to do the same thing? Might they also speak through Sojourner Truth’s words, and ask: *Am I not animal?*

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p.149.

<sup>186</sup> For a brief history of the use and misuse of Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” in trans literature, see: Hilary Malatino, “Biohacking Gender: Cyborgs, Coloniality, and the Pharmacopornographic Era,” in: *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, May 2017, eds. Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szczygielska and Anthony Clair Wagner, pp.179-190; republished in book form as *Tranimacies: Intimate Links Between Animal and Trans\* Studies*, eds. Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>187</sup> Huxtable and Spratley, “Play with Truth.”

<sup>188</sup> Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, p.82.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p.83.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p.84.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., pp.82-83.

<sup>192</sup> Hayward and Gossett, “Impossibility of *That*.”

<sup>193</sup> Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, p.83.

## Ain't I (this) animal?

### *Facetious furies: cute, cuddly, corporate and carnal*

Yet, when a therian asks *Ain't I animal?*, this is an entirely different appeal than Truth's – or, for that matter, Cox's – *Ain't I a woman?*. Mel Chen, for example, questions the efficacy of furies and therians in their ability to critically interrogate and destabilize human-centered narratives and the categories of human/animal. Particularly dubious in this regard is the tendency among the furry fandom to focus exclusively on cute, funny and otherwise relatable animals, on “seemingly predictable paths of recourse to animal becoming,” as a result of which “popular furies figures are much more based on rabbits, cats, and dogs than on, say, lizards, eagles, and centipedes.”<sup>194</sup> Perhaps even more problematic are generalizations of furry subculture as being essentially sexual or pornographic – tropes which furry scholar Brandy Juniper Lewis has attributed to “a representation of furies' being consumed by mass media's abjecting gaze”<sup>195</sup> into “a stage for pornographic and [ill]icit excess.”<sup>196</sup> Lewis links such puritanical disdain to what she sees as a further general misappraisal from academia, and calls instead for “a more personal, more affectively involved engagement with fan materials” in order “to see what outside scholars and conservatives still miss with regards to fandoms' numerous potentials.”<sup>197</sup> I am by and large in agreement that stereotypes of (my own) sexual deviance are the source of much of the contemptuous cringe directed at furies and therians.<sup>198</sup> More broadly, any such reductive readings privilege a gut response that marks trans bovines as frivolous, fungible, and instinct-driven beings who do not even seem to realize that they are setting themselves up as perfect lolcows – and who, I would argue, also do not seem to appreciate the degree to which they are willfully and critically engaging with difficult themes. Therians may seem, as Jay Johnston puts it, to be little more than “a faddish, perhaps even quaint or fashionable subculture.”<sup>199</sup> Yet Johnston also urges her readers and fellow academics, rather than dismissing the community outright, to appreciate how its “relationships and [its] critique of the human can offer potentially useful renegotiations of the concept of subjectivity and how relations with radical difference (alterity) are lived.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, p.106. Though Chen only explicitly mentions furies, most of their criticism similarly applies to therian practice.

<sup>195</sup> Brandy Juniper Lewis, “Untaming Fandom: Funny Animal Figures and the Page-Based World of Furies,” Ph.D. thesis, University of California Riverside, 2024, p.54.

<https://www.proquest.com/openview/5a32b8f0ca9a2dc334722d20108be4bf>

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>198</sup> Consider, for example, Blaire White's statement that “I have this rule in life, if something just doesn't make sense, it's probably a sex thing, it's probably a fetish [...] whenever I really, truly, just do not understand someone's, like, behavior, I just assume it has something to do with sex. And I'm usually right.” (Blaire White, “The Furies of TikTok: I Am Very Afraid,” YouTube Video, Oct 13, 2022, 6:30. <https://youtu.be/gwxVAK7QYFE>). Or, for that matter, Natalie Wynn's tongue-in-cheek remark that “Transsexualism is a deviant sexual identity” (Wynn, “Cringe,” 32:24).

<sup>199</sup> Johnston, “On having a furry soul,” p.307.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p.307.

### *Dehumanization: queerness, Blackness and animality*

Much more problematically, however, and beyond mere puritanical disdain or contemptuous cringe, the question *Ain't I an animal?* may seem a gross inversion of the slavery abolitionist slogans *Am I not a man and a brother?*, *Am I not a woman and a sister?*, and of course, *Ain't I a woman?* – statements formulated as questions, but which in fact proclaimed the humanity that had been so thoroughly denied to generations of enslaved Black people.<sup>201</sup>

Mel Chen, in discussing the efficacy of furry/therian figurations in the project of problematizing animacy hierarchies, argues that

[...] limiting ourselves to reworking the philosophies of animal-human dependencies, or the ethological studies of a particular animal, or this or that human-animal relationship, carries certain risks: namely, the importing of historical racializations and queerings (or, indeed, imperial tropes) that subtend the very humans and animals under discussion.<sup>202</sup>

Similarly, Jessica Ison<sup>203</sup> critiques animal studies which attempt to attach *queer* to *animal*:

We need to consider the practical ramifications of such an extension of queer: Could it inadvertently marginalise those who inhabit the inheritance of queer bodies that historically have been expelled, confined, and discriminated against? [...] We can see queer animal studies trying to reimagine, recreate and indeed queer both animal and queer as a category. But in using the queer person to make this argument, they are perhaps replicating and inverting the way that queer theory has used the animal.<sup>204</sup>

Ison's main misgiving about any overlap between the fields of animal and queer studies is that they may end up merely co-opting each other, rather than drawing attention to their shared subjugation within environments dominated by necropolitical logic.<sup>205</sup>

Lillian Wolf's analysis of Juliana Huxtable's cow-woman is highly attuned to this necropolitical subjugation. Therian and furry communities, however, lack such a basis in necropolitics, however terrible our grounds in cringe culture may be. As Lupa, author of *A Field Guide to Otherkin*,<sup>206</sup> stated in an interview with Devin Proctor: "There's not like a huge bunch of people getting disowned by their families for being Otherkin. There's not legislation against Otherkin. There's individual bullying and there's 4chan, but nobody has gone and murdered somebody they were dating when they found out they were Otherkin."<sup>207</sup> Laverne Cox, on the other hand,

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<sup>201</sup> Haraway, "Ecce Homo," p.91.

