

# Tough Breaks: Trans Rage and the Cultivation of Resilience

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*Countering hegemonic understandings of rage as a deleterious emotion, this article examines rage across specific sites of trans cultural production—the prison letters of CeCe McDonald and the durational performance art of Cassils—in order to argue that it is integral to trans survival and flourishing. Theorizing rage as a justified response to unlivable circumstances, a response that plays a key role in enabling trans subjects to detach from toxic relational dynamics in order to transition toward other forms of gendered subjectivity and intimate communality, I develop an account of what I call an “infrapolitical ethics of care” that indexes a web of communal practices that empathetically witness and amplify rage, as well as support subjects during and after moments of grappling with overwhelming negative affect. I draw on the work of trans, queer, and feminist theorists who have theorized the productivities of so-called “negative” affects, particularly Sara Ahmed’s work on willfulness and killing joy (2010, 2014), María Lugones’s writing on anger (2003), Judith Butler’s Spinozan reassessment of the vexed relations between self-preservation and self-destruction (2015), and the rich account of trans rage provided by Susan Stryker (1994).*

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Rage  
gives me back my body  
as its own fluid medium.

—Susan Stryker, “My Words to Viktor Frankenstein,” 252

Rage is equated by dominators with hysteria or insanity.

—María Lugones, “Hard-to-Handle Anger,” 111

## THE PRODUCTIVITY OF RAGE: THE WORK OF THE BREAK

Pop psychology would have us believe that anger is only a mask for sadness, a carapace protecting us from feeling the effects of a much deeper woundedness. It has

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been analyzed within psychotherapeutic literature as a form of “problem anger” (Eifert and Forsyth 2011; Pascual-Leone et al. 2013), and countless strategies have been developed in order to help folks therapeutically “manage” it. It tends to be analyzed in highly individuated terms, as a problem endemic to individuals, to be resolved—typically through a therapeutic relationship—at the level of the individual. The few social-scientific analyses that theorize rage as a social phenomenon tend to focus on the way it shapes majoritarian, hegemonic forms of subjectivity: that is, they analyze the rage of the privileged, the forms of rage driven by entitlement and characterized by intersections of xenophobia, racism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia (for a paradigmatic example, see Berry 1999).

Anger is, within these readings, that which protects the subject from experiencing the full psychic impact of trauma; it is a dissimulating mask that deflects attention away from profound hurt, that supports an idea of the subject as inviolable, impenetrable. It is a defense reaction that stands in the way of “true” healing, a roadblock on the way to recovery. We are told that one of the unfortunate aspects of anger is that it’s too often coupled with a conviction of moral righteousness, a righteousness that can be utilized to justify all manner of belligerent violence, all kinds of acting out and acting up. Anger is understood almost exclusively as a negative, deleterious emotion that is best worked through and then discarded; the possible resurgence of anger must be guarded against; if it does re-emerge, it should be prevented, contained.

I turn away from such culturally dominant articulations of rage and toward feminist philosophical re-evaluations of supposed “negative” affect because I seek a different way of interpreting anger, a different mode of understanding the phenomenon of rage. Contra popular understandings of the effects of rage, it offers a critical resource for minoritized subjects. Engaging the work of women of color feminist theorists and trans scholars, artists, and activists, this essay examines how rage is key to the survival of minoritized subjects; it is an energy that propels us toward more possible futures, an energy that encourages us to break those relationships that do not sustain us, that do not support our flourishing. Placing the artistic production of Cassils, a transmasculine, nonbinary durational performance artist, and the literary production of trans movement leader, intersectional feminist, and prison abolitionist CeCe McDonald into dialogue with feminist philosophies of anger, I explore how rage is transformative and world-building, not merely a negative affective force that compromises flourishing and impedes the cultivation of resilience.

Rage is an orienting affect (Ahmed 2006; 2010). It moves us. It is a repellent affect, meaning it scares away certain others and, in doing so, propels us as well. It is our vest of porcupine quills, that which makes us prickly, that which prevents proximity, deters the closeness of threatening forces. It is a kind of armor, shielding us from that which seeks to harm. It can form a force-field; it is a radiating affect that distances. This distancing can produce a small modicum of space for being that is less subject to trespass, less likely to be violated. Rage can make us seem unfriendly, unapproachable—it can deter less-than-welcome approaches. Being perceived as unfriendly can be an important mode of self-preservation, a way to inure ourselves in

relation to hostile publics, a way to inoculate ourselves against the emotional toxicity that is directed our way.

Rage happens. It happens to you. Is it welling up from within? Is it visited upon you, an exterior force you must grapple with? It feels overwhelming, excessive, too much. It leaves us short of breath. It leaves our rational capacities short-circuited. It is difficult to articulate. As María Lugones reminds us, it is hard-to-handle (Lugones 2003, 103). It happens when you sense the situation you inhabit is, in some significant way, inimical to your self-preservation, hostile to your survival. Minoritized subjects are so angry, it is said. So often angry. Why are we so upset? So depressed? So unhappy?

Sara Ahmed has painstakingly unpacked the normative cultural and political work these accusations of negative feeling do. They serve as a prelude to a lament about our failure to be pleased with the worldly conditions we encounter; we are told that others “just want us to be happy,” that our unhappiness is making them unhappy, that our anger is eroding the social and familial ties that bind. Ahmed calls this process “affective conversion” (Ahmed 2010, 45), and it is how minoritized subjects are made into killjoys. Bad feelings stick to us; once stuck, we become “affect aliens” (45): those beings not made happy by conventional causes of happiness, those beings who deviate from normativities, and in so deviating, pervert the normal, disturb the customs, rituals, and habits that shape dominant modes of sociality. This is how we become “unhappiness causes” (49): we convert “good feelings into bad” (49). We tell our uncle his joke is racist. We leave the family table when we’re consistently gendered incorrectly. We ask our loved ones to stop deadnaming us. We tell a transphobic street harasser to fuck off. We refuse eye contact with the stranger aggressively ogling us. We make eye contact with the stranger aggressively ogling us and sneer. We trouble others; we make trouble for others.

