

# Reinvesting in the Illusions

## a close reading of *Detransition, Baby*

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### A Small Preamble

Trans cultural workers have a particular problem. Okay, a few, most of them not unique to us.<sup>1</sup> But here's one of them: our work rarely gets thoughtful, detailed, critical attention.

The cis press generally doesn't care to acknowledge us. When it does, it's mainly interested in looking through our work to scrutinize us ourselves and our lives. And when it actually does look at our work, it simply doesn't have the range to say much that's worthwhile.

And trans writers, whether in the cis press or on their own, almost never get past a felt imperative to be supportive of anything that another trans person manages to put out into the world. Or - same difference - the urge to nitpick or condemn. Either way, there's not much there to help us see what the range of possibilities is for trans cultural work.

So, as a try at modeling the close critical attention that I hope all of us get for our work, here is some close reading that tries to understand Torrey Peters' latest book, *Detransition, Baby*. It's a book that I've got a mixture of feelings about, the strongest of them being fascination. Despite deeply disliking almost every character in the novel, I found myself thinking about it a lot after I finished reading it, and wanting to understand the world it built and how it works. This is a try at doing that.

### What's in the basket

*Detransition, Baby* came out from a Random House imprint in 2020; it's the first major-press book (following two self-published novellas, among other things) by Torrey Peters, an Iowa Writers Program MFA. All of this puts it squarely in the mainstream of U.S. literary fiction, rather than within any project of autonomous trans publishing (as her novellas were).

I'm one social degree removed from Peters, through several different paths. We went to different fancy New England universities, at roughly the same time. Our circles of friends and acquaintances intersect. We don't live in the same trans Brooklyn, but our cities overlap enough for me to be deeply familiar with some of what she's drawn directly from life (party names; bars with and without pseudonyms; park topographies; etc.)<sup>2</sup>.

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- 1 One thing that's not a problem: no cultural work can exist without a web of conversations and relationships. As with much of my thinking about trans cultural work and trans politics, this piece rests on many hours of thinking and talking and arguing with Malcolm Rehberger and Milo (who also gave key advice on an earlier draft).
  - 2 Full disclosure: I may or may not be mentioned in *Detransition, Baby* in passing, depending on whether Peters thought something I wrote was an "outraged screed" (209). For the record, I'm fine with the description, in a tag yourself kinda way. You can find the screed itself as this first part of this zine: <https://meansof.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/on-conflict-and-abuse-text-only.pdf>.

I want to be quite clear about what I am and am not doing here. This feels necessary because of the problem I named at the very start: I'm not writing to support or condemn *Detransition, Baby*, and any other response to trans cultural work is going to be unfamiliar. And, to make matters worse, I'm writing about characters who I don't like at all, which will be pretty obvious from how I talk about them (and, I hope, justified - at least for folks who share my ethics and at least some of my politics - by my analysis).

This piece asks only one question: what is the world this book creates? And it sets out to answer it through the words on the page, and very little else. This may seem old-fashioned (any approach that named itself "the New Criticism" was going to wind up looking that way as soon as it went out of style) but I think it's a necessary first step towards any other kind of reading or analysis. I'm not trying for further analysis, though, just to understand the world of the novel as it's presented between the covers.<sup>3</sup>

I'm not asking **why** the novel creates this particular world, just **what** its internal world is. I find authorial intent consistently interesting as gossip, and occasionally useful for some kinds of analysis, but generally irrelevant to understanding what a book does within itself and how it does it. So I'm not going to say anything about what I or anyone else - including Peters - thinks Peters might be trying to do in *Detransition, Baby*, or about how it's being received<sup>4</sup>. I'm just going to talk about what I find on the page, from where I sit. My assumption is that everything in the text is meaningful, and I give Peters full credit for putting all of it in there, just as I take full responsibility for my own analysis of it.

I'm interested in how the book makes sense within itself: the shape and structures of the world it builds, how its characters and their social context are shown to function within that world, and the nitty-gritty of its characters' worldviews (which is a lot of how the book's world is revealed to us). This is a work of literary fiction, so (by convention) the facts of its world are the facts of ours, and how it makes active contact with them tells us things about what's going on inside it. And that's what I'm trying to explore and understand.

I am also interested in where the worldview the novel's characters hold appears in our own world. But that's where I'll end the piece, since it's an extension of my close reading rather than a part of it. And let me emphasize: that's about the characters' worldview - which is not "the message of the novel" (if such a thing even exists), not "the author's view" (which I have no idea about), not "what the novel advocates" (if it does any such thing), or anything else. Unearthing or inventing any of those things is not what I'm doing here.

Finally, I'm not interested in passing judgement on *Detransition, Baby*. Like anyone who reads a book, I have things I could say about the ways in which I did and didn't like it. One of them is that it tries to do some difficult formal things and succeeds remarkably well. It is not easy to keep a narrative flowing through three separate rotating narrative times; doing that and having all three timelines

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3 One starting point for further analysis could be a look at the novel's events in relation to its internal timeline: the book's "now" can be no later than 2019, but its "eight years ago" is likely earlier than 2011. Between eight and three years before the novel's "now", Amy has been fighting to establish a procedure-by-procedure precedent for FFS coverage with her private insurance company. That places her relationship with Reese in the period before Obamacare opened space for successful struggles for broader trans surgery access (both through Medicaid and private insurers that receive federal money), starting in 2014. So if "three years ago" is no later than 2014, the "now" corresponds to roughly 2016-17. Thanks to Mal & Milo for pointing out timeline things to me.

4 To be even more explicit: Until I completed this piece, I avoided reading or listening to interviews, reviews, or thinkpieces on the book, so that I wouldn't find myself working to prove or disprove ideas (including Peters') about the intentions behind it. I remain pretty blissfully ignorant of discussions about that side of things.

include flashbacks and flashforwards (often with multiple layers) requires a whole other level of craft. But, as I've said, this piece isn't about that; it's about trying to understand what's within the book.

So! What is the world this novel creates?

### Genre and its contentments

To me, *Detransition, Baby* (from here on, DB) is above all a tragicomedy of manners. What drives it is the set of constraints created by a specific social circle and its ethos: the double binds a particular social context puts the characters in, the conflicts it creates between them, the impossible tasks it assigns them, and the myths they devise to explain what's happening to them. One of the questions that I don't have an answer to is what kind of tragicomedy of manners the book thinks it is: does it think it's lovingly pointing to the foibles of the social circle it depicts, or does it see itself as a biting and caustic satire? There's something interesting to me in how it places itself so precisely on that line.<sup>5</sup>

That ambiguity is built in a very classical way - DB is just as attentive to the conventions of its genre as Peters' earlier novellas are to theirs, as disparate as peri-apocalyptic science fiction, moment-of-choice bildungsroman, and tragicomedy of manners may be. The novel's section-by-section rotation among its three protagonists and consistently precise and direct narration create a certain sleight of hand, where what seems to be an omniscient third-person narrator is in fact always seeing through the eyes of a specific character.

