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Toward a historiography of the lesbian transsexual, or the TERF's nightmare

Jules Gill-Peterson

Department of History, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

ABSTRACT

This essay asks after the possibility of making the transsexual lesbian signify as a historical mode of sexuality, as a contribution to an anti-TERF method in trans and lesbian studies. What logics of mid twentieth century gender and sexuality are responsible for the opacity of transsexual and transvestite lesbians prior to the 1970s, despite the ample evidence that desire between femmes played a central role in trans social life? To move towards such a historiography and method, the author considers two paradigmatically difficult cases. First, Louise Lawrence, a well-known trans women in the San Francisco Bay Area who transitioned entirely do-it-yourself in 1944, and whose long term relationship with a partner, Gay Elkins, is high opaque in the archival record. Second, the essay considers the compulsory heterosexuality embedded in the medical logic of transsexuality in the 1960s, arguing that the medical ontology of the transsexual vagina was itself dependent upon the avowal of its immediate and exclusive use for penetration by straight men, making transsexual lesbians implausible despite their evident existence.

KEYWORDS

Trans; lesbian; trans exclusionary feminism; historiography

…Every

decade is a new trans moment, the

first trans literature, the first talk

show interview, the first trans billionaire,

the first transsexual polemic, the first arrival

of trans arrival.

—Amy Marvin, "The First Trans Poem"

Don't stop me if you've heard this one before; it's sort of the point. A Hollywood actor comes out as trans. A big name, too. This time, his name is Elliot Page. The Internet goes wild. Then chimes in from Twitter one "Sister Outsider" (2020) who dares to invoke Audre Lorde to say: "I find

CONTACT Jules Gill-Peterson jgillpe1@jhu.edu Department of History, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

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it depressing how many young lesbians now feel that, because they do not perform or feel invested in conventional femininity, they can no longer be women. And so they shift from identifying as lesbian women to straight men. Compulsory heterosexuality all over again." The Internet goes wilder. The most direct and perhaps elegantly irreverent reply to this tweet employing the same medium comes from a friend of mine (Gordon, 2020), a few hours later: "wait terfs think Elliot Page transitioned to be straight? ahahahahahaha."

I don't come with jokes to relitigate the so-called "border wars" between lesbians and trans masculine people (Gill-Peterson, 2018, pp. 167–171), about which much ink has been spilled, both in the 1990s and more recently. What draws my attention is that the contest here, the ostensible opposition between *lesbian* and *trans* is not cleanly over "gender" or "woman"—whatever the relations or differences between those might be imagined to mean—but *sexuality*. The cited critique of the trans exclusionary "radical" feminist (TERF)'s hostility to Elliot Page concerns the comedy of their mistaking a trajectory from lesbian to trans man as being a product of what Adrienne Rich (1980) first termed "compulsory heterosexuality," a term forever caught in Rich's endorsement of Janice Raymond's transphobic magnum opus, *The Transsexual Empire* (1979).[1] As countless other tweets from the day Page came out exclaimed with glee, gay men, trans and non-trans alike, were practically placing bets (Urquhart, 2020) on just how gay Page might soon announce himself to be, aesthetically and/or romantically.

If the shallow content of the ostensible schism between *lesbian* and *trans* as imagined by the trans exclusionary speaker on Twitter is not gender so much as sexuality, it suggests that their referenced problem of "the compulsory" has yet to be adequately understood. What is the difference between being "forced" to appear heterosexual and being forced to assume a legible sexual and gender identity as distinct narratives of the self? The fallacy of assuming that trans men are all straight, or that social or medical transition is inextricable from a heterosexualizing process, is only one side of the coin of this logic. It is, strictly speaking, no less presumptuous to assume that Elliot Page will turn out to be gay. What really draws my attention to him is precisely this unfinished business of the incommensurability of sexuality and gender as enmeshed zones of trans experience, desire, and sociality that routinely transgress all systems of norms designed to discipline them. The TERF arrangement of this would be that the refusal to recognize transness as real ontologizes sexuality—in this case, lesbianism—and subjects it to attack by a heterosexuality that arrives as trans masculinity. However, there are a multitude of other epistemologically normative consequences to the increasingly rigid

separation of gender identity from sexual orientation (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Valentine, 2007) over the past half century. Indeed, the queer and trans taxonomies of the very same, though they arrive at different conclusions and politics by claiming Page as gay, awkwardly serve the same master discourse as the TERF: sexology's imperative to classify, sort, and separate (Amin, 2020). That is to say, the reply that trans men most certainly can be gay has to do with an ontologization of gender as distinct and autonomous from the domain of sexuality and desire. Same style, albeit different outcome.