Rage helps us come unstuck, helps us find an exit from these troubling relations. Ahmed writes, throughout her oeuvre, of breaking points, limit points, moments of outspokenness and reaction that sever bonds, that transform—and often end—relationships. In her meditation on bearable lives—a reworking of Butler’s theorization of livable lives (Butler 2004)—she writes:

A bearable life is a life that can hold up, which can keep its shape or direction, in the face of what it is asked to endure. . . an unbearable life is a life which cannot be tolerated or endured, held up, held onto. The unbearable life “breaks” or “shatters” under the “too much” of what is being borne. . . when “it” is too much, things break, you reach a breaking point. (Ahmed 2017, 97)

Rage is what happens, sometimes, when “it”—the institutional, political, and interpersonal modes of relationality that shape your present—is too much. A moment of shattering, a moment of breaking.

A break can be a moment of mental “instability” (as in a psychotic break)—what I would prefer, rather, to understand as a moment of cognitive divergence. It can be a desirable reprieve from our quotidian reality (“I could really use a break”), or an

invective that names a statement or situation unrealistic, absurd, ridiculous (“give me a fucking break”). Importantly, a break can also be all three—or, perhaps, the three are not as distinct as we may tend to believe. Can we understand breaking as a phenomenon that partakes of each of these inflections of meaning, without necessarily imposing hard separations of sense among them?

Rage breaks things. Rage signals a break. Breaking leads us beyond rage. Rage enables a break.

Why do we break? I turn to Butler’s critical reappraisal of the Spinozan concept of the *conatus* as a way into thinking the *why* of the break. Spinoza uses the term *conatus* to name the desire to persist or persevere in one’s being—in other words, the desire to keep on living. The *conatus* is not a uniquely human trait, but one common to all things. Butler, too, has dealt throughout her career with questions of survival, particularly with the question of what makes life livable. Her interrogation of livability leads her to approach the *conatus* asking what conditions need to be met in order to desire to persist in existing. Put differently: when we desire to live, what is it that we desire?

Butler argues that, for Spinoza (as for her), selfhood is never self-contained, never ends at the border of the skin. Additionally, the fact that the *conatus* is driven by a *desire* for self-preservation means that it is always a more-than-individual matter: “the desire to live implicates desire in a matrix of life that may well, at least partially, deconstitute the ‘I’ who endeavors to live” (Butler 2015, 76). Clarifying, she writes that “to live means to participate in life, and life itself will be a term that equivocates between the ‘me’ and the ‘you,’ taking up both of us in its sweep and dispersion. Desiring life produces an *ek-stasis* in the midst of desire, a dependence on an externalization, something that is palpably not me, without which no perseverance is possible” (67). Self-preservation is fundamentally reliant on others. Survival is always collective. The desire to persist in one’s being is dependent on conditions that are in many ways external to the self. “The problematic of life,” she writes, “binds us to others in ways that turn out to be constitutive of who each of us singly is... [however], that singularity is never fully subsumed by that vexed form of sociality” (67).

I focus on self-preservation because I think it is at the heart of the matter when we’re considering trans rage. We feel rage and are transformed by rage whenever we sense, or are reminded, that the networks we rely on for survival are inimical to such survival. This sense precipitates loneliness, the feeling of being ontologically adrift, unmoored, homeless; it also, for many of us, produces suicidality or precedes suicide. Considerable social-science research has been undertaken in order to track the prevalence of suicidal ideation attempts among trans populations; a recent review of such studies reports ideation rates ranging from 9.2% to as high as 84% (McNeil, Ellis, and Eccles 2017, 341–42). However the numbers are crunched, it is clear that trans subjects engage in suicidal ideation and attempt suicide at rates that far outstrip those of cisgender populations, including cis lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations. It is also apparent that such high rates are significantly related to interpersonal, institutional, and systemic forms of discrimination, with “forced sex or rape, gender discrimination (being discriminated against due to one’s gender identity/presentation), and physical

gender victimization (being beaten or physically abused due to one's gender identity/presentation)" (Moody and Smith 2013, 740) all operating as independent predictors of attempted suicide. Correlatively, insulation from such forms of interpersonal and institutional violence—in the form of strong social-support systems and the existence of "reasons for living" (741)—is understood as a protective factor that mitigates such high rates of suicidality.

This research resonates with Butler's claim that the problem of suicidality arises not from within, but when the singularity that one finds extremely limited support within the "vexed form of sociality" one inhabits. It is not an individuated pathology, not the product of individual mental sickness. Rather, suicide—the phenomenon that seems, on the face of it, to fundamentally trouble the concept of the *conatus*—actually works to uphold this Spinozan/Butlerian understanding of the self as simultaneously singular and radically interdependent. If one's desire to persist involves a form of subjectivity that is unintelligible, persecuted, or condemned—though it causes no deleterious effect to others, though it does not actively intervene in the flourishing of others—one finds oneself simultaneously desiring to live and lacking the necessary supports to persist in doing so. This is how lives are rendered unlivable. This feeling—of life being or becoming impossible—is often, if not always, what produces suicidality. Sometimes, a break is followed by a suicide; but often, a break is a moment that enables a more livable life to be realized. We associate instability with breaks precisely because of this radical differential of possible aftermaths, precisely because of these high stakes. Breaks scare us—and others—for that reason. But our survival is radically dependent on these others; what happens during and after a break depends on the communal uptake such breaks receive: how they are witnessed and understood. If one breaks—if one keeps breaking—and is met only with criticism, pathology, censure, isolation, or institutionalization, the specter of suicide looms larger and larger.