With characters as committed to specific forms of self-scrutiny as these protagonists, this creates some deep abysses. Take, for instance, this: "As Amy tensed her arms—the gestural prologue to a shouted *Come at me, bro!*—an expression of naked scorn came over Reese's face." (254) This is narration through Amy's eyes. What we are hearing in the inset phrase is Amy's fantasy of what she imagines Reese's facial expression means Reese is projecting into Amy's muscle movement as Amy braces herself against a coming attack. And even this is not what is happening in Amy's mind at the time: we're told that all of it is what she comes up with "in some future moment". (254) Amy's deep internalization of all of that fantasy - from the emotion she reads into Reese's face to the interpretation of her own tensing that she attributes to Reese - doesn't change the fact that every bit of it is, in fact, **her fantasy**, presented to us through her eyes only. We never do hear what Reese actually was thinking or feeling in that moment, and there is no indication that Amy ever asks her.

That collapse of individual perspective into seemingly objective narration is precisely the formal move that carries a tragicomedy of manners forward. It's also what makes DB so interesting to unpack, in very much the way that other tragicomedies of manners are, from Austen on down. A single unreliable first-person narrator can make a book simply a study of an individual - take Nabokov's *Lolita*, for instance, with its much-ignored first section warning the reader that Humbert, who narrates the rest of the book, is a manipulative liar. But with several perspectives (none entirely trustworthy; none explicitly labeled as such) flowing through a single narrative voice, you get the anatomy of the social space that brings them together.<sup>6</sup>

And indeed, DB can be such a classical tragicomedy of manners because its central characters live so determinedly in a single, tightly bounded social context (yes, including Katrina - I'll get there). As dissatisfied as they each may be with the social world they live in, they all choose to stay firmly within

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5 This ambiguity is pretty usual in the genre: think about the ways Austen or Brontë nod to the plantation slavery that funds the social worlds of their novels' British gentry, for example.

6 For the LitCrit geeks: it's classic "quasi-indirect discourse", in the ways that Bakhtin and Voloshinov write about it.

it. Other choices could be imaginable to them (even ones that wouldn't require the kind of bridge-burning leap that Maria Griffiths makes in Imogen Binnie's *Nevada*), and they certainly have the resources necessary to sustain them through such a change (unlike Click and the other central characters of Sassafra Lowrey's *Roving Pack*) - but they all choose to remain.<sup>7</sup>

### **The elephants in the room (or not)**

The central myth of the world of *Detransition, Baby* is presented to us twice, first by Reese (89), and then at far greater length by Ames, in his 5-page explanation of the "juvenile elephant" theory (99-104). For the two of them, and to some extent the novel as a whole, this myth is the explanation for their feeling of being adrift and unrooted in the world. For Ames and Reese, that adrift feeling defines the trans-ness of their lives, which they understand as "without obvious precedent" (Reese, 337), cut off from a past that could direct them in "how to actually live" (Ames, 99).

This theory is simple: it says that all the ills that afflict trans women stem from being "a lost generation" that has "no elders, no stable groups, no one to teach us" because the "older generations of trans women died of HIV, poverty, suicide, repression, or disappeared to... stealth lives" leaving only "scattered exhausted voices" behind. (101) It starts out claiming universalism - that what it describes is the best-case scenario, restricted to those "lucky enough to be white". (101) Both Ames and Reese walk it back (89, 102), however, saying it is only white trans women who form this "tribe of motherless women without survival or social skills". (103)

This mythic narrative is transparently absorbed from the 'Lost Generation of AIDS' narrative about gay male life, which was popular among young gay men (and, in particular, young gay trans men) writing about queer culture in the early 2010s.<sup>8</sup> One of the most striking things about it then was that it was often propagated by young gay men who had in fact received extensive mentoring and professional support from older queer cultural workers - especially lesbians, but also gay men and at times trans folks. That is not the case with Amy and Reese: we never see them exchange so much as a word with an older trans person in DB. But their myth is no more accurate an account than its gay male model. Yes: a huge number of trans women were among the thousands upon thousands murdered in the U.S. by medical neglect and the (still ongoing) state refusal to build a genuine public health response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. But, as with gay men, those losses have not led to some absolute generational absence or interruption.

There are trans women from every generation since Stonewall (and even before) alive, active, and easy to find today. Some founding figures, like Miss Major or Roz Kaveney, are high-profile in certain ways and may seem unapproachable. But (to speak only of what I've seen in NYC) many of the most visible, like Kate Bornstein, Cecilia Gentili, and Ceyenne Doroshow, actively cultivate approachability both in public appearances and by being Quite Online; others are simply ubiquitous on the dancefloors of Brooklyn. Many more, of course, are not in any way high-profile, simply showing up regularly at trans support groups, political meetings, cultural events, vigils, and benefit parties. And that's not even mentioning the slew of trans projects that are either specifically intergenerational (from theater groups to dinner parties) or focused on bringing together older trans people (with gay and lesbian elders or separately). Further, most of the major figures involved in shaping the contemporary U.S. trans social and political landscape are still around - because the seeds for it were sown in the wave of public trans

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7 I invoke these two trans novels because at the time of their publication they each received a similar kind of buzz to DB's, though on a smaller scale, since they weren't published by a "major" house.

8 I wrote about this myth of a "AIDS Queer Art Gap" for VisualAIDS in 2014 here: <https://visualaids.org/blog/to-fight-another-day-the-myth-of-the-aids-queer-artist-gap>

organizing and visibility that took place in the early-to-mid 1990s (the period when first AZT and then, slowly, antiretrovirals became widely available in the U.S.), and then cultivated in the late 90s and 00s by people now in their 40s and 50s. That's precisely why the loss of figures like Lorena Borjas and Monica Roberts last year have hit so hard - not because they're the last of a generation, but because **so many** of their contemporaries are present to grieve.

So what do we find if we look more closely at this fantasy of absence, understanding it as a fantasy?

One big part of it is an active refusal to connect across generations. This is explicitly stated. Ames says that his peers are "too angry and self-righteous to accept mothering anyway." (103) Reese says those younger than her "won't accept [mothering] if they realize what it is." (89) Both clearly include themselves among those who reject connections to older trans women. Indeed, the one time that older trans women appear (the trio of "forty-somethings" at the picnic), Reese assumes they are "just-out" - based on what, we do not know, since there is no indication she knows them or they know her - and therefore beneath her notice.