Moreover, this essay is not about trans men. It's about the intellectual work to be done to explore a common reply to TERF anxieties that trans men will make lesbians obsolete: can we not talk instead about how so many trans women are lesbians, making transness as much an empirical *increase* to their ranks, rather than an existential threat? I submit the following hypothesis: that the trans lesbian has been made libelously implausible because the TERF historical imaginary, derived from the same sexological modernism as contemporary gay, lesbian, and trans taxonomies, has defined the historiography on this matter despite the empirical, historical reality of trans lesbians, which leads astray from sexology's boundaries. It is not helpful to rescue trans people as gay and lesbian to protect them from TERFs. The very demand to resolve narratives around *either* gender *or* sexuality, but never their obvious admixture, is a failure to think the historicity of trans people's sexualities.

Consider the predominant narrative of how *lesbian* and *trans* supposedly fell out of step. The initial feminist, queer, and trans historiography of the 1970s made Beth Elliott's harassment at the West Coast Lesbian Conference and Sandy Stone's firing from Olivia Records into something of definitive bookends for the parting ways of these two terms, a divorce that signifies the emergence of trans-exclusionary lesbianism and feminism as an enduring political problem. Only recently have historians like Finn Enke (2018) begun to question this consensus and look at the far messier enmeshment of trans women, trans lesbians, and non-trans lesbians found in the archive of these events. As Enke points out, scholars and community memory may have both acquiesced to the TERF account of the 1970s too quickly. The present writing concurs with Enke that this historiographical narrative is too simplistic and, what's more, confers far too much power on TERFs to have defined the category of lesbian. My question is somewhat different: what happened *before* 1970? The mid-century might serve to destabilize the ongoing power of TERFs in defining the category of lesbian to police womanhood—not because it proves that trans women and lesbians got along before the 1970s, but because an expanded historical frame beyond the 1970s questions the very notion that *trans* and *lesbian*

have any obvious relationship, adversarial or otherwise. In the face of a resurgent TERF movement that targets both trans men and trans women for their ostensible violations of the category of lesbian today, I seek to make the trans lesbian signify some more *as a sexuality* with a traction in the mid-century different than how it has been narrated since the 1970s. This I undertake as one entry in the broader project of elaborating an anti-TERF method for trans and lesbian studies. My guiding historical question is this: what logics of gender and sexuality in this period are responsible for the presumed and actual historical opacity of trans lesbians in the mid-century, despite the ample evidence that desire between women played a central role in trans social life?

To find an answer, I will consider two paradigmatically difficult cases, which don't scale to a representative argument but instead offer provocations for a longer study of mid-century trans lesbians. First, I will turn to Louise Lawrence, a well-known trans women in the San Francisco Bay Area who transitioned in 1944. I will survey the loud archival opacity of her relationship with a long-term, live-in female partner. Strangely, Lawrence has never been read as lesbian in terms of desire, affection, or companionate life (not to mention identity), much like the transvestites of her generation who are assumed to be straight (though even their self-professed heterosexuality, as we shall see, is rather oddly gay). Second, to spin the TERF claim about Elliot Page on its head by turning to trans *women*, I will turn to the compulsory heterosexuality embedded in the medical logic of transsexuality in the 1960s to argue that the medical ontology of the transsexual vagina was dependent upon the avowal of its expedient and exclusive use for penetration by straight men. Finally, I turn to the riddle of a footnote in Esther Newton's 1972 classic ethnography of female impersonators, *Mother Camp*: a rumor about a transsexual drag performer who became, against all norms, a lesbian.

My point, then, is not to suggest that trans lesbians "have always existed" or can be counted upon like any other category. Nor am I arguing that the 1970s was the moment of split after decades in which trans women and lesbians were more porous in their relationships. Rather, I am interested in a reading practice labile enough to engage the historical opacity of trans women's desires for one another as an anti-TERF method in the practice of trans history, transgender studies, and lesbian studies. A trans lesbian reading of women serves to destabilize the libelous and alarming assumptions upon which contemporary TERF rhetoric operates in weaponizing sexuality by ontologizing it. The continued dismissal of trans women as unable to be lesbians reflects the persistence of a kind of stubbornness one might call, for dramatic effect, *Raymondian*—as Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*

established the genre for TERF discourse as concerns the disqualification of the transsexual lesbian on the grounds that she is an imposter and avatar of male sexual violence.