The desire to live, Butler argues, is commensurable with the desire to live well. The *conatus* seeks augmentation, an expansion of potential (what Spinoza refers to as *potentia*, an increase in ability or capacity). It can be diminished in potential, as well, when it finds itself encumbered by sad passions, which also travel under the name of negative affect. Butler glosses Spinoza on this topic: "the *conatus* is augmented or diminished depending on whether one feels hatred or love, whether one lives with those with whom agreement is possible, or whether one lives with those with whom agreement is difficult, if not impossible" (Butler 2015, 67).

Which brings us back to the break.

We break to keep on living. We break when engulfed by sad passions, when living among entities intent on minimizing our capacities. To paraphrase Gilles Deleuze, it is always in the interest of authority to produce sad passions (Deleuze 1990, 242); sometimes, the institutions we are reliant upon—and family is always one of these institutions, whether chosen or blood, kith or kin—precipitate our breaking. One final quote from Butler:

it might be that the constituting relations have a certain pattern of breakage in them, that they actually constitute and break us at the same time.

This makes for a tentative or more definitive form of madness, to be sure. What does it mean to require what breaks you? If the dependency on those others was once a matter of survival and now continues to function psychically as a condition of survival (recalling and reinstituting that primary condition), then certain kinds of breaks will raise the question of whether the “I” can survive. Matters become more complex if one makes the break precisely in order to survive (breaking with what breaks you). In such situations, the “I” may undergo radically conflicting responses: as a consequence of its rupture with those formative relations, it will not survive; only with such a rupture does it now stand a chance to survive. (Butler 2015, 9–10)

Butler references survival quite literally here. Trans folks—youth, particularly, as well as those of us who are multiply marginalized—intimately understand the high price of severance from communities of origin, the slow death precipitated by our social and institutional illegibility and estrangement. So often, we must rely on relationships with people and institutions that interpret us as subhuman, or at the very least misrecognize us so profoundly that the “I” conjured in interaction barely resembles the “I” we understand ourselves to be. So many of us have faced this dilemma Butler references: we must break to survive, yet in that breaking our survival becomes compromised. Breaking with what breaks you is a risky matter; it puts one’s existence on the line. One might not survive the break, as one might lose the fundamental social and institutional supports that make life possible, yet one cannot survive without such a break if one’s interdependencies are embedded within socialities shaped by interpersonal and institutional transmisogyny and transphobia.

Rage often accompanies the break; importantly, it can operate both as a sense-making tool and an affective response that places one on the outer boundaries of sense. How rage is understood depends on the interpretive community of witnesses. Are there witnesses? Do they empathize with our rage? Does it resonate with them, producing what Teresa Brennan identifies as an “affective transfer” (Brennan 2004, 3), what Claudia Card calls “emotional echoing” (Card 1995)? Or does our rage appear to these witnesses as outsized, unfathomable, over-reactive? Is it illegible? Does it make a claim to authority to respect us? Does it demonstrate to a community of similarly marginalized folks that their experiences of rage are shared, legible, and legitimate?

Butler contends that the relational quandary produced by being both constituted and sustained (however poorly) by relations that break us produces a “tentative or more definitive form of madness, to be sure.” I don’t believe Butler is seeking to pathologize the concept of madness, here, but I want to press a little harder on the status of madness in relation to the break, accompanied by the work of María Lugones. In “Hard-to-Handle Anger,” a deeply self-reflexive essay committed to exploring the role of anger in the lives and work of women of color, she develops what I think of as a nonce taxonomy of anger (in Lugones 2003). Nonce taxonomies, as Eve Sedgwick conceives of them in *Epistemology of the Closet*, are tactically

developed from the lived experience of oppression as a means of “mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations” that shape the “human social landscape” (Sedgwick 1990, 23) of marginalized peoples. They are forms of categorization that are essential to our survival, though they are not necessarily intelligible or perceptible to dominant culture. Nonce taxonomies are also, often, stealth taxonomies. You understand them only if you need to understand them, only if your experience necessitates deviant and intricate forms of uncommon sense.

Theorizing from her felt experiences of anger and the wide range of responses they receive, Lugones produces a useful set of classifications that parse anger in relationship to its potential for politically resistant use. At the outset of this essay, she renders vivid a multiplicity of angers:

there is anger that is a transformation of fear; explosive anger that pushes or recognizes the limits of one’s possibilities in resistance to oppression; controlled anger that is measured because of one’s intent to communicate within the official world of sense; anger addressed to one’s peers in resistance; anger addressed to one’s peers in self-hatred; anger that isolates the resistant self in germination; anger that judges and demands respect; anger that challenges respectability. (Lugones 2003, 103)

We see, then, that anger is much more than an undesirable loss of control, an irrational form of overreaction. It can be productive; it can transform selves and situations in ways that are not exclusively negative. Anger, for Lugones, is not merely a symptom of pathology, nor an exclusively isolating phenomenon; it is often a sign of injustice, a semaphore that communicates effects of systemic and interpersonal maltreatment. In and through communication, it transforms social relations. In transforming social relations, it transforms us. Sometimes, as Stryker notes in her germinal “My Words to Viktor Frankenstein” (Stryker 1994), it gives us back our bodies and lives, steals them back and recuperates them from dominant systems of sense where they are illegible, dehumanized, and significantly maltreated, dominant systems of sense where we are understood as mad, insane, hysterical (importantly, dominant systems of sense operate in such a way that these terms carry a negative valence—they are not signs of cognitive divergence, but rather operate as indicators of pathology that become cause for scapegoating and shunning).