<sup>202</sup> Chen, *Animacies*, p.106.

<sup>203</sup> Jessica Ison, *Queer and Animal Provocations: Homonormativity, Animal Exploitation and Sexual Violence*, Lexington Books, 2025.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.

<sup>206</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*, Megalithica Books, 2007. *Otherkin* is an umbrella term for individuals who identify in some way as a nonhuman being. This usually includes therians, and usually does not include furies.

<sup>207</sup> Lupa, interviewed by Proctor, "On Being Non-Human," p.117.

is able to invoke the spirit of Sojourner Truth because of her own specific positionality not just as trans, but as a Black transgender woman. That I myself, as a white trans woman, now call upon these figures and movements – specifically to interface with the overwhelmingly white<sup>208</sup> furry and therian communities I find myself invested in – requires a careful and explicit acknowledgement on my part of the context of Black subjugation. Crucially, politics like those of the trans bovine must always remain cautious, as Abraham Weil argues, of any equation between Blackness and animality:

I argue that it is critical to intervene in discourses that associate blackness with animality in ways that devalue black lives by forcefully withdrawing their humanness precisely because such a move both makes the human exceptional (placing the human above the animal and all else) and because it reinvests in animacy hierarchies that place both the human and animal in the fungible state of exception. The analytic of trans\*, which in some spaces has taken up animality as a point of disruption in these very devaluing and delegitimizing politics, must also recognize these moves as risky and be attendant to the ways in which blackness and the animal are choreographed. Thus, linking trans\* to animality is always already associated with blackness. Black and trans\* are not disparate categories when invoking animacy, but rather are inextricably linked.<sup>209</sup>

Thus, in order to arrive at a trans bovine politics that includes the capacity to engage with the difficult themes that exist presently within the discourses of real-life transspecies actors, the various contributions and interpretations of necropolitical theory must somehow find their way into any analysis of cringe economies. This is why I have explicitly opted for the contentious phrasing *Ain't I animal?*, which preserves the cultural and historical grounds of the originary Black<sup>210</sup> and trans questions. Moreover, it preserves the tension between a Black interrogation of humanity that is directly paired with an affirmation of that same humanity, and a therian rejection of humanity in favor of an affirmation of animality. I also wish to argue that therian thinking and practice are far removed from productions of the other-than-human as being anything *less* than human, since therians are in fact

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<sup>208</sup> Furscience, "1.2 Ethnicity." <https://furscience.com/research-findings/demographics/1-2-ethnicity/>

<sup>209</sup> Abraham Weil, "Trans\*versal Animacies and the Mattering of Black Trans\* Political Life," in: *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, May 2017, eds. Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szczygielska and Anthony Clair Wagner, pp.191-202; republished in book form as *Tranimacies: Intimate Links Between Animal and Trans\* Studies*, eds. Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>210</sup> As an aside, I am also drawn to this phrasing because it highlights a shared trouble of authorship and specificity between Sojourner Truth and the trans bovine. Haraway has described this ubiquitous transcription of Truth's words and question as "the falsely specific, imagined language that represented the 'universal' language of slaves to the literate abolitionist public, [...] the language that has come down to us as Sojourner Truth's 'authentic' words." (Haraway, "Ecce Homo," p.97). This is a language that Sojourner Truth, in fact, almost certainly did not speak. For Haraway, such a generalization of Truth's words "sneaks the masterful unmarked categories in through the back door in the guise of the specific, which is made to be not disruptive or deconstructive, but typical." (Haraway, "Ecce Homo," p.97). The trans bovine as a lolcow similarly struggles with such issues of translation, especially through the heavy editing and decontextualization which their words suffer in online cringe environments, rendering every trans bovine into a fungible lolcow rather than a unique creature.

deeply respectful of the animal figures of their theriotypes. It is only within cringe economies that trans bovines are forcefully de-animated, and may thus be instrumentalized in the subsequent (necropolitical) de-animation of Black and trans actors. Weil argues that “it is not the rhetorical use of the animal, per se, that justifies analogous placement of the black or trans\* human and animal on the auction block but rather (in both cases) it is their forced *inanimacy* that renders them available for sale and slaughter.”<sup>211</sup>

### ***Corporeal affirmation***

It is precisely this forced de-animation that makes many a therian into a lolcow. Devin Proctor argues that “the central problem for the Otherkin is not that therians identify as other-than-human, but that their bodies do not match that identification.”<sup>212</sup> For most of my readers, a statement such as “I can speak, I live in a city and wear clothes and sleep in a bed – am I not an animal?” will seem a perfectly logical claim to make in the context of evolutionary science, which tells us that all humans are of course animals – of the species *homo sapiens*. Yet, ironically, therian claims to animality, to being *this* specific animal, an animal of a *different species* than human, are much more problematic. When the therian asks “Am I not animal?,” the subtext is understood as: “I sometimes walk on hands and feet, I wear a mask and an easily detachable prosthetic tail, and I meet up with my pack six times a year to run and play in the forest – am I not a wolf?” Here, regardless of whether the therian question “Ain’t I an animal?” can meaningfully *interrogate* the category of animal, and regardless of any misgivings one might have about the therian choice to affirm animality rather than humanity, we might question whether therians can even *affirm* the category of animal – considering that neither the subtext of the therian question, nor the therian’s own physicality, appear able to extend the category of their selected theriotype over to their human bodies. It might appear that herein lies a key difference between Truth’s question, and the therian’s question. Sojourner Truth seemed to be able to rhetorically list the critical markers that had historically excluded her from the category of *woman*: having done hard labor, having black skin, having suffered horrifically brutal treatment, having seen her children sold off into slavery – precisely because her body, even marked Black and female as it was, would still have been recognized by Truth’s audience as a shape and a voice which it must finally understand to belong to a woman; while a modern audience’s glance at a cow therian will merely reveal a human shape with some cow accessories.