Another element is the forcible constriction of any form of intergenerational relationship (and, indeed, of connections across even the slightest differences in either clock-time or trans-time age) into a model of "mothering", as we've seen in the passages I've just quoted. This is the only language that Reese, Amy, or Ames ever use, revealing a stunningly limited imagination for the possibilities of such relationships. There is no space here for simple friendship, for mutual support and reciprocal learning across different experiences, for shared work on a common project, for political comradeship or artistic collaboration, for advice or guidance without the "explicit hierarchy" (89) (and, by implication, the coercive force) of motherhood. Any relationship, including ones between age-mates and functional peers like Reese and Thalia, must be pushed into this single model. And need I even point out that this is not only a straight model, but a model that the experience of many trans women with our families of origin - likely an overwhelming majority - reveals as a structure that breeds toxic relationships and enables abuse of many kinds?

And a third major part is the way that this fantasy racializes mothering in all the most familiar ways. Reese and Ames are quick (once challenged) to describe the "juvenile elephant" theory as only applicable to white women. This is despite the fact that the theory's alleged basis is the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which affected Black, indigenous, and Latina trans women much more than their white peers, for all the usual reasons of structural and institutional white supremacy. Nonetheless, both of them backpedal from their theory's supposed root cause to assure us that "the mother role still holds sway with the black and Latina girls adjacent to the ballroom world". (89)

This is a very familiar move, casting people of color as having more genuine, organic, and natural relationships than any white person could aspire to - a version of the 'noble savage' / 'close to nature' stereotype, repackaged as a supposed critique of white "entitlement" (89). As usual, this is coupled with a version of the matching 'barbaric savage' / 'undisciplined' stereotype: as well as "guidance and love", young trans women of color "need... firm talking-tos on occasion". (89) By contrast, the young white women who won't "accept mothering" apparently need no such thing. It is not accidental that within the overall structure of Ames' theory, this casts Black and brown women as pre-lapsarian, untraumatized elephants: simultaneously idealized and inhuman creatures who have "learned their place" (100) and stick to it. We're told to view them as model mothers and daughters - but the models Ames and Reese present look more like Mammy and Topsy the closer you look.

Along the way, these elements combine to evade any actual look at the specificities of ballroom house relationships. That isn't my world, so I don't have the knowledge to go very deep. But even a look at *Paris Is Burning*<sup>9</sup> will let you hear legendary mothers (Dorian Corey and Pepper LaBeija among them) and legendary children model and discuss what these roles are, making it very clear that they cannot be mapped onto straight motherhood and daughterhood in the ways Ames and Reese want them to. To point out only one of the more glaring examples: The straight mother/daughter relationship is permanent, fixed, and isolated, with the nuclear family (or single motherhood, understood as a defective variant) as its structure. So, in Reese's mind, Amy and Thalia will always be her children, and need have no particular relationship to each other. The ballroom role of mother or child exists in overlapping multiple relationships inside both the framework of the house and the larger structures of relation connecting different houses, and can change and evolve as people shift roles, move from place to place, or change houses, transforming their relationships without breaking them. Today's child may be tomorrow's co-mother, or the mother of another house. For Reese and Ames, however, a mother is a mother: the shared label is assumed to make the role identical.

The next question, of course, is what this myth, this fantasy, offers to those who choose to believe it - what makes it a compelling way of interpreting the world. But to get into that, we need to look at the social world DB creates around its characters, and at their strategies for navigating it.

### **Location, location, location**

So: what is the social context in which our protagonists live?

It is a class-bounded space, in very precise ways. DB cites a version of the standard quip about trans women's employment: "*So which of the three transsexual jobs do you do? Computer programmer, aesthetician, or prostitute?*" (54)<sup>10</sup> No aestheticians, however, appear in the novel. We see tech industry workers - but only the kind that can afford apartments on Prospect Park West or in Fort Greene, not the underpaid datacrunchers working overnight shifts on short contracts. We see sex workers - but mainly those whose sex work is a lucrative second job, whether they pair erotic and therapeutic massage (Iris) or sugar-baby arrangements and regular waged employment (Reese).

The repeated mentions of the comparative poverty of the one central character without a college degree, Reese, make it clear that she is to be seen as an outlier, economically. But that is only relative. She is far from economically precarious, even without the various kinds of transactional sex that give her substantial disposable income (either directly or by paying for her housing). While Reese has a three-digit bank account and cracked phone in her mid-20s (53), we see her move steadily up the ladder of New York City's service sector for the next decade: waitress to child care worker to front of the house at a PR firm. She avers that "money has always been a struggle for her" (169), but we see no evidence of that in the life we're shown. We see her insecurely housed in the earliest of the book's three timeframes, but as a result of an abusive sugar baby relationship, not poverty.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, we never see

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9 Really, though, you should check out the work of Michael Roberson, Marlon M. Bailey and other scholars from the ballroom world. Here's some Roberson: <https://artseverywhere.ca/projects/ballroom-freedom-school/>  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/michael\\_roberson\\_the\\_enduring\\_legacy\\_of\\_ballroom](https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_roberson_the_enduring_legacy_of_ballroom)

10 Mal pointed out to me that only a very few characters (neither one a protagonist) seem to have any of the equally canonical trans avocations: artist (Thalia and Tammi), activist (Ricky, the only named trans man in DB), and academic (now that we can get into grad schools in any numbers) The latter might better be glossed as 'public intellectual', but I can't resist alliteration - and the tertiary-education job market really is bad enough that 'academic' is more aspiration or avocation than career path.

11 To go a little deeper, as a New Yorker: Reese and Iris moved into an apartment in northern Greenpoint in the mid-to-late 2010s - after a solid fifteen years of gentrification in the neighborhood had already raised the floor for rent, especially in

her unable to eat out; she may be glad to be prevented, but she was willing to offer to pick up the entire tab for a party of six at a fancy dessert spot (295).

While as a waged worker Reese may **feel** stretched by comparison with salaried Amy and her corporate job, or with Thalia's family wealth, she is far from struggling. Her precarity is not a material reality; it's a rhetorical gesture. Katrina provides the balancing outlier in the other direction - she and her briefly-glimpsed cis friends are somewhat better off, but not more than we'd expect, given their access to more options for employment (real estate; the mixed new age wellness hustle of teaching yoga and hawking essential oils) and more possibilities for support through long-contract transactional sex (in its legalized form, marriage).