How anger communicates is, as I mentioned above, contingent on the interpretive community that bears witness. There is anger that is a bid for respectability within official modes of sense; this anger is usually tamed, a means of communicating displeasure to someone with more institutional power than you. There is anger that is displaced, that occurs within peer groups of similarly marginalized peoples: the externalization of internalized oppression, the transmutation of self-hatred into excoriation or judgment of others. There is anger that produces a rejection of others, that supports the desire to be alone: the kind of anger that pushes folks away, often to protect what Lugones, following Anzaldúa, understands as a “resistant self in germination” (Lugones 2003, 103; Anzaldúa 2012). A kind of cocooning anger. This is a form of transformative anger: it enables one to take a break, institutes some distancing

between oneself and harmful relationships that gives one the chance of healing, but also the possibility for becoming otherwise, for flourishing once one departs from abusive situations.

Another manifestation of transformative anger is “anger that challenges respectability” (Lugones 2003, 103). This anger rejects official worlds of sense wherein one’s being is pathologized, dehumanized, understood as dysfunctional, malformed, undesirable, wrong. This is a defiant anger, an anger that provides resources for working through internalized oppressions that manifest as self-hatred and self-abuse. When collectivized, such anger becomes protest. In order to become collectivized, this anger must resonate, must transfer affectively from one being to another. We witness it, we hear it out, and we feel it; we affirm it. We sometimes say, in these moments, in the spark of recognition that occurs when affect is made manifest in a way that meshes with one’s own, perhaps yet-to-be-articulated experiences, “I feel you.”

This is a casual way in which we index what Brennan conceptualized as the “transmission of affect,” which she understood as a process whereby “the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another” (Brennan 2004, 3). The transmission of affect troubles understandings of subjects as bounded and impermeable. If affect transmits through, travels between, and impacts other bodies, it means that our embodied, feeling selves are always co-constituted, co-corporeal. The transmission of anger between bodies in the form of the collectivization and sharing of a sense of rage—so often pathologized and criminalized—can be crucial to survival. It can help, to return to Butler, one move through the difficult process of “breaking with what breaks you,” demonstrating that one has company, that there are others who grasp the logic, significance, and impact of such ruptural moments.

Philosopher John Protevi reminds us that these transmissions of affect can also work to form what he calls “bodies politic” (Protevi 2009, 33). He develops this term in order to “capture the emergent—that is, embodied and embedded—character of subjectivity: the production, bypassing, and surpassing of subjectivity in the imbrications of somatic and social systems” (33); “bodies politic” refers to the affects that pass transversally between subjects, out of which political collectivities emerge. This occurs through the coordination of autonomous affective reactions, and this coordination is shaped by the “approving or disapproving reaction of others” (35), which subsequently “form patterns of acculturation by which we are gendered and racialized as well as attuned to gender, race, and other politically relevant categories” (35). What I’d like to suggest is that the kind of affective transfer that occurs when “anger that challenges respectability” resonates and travels between similarly minoritized subjects enables transformative world-making according to different, emergent patterns of acculturation. It is one way that minoritized subjects can become otherwise. When this kind of anger is collectively mobilized, it becomes a movement. Movement: that which shifts the horizon of possibility for minoritized subjects, that which makes other worlds, other ways of being, more possible. I am concerned primarily with



manifestations of transformative anger, and the role it plays in trans artistic and intellectual expression.

Transformative anger is often misinterpreted by dominant culture as illogical, irrational, “mad,” “insane.” Lugones highlights how accusations of madness work as a means of stigmatizing rage: a form of oppressive logic that interprets rage as madness, hysteria, or insanity. Lugones notes how this contributes to the mythologization of the anger of women of color as an “attitude” (Lugones 2003, 117) or “sickness.” This failure to understand anger as a legitimate, rational, and productive response to discrimination further entrenches the essentialized stereotype of the always hostile woman of color: the angry black woman, the fiery Latina, the Dragon Lady.

Trans and gender-nonconforming folks are, similarly, often accused of illness, pathology, unnaturalness, abnormality, and monstrosity for merely being open about ourselves. Any public display of negative affect—anger, rage, hostility, unwillingness—exacerbates these associations, and those of us who are multiply marginalized experience this even more intensely. A 2017 joint report of the Human Rights Campaign and the Trans People of Color Coalition, entitled “A Time to Act,” details that there were upwards of twenty-five trans homicides in 2017, and that “84% of them were people of color and 80% identified as women” (Human Rights Campaign 2017, 4). These statistics make exceedingly clear that when racialized feminine typologies merge with transphobic understandings of non-cis embodiment, the specter of death is brought near.

#### TOWARD AN INFRAPOLITICAL ETHICS OF CARE

CeCe McDonald’s prison letters, edited by Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley for publication in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, illuminate the high cost of rage for black trans women. McDonald was imprisoned for twenty-six months in the Hennepin County Jail Stillwater and St. Cloud facilities in Minnesota following an act of self-defense where she fought off a transphobic attacker, emerging with her life intact. Her letters, written from within what she calls the “concrete chaos” of prison life (McDonald 2017, 243), speak to us of the genesis of black trans rage, but also of the resilience and love that both motivates such rage and emerges in its wake.