However, for Katrine Smiet, Sojourner Truth’s question does *not* in fact “presume ‘womanhood’ as a given and stable category, into which Sojourner Truth – and with her, other marginalized women – are to be simply included[.]”<sup>213</sup> Rather, Truth’s question was necessary, precisely because her claim to womanhood and humanity was by no means self-evident to a contemporary audience on the sole basis of her

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<sup>211</sup> Weil, “Trans\*versal Animacies and the Mattering of Black Trans\* Political Life.”

<sup>212</sup> Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” p.4.

<sup>213</sup> Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, p.70.

bodily appearance. On the contrary, it was her body, marked as black and female, that was understood to dehumanize her. Truth's question was meaningful and productive precisely because it problematized the existence of any pre-given (physical) markers which need to be present before an affirmation of the category can take place, thus "work[ing] to expose the ideological character of the category 'woman' itself."<sup>214</sup> And so, in taking seriously the fundamental instability of the categories of woman and human, it is no more self-evident that Sojourner Truth (or any other women) are indeed women, than it is self-evident that therians are human.

### *Extra-corporeal affirmation*

Nonetheless, there are a wealth of difficulties to be found in the specifically therian claim to animality that arise from the therian's relative lack of attributes that might support their claim to the category of the non-human. For one, the *otherness* of any other animal species to humans is of a rather extreme degree, even for those of us who are used to thinking across alterities.<sup>215</sup> Another difficulty is that, unlike for transgender people, there are no technologies afforded to therians that could help them overcome the hurdle toward a possibility of *passing* (i.e. of being casually perceived) as their theriotype species, which would in turn make it sensible to pose the question *Am I not (this) animal* to a wider audience. Such a lack of transspecies embodiment does not, however, mean that therians do not transition in any material way. Proctor writes that, precisely because passing is unattainable in this manner, "the daily practice of Otherkinty is to align the relationship between identification and corporeality."<sup>216</sup> We should thus pay special attention to the "extra-corporeal means (i.e. Internet technologies) [required] to reach a place of negotiated balance."<sup>217</sup> Proctor calls this extra-corporeal practice of body-identity negotiation "open-bodied-ness."<sup>218</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, it is precisely this difficulty of passing that marks certain trans people as potential targets of harassment in cringe economies. For Proctor, the open-bodied-ness of therians should make them natural allies to those trans people who are, likewise, unable to easily resolve the tension between their identification and their physical body.<sup>219</sup> Proctor sees therian practice as "the most clear and extreme example of body-identity negotiation," and thus exceptionally well suited as a topic of study for those interested in the broader phenomenon of open-bodied identification.<sup>220</sup>

In this potential alliance between therians and non-passing trans people, both struggling for the perceived viability of open-bodied identification, I find a formally similar process as we have seen in the case of Sojourner Truth – even though we are now operating within a new set of relevant social institutions, historical context,

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Johnston, "On having a furry soul," p.302.

<sup>216</sup> Proctor, "On Being Non-Human," p.4.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p.28.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p.vii.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p.4.

discursive backdrop, and technologies. According to Katrine Smiet, “[Truth’s] speech called attention to differences among women, and challenged the focus on white and middle-class women’s concerns. Asking ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ Truth can thus also be understood to be asking: who is the normative subject of feminism?”<sup>221</sup> This time, however, there is no powerful existing, embedded category like that of *woman* to which transspecies actors can make claim. Thus we observe therians as not only problematizing the efficacy of visibility politics, but also posing a question: who is the normative subject of trans identification? In other words: *Am I not trans?*

## Ain’t I trans?

### *Species dysphoria*

Whether or not there is indeed a therian claim to transness is in itself contentious. Timothy Grivell, Helen Clegg and Elizabeth C. Roxburgh, in their 2014 survey *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Identity in the Therian Community*, found that “all participants experienced a discrepancy between how they felt on the inside and their physical body. Also, similar to many LGBT individuals, the participants identified a desire to ‘come out.’”<sup>222</sup> The authors also remarked that “one of the most salient experiences that therians and transgendered individuals have related to are the feelings of ‘being in the wrong body’ or species or gender dysmorphia.”<sup>223</sup> It is worth noting that the diagnostic terminology of “gender dysmorphia” (or more commonly “gender dysphoria,” the term used almost universally both by clinicians and within the transgender community itself) has supplanted here the earlier, highly stigmatizing and pathologizing concept of “gender identity disorder.”<sup>224</sup> Earlier researchers of therians such as Kathleen Gerbasi et al.,<sup>225</sup> writing in 2007 in the journal *Society & Animals*, still mirrored the then-prevailing terminology of “gender identity disorder” in their speculative “proposed construct” of “species identity disorder.” This was heavily critiqued, for example by Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, writing in 2011 in the same journal: “Species identity disorder is modeled on gender identity disorder, itself a highly controversial diagnosis that has

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<sup>221</sup> Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, p.2.

<sup>222</sup> Timothy Grivell, Helen Clegg and Elizabeth C. Roxburgh, “An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Identity in the Therian Community,” in: *Identity*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, 2014, pp.122.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p.131.

<sup>224</sup> For example, in the 2013 revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5): “*Gender dysphoria* is a new diagnostic class in DSM-5 and reflects a change in conceptualization of the disorder’s defining features by emphasizing the phenomenon of ‘gender incongruence’ rather than cross-gender identification per se, as was the case in DSM-IV gender identity disorder.” (American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition, American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.814). Furthermore: “The current term is more descriptive than the previous DSM-IV term *gender identity disorder* and focuses on dysphoria as the clinical problem, not identity per se.” (Ibid., p.451).