Like the border wars, however, I have no interest in returning to Raymond's text or its legion of excellent critiques. Rather, I am stubbornly interested in the other side of its logic, or its impact through circulation: the constriction of the trans imagination. The pleasurable but vexed possibility that the trans lesbian lives hidden in plain sight decades *before* Raymond's polemic hit bookshelves is important in challenging TERFs not just on their terms, but on the internalization of their terms by trans people, trans studies, and trans-inclusive lesbian and feminist studies. What if the capacity to interpret the trans past as lesbian (where lesbian means less a consistent identity than a patterned mode of prohibited desire between women that might look other than how we define it today[2]) is limited not by a lack of evidence, but an internalization of the TERF imagination of history? If so, then the critical history of the lesbian transvestite and the lesbian transsexual carries force in the important tradition of the *Empire* striking back (Stone, 1992)—and perhaps poetically for this metaphor, from before the Empire came to power.

Her partner was gay

Louise Lawrence (b.1912), who transitioned entirely non-medically in 1944, was something of a fixture of the San Francisco Bay Area and California trans community by the 1950s. She is, for that reason, one of the rare non-transsexual women from the mid-century to occupy a significant place in trans historiography (Meyerowitz, 2002, pp. 185–187, 211, 318n74; Stryker, 2008, pp. 55–60; and Gill-Peterson, 2018, pp. 138–151, 203–206), both because of her community networks and, more centrally, her efforts to educate a generation of American sexologists, endocrinologists, surgeons, and psychiatrists who were founding the post World War II medical model of transsexuality. While Lawrence was not herself interested in medical transition or surgery, she developed a friendship with Christine Jorgensen, the most famous transsexual woman in the world in the 1950s, and cultivated relationships with major figures of the incipient trans medical and social scientific establishment, including Alfred Kinsey and Harry Benjamin (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p. 138).

What remains glaring in the archive of Lawrence's life is the rather loud case to be made that she was, in a way that we cannot precisely elucidate because of that archive's limitations, a lesbian. Or, perhaps it is better to say that transvestites like Lawrence, who did not take hormones, did not seek gender confirmation surgery, did not always live full time as women,

and were often content going by their birth names and male pronouns, are excessively heterosexualized in the historical imaginary. No doubt much of this has to do with the enduring impact of the sexological pathologization of cross-dressing and transvestism as sexual fetishes (as in Cauldwell & Haldeman-Julius, 1947). Yet the published sexological and psychiatric discourses that enveloped lives like hers were pallid in comparison to the sheer lesbianic richness of their circumstances. In her unpublished autobiography, Lawrence (1951) recalls first wearing her sister's clothing as child, for something approximating erotic gratification, and that her first sexual experience at age fourteen was with a man. But explicitly sexual events occupy no especial significance in the narrative, which makes much more of her obsessive "collecting clippings from magazines, newspapers, etc., that dealt with the subjects of female impersonation" (p. 11), and how "masquerading" led to her being arrested and sent to a Juvenile Hall (p. 19). From there, Lawrence had a girlfriend in high school and married an ostensibly straight woman in the early 1930s who later died from pneumonia (p. 52), before remarrying in 1941 to a woman named Montez, who divorced her in 1944 when she decided to transition (p. 61).

The interpretive efforts required to "straighten" out the possibilities for coding these modes of desire—a young cross-dressed girl with an older man, *or* a gay initiatory experience; a straight-passing husband to a wife with a secret life, *or* a Russian doll of cloaked femme desire for another femme—only becomes more herculean after Lawrence's divorce and transition. To support herself, Lawrence took a job in 1944 as a photographer in bars full of passing sailors, service people, and working class queer men and women. This led her "to go to Broadway in the afternoons and sit in the various bars in which I worked at night and make friends with the owners, bartenders and steady customers" (p. 114). When conversations at the bar "turned toward sex…and [they] frequently did," Lawrence recalled that she "would try to kid my way out of it as quietly as possible and most of the time I succeeded" (p. 114). Tucked into this recollection is a brief hint of something more: "Whether any of these people (*there were girls as well as fellows*) knew or suspected anything about my true sex I was never certain for the subject was never brought up…I had become well established in the neighborhood and many of the 'regulars' knew me…knew me as Louise, that is" (p. 114, emphasis added). During this period and for decades afterwards, Lawrence also carried on an extensive dom/sub correspondence with other transvestites, playing out elaborate forced feminization, servant girl, and petticoat punishment fantasies through the mail. Lawrence, who was an aspiring artist, even drew her own erotic images of some of these scenes, all depicting high femmes.[3]