In these letters, McDonald uses her story as an opportunity to reflect on the failure of the carceral state to address violence against women—all women, but especially trans women and women of color. She discusses the assumption of the police that the group of black queer and trans youth were the aggressors in the attack, writing “surely, for them, it had to have been the group of black kids who started all this drama” (258). This is not at all surprising; as Lugones reminds us, the racist, sexist typology of the irrationally angry black woman runs deep in official worlds of sense. In the imaginary of the arresting officers, we can safely assume it was compounded by assumptions about the supposedly endemic aggression and violence of black urban youth. McDonald’s conclusion, drawn from a lifetime of violence, shunning, scapegoating, with no viable institutional or legal means to redress this abuse, is this: given

her status as a trans woman of color, she would be foolish to believe that the state will protect her. The people who will save her life, who will make her life livable, are herself and her friends. In this environment, rage is a resource: it quite literally saves lives. Embracing her learned willingness to protect herself in the context of repeated bashings (which she recounts, in detail, in her letters), she reflects,

Street violence and transwomen go hand in hand, and I'm sure that if asked any transwoman can agree that most of her conflicts occurred outside of her dwelling. For me, all of the incidents that I've experienced were outside of the home. I, and most transwomen, have to deal with violence more often and at a higher rate than any cissexual person, so every day is a harder struggle, and the everyday things that a cissexual person can do with ease are a constant risk, even something as simple as taking public transportation. Street violence has affected me drastically, and I think—no, I know—that *if I never learned to assert myself that I would've never gained the courage to defend myself against those who have no respect or gratitude towards others in the world, I would have met my demise years ago.* (258; emphasis mine)

In situations of abuse, particularly those wherein calling the police only redoubles violence and injustice, an infrapolitical ethics of care is called for. By “infrapolitical ethics of care,” I mean a reliance on a community of friends to protect and defend one from violence, to witness and mirror one another's rage, in empathy, and to support one another during and after the breaking that accompanies rage. Infrapolitics, a concept developed by James C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, names the forms of resistance enacted by subordinate groups that don't tend to register on the radar of oppressors. It indexes “the circumspect struggles waged daily” that are, “like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum” (Scott 1990, 183). Infrapolitics takes many forms, very few of which register as conventional forms of political resistance. It is shaped by an attention to the forms of care that enable co-constituted, interdependent subjects to repair, rebuild, and cultivate resilience—whether that is housing someone after they've been ousted from the dwelling of their family of origin, cooking for someone in a moment where healing might be needed (post-surgical transition, in the context of an emotional crisis, or because someone is in danger of activist burnout), defending one's beloveds in the face of multivalent forms of violence, or simply empathetically listening to someone describe such forms of violence.

Crucially, Scott contends that infrapolitics “provides much of the cultural and structural underpinning of... more visible forms of political action” (184). By conjoining the term “infrapolitics” to “ethics of care,” I explicitly position care ethics—the embodied, person-to-person practices of assistance and support that foster capacities for personal and communal flourishing—as integral to political movement, in a way that disrupts any rending of the private (the ostensible realm of care) from the public (the ostensible realm of political action). In doing so, I build on the work of feminist care ethicists like Nel Noddings and Fiona Robison, who have argued for

the necessity of understanding care as a fundamental component not just of kin relations, but of public policy and international relations, thus disrupting the assumption that an ethic of care is limited to the domestic sphere (Robinson 1999; Noddings 2002). Somewhat differently, an infrapolitical ethics of care is located in excess of this binary. Rather, it is a form of care that circulates among a beloved community that enables both political resistance and intracommunal survival and resilience. It moves us beyond (sometimes troublingly neoliberal) understandings of “self-care” and into a terrain shaped by the recognition that caring, in the context of structural marginalization and systemic violence, must always be collective. An infrapolitical ethics of care is comprised of all of those phenomena that enable one to piece themselves together in the aftermath of a break, all those forms of caring labor, from attending to basic survival needs to generating, supporting, and co-elaborating continued reasons for living.

We see this ethic throughout trans and queer histories, from Stonewall to the uprising at Compton’s Cafeteria to the activism of Bash Back! and pink-bloc antifascist protesters. Maintaining one’s life sometimes comes down to the ability of a squad, crew, or clique to counteract street violence. We also see an infrapolitical ethics of care at work in the experiences of the New Jersey 4, the group the New York Post indicted as a “Lesbian Wolf Pack” who were imprisoned for self-defense when they fought back against a homophobic street attacker (Richie 2012, 12). We see it again in the phenomenon of the queer/trans DC gang documented in the film *Check It* (2017). Although certain actions undertaken in the name of this ethics might open the door to imprisonment and other forms of institutional abuse, particularly if one is racialized as nonwhite and thus subject to intensified forms of state, carceral, and administrative violence, they do make it more possible to emerge with one’s life. To put this differently: one of the central aspects of an infrapolitical ethics of care is to support vulnerable and traumatized persons in the context of a break: to witness, hold space for, and, when appropriate, amplify and intensify their anger, especially if this amplification serves the greater purpose of keeping one another alive. This is the precise opposite of shunning, wherein a break brought on by trauma is met with communal criticism and rejection, and especially distinct from the practice of calling the police in the hopes that they, or some other state actor, might successfully manage or mitigate a break. Sarah Schulman, in *Conflict is Not Abuse*, expounds on the importance of such practices of empathetic witnessing, writing, “nothing disrupts dehumanization more quickly than inviting someone over, looking into their eyes, hearing their voice, and listening” (Schulman 2016, 280). She positions this form of infrapolitical care as a communal responsibility shared between and among marginalized subjects, calling it the “duty of repair” (31).

Repair is essential to an infrapolitical ethics of care. It is crucial that that we support practices of healing and accountability as we move through and beyond breaks and aid one another in the process of envisioning and inhabiting more livable lives. Situating ethics infrapolitically and collectively, as something that happens among friends and parallel to, outside of, or beyond institutions, means that we assume responsibility for one another’s lives. It means that our support in the context of a

break should remain present in the aftermath of one; that we do our best to recognize, simultaneously, the possibilities that breaks enable and the vulnerability and precarity that is often exaggerated in their aftermath.