It is also a space that's racially bounded in very specific ways. It is a social circle that includes people of color, but only around the edges, with their distance from the center precisely differentiated in racialized ways. At the GLAAD awards, we see trans "actresses on a cable show, a couple of whom Reese knew glancingly". (167) Their race is never mentioned, but there are next to no television shows from the late 2010s besides *Pose* that had more than one trans woman in the cast, so we can safely guess they are Black and Latina. At the trans lady picnic, we glimpse Iris' acquaintance Felicity, "the pretty Latina girl who had somehow skateboarded there in a dazzlingly white dress". (72) And, most centrally, there is Katrina, who has to remind both Ames (102) and Reese (171) that she's not white, and whose cis friends fit the same barely-diverse profile as the trans characters' inner circle: white, with one other Asian woman. (286)

And, most importantly, this social context is almost entirely straight. I'm being very specific here: I don't mean heterosexual (though almost every central character of DB is that too<sup>12</sup>). I mean straight as a practice, defined in contrast to the original, political, meaning of 'queer', before it became an aesthetically spicier synonym for 'LGBT' (or, as we used to say, "LGmaybeBfakeT"). Straight, meaning people who conduct their intimate relationships (sexual, romantic, and otherwise) according to the standard codes of the dominant culture. Not just in making a rigorous distinction between "actual love" (Reese, 199) and lesser involvements, but in the permanence and exclusivity ascribed to "adult romantic love." (Ames, 15) Not just in those prioritized relationships being monogamous (in principle; rarely in practice, thus the need for the category of "cheating" (239, 250)) and aimed at cohabitation and coparenting, but in taking those limits and goals as assumptions that need no discussion, rather than decisions to actively make. Not in rejecting what Amy calls "switchier and kinkier" (244) sex, but in keeping its importance in their lives unspoken within the primary relationship, articulable only in involvements that are either transactional (Amy's visits to sex workers, 244-7; Reese with Stanley, 53-7) or otherwise outside the couple structure (Ames and Katrina's first hookup, 24; Reese with her cowboy, 8, 10).

This straightness is the only framework in which Ames' assessment of the sex that he and Katrina have been having makes sense: only deep within that paradigm is there any connection between "really good sex" and "buying property, or moving in together... [or] keeping the baby" conceived accidentally through bad planning (25).

### **Straightness as social practice**

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parts of the neighborhood - like hers - where few buildings are rent-stabilized.

- 12 Amy may be the only exception, depending on how we understand James' involvements with non-crossdressing men. I'm inclined to accept Amy's analysis that as James she "was not attracted to men... they were simply another feminizing accessory" (122), and read those involvements as not particularly about sexuality. That also means I don't have to take a position on James' gender, which makes me happy. Ames, of course, is heterosexual.

Above all, however, the marker in DB of what I mean by 'straight' is an absence of direct conversation and shared decisionmaking about the concrete practicalities of relationships. This deep straightness shows up all over the novel. It's most on the surface in the passages about Reese and Amy's sex life (for example: Reese on 118, 198-9, Amy on 113-4, 119, 152, 244), in which they never manage to talk about the sex itself and what is and isn't satisfying for them. But it's just as present in the conversations that Reese, Ames, and Katrina have about their possible parenting triad. Ames may be "brainstorming prodigiously" (272) but as soon as the possibility of actually discussing practicalities is broached, all three of them leap back from any real talk about "concrete logistics" (273) and Ames leads them off towards "abstract thoughts about parenting, and hypothetical solutions to their dilemma." (274) Even a part of the conversation that starts with a concrete example of a multiple-parent household doesn't lead to any hint that the trio could make a decision **together** about how much proximity to live in while co-parenting (273-4).

Similarly, when Reese and Katrina go to Buy Buy Baby, after Maya urges them to "get a jump-start on the real work of making [a family]" (275), they adeptly avoid any actual conversation about their different priorities (Coach baby shoes vs. unbranded wearable blankets, 276), the concrete emotional charge the situation carries ("the eroticism of motherhood" for Reese, 277), and even the one baby-registry item that brings them into direct conflict. The surface aspect of that issue, whether to put a crib on the list, is resolved (twice!) in the least communicative, most indirect - straightest - way possible. Reese "raises the bar-code scanner and pulls the trigger"; Katrina later "remove[s] the crib from their registry" on the store website. (280) The underlying question - how decisions about child-rearing will be made, and by who (and whether the three prospective parents do in fact "need consistency" (280)) - is addressed only through an unspoken and unchallenged reliance on the standard dominant-culture model: which is to say, it is not addressed at all.

It isn't just me who understands this lack of communication as straight. Reese and Amy explicitly and implicitly label the kinds of conversations they evade throughout DB as specifically lesbian. At the start of the baby-registry sequence I've just quoted, Reese "wonders whether, in proper lesbian fashion, they really ought to stop and process th[e] moment" of handholding when Katrina has for the first time "initiated any kind of intimate touch." (268) No such thing happens. Using only the coded term, while on the way to confront Reese about having resumed her involvement with Stanley, Amy thinks "*well, we shall sure as fuck emotionally process now.*" (243) They never do. While Reese and Amy's relationship is a lesbian one, neither of them misses an opportunity to avoid "processing", even when it is explicitly offered. (242-3) The closest approach we see them make, after Amy's wild ride on poppers, involves one dodge into abstraction after another: a refusal to name that "their sex had not been good" (Reese, 120); an only-vaguely-relevant explanation taken from a clinic sign (Amy, 120); and ultimately, a content-free gesture of comfort and non-specific understanding (Reese, 152). Neither of them follow up on the one step towards concrete specificity that appears (Amy, 120).

But the straightness isn't just on these structural levels. We see no sign from any significant character in DB of participation in queer aesthetics, expressive culture, or sexual economies. Reese cannot see the camp possibilities of taking "an elaborate selfie on a fake red carpet" (160) at an awards event for a notoriously useless organization whose fundraising gala is an occasion for straight celebrities to posture for their straight liberal fans. While Reese does use both Grindr and Tinder to chase "the most dramatic tachycardia of an affair she [can] find" (5) - always, so far as we know, with straight men (211, 319) - neither Amy nor Katrina seems even aware of cruising apps as a possible outlet for their sexual

frustrations.<sup>13</sup> And in the denouement, of course, we learn not only that Reese actively dislikes her homophonous beach, but that her preferred alternative is neither the adjacent Fort Tilden Park (beloved of crowd-hating queers) nor Fire Island (where one can combine gay luxury and empty beaches simply by walking westward from Cherry Grove) but the adamantly straight-marked generic "Long Island". (321, also 324)

Outside our central trio, Tammi makes her closest approach to a living appearance in the novel at a gig at St. Vitus, a primarily straight venue.