After spending six months in Los Angeles in 1947, Lawrence returned to San Francisco and moved in with a roommate named Donna, with whom she became close. "Our friends never seemed to think of me as anything but [Louise], a female," she explains in her autobiography, but "the fact that a number of these friends were homosexually inclined was immaterial for they never attempted to involve either Donna or myself in this activity" (no page number). These sorts of narrative disavowals, with self-aware displays of knowledge of specific forms of desire between women, ought to be contextualized in the genre and time period in which they appear. Although never published, Lawrence was writing an autobiography for which she likely had high hopes in humanizing and pressing the case of transvestite women for a public audience. Such mid-century trans autobiographies were heavily freighted with the representational burden of producing sympathetic accounts that balanced titillating glimpses into a strange world of deviance while not reinforcing the outcast status of the author. As a white, middle class woman, Lawrence lived at a great and desired distance from poorer, policed, politicized, and racialized trans people in the era.[4]

Lawrence's statements about lesbians and relationships between women are mostly consistent across the archival record of her life: while it is not hard to imagine a range of sexual or affectionate experiences hiding behind her ostensible disavowals of the same, the materials themselves cannot be made to speak any particular truth. Interestingly, however, a major segment of that archive is, as is more often the case in queer and trans history than is recognized, rather impersonal: paperwork relating to a house that Lawrence co-owned with a woman named Gay Elkins for decades beginning in the 1950s, which they managed and rented out to various tenants over the years.[5] The litany of rent receipts, work orders, business filings, tax documents, and municipal paperwork are the largest body of evidence that Elkins, a US Army nurse, was Lawrence's partner—*business* partner, that is.[6] Whether they were more than just business partners requires some attentive reading to why it would appear so opaquely.

Quite unlike a pair of entrepreneurial women who banded together purely for financial reasons, Elkins would frequently travel with Lawrence, like when the two of them made a trip to Bloomington, Indiana in 1950 to visit Kinsey and tour his facilities. As part of that trip they also stopped in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and upstate New York to visit transvestite and transsexual friends.[7] When Elkins received orders from the Army in 1952, reassigning her to Japan for several years, the two decided that Lawrence would remain in San Francisco to manage the house.[8] Five years later, however, when Elkins was reassigned to Germany, Lawrence decided to go with her. In a letter to a friend, she related that "lo and behold, I am

now the proud possessor of a United States passport in the name of Louise Lawrence, with picture and all."[9] It was this passport that would drag Lawrence and Elkins' relationship into the limelight, for it led to Elkins being dishonorably discharged from the army, presumably on the grounds that she was in a homosexual relationship.[10] Apparently the State Department then reconsidered Lawrence's passport ex postfacto on the grounds that she had committed identity fraud in obtaining it as a woman. By some means this news had gotten back to the Army, where it was presumably a problem in that the State Department had, in first approving the passport, implicitly endorsed that Elkins was a homosexual. A year later, in 1958, Elkins won an appeal, allowing her to be retroactively honorably discharged with full veteran benefits. Likewise, the State Department reversed its decision and allowed Lawrence her passport as a woman, though the reasons why remain unclear. Elkins and Lawrence immediately began planning a trip to Europe, this time as civilians.[11] The effort to bureaucratically heterosexualize Lawrence and Elkins, as well as punish the latter for any whiff of lesbianism, failed.