My thinking about infrapolitical ethics of care is derived from Butler's writing on "ethics under pressure" (Butler 2015, 63), which is a form of ethics that takes as central the idea that each one of us desires life, which means desiring the endless renegotiation of the social and political conditions that enable life. Within an ethics under pressure, bodies "incite one another to live" (89). It would seem, on the face of it, that rage has no place in an ethics under pressure, but rage is a manifestation of dealing with pressure and responding to trauma. Rage is what must be grappled with to come to a place wherein we incite one another to live; it is a manifestation of the *conatus*, of the drive to keep living, in and through conditions that seem inimical to our survival. Put differently, the desire to live well, to lead a life under conditions that support resilience and flourishing, sometimes manifests as rage. If we understand rage to be an extroverted response to forms of trauma that, when internalized, manifest as depression, this means that rage is closely allied to desire. Rage is a legitimate response to significant existential impediments, to roadblocks that minimize, circumscribe, and reduce one's possibilities, and it is a response that seeks to transform—and destroy—such impediments.

It is instructive to revisit Audre Lorde's writings on the anger experienced by women of color in response to the racism of white feminists, as what she says about anger illuminates the ties between rage and desire. This commentary resonates, as well, with Schulman's discussion of the "duty to repair" insofar as processing and working with anger is central to negotiating infrapolitical support, even—perhaps especially—in moments of conflict, dissension, and affective and communicative difficulty. Lorde situates her meditation on anger by highlighting that minoritized subjects engaged in social-justice movements are "working in a context of opposition and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled... against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving toward coalition and effective action" (Lorde 1984, 128). For Lorde, it is necessary to dignify and learn from both forms of anger: the anger generated by the violence of dominant culture(s), of which all marginalized subjects have a "well-stocked arsenal" (127), as well as anger that occurs between and among differently marginalized subjects. Lorde writes of the infrapolitical imperative to attend to these angers, to voice them and listen to them, reporting that "anger has eaten clefts into [her] living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone" (131). She unpacks the transformative significance of such voicings and hearings, writing, "it is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment" (130), and, further, that "anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth" (131). Anger is a sign of our desire for transformation; infrapolitical engagement with anger is an integral form of repair that supports

transformative and visionary world-making, a crucial way in which minoritized subjects can incite on another to live.

Although rage enables breaking, it is not an affect that can be sustained indefinitely. There is a phenomenology of rage indicated by the physiological impacts associated with it, which are difficult to endure: the shaking, the cold sweat, the inarticulate brain fog, the adrenaline dump. Rage may recur, but it does its best work if coupled substantially with periods of recovery or repair. I hesitate to use those words, as they signify a return to a former state, while I'm arguing that rage transmutes subjectivity in such a way that makes becoming—not a return to a static self—possible. Perhaps a better way to think of it would be as a *dénouement*, an impermanent subsidence, a gradual tapering off. Rage changes us, yes, and it changes us through the impact wrought by enduring it. It teaches us about survival and endurance; it teaches us how to become resilient by leaving us with options: remain undone, in the space of breaking enabled by rage, or reterritorialize, attach differently, in a way that enables living well, that enlarges our capacity and potential. Experiencing rage prompts one to consider how best to move through it and encourages the seeking out and invention of spaces and subjects who might make experiences of rage easier to survive and recover from. Considering literature on the cultivation of resilience among trans and queer subjects, it is quickly apparent that all indicators of resilience—for instance, ability to access safer spaces, opportunity to narrativize experiences of pain and trauma, the support of kith and kin who understand, dignify, and respect the complexities of queer and trans experiences, the ability to enact agency than can go beyond protective forms of closeting, and the cultivation of forms of political and infrapolitical communal healing (Asakura 2016)—rely on navigating negative affect in ways that enable living differently. Learning to live with and through ostensibly negative affects drives the co-production of trans- and queer-affirming connections and spaces; again, anger is a transformative energy. Kenta Asakura, a professor of social work specializing in queer and trans community-based research, calls this “paving pathways through pain” (Asakura 2016, 1), and his phrasing suggests that paving such pathways is less about restoring the self to an unharmed state and more about utilizing negative affect to drive world-making projects. Resilience is thus not about bouncing back, nor about moving forward, but rather a communal alchemical mutation of pain into possibility.

It might also be that our ability to process rage, to use it in transformative ways, depends on a pedagogy of rage. By this, I mean access to performances of rage that work in multivalent ways: that demonstrate rage as shared and common, that articulate rage as a justified response to situations of injustice, that amplify rage in such a way that it becomes a mobilizing political affect, capable of transforming a body and a body politic. When considering the archive of trans rage, *performed* rage emerges as integral. Susan Stryker, in “My Words to Viktor Frankenstein,” comments on the transformative pedagogy inherent in performances of trans rage:

Transgender rage is a queer fury, an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one's own

continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one's exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject. However, by mobilizing gendered identities and rendering them provisional, open to strategic development and occupation, this rage enables the establishment of subjects in new modes, regulated by different codes of intelligibility. (Stryker 1994, 249)

Rage produces estrangement and exclusion from official worlds of sense and ways of being and, through this exclusion and estrangement, becomes central to trans forms of becoming. Trans rage is productive and enabling, as it addresses ciscentric conceptions of trans embodiment as impossible or inauthentic with a call to become monstrous, to reject the logics of embodiment and personhood that make your life unlivable. As Harlan Weaver writes, commenting on Stryker's essay, "her words reach towards us so that we too might become like her in kind, so that we might also be transformed by affect" (Weaver 2013, 302): trans rage as affective contagion.

Performances of trans rage, though seemingly excessive, outsize, or hysterical to majoritarian witnesses, signal *ways out* to those witnesses who see their own rage mirrored. This dynamic between performer and empathetic witness is a form of communication that validates an understanding of rage as essential to survival and transformation. As Kelly Oliver writes regarding the importance of empathetic forms of bearing witness, "our experience is meaningful for us only if we can imagine that it is meaningful for others" (Oliver 2010, 82). For trans folk, performed trans rage demonstrates that another way of being is possible, and rage is the generative, propulsive force that helps us get there. It illuminates that rage is much more than an affective phenomenon that merely *possesses* us; rather, it *undoes* us so that we may transform.