A small digression: it's interesting that St Vitus appears under its own name - unlike TNT, which is renamed Dynamite in DB - since it is perhaps best known to queer New Yorkers for booking the first U.S. appearances (in 2015) by a Norwegian black metal musician who brutally murdered Magne Andreassen for being a gay man, later describing the killing as "no big deal".<sup>14</sup> Those shows would have taken place roughly at the midpoint of DB's timeline (and likely closer to the novel's "now"); at the presumable start of the timeline, the venue was booking nazi-affiliated neo-darkwave bands<sup>15</sup>. St Vitus has certainly booked trans-fronted bands, and recently even the occasional overtly leftist project, but its owners have never made their stage unavailable to musicians affiliated with the far right (and the space seems particularly appealing to those - including trans women - who would explain away those affiliations<sup>16</sup>).

At Dynamite, we find the only other cultural worker to appear in the novel. But although she is performing in a gay venue, Thalia, unlike most of the real-life "Brooklyn queens" who "turned transsexual" in the so-called Tipping Point years, has "renounced [her] gay past". This may be why she is similarly unusual in finding the "desperately cute twinks" to be "sexually unavailable" to her (86). That is, if we believe Reese's account to reflect a friend's knowledge of Thalia's reality rather than an acquaintance's repetition of a self-deprecating rhetorical bit. If Thalia has in fact been having troubles getting laid on the party circuit, I'd suggest she try Grindr.

### **"Queer" as in what?**

The straightness of DB's protagonists and their social circles is, I think, the key to the novel. Not because it's at all hidden, but because the gap between it and the protagonists' desire to understand themselves as somehow "queer" is the key tension of the tragicomedy of manners.

Reese, and to a lesser degree Ames, constantly categorizes things in relation to queerness. "Hetero" and "straight" are the terms used to be dismissive of everything from the young cis women talking to detransitioned William (33) to Ames' behavior before pitching the co-parenting scheme to Reese (30) to Sebastian's cultural distance from U.S. norms (64). Similarly, both Reese and Katrina seize on terms from academic queer theorists to give themselves hope for their child-rearing futures: Reese with "queer temporality" (187-8); Katrina with "heteronormativity". (269) But the "straight" temporality that Reese is measuring herself against is a pure product of the "the financial ads" (188) and the tiny

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13 The place - and absence - of the online world in DB is fascinating, I'm not going to go any further into it here. I hope that Mal, who talked to me for a while about his thoughts on that and other aspects of the book while I was working on this piece, will write about it at some point.

14 <http://www.vh1.com/news/220695/bard-faust-eithun-martyrdoom-controversy/>

15 <https://www.facebook.com/AntifascistDarkwave/posts/262559140550315>

16 For more on this: here are two articles on the far right in these subcultural scenes - one a more historical account, one more personal - both from an extensive website that tracks far right bands and the ongoing struggles against their apologists: <http://www.whomakesthenazis.com/2011/06/far-right-tendencies-in-wave-and-gothic.html>; <http://www.whomakesthenazis.com/2010/11/what-ends-when-symbols-shatter-my-time.html>

part of her age-cohort with "employer-matched 401(k)s" (187), not the real world. In the world of actuality - our world (this isn't science fiction, after all, or even magical realism) - her temporal trajectory is entirely typical. The majority of New York City women who have children are over 30 when their first is born<sup>17</sup>; student and medical debt (neither of which Reese has) have made a non-working retirement into a myth for the vast majority of her generation. Similarly, the baby registry sequence shows us that while Katerina may find heteronormativity a useful concept to help her mother understand why she'd want to have more than one co-parent, that does not imply any weakening of her felt prerogative to make (and change at will) all the key child-rearing choices.

That gap between an abstracted, contentless identification as "queer" and an emphatically straight practice is most ostentatious at the various points where elements of queer and trans history come up, often through Reese's eyes. Every single time, the protagonist has the history wrong.

Reese: "Transgender is the name selected to recognize a vector of disease" and adopted for legibility to the CDC, who needed "a categorical name" to use in HIV/AIDS statistics in the 1980s. (306-7) No. Just no, on every detail. "Transgender" became widely used among (in current terminology) trans and non-binary people as an umbrella term in the early-to-mid 1990s, (with contentious debates, largely among trans women, continuing throughout the decade)<sup>18</sup>, and was only significantly later used by any substantial number of cis people. The CDC didn't even begin to collect data on trans people until much, much later - everyone in the entire range from secret crossdressers to proudly out trans women to "post-op transsexuals" living stealth were just "men who have sex with men" to them until well into the 2000s<sup>19</sup> (the word "transgender" first appears on their **current** official HIV/AIDS timeline under the events of 2011<sup>20</sup>).

Ames: "The generation [Amy] transitioned into" having "basically invented screaming online" (102). Trans women have been screaming online for as long as there has been a line to scream on<sup>21</sup>. Much of the debate over the use of "transgender", for example, took place in the always rancorous alt.transgendered newsgroup on Usenet (founded 1992), with some of the loudest voices being trans women who were in their 40s when James was born, and their 60s when Amy's egg cracked.

Amy: "Candy Darling? She was just some helpless languid blonde waiting around for a man to save her and make her famous." (217) Darling's stage and film career would be the envy of any 29-year-old actor - just show one her credits and ask them. And she was hardly waiting around when Warhol first encountered her: she was starring in a Jackie Curtis play, opposite Robert De Niro. And I won't even list the posthumous one-woman shows of her visual art that have been hung from the 1990s to the present.

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17 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/04/upshot/up-birth-age-gap.html>

18 Primarily between those seeking a term under which to build solidarity and mutual support across different relationships to medicalized transition and identity (both in everyday life and in organizing), and those committed to maintaining the divisions created by cis gatekeeping and differential access to healthcare. You can read that drama directly in the archive of the alt.transgendered Usenet group. Yes, this is the exact same division between self-proclaimed True (medical-gatekeeper-approved) Transsexuals and the rest of us that we see now. For an extensive and well-documented history of the term "transgender" across all its meanings, look here: <https://zagria.blogspot.com/2011/09/cross-gender-transgender-concepts-and.html>

19 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm>

20 <https://npin.cdc.gov/pages/hiv-and-aids-timeline>

21 And who invented that line? One of us. Mary Ann Horton, who connected Usenet and ARPAnet (and was the first mod ever), has as much responsibility as anyone for the invention of the internet as we know it.