The Cold War, McCarthyite investigation of Elkins and Lawrence is, despite its internal contradictions, the strongest case for naming their relationship as lesbian, since the US state recognized them as much in spite of itself (see Canaday, 2009 and Johnson, 2009), using the technicality of Lawrence's sex on her birth certificate as a kind of get out of jail free card for avoiding creating a precedent out of the legal appeal. Lawrence's own words remained consistently careful on the subject, although in a 1953 letter to another trans woman she relates that "for the past 5 or 6 years I have been living with a woman of my own age who is a nurse in the Army Nurse Corps with the rank of Captain." Explaining that Elkins was stationed in Japan at the time, Lawrence writes in an unmistakably romantic mid-century idiom, "I am keeping the home fires burning for her."[12]

What seems most plausible, then, is that the narrative constraints of transvestism, which equated cross-dressing without medical transition as a heterosexual fetish, and the very real and menacing politics of the Cold War closet, convinced Lawrence to keep her decades-long relationship with Elkins something of an open secret. It seemed to work, for when Susan Stryker conducted an oral history interview (1997a) with Don Lucas, who had been friendly with Lawrence and other trans women in the 1950s and 1960s, no mention was made of Elkins. When Stryker asked if Lucas had ever met "anybody male-to-female who identified themselves as a lesbian," Lucas replied immediately and definitively, "No" (p. 20). And when Stryker pressed on, asking if he remembered "talking with people about choices they made about whether they either were or weren't sexual," he also replied no (p. 20). "The sexual thing pretty much just wasn't there," he offered.

"They would talk about just the gender thing" (p. 20). When Stryker asked specifically about Lawrence, Lucas replied, "I never got any inkling that she was ever attracted to anybody sexually" (p. 20). So much for Gay Elkins. In reality, the extreme opacity of the archive around Lawrence's life is to blame here. One gay man's recollection of someone he knew decades earlier can hardly be taken as definitive on Lawrence's sexuality. To read her as lesbian in an opaque sense—which is to say, to read her as lesbian without deciding in advance that being a lesbian has to conform to a post Stonewall, out and proud model of visibility—is as far as the archive will allow. What Lawrence's sexuality meant to her, or Elkins, is irretrievable. But such a lesbian reading of Lawrence, relieved of the sexological imperative to know if "she really was or wasn't," is a far more accurate parsing of the extensive records of her and Elkins' home.

Did you hear the one about the transsexual vagina?

If the generation of midcentury transvestites like Lawrence had their desires and relationships cloaked by heterosexualizing fetish discourses and closeting regimes engendered by the Cold War, the notion of a transsexual lesbian proved even more difficult to imagine. Here, the bad faith deployment of "compulsory heterosexuality" by contemporary TERFs finds its pre 1970s undoing in a different kind of obligation: that the trans woman's vagina bear a medical ontology dependent upon penetration by a straight cis man's penis.

While avowed heterosexuality was a strict criterion for surgery in this era, the landmark clinical volume *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment* (1969)'s chapters on care after vaginoplasty make the penetrative imperative even more insistent. An entire chapter (Thompson, 1969) is devoted to the "vaginal form" necessary postsurgery to maintain the new vagina's shape and depth. Because this dilating device, made either of "balsa wood with a foam rubber sheathing, stockinette and plastic covering," or "lucite and silastic" plastics was meant to be left in for a number of weeks, it was typically attached to a harness that held it in place at the right depth (p. 323). Smaller, less bulky version of this girdle and panty system were given to women to take home with them once discharged from the hospital, where they would have to use them potentially for months, if not indefinitely. It is here that matters begin to slide, as the author notes that because "these patients are striving to be totally feminine," the goal of the surgeon should be to provide the most "appealing" dilator possible so that she will actually use it before finding a suitable replacement (p. 324). Leo Wollman (1969), a physician in New York City who saw trans women in the 1960s, makes that "replacement" unambiguous in the following chapter, writing: "A properly directed penis in heterosexual intercourse provides the most natural

means of dilation" (p. 335). (Conspicuously enough, Wollman then adds that "the physician who treats the postsurgical, sex-altered patient *should ideally be a man*" [335, emphasis added].) The vague category of female "sexual function," including the ability to orgasm exclusively from heterosexual penetration, was established by endocrinologist Harry Benjamin (1967, p. 119) as a major criterion for a "successful" surgery result. Benjamin attributed what he called "the *sex motive*" to this aspect of surgery: trans women, he explained, "love normal heterosexual men and want to be as normal a sexual partner to them as surgery and medicine can make them."