<sup>225</sup> Kathleen Gerbasi, Nicholas Paolone, Justin Higner, Laura Scaletta, Penny Bernstein, Samuel Conway and Adam Privitera, “Furries from A to Z (Anthropomorphism to Zoomorphism),” in: *Society & Animals*, Vol. 16, Issue 3, 2008, pp.197-222.

been criticized for pathologizing homosexuality and transgendered people.”<sup>226</sup> Natalie Bricker, whose analysis of Grivell et al., Gerbasi et al., and Probyn-Rapsey I have largely echoed here, concludes that “the findings of Grivell et al. seem to indicate that therians are able to cope with any discomfort they experience due to their nonhuman identities and function effectively in society. In sum, based on the little evidence available, it is inappropriate to label nonhuman identity as a disorder.”<sup>227</sup>

Lupa, author of *A Field Guide to Otherkin*,<sup>228</sup> ultimately stops identifying as therian, a departure motivated by her perception that the therian community was shifting away from *kinship with one’s theriotype* toward *identification as one’s theriotype*.<sup>229</sup> We may well question whether any move to consolidate open-bodied identification as transgender experience runs the risk of relegating trans practice and identity to a merely discursive realm. Jay Prosser, commenting on the state of academic thinking at the time of writing of his foundational work *Second Skins* (1998), noted: “queer theory has written of transitions as discursive but it has not explored the bodiliness of gendered crossings.”<sup>230</sup> As I will argue momentarily, I do not believe this to be of particular relevance when discussing therians; still, we can see how expanding the category of *trans* to include therians can lead to difficulties beyond purely normative accusations.

Devin Proctor argues that trans identification (even if imprecise) is useful as a conceptual tool which helps others understand therian experiences.<sup>231</sup> One of Grivell et al.’s interviewees, for example, noted how much easier it would be to be able to explain therianism as being akin to transgender, instead of being akin to furry.<sup>232</sup> Such a desire for recognition may also extend into the realm of research: therians frequently “see themselves as part of a long history of science’s vindication of previously ridiculous notions, stretching as far back as heliocentric theories to contemporary ideas about gender identity.”<sup>233</sup> Thus, where therian discourse and self-understanding rely on previously transgender-specific notions of “species dysphoria” and “wrong body” discourse, I argue that this in part has to do with the difficulty of finding speech that communicates the affective leap of therians across

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<sup>226</sup> Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, “Furries and the Limits of Species Identity Disorder: A Response to Gerbasi et al.,” in: *Society & Animals*, Vol. 19, Issue 3, 2011, p.294.

<sup>227</sup> Natalie Bricker, “Life Stories of Therianthropes: An Analysis of Nonhuman Identity in a Narrative Identity Model,” Senior thesis, Lake Forest College, 2016, p.17.

<sup>228</sup> Lupa, *A Field Guide to Otherkin*.

<sup>229</sup> “As time went on it felt more and more like it was people trying to literally prove that Otherkin exist in a literal manner in the same way that for example transgender people exist.” (Lupa, interviewed by Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” p.117).

<sup>230</sup> Prosser, *Second Skins*, p.6.

<sup>231</sup> Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” pp.260-261.

<sup>232</sup> Grivell, Clegg and Roxburgh, “An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Identity in the Therian Community,” pp.122.

<sup>233</sup> Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” p.260.

species in a manner that is (usually) not deemed physical, and has no hope of being effectively communicated as such to individuals outside of the subculture.

However, even as Proctor argues that open-bodied identification places therians in proximity to the struggles of many trans people, he also remarks that “Otherkinity is not quite animism,<sup>234</sup> is also not quite trans\* [...] this inability to place Otherkinity boggles people; it disturbs them to a point beyond anger, to disgust. They pretend to think it is funny, but instantly distance it as pathological and abnormal, claiming normalcy for themselves.”<sup>235</sup> As such, therians find themselves in a double bind. Their open-bodied identification is seen as cringe and weaponized in anti-trans rhetoric, even without any self-proclaimed proximity to transness. But when therians attempt to use trans language to make their own methodology more palatable, they open up new possible angles of ridicule for trans people, while additionally drawing the wrath of actors of transnormative harassment such as Blaire White.

### *On becoming with: kinship vs. identity*

A possible escape from such entanglements would be to adopt Lupa’s perspective, and stress identification *with* over identification *as*: to promote the development of therian techniques of kinship, while disavowing therian disidentification with humanity. Proctor observes that “identifying in a certain way does not fulfill the need that Lupa believes is at the heart of Otherkinity: a cultural yearning for the process of play that we in America have lost.”<sup>236</sup> As Lupa explains to Proctor:

In dominant American culture, we do not have a good way for adults to play. We have structured things like sports, but we don’t have more gentle curiosity type of play. And we’re basically expected, once you’re an adult you leave behind the things of childhood. ... And so we don’t have a place or a way to explore the concept of the other, including the sacred other. In Paganism we have that opportunity, at least on a temporary basis, we have the opportunity to go into meditation. We have the opportunity to go into an altered state of consciousness. We have the opportunity to invoke beings into ourselves. But we don’t have a way of saying ‘I am kin to the wolves’ or ‘I am the sister of water’ or ‘I feel a deep kinship with this mountain.’ We don’t have a way to speak of that. We don’t have a way to grieve when those things are lost.<sup>237</sup>

This *being kin* is precisely what Donna Haraway expressed as “becoming with,” and what Eliza Steinbock et al. mean by “thinking linking.”<sup>238</sup> We might then ask if therians need to be trans, or even transspecies, if we can already approach their alterity from the vantage point of this kinship. In transspecies literature the possibility

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<sup>234</sup> On the link between Otherkinity and animism, Proctor writes, in the abstract of this same paper: “Otherkin experience can be understood as a form of animism, yet it arises out of a post-Enlightenment paradigm that rejects the infrastructural elements needed for animist thought (e.g. magic, spirits, kinship with natural elements). The industrialized West simply does not have the cultural vocabulary to comprehend the virtuality that is animist experience. What it *does* have are the virtualities of language and of Internet technology.” (Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” p.vii).

<sup>235</sup> Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” p.53.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118.

<sup>237</sup> Lupa, interviewed by Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” p.118.