Reese: "Femme" as a "nameless amalgamation of characteristics" that boils down into extreme territoriality tempered only by "barely functional political movements like 'femme solidarity' or 'femme4femme' relationships" (164-5). An excellent burlesque of the self-parodying phrase 'Highlander femme' that Reese refers to in passing, but one that seems to entirely miss the point of the self-parody. Which is, not to put too fine a point on it, adding a high camp epic dimension to how some people's diva fantasies lead to one of the few ways to do fem that's generally accepted among fems as bad for both yourself and others. And, of course, fem is a century-old, highly specific gendering and social position, with a politicized revival that began about thirty years ago - all of it copiously documented in widely available books. But I wrote about fem already this spring, so I won't go into that all here.<sup>22</sup>

And there's the "juvenile elephants" myth and its rewriting of recent trans and queer history, which brings these fictions (and more) together into a single framework.

These kinds of overt disconnects are the tip of the iceberg. As Reese puts it about "heteronormativity", the word "queer" in DB is "impossible to say aloud without first dunking [it] in a bath of irony." (269) She identifies queerness purely with this form of "cynicism" (269) - an aesthetic gesture that points at the possibility of living outside the enforced norms only to disavow it. The very idea that it might in reality be "freeing to just make up your own rules" strikes her as "the straightest... thing anyone had ever said." (294) Similarly, when Ames ironically invokes "queer liberation" in response to Reese's internalization of the idea that "women without children are silly whores" (179), the idea that women could - and should - **not** be treated that way doesn't even make it onto the table. How "everyone acts" in "any movie" (179), is a permanent, unchangeable truth - perhaps to be lamented, but only while it is accepted and internalized.

This is the world as we see it through all the protagonists' eyes: a cityscape where the idea of a different way to live cannot possibly have a concrete reality. Except, perhaps, as a shortcut to turning a series of workplace hook-ups into a viable long-term child-rearing partnership - a way of finessing the emotional bookkeeping for a heterosexual pairing that is not yet even a public couple. All the while insisting that "queer" means a foreclosure of alternative possibilities rather than a daily practice of living them.

### **Evasion and abstraction**

So what do these protagonists, this social circle, get from their imaginary queerness?

Primarily, a certain kind of politics-by-aesthetic-association. A part of that is certainly the dynamic that Reese observes in herself near the denouement, where "individuals fight personal battles with unnecessarily political weaponry" as she is about to do by invoking "the gentrification of queerness" (306). But we have to remember as we interpret that description that the "political" in that phrase is defined purely through Reese's eyes.

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22 My piece, "Our Own Words: Fem & Trans, Past & Future" is in McKenzie Wark's "trans | fem | aesthetics" issue of e-flux: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/117/387257/our-own-words-fem-trans-past-future/> You could also listen to these two panels: <https://brooklynrail.org/events/2020/12/07/isabel-sandoval-and-rosza-daniel-lang-levitsky-with-mckenzie-wark/> <https://www.facebook.com/blackfeministfuture/videos/734003250585606/> And the classic books on fem are: *The Persistent Desire: A Femme/Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (anthology); *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis (oral history - excerpt at <https://fashpow2015.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/weregoingtobelegends-bootsofleatherslippersofgold.pdf>); *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg (fiction - available at <http://www.lesliefeinberg.net/download/661>), *A Restricted Country* by Joan Nestle (fiction and biomythography).

And we have already been shown how Reese understands the material reality of "gentrification" that she goes on to turn into a metaphor and decry in *Katrina and Ames*: "Occasionally, Reese worries about the appearance of her living in Greenpoint—to live in Brooklyn and inhabit one of the few neighborhoods overwhelmingly inhabited by white people? It doesn't look good." (218)

For Reese, somehow, it is suspect to live in an area where her whiteness makes her presence **less** of a factor in the displacement of longtime residents, and it would look better to live as a new arrival in a Black or Latinx area where she would be directly part of a classic gentrification process of racialized mass displacement. She would worry less about appearances, she is telling us, in a situation where she could use some identity calculus to balance out her whiteness against her transness and claim a kind of mystic neutrality as her non-white neighbors got foreclosed on and evicted. What she can't even contemplate is the reality of a neighborhood where a handful of Poles who once owned buildings may be millionaires in Warsaw (218) but most remain as renters just like her - if mainly older, less well-off, and without the benefits of citizenship - and where both she and they are exposed to displacement pressure from the gentrification fronts closing in on them from the south and north.

More pervasively, though, what imaginary queerness enables for the central characters of *DB* is the approach to conflict shown in Reese's relationship to gentrification. Whenever our protagonists are faced with real tension, whether internal or external, they move to identify their way out of it. This starts from the earliest pages of the novel; I'll give that example in detail to illustrate the pattern.

Reese's very first presentation of her personal desire to be a mother comes with an assessment of the concrete reasons she hasn't acted on that desire. First, her relationship with Amy, which she describes with gleaming inaccuracy as full of "trust and boredom and stability" (9) rather than restlessness, infidelity, and mediocre sex. And second, the bureaucracy of adoption, dwelling on how the "stalwart respectability" of the apartment she shared with Amy posed no barrier (9), rather than her own resistance to taking an actual first step towards bringing an adopted child into her life (200-206). Rather than addressing any of this, Reese instead reframes her childless state as inevitable, through two jumps of identity-based abstraction. First, she appeals to her womanhood to make her situation "a problem for all women" and then to her trans identity, to make it "an aspirational problem" that trans women are "barred from" solving (9). These jumps deploy identity to make it possible for her to avoid dealing with the actual, fairly minor, obstacles to motherhood she faces. That is, in fact, pretty much all that these moves do.

Everything the "*Sex and the City Problem*" supposedly says about trans life is disproved by Reese herself and her social circle. "No jobs," says the stably-employed worker who seems to never have been unemployed or done illegal work<sup>23</sup>. "No lovers," says the woman who's just been waxing nostalgic for her five-year cohabitation and seems to have no difficulty finding a "dramatic tachycardia of an affair" (5) whenever she wants one. "No babies", says the person who refused to talk with an adoption agency actively seeking "trans and genderqueer foster homes" (201). No art in which trans women "sp[eak] for themselves", says the friend of a musician whose adoring cis fans will come hear her dj and rant at them if they can't come hear her sing her own music. (88) The invocation of identity is a way out of addressing her real difficulties - personal, interpersonal, and structural - rather than clarifying them, providing a path through them, or even accurately identifying them.

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23 Unlike Iris' in-call massage business, Reese's sex work lives purely in the 'open secret' realm of not-quite-illegal transactional sex, where the fuzziness of categories like sugar baby, kept woman, mistress, and affair provide a degree of safety (especially for white women who, like her, also have legitimate employment).