In the following section, I examine the relation between trans militancy and performed rage, as articulated through the writing of CeCe McDonald and the durational performance art of Cassils.

#### TRANS MILITANCY, PERFORMED RAGE, AND THE CULTIVATION OF RESILIENCE

McDonald, reflecting on the importance of Trans Day of Remembrance and her new mantle as a community leader and spokesperson for multiple, intersecting marginalized communities, writes,

of course it is more than important to recognize and pay homage to our fallen, but we also need to put our feet down and start being real leaders and making this stand. And personally speaking, if it's true that this is my personal journey as a leader, I want to lead my troops to victory. I can't continue to say "how bad" that another brother, sister, mother, father, partner, friend is gone from blind-hatred. From ignorance and discrimination. (McDonald 2017, 255)

"I want to lead my troops to victory." In the long and vibrant tradition of black, queer, and trans radicalism, loss becomes militancy; the memory of the dead becomes a call to arms. Collective trauma transmutes and becomes collective strength. This happens when we deindividuate trauma, when we no longer believe we are suffering independently, or have somehow called trauma upon us through our nonnormativity or through our difficulties navigating life conditions that operate as an adversely stacked deck. When we have a beloved community to witness trauma, to hold us through it, to open up possibilities for life otherwise, we can fight together. We can incite ourselves and others to live.

Toward the end of *Living a Feminist Life*, after a long meditation on the ways in which trans-exclusionary radical feminists quite literally dehumanize trans women through recourse to what she calls "gender fatalism" (Ahmed 2017, 234), Ahmed echoes this militancy. She sharply articulates the ways in which an antitrans stance is an antifeminist stance, and writes that this form of transphobia is decidedly

against the feminist project of creating worlds to support those for whom gender fatalism (boys will be boys, girls will be girls) is fatal; a sentencing to death. We have to hear that fatalism as a punishment and instruction: it is the story of the rod, of how those who have wayward wills or who will waywardly (boys who will not be boys, girls who will not be girls) are beaten. We need to drown these anti-trans voices out, raising the sound of our own. Our voices need to become our arms: rise up; rise up . . . Intersectionality is army. (Ahmed 2017, 234)

Both Ahmed and McDonald offer accounts of the hope that trauma can be transformed into militancy. They offer testimonies of the productivity of collective rage. Militant rage is a central phenomenon of analysis for Ahmed; she centers *Living a Feminist Life* around the visual rhetoric of the raised fist, a transnational symbol of minoritarian political outrage. She writes of arms raised and turned into fists; of the transformation of bodies punished in the name of docility, obedience, and subservience into corporeal vehicles for the elaboration of anger; of a multiplicity of arms: "laboring arms," "striking arms," "broken arms," arms that deviate from the "narrow idea of how a female arm should appear" that, together, become an intersectional "army." She does not shy away from metaphors of militancy; neither does McDonald. I cite them because, for an infrapolitical ethics of care, the relation to militancy is important. Vets share their traumatic experiences with other vets; the telling of war stories is always the telling of stories of violence, harm, and coercion. These painful stories are sometimes masked, albeit very thinly, by bravado or braggadocio, but their sharing happens most powerfully among those who have similar experiences. In terms of recounting trauma, and developing resilience in the aftermath of trauma, it is necessary to access folks who share a similar crucible: this is your squad (or your consciousness-raising group, your crew, your clique, your support system).

Army stories are stories of embodied resistance indissolubly linked to trauma, stories of resistance and resilience emerging from a space of rage, of anger, of hard-to-handle affect.

Another army story, one that speaks to the importance of performances of trans rage, is the story of the genesis of trans-identified performance artist Cassils's recent project, *Monument Push*. In 2013, Cassils—known for their history of gender-transgressive body modification through weight-lifting and intense physical training, as well as their durational performance art that focuses on pushing the physical limits of the body—conceived a site-specific performance piece for the ONE Archives in Los Angeles, which is the oldest active LGBTQ archive in the United States. The premise of the piece is simple: in a dark room, there is a 2000-pound block of clay. Spectators are brought into this darkness, along with a blindfolded photographer. Cassils, their highly-muscled physique clad only in nude underwear and tape gloves to protect their hands, begins attacking the clay, kicking and punching it, gradually transforming it through their pummeling. No one—not Cassils, not the photographer, not the audience—can see. Cassils fights the clay for nearly half an hour in total darkness. Their enemy is (mostly) invisible but haptically tangible; it exerts a weighty presence. It is heavy. Recalcitrant. Difficult to transform. Any modulation of the clay effects a modulation in the body of Cassils. Our tendency is to think of the clay as inert, nonlively, but the performance makes its animacy obvious. In interrelation, Cassils and clay transform each other. Cassils attacks; the clay fights back with its stolidity, its resistance to transformation. At random intervals, a photographer's flash illuminates the darkness, capturing a small slice of action and burning it into the retina of the viewer. This strategy elongates the temporality of embodied rage; a flicker, an instant, becomes durative, lingers longer afterwards than one expects.

(Rage is like this; it has many afterlives.)

Cassils, in the trailer released for the performance, describes it as a meditation on the relations between documentation, memory, and visibility. They intone calmly, as we watch blackness interspersed with brief moments of illuminated action from the performance, that “the act of photographing is the only way in which the performance is made visible . . . performed in the gutted room of an archive and inspired by the oldest active LGBTQ organization in the United States, *Becoming an Image* points to the Ts and Qs often missing from historical records. It calls into question the roles of the witness, the aggressor, and the documenter” (Cassils 2013).