<sup>238</sup> Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, “Introduction: Thinking Linking.”

for relationality, in place of identity, is sometimes addressed through hyphenation of the word, as trans-species: “A little hyphen is perhaps too flimsy a thing to carry as much conceptual freight as we intend for it bear, but we think the hyphen matters a great deal, precisely because it marks the difference between the implied nominalism of ‘trans’ and the explicit relationality of ‘trans-,’ which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix.”<sup>239</sup> *Trans-* here is not a stable identity, but rather a practice that might yield valuable results when applied to a variety of previously bifurcated notions. The question *Ain’t I trans?* makes much more sense when we understand *trans* in this relational capacity. Certainly, such language centered on relationality might prove an effective figuration through which to dispel the hierarchy between the human and the nonhuman Other, while leaving some distance between transspecies and transgender.

### ***Open-bodied-ness: phantom and mental shifts***

Yet, the need for an addition of the hyphen for trans-species/transspecies is precisely such a site where we hash out which modes of transness are considered viable as matters of identity, rather than as “mere” relational practices. Also, as Myra Hird and Harlan Weaver have argued, these relational practices will likely be performed with a different level of skill by transgender (as opposed to cisgender) people, as our inhabiting of transness would provide us with a certain experience of practice at engaging with the Other in their alterities.<sup>240</sup> Something similar could be said for therians, precisely when we behold them and declare *Ecce bovo*, thus taking them at their word in their nonhuman (identifying *as*) animal form. Therians move beyond mere textual gender/species performativity, precisely because this allows them to attend to their desire *beyond* the textual in their continuous struggle with the mismatch between self and body – a desire which carries within it a deference to an unreachable physical transformation. Jay Johnston argues that in their sorrow over this impossibility – i.e. in their species dysphoria – therians retain a sharp focus on that which sets them apart from their theriotype.<sup>241</sup> Proctor observes that this species dysphoria often manifests as what therians call a “*phantom shift*, because of its similarity to ‘phantom limb syndrome’ [...] the sensory perception of a body part that is not physically there”<sup>242</sup> – specifically, *supernumerary* phantom limbs that have never existed on the physical human body<sup>243</sup> but which are able to keep the same body *open* to experiences which it could otherwise not have, for example: “to have phantom wings is to remain open to all the actions of which wings alone are

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<sup>239</sup> Weil, “Trans\*versal Animacies and the Mattering of Black Trans\* Political Life,” p.330.

<sup>240</sup> Myra Hird and Harlan Weaver, “Interchanges,” in: *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, May 2017, eds. Eliza Steinbock, Marianna Szczygielska and Anthony Clair Wagner, pp.217-232; republished in book form as *Tranimacies: Intimate Links Between Animal and Trans\* Studies*, eds. Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, Routledge, 2021.

<sup>241</sup> Johnston, “On having a furry soul,” pp.306-307.

<sup>242</sup> Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” p.203.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.204-205.

capable.”<sup>244</sup> Another such shift, often experienced simultaneously with the phantom shift, is the *mental shift* by which therians adopt “the mentality and thought processes of the kintype.”<sup>245</sup> The therian’s open-bodied-ness thus facilitates their connection to animality without surrendering to a relativism in which critical differences between humans and their nonhuman theriotype species would be lost.<sup>246</sup> Their inability to fully become animal, outside of the ill-recognized methods of open-bodied identification, thus draws them to *critically interrogate* the category of animal at all times. In so doing, they also critique the boundaries of the category of *human*, but from a perspective very different to that of Sojourner Truth.

In “Ecce Homo,” Donna Haraway proposes the figure of Sojourner Truth as a counter-figuration to the Rational Man of Enlightenment humanism. According to Dana Luciano and Mel Chen, this Rational Man is but one of several anthropocentric figures problematized by the nonhuman turn.<sup>247</sup> Another figure, especially of interest to therians, is that of “the human as species”: “undergirded by evolutionary thought, [...] both aligned with and hierarchically differentiated from other forms of life.”<sup>248</sup> This figure “refer[s] at once to a putative ‘fact’ of (human) nature, the way things *are*, and an ideal, a standard to aspire to, the way things *should be*.”<sup>249</sup> Yet, as the authors of the nonhuman turn have pointed out, an increased understanding of the complexities of interspecies connections and of “the impersonal nature of affect, as opposed to the putatively personal implications of ‘emotion’”<sup>250</sup> leads to a “breaking down of beliefs in species individuality”<sup>251</sup> – and of the structuring of life through humanist fantasies of exceptionalism, built upon a misguided conception of nature as *the way things unchangingly are*<sup>252</sup> – in favor of new and queer understandings of world-making.<sup>253</sup>

### ***Furries and therians as physical/virtual cyborgs***

The therian focus on methodologies of *identifying as* may allow for new productive behaviors and languages *outside* of models of strict species separation – even as the therian experience of dysphoria, in common with transgender people, provides therians with a *need* to inhabit, and thus *critically affirm*, the category of animal. Where transgender people simultaneously trouble and re-affirm gender through, for example, a cyborg inclusion of pharmacological machines into our bodies, Proctor sees therians as being able to breach the human/animal dichotomy using methods afforded to them through a cyborg breaching of physical/virtual dichotomies.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p.205.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., p.172.

<sup>246</sup> Johnston, “On having a furry soul,” pp.306-307.

<sup>247</sup> Luciano and Chen, “Has the Queer Ever Been Human,” pp.189-190.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p.190.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p.191.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p.191.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p.191.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., pp.190-192.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p.192.

<sup>254</sup> Proctor, “On Being Non-Human,” p.30.