The worry on the other side of this insistence was that any lapsed or disingenuous heterosexual might be given to "promiscuity" and "prostitution," deviant categories associated with working class and racialized trans women. In 1967, Benjamin wrote of sex work as rather sensible in its allure from the point of view of any transsexual: "How much more can femininity be confirmed," he opined rhetorically, "than by having normal, heterosexual men again and again accept her as a woman, and even pay her for sex services?" (p. 123). Here the class and labor elements of transsexuality come into clearer view: heterosexuality was a narrative of class escape, of cleaning up one's act and living as a wife to avoid sex work. This normative possibility in the mid-century, from the trans feminine as a social position defined primarily by criminalized sex work, to the transsexual as a reformed, heterosexual subject, was immensely difficult to enforce and was the source of many rifts in tight-knit communities of trans women at the time (Heaney, 2017). In another oral history interview conducted by Susan Stryker (1997b), Aleshia Brevard Crenshaw, who worked as a female impersonator before accessing surgery through Benjamin in 1962, explained a vagina as nothing less than a gentrified escape out of "scuzzy, low, dirty dives" of San Francisco's notorious Tenderloin neighborhood (p. 31). While performing drag at the city's famous Finocchios club in the late 1950s, Crenshaw developed a reliance on heavy prescription drugs in the nightlife scene in the Tenderloin "until I met the man of my life, Hank," who asked her to get clean (p. 31). "And I also had surgery then," she explained, "I think at least partially because of Hank, that this was what life was about—a straight man who was willing to overlook what I had" and who could be her ticket out of the life of poor trans women, street queens, and sex workers, many of whom were women of color, unlike her (p. 31). "Very strange," she said of this later in her interview, "but very telling of how our social structure works. If you want to be a woman, you better have a man in tow" (p. 31)

This new maxim, enforced through narratives of class escape and backed by a flimsy medical discourse of "natural dilation," made the lesbian transsexual nothing less than a spectacular failure of new norms of

medicalization. For that reason, rumor was more often the genre in which the lesbian transsexual could appear, spectacularized and frowned upon, but a titillating possibility born of the fact that trans women most certainly did *not* actually need a straight man to maintain their vaginas. In her rich and now foundational ethnographic study of female impersonators and poor gay and trans femme people in the 1960s, *Mother Camp* (1979), Esther Newton corroborates in a footnote at one point "the provision that 'sex changes' should get out of gay life altogether and go straight" (p. 102). However, "the 'sex changes' do not always comply," she adds, recounting that some of her informants had heard of a "successful impersonator in Chicago" who had undergone gender confirmation surgery and was *still* performing as a drag queen, in flagrant violation of the industry's norms. What's more, adds Newton, "I also heard a persistent rumor that 'she' now liked to sleep with lesbians!" (p. 102).

This exclamation point from a closeted lesbian anthropologist, writing of "sex changes" and trans women using social scientific inverted commas around the pronoun "she," offers an object lesson to reading for lesbians in the pre 1970s trans past. They may have been plentiful, but they had every reason not to appear, and to closet themselves just like Newton and other non-trans lesbians in the era.

Conclusion: the emperor's new clothes

Louise Lawrence and the unnamed transsexual lesbian from *Mother Camp* are not historical evidence of the preponderance or demography of trans lesbians in the mid twentieth century, nor are they a corrective that restores lesbianness to a trans-inclusive identity. Rather, as two archival object lessons that require careful attention to regimes of opacity, closeting, and compulsory heterosexuality, they signal lesbian *as a reading practice* for the past, a way of destabilizing the historiography that fixes the relationship of *lesbian* to *trans* in the supposed conflicts of the early 1970s, as well as their sexological matrices. While *transvestite* and *transsexual woman* were matters of shifts in gender, the archive suggests that they were also matters of sexuality, of a mode of prohibited desire between women, and much richer worlds of erotics, sociality, and relationships than contemporary taxonomies separating gender and sexuality allow for—or that the most extreme misogynist theories of trans womanhood, such as sexologist Ray Blanchard's "autogynephilia" (see Moser, 2010) would dare admit.