But this move isn't exclusive to trans identity. Illustrating once again how thoroughly the trio is part of the same social context, Katrina is just as adept at identifying her way out of things. At dessert with her cis friends and Reese, she deploys her newly unearthed "affinity for queerness" (294) to divert any pushback against her decision to have a child with a man she hasn't even introduced them to, and raise it with a trans co-parent she's just surprised them with. And earlier, at the GLAAD awards, she meets Reese identity-deployment for identity-deployment, each time matching an abstract trans experience of being blocked from parenthood with an equally abstract racialized one (170-1, 176-8).

That last example is perhaps the purest. What Katrina and Reese invoke are indeed genuine oppressive structural dynamics, that do indeed shape people's emotional responses. But none of them have to do with these particular people's actual experiences. Throughout the novel, we see both Reese and Katrina effusively encouraged towards motherhood (Reese, 69; Katrina, 290; the duo, 292), and hear no discouragement of either from any quarter. But for both of them, the first move in a situation where the actual tensions of their concrete situation could lead to open conflict is to shift immediately into abstraction, using identity as the hinge to get them there. This is not, as Reese suggests, an attempt at "playing Oppression Olympics" (171), where identities are ranked to establish who will thenceforth have the upper hand. Instead, it is a way for them to dissociate themselves as actual, specific people from what they want, what they fear, what they worry about - using identity to make tensions and conflicts be not about them, personally. It is identity as alibi.

### **Trans as alibi**

That identify-your-way-out-of-it mode is central to how being trans functions for the trans protagonists of DB. Being trans, for them, is largely a source of abstract generalizations and a way to abstract themselves out of their own experiences.

Take, for instance, Ames' description of what made "living as a trans woman just [seem] too fucking hard" to sustain: "I got beaten on the street and no one helped me." (98) When we finally arrive at that event, however, two things become clear, even as we see it exclusively through Amy's eyes. First of all, although no one intervenes in the two-punch fight (in which Amy strikes first), as soon as it is over a bystander approaches her. He not only offers help, he sticks around when she isn't yet ready to accept aid and then offers again, he listens to her when she tells him what kind of assistance she does and doesn't want, he suggests a nearby place for her to get what she needs, he walks her there, and he gives her reassuring (and accurate) advice - and Kleenex. (256-7) This isn't just the bare "help" that Ames later denies having received, it is exemplary behavior while offering and giving assistance. Second, the fight's relationship to Amy being trans is far from direct. Had she been a cis or trans man similarly confronting a lover after chasing her down with Stanley, it seems pretty clear that the scene would've gone identically. Had she been a cis woman, it would likely have depended on how butch she appeared to Stanley (and she might've been called a dyke rather than a faggot<sup>24</sup>).

Ames' account is perfectly tuned: it takes his actual experience and substitutes an abstract invocation of the social violence that targets some trans women<sup>25</sup>, mostly those whose lives resemble Amy's not at all, and bystanders' deadly inaction in the face of that violence<sup>26</sup> - and then calls this abstraction "the cold facts" of Amy's life. (98) By passing his experience through this abstracting (and distorting) lens to make it into an example of "*living as trans*" (98), he can then identify his way out of any concrete

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24 Even this degree of difference is hardly a certainty, though, as almost any dyke can testify.

25 Black, indigenous, and Latina trans women, to be specific, and street-based and low-rate sex workers above all.

26 The best-known NYC examples being the murders of Amanda Milan and Islan Nettles.

look at what did in fact lead to the fight with Stanley, absolving both himself and Reese of responsibility for the ways they conducted their relationship.

As we've seen with both Reese and Ames, part of how identifying-your-way-out-of-it works is through making gigantic abstracting statements about trans life that not only dissolve the concrete specifics of their own lives but pull in things that are at best incidentally related to being trans. Perhaps the most telling illustration of all this is the simplest. The trans analogue to the Bechdel Test needs to be renamed, but not changed<sup>27</sup>: do two trans characters have a conversation about something other than being trans? In DB, the answer depends what you think counts as about being trans, and what counts as a conversation. Are Iris and Reese's exchanges - summarized, not presented - about violent relationships about being trans? Is the conversation that ends with Reese deciding to move in with Amy about being trans? Is Ricky and Amy's talk about Reese - mostly a monologue by Ricky - about being trans? The fact that these are the closest possibilities I can point to makes a point that's not about the book as much as its protagonists: in their conversations and narrative perspectives, everything that conceivably can be is made to be about being trans.

And I do mean about **being** trans, in an abstract and essentialized way, rather than about living in the world as a trans woman. In order for everything to be about trans - for every situation to offer the escape hatch of identifying your way out of it - trans can only be an essence, and never a mundane everyday practice or an incidental fact. Understanding this lets us make sense of Ames' (and perhaps Amy's) distinction between 'being trans' and 'doing trans' (98-9). The former, the fully abstracted version of trans, is trans as a tool for identifying your way out of conflict and responsibility. It is eternal, regardless of how a person lives their life. The latter, the concrete version of trans, is according to Ames either dispensable or impossible. For him as an individual - as Amy - it consisted of "put[ting] up with the bullshit of gender in order to satisfy my sense of myself" (98), which he is willing and able to do without (apparently men, and perhaps all cis people, do not have or have to "put up with" gender<sup>28</sup>). On the collective level, 'doing trans' simply doesn't exist for him: "trans women... didn't know how to *do*.... [because] there's almost nothing out there on how to actually live." (99) This feeling of being adrift is much of what constitutes trans life for both trans protagonists. We hear similar things from Reese throughout DB. In its first and last pages, she invokes it through her "*Sex and the City Problem*" (9, 336); towards the end she conjures a vision identical to Ames' of a previous generation's "wounds [that] have never healed" (307), leaving her and her peers unmoored and directionless.

### **Not a rope, not a spear, not a tree, not a wall, not a snake**

This understanding of trans life as either an alibi or an emptiness is what the "juvenile elephant" myth sets out to explain, and to justify. It provides a framework that not only lends a certain guiding coherence to an assemblage of practices and fantasies - as any myth should - but extends specific social benefits to its believers. That's especially true for the the social circle of straight, white, economically stable trans people who created the myth, just as one would expect.

It offers a position of authority. If you've decided that you "don't really have trans elders" (167), you can then "have a sense of [yourselves] as trans elders" (63) as twenty-somethings, after less than a

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27 Especially since so much of the press response to recent trans fiction looks at it mainly through the handful of books put out by Topside Press (one in a series of vanity projects funded and then killed off by Tom Léger), rather than the decade of published fiction by trans women (including Torrey Peters' novellas) that have followed its short and much-hyped career, or the less-publicized work that preceded it.