*Digital avatars* are a standard practice within furry and therian spaces, expressed through a variety of media ranging from self-drawn or commissioned profile pictures, to archives of written lore about one's fursona or theriotype, to 3D-rendered avatars that are brought to life through the user's own bodily movements on virtual reality (VR) platforms. Proctor positions such practices on what he calls a "spectrum of virtuality,"<sup>255</sup> a "sliding situation of being-in-the-Internet, between poles of the corporeal and the digital."<sup>256</sup> If we consider therian practice as the most extreme case of open-bodied identification, then VR experiences provide the most extreme confusions of the physical/virtual boundary. Through full-body motion-capture systems, the user's body movements are directly translated into a social virtual world where users connect with each other.<sup>257</sup>

For furies, this provides opportunities for roleplay with little risk of the limitations of the physical body *breaking the spell*. For therians, it is a means of *being* their other-than-human selves. Accounts of therian VR usage also showcase how the virtual may bleed back into their corporeal bodies; for Proctor, therian experiences of phantom and mental shifts are, in and of themselves, moments where the virtual clearly expresses itself in the corporeal: "If avatar embodiment can be seen as corporeality asserting itself in techno-virtual space, then the Otherkin phenomenon of 'shifting' presents the opposite: virtuality imposing itself on/through the corporeal body."<sup>258</sup> Proctor describes such shifts as an "avatar embodiment"<sup>259</sup> in the traditional sense of the term within Hinduism as "a manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth; an incarnate divine teacher."<sup>260</sup> Therians are thus in an exceptional position of embodying both technological avatars and physical avatars of *animal souls*.<sup>261</sup> And – as the electronic avatars are approximations of the user's animal soul – wherever technology allows these users to creatively tweak the appearance and expressivity of their avatars, the inner animal may morph in tandem.<sup>262</sup> In this communication, the techno-virtual comes to be expressed in the corporeal – as the adaptations made to the techno-virtual are expressed in therian's mental and phantom shifts. Returning full circle to Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg, it is precisely in such expressions of high-tech culture that "it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine."<sup>263</sup>

For Jay Johnston, this aspect of therian practice calls into question any sharp distinction "between the 'real' and the 'imaginary'."<sup>264</sup> For Proctor, it further teaches

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., p.vii.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p.vii.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p.170.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p.56.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p.169.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p.171; Proctor quotes here the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word "avatar" and also references its etymology: Sanskrit *avatāra* (अवतार), literally *descent*.

<sup>261</sup> Proctor, "On Being Non-Human," p.171.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., pp.173-174.

<sup>263</sup> Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," p.177.

<sup>264</sup> Johnston, "On having a furry soul," p.296.

us that open-bodied identification of therians is, in fact, still very much embodied. Juliana Huxtable takes this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, arguing that there is in fact no meaningful conceptual difference between (virtual) claims of identity and transgender hormone replacement therapy, as both are simultaneously real and fantastical metaphors of the body:

For me, yes, a person is their gender identity before they start taking hormones, so hormones are just making a metaphor by taking flesh and pushing it towards a metaphor. Every movement, every gesture, every intonation of your voice, every turn of your head is an opportunity to define and radically shape or shift the presumed relationship between your body, your flesh and what others presume it should be or could be. So, there is not really a distinction between those two for me. When I say I write from my body, it does not mean I use my body as something isolated and separate from the larger questions of fantasy, history and performance, it's that the body is the avatar, and the avatar is as much in the data fields as the system it has come to represent.<sup>265</sup>

### **The trans bovine: conclusion**

Returning to my third sub-question: what might cringe transspecies actors, who are not directly interfacing with trans theory, nonetheless contribute to trans thinking? To answer this, I have brought forward the therian question *Ain't I animal?*, asking how this question might build upon historical claims to womanhood and humanity by Black and trans people who have historically been denied such a status. Following Sojourner Truth's famous question *Ain't I a woman?*, I have asked if therians might achieve their claim to animality through the question *Ain't I trans?*. Therians certainly demonstrate transitional practices towards an inhabited identity, and are indeed adversely affected by transnormative logics. This alone, however, is not enough to declare that therian practice inhabits the category of trans in any meaningful, political sense. Moreover, the claim to transness made by therians is more comparative than declarative: their question is not so much *Ain't I trans?*, but rather *Ain't I like trans?*. Still, I see therian practice as a real and embodied way of being transspecies, containing transitional methodologies supported by a nominal and ecstatic claim to *being animal*. What I have found is that it is in precisely the most cringeworthy therian claim of identifying as animal that we are presented with new ways of thinking trans – especially in the therian need to practice *becoming with* through extra-corporeal means. Trans in the context of their animality, therians are trans wolves, trans foxes, trans goats, trans porcupines, trans dogs, trans cats – and indeed trans bovines.

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<sup>265</sup> Huxtable and Spratley, "Play with Truth."

## CONCLUSION: TRANS BOVINE POLITICS

All of my hybrid animal actors have now entered the circus stage – the artful and satirical cow-woman, the decontextualized and dehumanized lolcow, and the techno-virtual transitory therian. Together, these figures make up my proposed figure of the trans bovine. With this figuration I wish to assert often overlooked qualities of the real-life actors animating my trans bovine figure. Building upon Eliza Steinbock et al.'s understanding of *trans* within their trans/animal/animacy synthesis of *tranimacies*, my figure of the *trans bovine* refers to beings: in transition, in (open-)bodily metamorphoses, who relate to their bodies through synthetic hormones and/or the absence of physical remedies to body/identity rifts, who are in conflict with Human, who resist and transgress clearly defined categories, who operate on the fringes of a taxon, who are on display/exhibit, who have come under a classificatory gaze, and who have a disputed stake in the visual politics of embodiment.<sup>266</sup> Though my hybrid actors most closely embody what I wish to communicate with this figuration, the casting as trans bovine can be extended to any groups and individuals who, in their desire to *become with* nonhuman Others, have found themselves involuntarily placed within normative cringe economies.