As an anti-TERF method for reading the past, it is ultimately to the enduring, ahistorical fantasy of the always imperiled lesbian to which this essay's historical excursion is addressed. What has changed since the

mid-century is that trans men and trans children, not just trans lesbians, are now construed as existential threats to a lesbian womanhood most jealously policed and guarded by white, middle-class feminists. Yet the "unlikely bedfellows" (Bey et al., 2020) of these lesbians and feminists need to be brought into sharper relief. The United Kingdom High Court's 2020 decision barring trans children under sixteen from consenting to medical treatment with puberty blockers, the result of a coordinated, years-long libel campaign by British TERFs, has joined middle-class lesbian feminists and their apparent sympathizers—including author J.K. Rowling—to white supremacist, neo-fascists. Where the TERF ostensibly worries that young lesbians like Elliot Page are transitioning to become straight men, the fascist website the *Daily Stormer* put it this way in reference to him: "F to M Transgenderism is a Plot to Exterminate the White Race by Neutralizing Our Breeding Vessels" (quoted in Burns, 2020) In such an extremist political coalition, one which trans activists warn will result in a massive onslaught of legislative prohibitions, bans, and attacks on trans people of all genders, sexualities, and ages in the coming years, the urgency of invalidating the imperiled fantasy of the lesbian has become only more urgent. As one contribution to that project, a richer reading practice for trans lesbians prior in the past serves the purpose of denuding the TERF historical imaginary, defanging the threat that they have conjured for themselves and revealing the trans-exclusionary feminist to be the wearer of something like an Emperor's new clothes.

There is nothing particularly obsolete about lesbians if we take a non-sexological, historical point of view on the interfaces of trans and lesbian life since the 1950s, which are clearly many, if not tidy or unambiguous. While Louise Lawrence or the unnamed transsexual in *Mother Camp*'s "lesbianism" doesn't resolve into the scientific clarity—and political visibility—of a post Stonewall, out and consistent identity, that enigmatic quality might be taken up as an advantage, rather than liability. In lieu of the equation of visibility with political clout, a narrative to which trans femininity is not easily conscripted, and in concert with the well-developed queer critiques of sexual visibility (Tourmaline et al., 2017), we might note that becoming more visible has made trans lesbians the targets of TERF attack, rather than emancipated.

Notes

1. Rich's term is a loaded one to invoke in 2021, for on the one hand, her notion of the "lesbian continuum" suggests a framework for the historical inquiry at hand in this essay: that what is "lesbian" is not literally genital sexual acts, but a wider social system of affectional and companionate relationships between women. Yet, at the same time, Rich's work is increasingly read in the context of her sympathy and aid

for Janice Raymond's vicious transphobic work (Ira, 2020).

2. I am guided here by work in lesbian studies that stakes its unique place in the history of sexuality, including Jagose (2002). Of signal importance are Susan Potter's (2019) recent claim that "women's same-sex desires have been rendered knowable *by being coded, paradoxically, as invisible*, impossible, or secondary to other modes of erotic life," including heterosexuality (6), such that "lesbianism in this respect is not opposed to or distinct on heterosexuality—however much their everyday instantiations make them seem so" (p. 3).
3. Some of this dom/sub correspondence can be found in the Louise Lawrence Collection, Series 1B, Box 1, Folder 6, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN. The erotic drawings can be found in Louise Lawrence Collection, Series V, Box 7, Folders 1-2, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN.
4. On the class, race, and bourgeois politics of midcentury trans autobiography and their lingering effects, see Aizura (2018).
5. Louise Lawrence to Wilma, January 5, 1953, Louise Lawrence Collection, Series 1B, Box 1, Folder 11.
6. These materials can be found in the Louise Lawrence Collection, Series A, Box 1, Folder 5.
7. Louise Lawrence to Alfred Kinsey, November 16, 1950, Louise Lawrence Collection, Series 1B, Box 1, Folder 1, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN.
8. Louise Lawrence to Alfred Kinsey, August 11, 1952, Louise Lawrence Collection, Series 1B, Box 1, Folder 1, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN.
9. Louise Lawrence to Dr. Gebhard, October 15, 1957, Louise Lawrence Collection, Series 1B, Box 1, Folder 1, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN.
10. Louise Lawrence to Paul Gebhard, April 7, 1958, Louise Lawrence Collection, Series 1B, Box 1, Folder 1, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN.
11. Lawrence to Gebhard, June 11, 1958, Louise Lawrence Collection, Series 1B, Box 1, Folder 1, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN.
12. Lawrence to Wilma, January 5, 1953.

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Notes on contributor

Jules Gill-Peterson is an associate professor of History at Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of Histories of the Transgender Child (University of Minnesota Press, 2018) and a General Co-Editor of TSQ: Transgender Studies Quartely.

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