28 A very common view, of course, and the basis for much anti-feminist and anti-trans thinking.

decade living a trans life. Which then makes you an authoritative voice to speak for all trans women. Including, of course, the actual elders you've declined to form relationships with or even acknowledge as alive and present. You can come up with all kinds of exciting 'new' ideas and teach them to younger trans people, and to the cis people around you, as Reese and Ames do throughout the novel, without even noticing (or, likely, knowing) that those same ideas were widespread in trans circles a decade, two decades, three decades ago. And, further, you don't have to reckon with the fact that those ideas were generally set aside almost as long ago, because they undermined the solidarity necessary for us to preserve each others' lives in a society that wants all of us dead. Here DB is remarkably true to real life, which has furnished all kinds of high-profile examples of this over the past few years - think of any of the much-praised New Trans Voices who've flashed across YouTube or Verso shortly after hatching.

It strengthens the possibilities for identifying your way out of things. By framing young white trans women as uniquely adrift - specifically in contrast to trans women of color and their (imagined) organic, undisturbed "mother relationships" (103) - it lets them use the bare fact of their trans identity to explain away lack of community, unkindness to those around them, denial of support to each other when in need, and all the resulting harms. They just can't help it! They're (un)socialized to be that way! How could they be expected to do differently? And asking them to try would be to dismiss their pain, if not their validity as trans people.

It allows them to center cis people and cis life patterns in their lives rather than working to connect with other trans people and build lives on our own terms. Reese describes the connection very explicitly: "The only people who have anything worthwhile to say about gender are divorced cis women... And, since I don't really have trans elders, divorced women are the only ones I think have anything to teach me, or who I care to teach in return." (167) This makes an offer of mutuality and partnership in learning to live that we never see Reese extend to any trans person in DB, including Amy. The same dynamic is visibly between both Amy and Ames and their only close friend we hear about, Jon (311-12). It makes divorced cis women not only a substitute for but an improvement over the supposedly vanished "elders... stable groups... matriarchs", who in this fantasy can only "teach us how to countenance pain. ...tell us what will be lost." (101)

Like Reese's interpretation of "queer temporality", this is based on some decidedly odd notions about cis straight people's lives. Who in the U.S. of the 2010s or 2020s considers divorce to destroy "the narratives given to them since girlhood" leaving "no plan to guide them"? (167) Hardly anyone, outside very limited (if influential) subcultures: mainly specific sects of devout christians. Half of marriages in the U.S. have ended in divorce ever since the late 1970s: a single lifelong marriage has not been a majority experience for not only the full lifetime of every central character in DB, but for their parents' entire adult lives, and for solidly half of their **grandparents'** lifetimes. Even television and movies have acknowledged divorce as a common - not to say expected - narrative for quite a few decades, despite constant christian right ranting about the sanctity of marriage (and the lingering effects of the Hays code).

It deepens lines of difference among trans women, allowing them freedom from any sense of mutual obligation or solidarity. This is most evident with racial lines. Ames and Reese both collapse all trans women of color into an fantasized version of the ballroom world as they imagine the organic "mothering" experienced there. Racialization of any kind becomes identical first with a single specific racialized subculture, and then through that lens a stereotype of deprivation: "girls whose families reject them young and early... seeking family in the ballroom scene". (89) And even though the central element of that fantasy could easily provide a space for connection across racial categorizations - of all

the trans characters we see, only trust-fund kid Thalia has any relationship with her family of origin - it is used only as a mark of irreducible difference: "That's not how it is with the white girls Reese knows." (89)

That vigorous assertion of an unbridgeable gap<sup>29</sup> - however apologetically it may be framed - is directly connected to the rejection of any involvement whatsoever in political organizing (or indeed any form of concrete collectivity). Despite repeated invocations of various characters' "political consciousness" (198), the only time we see trans organizing even referred to is in the climactic sequence at Riis Beach, where Reese "dissembles" rather than answer the implicit question about mutual responsibility she hears tucked within Ricky's patter about work he's been involved in. (323) Behind her dissembling, she poses her desire for motherhood as somehow opposed to involvement in trans politics, rather than a specific material desire that a collective response could address and help facilitate (as, of course, the black-led, explicitly pro-trans Reproductive Justice movement has for many years). When Reese said, earlier on, that "politics and practice parted paths at her *own* body" (198), she may have intended it only as a reflection on her relationship to plastic surgery, but it reads as much more far-reaching. If something has to do with her, in an unavoidably concrete way, for Reese it lies by definition outside the realm of any collective consideration or action.

### **The new trans liberalism**

I'll bring this long examination of DB to a close, as promised, with a note on the book's social world and the world we live in.

The central elements of the worldview of the social circle the novel's protagonists belong to - deeply straight life practices overlaid with imaginary queerness; being trans as an abstraction and essence; the identify-your-way-out-of-it approach to conflict; identity as an alibi more generally; centering cis norms rather than building trans lives on our own terms - are very visible in the current trans public sphere. They are at the core of the political innovation of the new trans liberalism ("innovation" here is not a term of praise, but a recognition that only recently has there emerged the critical mass of economically secure, largely white, trans people who could be the constituency for such a project).

This political project is very much the inheritor of the new gay liberalism of the 1980s, which preached the 'single-issue politics' of an equal right to become cannon-fodder and to evade the estate tax<sup>30</sup>, ignored workplace discrimination, reproductive justice, access to healthcare, and social & state violence - and abandoned any form of solidarity with trans people. One key difference is that the Reeses, Amys, and Amesos of the new trans liberalism are even better than their gay predecessors at using a rhetoric of freedom to throw other trans people under the bus. DB shows what that worldview looks like when the people it's harming are its own true believers; for a taste of what it looks like in more outwardly-directed forms, all you have to do is go on social media and look around.

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29 This is also the basic premise of the "allyship" framework, which is based on deploying abstractions to impose a permanent separation between self-declared "allies" and those they target for "support". For more on this, and the ways the "ally" model has weakened concrete practices of solidarity across difference within justice movements over the past twenty years, see: <https://meansof.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/against-allies-v5.3.pdf>

30 This is what the legal case celebrated as winning 'marriage equality' was actually about: a rich white woman's right to give **all** of her wealth to another rich white woman, rather than having some of it go to support social services that poor people might conceivably benefit from. People who aren't heterosexual (including the overwhelming majority of trans people) are disproportionately poor; this was a legal decision that materially hurt millions more queer and trans people than it helped.