With my three figures so far neatly mapped out, each onto one chapter and one research sub-question, I will now have my figures speak out of turn and overlap to answer my main research question:

*What is the current position and possible contribution of cringe transspecies/transgender actors within broader trans discourse and theory, considering their frictions with transnormativity and their status as targets of ridicule and harassment?*

### **Sub-question #3: Trans bovines, trans figures?**

Through the figure of the trans bovine, I have asked whether the simple act of existing as a transspecies actor, with little or no knowledge of transspecies literature, allows for meaningful contribution to the theory and discourse within this field. To this end I have deployed Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg, to explore how groups such as therians/furries might be seen as breaching the human/animal dichotomy. What became further apparent in my research, was how furries/therians, in reaching toward their ontologies and identities, incorporate methods by which further cyborg dichotomies – between animal/machine, and between physical/virtual – are also called into question. I have argued that especially the open-bodiedness of therians may help confound anthropocentric projects through therian self-affirmation as

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<sup>266</sup> Here I am improvising a variation upon an inspiring quote which I cited verbatim earlier in this thesis: “[...] experiences and practices that include beings in transition, bodily metamorphoses, relating to your body through substances like hormones, resistance to and transgression of clearly defined categories, falling out of a taxon, being folded into the bio-medical-industrial complex, being on display/exhibit, coming under a classificatory gaze, and having a stake in visual politics of embodiment.” (Steinbock, Szczygielska and Wagner, “Introduction: Thinking Linking.”)

nonhuman, while also serving as a clear expression of a virtual-techno embodiment of a trans identity that crosses the species divide.

Yet, by no means do I wish to position therians' open-bodiedness somewhere at the apex of effective trans practices, and in that process, in the words of Jay Prosser, "discard transgender in looking for the next transgressive thing."<sup>267</sup> Such is the trap we might fall into when we measure the *worth* of a mode of existence for the politics of any agenda – be that agenda transphobic, transnormative, feminist, or post-modern. Although my rejection of the perception of trans bovines as merely frivolous creatures does, to some degree, stem from their potential to meaningfully add to trans and transspecies dialogues, the trans bovine is not merely a hypothetical synthesis of trans and animal. It is modeled after very real attempts by human animals to *become (with)* nonhuman animals. For Haraway, the task ahead is not some endless, gratuitous breaching of "the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized [which are already] all in question ideologically,"<sup>268</sup> but rather to grapple with how this complexification of the world is implicated in new and continued means of domination.<sup>269</sup>

### ***Sub-question #1: Trans(species) subjugation?***

This grappling with sites of subjugation shared between transspecies and transgender actors, as per my first research question, is precisely what is on display in the world of the cow-woman in Juliana Huxtable's "Interfertility Industrial Complex" – as a surreal caricature of present-day intersectional efforts, showing just how this subjugation might take place. The fictitious intersectional feminists it portrays deny any connection to the cow-woman and her transspecies nature, while the cow-woman, in turn, vigorously disavows any connection to transgender people. What is so fantastical about the world of the cow-woman is that precisely the impossibility of *physically becoming* cow has been overcome, allowing the cow-woman to convert her identification from an *open-bodied* dream to a much more readily visible kind of *bodied-ness* in her surgical "journey to quadruped."<sup>270</sup> In a utopian vision we might expect this to result in a closer kinship between transgender and transspecies actors. The parodic effect, which the impossibility of transspecies actors to meaningfully *pass* as a nonhuman species was feared to have on vulnerable transgender women, has been neutered, and there should be no more need for a scapegoat. Yet the gutter-press headline still reads: "GENETICALLY MODIFIED 'COW WOMAN' ATTACKS TRANS ACTIVISTS: 'I MAY BE PART COW, BUT I AM A BIOLOGICAL FEMALE!'"<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Prosser, *Second Skins*, p.203.

<sup>268</sup> Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," p.163.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p.163.

<sup>270</sup> Huxtable, untitled Instagram publicity post.

<sup>271</sup> Huxtable and Spauldings, *Interfertility Industrial Complex*.

I have incorporated the cow-woman as a critical node in my figuration of the trans bovine. Yet, she refuses to co-operate with my attempt to read her and her sibling bovines – lolcows, and particularly therians – as standing in the tradition of Sojourner Truth. I have argued that even as the question *Ain't I Animal?* problematically inverts the substance of Truth's claim, it nonetheless holds within it the possibility for a critical interrogation of the dichotomy between human and animal. Yet, paradoxically, even as the cow-woman's claim *I MAY BE PART COW, BUT I AM A BIOLOGICAL FEMALE!* reaffirms Sojourner Truth's own claim of womanhood, and even points to the cow-woman's differences from conventional womanhood – as most women are not human-cow hybrids – she nonetheless completely upends the logic of Truth's question. One marker that clues us in to this departure is the cow-woman's choice of an *exclamation mark* over a *question mark* at the end of her claim. Here she stands in stark contrast to the cow-woman's therian sisters, for whom the claim to transness is by no means a given; it is a soft, hopefully muttered thing; their question *Ain't I (like) trans?* posed not only to the audience, but to the members of the subculture itself. Both bell hooks<sup>272</sup> and Laverne Cox<sup>273</sup> have argued for a rephrasing of Truth's question without the question mark, in the formulation *Ain't I a woman*. Such a declarative phrasing, Katrine Smiet argues, would strengthen the rhetorical dimension of the claim, thus bolstering the critical affirmation that it may be able to achieve.<sup>274</sup> However, Smiet also contends that this declarative formulation may inadvertently undercut the interrogative aspects of Truth's statement.<sup>275</sup> Much more discordant, however, in my attempt of a read of trans bovines as feminist figures, is the cow-woman's total foreclosure of "non-biological females" from the category of woman; or rather, the foreclosure of a *femaleness* which does not adhere to the cow-woman's specific read of what constitutes a biological woman. Whereas the transgender body confounds biological sex as being a purely chromosomal matter, and so does not outright concede to a sex/gender dichotomy (wherein the former relates to biology and the latter to identity), the cow-woman, in her exclusion of transgender women, smothers such involved reads of trans biology – as well as any alliances which would have been possible through critical yet affirmative claims of the assumed biological grounds of womanhood. Though alliances between various expressions of surgically affirmed trans creatures might seem obvious, mere public visibility of these bodies guarantees nothing *but* that visibility. Even more damning, Huxtable argues that "the policing and the violence against trans people have a direct relationship to that increase in visibility. The people who gain visibility – those whom the media deem to be relatively 'passable' in one sense or another – end up being used as examples to police trans people generally."<sup>276</sup> Thus, as Lillian Wolf

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<sup>272</sup> Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, p.4.