In place of an archive, a battle between two very distinct opponents: one spry, muscly, mobile, human, actively engaged in trying to transform something; the other malleable, but also heavy, recalcitrant on account of its mass.

Could there be a more vivid dramatization of the force of official, sedimented histories? The superpower of these histories, the superpower of the institutions shaped by these histories: they resist struggle by just being there, dense, heavy, hard to move. Cassils does more than point to the trans and queer folk absented from the historical record—they fight as one of them. The battle is witnessed only ephemerally, but they leave traces that mold and mutate that which they attack. What is fought takes the form given by the battle marks, though the opponent, after the fight, is no longer



present. Given Cassils's positioning of the piece as a meditation on the historical erasure of trans and queer subjects from "official" gay and lesbian histories, we're forced to ask after the tangible marks left by the struggle of those left out. One implication: trans rage leaves material traces. There is a material history to rage. The material history of trans rage is manifest even in those places where we are absent, where there is only a very minimal record of our once having been present.

How does our exclusion, erasure, and absence manifest? In the shape institutions have taken. The shape institutions take is the shape of our absence, but also the shape of our struggle against them.

Trans rage is forceful. The greater the force, the greater the material shift effected. *Becoming an Image* makes clear the immense resources—physical, emotional, psychical—necessary for us to make even the slightest institutional or historical dent. Cassils—with all their years of training, with all their meticulous preparation for a durational performance like this—can last less than half an hour in battle. A question then arises: how do we strategize to make greater impact? How do we take care of selves and bodies so that they can fight, rest, and repair in order to fight again? In other words, how do we sustain the transformative effects of rage? How do we marshal resources to make sure the traces of our rage and the impact it has wrought are made visible, documented, remembered, memorialized, turned into source material for transforming our presents and making possible less violently oppressive futures?

There is a polysemy to this performance, however, and other suggestive readings are certainly possible. Cassils may also be inhabiting the position of a queer/transphobic agent of violence; the animation clay they attack might very well be representative of trans and queer communities adapting and persisting in the face of a near-constant onslaught of violence, absorbing the blows, reconfiguring and mutating as they do so, but still present. No matter lost, just shape-shifted from the multivalent impacts of violence. It is this latter reading that Cassils elaborates in the extension of the performance entitled *Monument Push*.

For *Monument Push*, Cassils had the clay from a performance of *Becoming an Image* cast in bronze, and named it "Resilience of the 20%." 20%—a reference to a 2012 report that indicated a 20% rise in the murders of trans folk from the previous year. The piece becomes a monumental memorial to monumental struggle; a representation of the resilience of those trans and gender-nonconforming folks whom we've lost. *Monument Push* is, put simply, a performance piece where "Resilience of the 20%" is pushed by a loose collective of LGBTQIA folks through the streets, past spots of note to trans and queer communities. The first—and to date, only—performance of *Monument Push* took place in 2017 in Omaha, Nebraska, over the course of four hours on a dreary, early spring day. At six different spots, the procession participating in pushing the sculpture paused for a moment of silence or a brief rally. They stopped at a spot where a gay-related hate crime had taken place, as well as at a correctional center where one of the featured speakers—Dominique Morgan, a queer community advocate, R&B vocalist, recent recipient of an NAACP Freedom Fighter award and founder of Queer People of Color Nebraska—had been incarcerated for eight years for writing bad checks at age seventeen and homeless in the

aftermath of being kicked out of his childhood home then living with, and subsequently leaving, an abusive partner (Coffey 2016). At the correctional facility, he sang. Art historian Karen Emmenhiser-Harris, writing up the performance for *Hyperallergic*, recounts this moment: “When he raised his voice for the refrain, it echoed off the walls of the center, amplifying his personal pain and trauma” (Emmenhiser-Harris 2017)—a moment of aural and affective resonance that speaks to the work of empathetic witnessing and the reparative work done through such infrapolitical sharing of pain.

*Monument Push* highlights the fragility of trans and queer existence, marks the ways that our personal rage, the intensity of our effort to fight, is sometimes not enough to keep us alive, and can often make us targets. We see this with McDonald’s unjust arrest and imprisonment: fighting back, defending oneself and one’s beloveds, opens one up to intensified racist, transphobic interpersonal and state violence, particularly if one is multiply marginalized. Cassils’s work suggests that collectivizing and amplifying negative affect—rage, pain, trauma—is integral to developing resilient strategies for survival and flourishing.

McDonald and Cassils demonstrate the hard process of transmuting rage into resilience, illustrating that trans activists, artists, and thinkers specialize, as Stryker reminded us at the opening of the first international trans studies conference in Tucson, Arizona in the fall of 2016, in “deep and substantive change.” We are deeply learned in the art of transmutation, experts at learning how to take something—flesh, affect, circumstance—and render it otherwise. The work of McDonald and Cassils demonstrates the ways in which trans rage is a powerful force for becoming, a manifestation of the *conatus* that has an integral role in making life in adverse circumstances more possible. Trans rage is an affective response to the cumulative effects of (racist, heterosexist) manifestations of transphobia across multiple domains of power relations, and carries significant force when it is collectivized, when it is able to amplify, resonate, and echo. What their work highlights is how the sharing of rage among communities of empathetic witnesses—whether through the publication of prison letters or through the collective pushing of something far too heavy for one person to bear—can actually transform rage, can render it a source of communal resilience. Documenting, demonstrating, and sharing the anger it takes to keep on living, or the anger elicited through the ongoingness of our practices of living, helps us not only survive, but invent projects that enable a communal ethic of flourishing. When rage is collective, it is that much harder to scapegoat, punish, other, demonize, or dismiss the bodies, persons, and communities so affected. Sharing army stories helps us develop and learn the tactics that we can utilize against transphobic apparatuses in order to ensure our survival.

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