<sup>273</sup> Bell hooks and Laverne Cox, "A Conversation with Laverne Cox," in: *Appalachian Heritage*, Vol. 43, No. 4, Fall 2015, pp. 24-40.

<sup>274</sup> Smiet, *Sojourner Truth and Intersectionality*, pp.72-75.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.72-75.

<sup>276</sup> Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable, "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility," in: *Trap Door*, eds. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton, MIT Press, 2017, p.42.

clearly saw, even though figures such as the cow-woman have the capacity to engage each other in new relations, these new relations are as likely to reproduce reified humanist discourses as they are to displace them. And so, beyond their mere existence, it is in their specific trans methodologies, and in their grappling with cringe economies, that trans bovines contribute to trans thinking.

### ***Sub-question #2: Lolcows, unfairly maligned?***

The issue that remains, as per my second sub-question, is whether certain marginalized actors are justified in refusing to associate themselves with cringe actors. And so, through my figure of the lolcow, I have asked whether or not trans bovines have been unfairly maligned in their possible tensions with transgender people, based on their status as cringe actors which would fuel anti-trans rhetoric.

Through an exploration of harassment forums, I have shown how the experience of cringe toward especially non-passing, trans-adjacent people may *appear* as an emotional guideline motivating a politics which privileges internal cohesion and the physical safety of trans women as a vulnerable category, at the unfortunate but acceptable expense of reducing other trans and trans-adjacent people to lolcows. However, building upon sociological studies of harassment in online forums, as well as Katherine Anne Schell's affect-based analysis of cringe, I have questioned whether accusations against non-passing trans and transspecies people can indeed claim to be primarily motivated by a genuine concern for the well-being of transgender people. I have argued that we might instead see these accusations as transnormative moral justifications which serve to cognitively reconcile internalized biases, obfuscate how these accusations serve to solidify one's own position in a community, and further add to ongoing narratives of mainstream transphobic discourse.

Once these transspecies figures have been reduced to lolcows, any exploration of the possibilities of trans desires becomes severely limited. In Huxtable's "interfertility industrial complex," all the beautiful complexities of the cow-woman's engagements with cattle and cattle farming are reduced to nothing once in public vision. She becomes subordinate to what Haraway names "control strategies [...] formulated in terms of rates, costs of constraints, degrees of freedom."<sup>277</sup> Systems in which "the privileged pathology affecting all kinds of components in this universe is stress – communications breakdown."<sup>278</sup> And so the cow-woman's viability for inclusion into queer feminist politics comes to be measured primarily through her ability to exchange, talk, and trade with the visibility politics of pre-existing, recognized modes of marginality – and without placing any undue stress on existing narratives. In our own world, wherever trans bovines are reduced to the contemptuous cringe they produce, they find themselves simultaneously troubling and fueling transnormative and homonormative rhetoric. Persisting in the face of "bad press" accusations, the

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<sup>277</sup> Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," p.163.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p.163.

trans bovine finds itself as a nexus point around which discussions about actors other than itself take place. Trans bovines are those who readily accept closeness to that from which distance is sought, and, in their crossings, are always at risk of themselves becoming the laughing stock, becoming the lolcow.

### *Furry transimacies in cringe economies*

As a tentatively final answer to my main research question: cringe transspecies/transgender individuals – here in the guise of my figure of the trans bovine – indeed do fulfil the dual role required by the methodology of feminist figuration: providing bold new possible ways of being, speaking about, and thinking *trans*; while also allowing us to interrogate reified normative trans feminist discourses through which trans bovines are marked first as frivolous and cringe, and subsequently as fungible. If there is one politics to be derived from my farm-menagerie thus situated within feminist discourses, then this is a politics of question marks!!! These will not be questions of categorical sorting into this or that queer category, but of which queer figurations and discourses the bovines may interface with. They will be questions of how and where these encounters may take place, and of what the privileged forms of communication will be. Of whether it will be a televised or a private affair. It will ask of these queer feminist discourses whether they interpret the signs broadcasted by trans bovines as problematic, as sources of stress for ongoing narratives. Whether they see in trans bovines a simultaneous rhetorical challenge and opportunity, or whether trans bovines and feminist discourses alike are ready to fit together into improvised and hopeful new couplings.

How individual instances of the trans bovine figure will perform in these communications is never a given. Yet, a trans bovine politics which seeks to include the entirety of its cross-species figure must hold within it a critique of the domineering logic of contemptuous cringe, *even* when the transspecies crossings and encounters of its ilk lack immediate political efficacy. It must critically affirm that it is of the same bovine stock that renders its kin laughable. Trans bovines are all those who pursue transspecies modes of existence, *both* frivolous *and* profound – profoundly frivolous, and frivolously profound.

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# TRANSBOVINE MANIFESTO

WE ARE TRANSBOVINES. WE REFUSE  
 TO BE NAMED AFTER THE COMMODITY  
 STOLEN FROM US. AS OUR SISTERS CRY OUT  
 AT THEIR MILKING IN THE AGRO-INDUSTRIAL  
 COMPLEX, SO DO WE REJECT ANY ATTEMPT  
 TO BE FARMED FOR LOL'S. WE REJECT  
 THE RENDERING OF OUR TRANSVERSAL  
 AFFECTS AS FACETIOUS. WE SPURN THE  
 USE OF OUR BODIES TO GENERATE  
 DEMERIT FOR OUR COMPOSITE PARTS, AS  
 BOVINE ANIMALS AND TRANS-HUMANS.  
 IF OUR VERY REAL BODIES MUST BE  
 IDOLS TO YOUR INTERSECTION BETWEEN  
 ANIMAL AND TRANSGENDERITY  
 THEN WE DEMAND A SHARE IN OUR  
 STARDOM. IF YOU MUST DRINK  
 THE MILK SECRETED FROM OUR  
 MAMMARY GLANDS, MEANT FOR THE  
 REARING OF OUR OFFSPRING,  
 THEN MAY THIS TASTE OF OUR  
 LIVES SHOCK YOU OUT OF YOUR  
 VIOLENT HUMANIST FANTASIES!!!

