Surviving Trans Antagonism

Aftercare

It’s a new year: 2020. I have top surgery scheduled in two weeks. Friends are beginning to rally, sending books they love through the post for me to read while I’m stuck in bed, booking plane tickets to come help with domestic work that I’ll be unable to do, volunteering to organize a post-surgery meal train, asking if I want to throw a farewell gathering to my tits (I don’t). I’m a little nervous about the surgery, but I have so many loved ones that have been through different iterations of it. I know their stories, I know their scars, I know sitting up and standing is going to be rough for a while, that I need bendy straws to drink through and that I shouldn’t really lift anything for a good long while.

I feel lucky to have all these practical manifestations of love in the form of care work coming through. A partner to help me through the healing process. Trans-inclusive insurance coverage. An employment situation that feels stable and relatively supportive. Friends with emotional, energetic, and financial resources. Manifestations of privilege, all. But also, this care web that is cohering around surgical aftercare has been delicately and elaborately woven for years, periodically (and always only partially) rent apart and repaired, made as much of loss as it is of
sustaining linked threads. Its expansiveness is the reason for its resilience; the force of traumas psychic and physical is dispersed throughout its filigree of filaments. This is the secret power of the care web, which Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha theorizes as a crip-femme reworking of the integral anarchist concept of mutual aid (2018, 46)—from each according to their ability, to each according to their need. A resilient care web coheres through consistently foregrounding the realities of burnout and the gendered, raced, and classed dynamics that result in the differential distribution of care—for those receiving it as well as those giving it. A care web works when the work that composes it isn’t exploitative, appropriative, or alienated. This is the gauntlet thrown down by any sustained attempt to collectively cultivate a care web: it challenges us to be deliberate, to communicate capacity, to unlearn the shame that has become attached to asking for, offering, and accepting help when we’ve been full-body soaked and steeped in the mythos of neoliberal, entrepreneurial self-making. It asks us to think carefully about what constitutes “good” care. It prompts us to sit communally with the question of how best to care for each other, with our differing abilities, idiosyncrasies, and traumas, with our hard-to-love thorns intact and sometimes injurious (to ourselves and each other).

This queer and trans care web has no center, but in some significant ways it has emerged because of the way the normative and presumed centers of a life have fallen out, or never were accessible to or desired by us in the first place. So many estranged and tangential relationships to birth or adoptive families, skepticism and proverbial allergies to normative familial structures, interpersonal, institutional, and professional shunning, exclusion, and ostracism. This is not the only synopsis I could provide—there’s plenty of joy. But it would be foolish to deny that some of what binds us to one another is directly tied to the affective and practical disinvestment of the people and institutions we’ve
Surviving Trans Antagonism

needed—or been forced—to rely upon for survival. We have learned to care for one another in the aftermath of these refusals.

We talk about aftercare in the context of medicine, surgery in particular. It’s a shorthand we use to mark the intensified vulnerability and differential physical capacity that one experiences after a physically traumatic event. We also speak of aftercare in relation to institutions—where children go between school and their return to a domicile, or what imprisoned subjects need upon release in order to “reintegrate” and prevent recidivism. It comes up in the context of BDSM, as well, as a way of recognizing that in the aftermath of an intense scene, some form of empathic connection and attending to one another is imperative. In all of these uses, care is necessary in the wake of profound recalibrations of subjectivity and dependency. We need care in order to heal from transformative physical and emotional experiences. We need it when the milieu we inhabit becomes radically reorganized. We need it especially when our lives fall in the gaps between institutions and conventional familial structures. Those gaps are worlds, and those worlds don’t function without care work.

There are two linked definitions of aftercare, then. It is what needs to be provided in order to help a subject heal in the wake of massive upheaval and transformation, and it is what facilitates and supports emergence into a radically recalibrated experience of both bodymind and the world it encounters.

This feels like a trans concept. Whatever being trans is about, it’s decidedly characterized by upheaval and emergence into a social world with shifting and shifted parameters. For many of us, surviving this process means committing to forms of healing that are unthinkable, indeed impossible, without care webs.

Aftercare is a concept that might move us beyond a focus on death, and in particular the spectacular homicides that continue to be enacted upon trans women of color, characterized by a form
of violence that Eric Stanley has termed “overkill” (2011, 1). The recurrent reference to such forms of overkill—operationalized through the memorials that compose the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDoR) and familiar to most of us via routine posts about trans homicide on social media—has become de rigueur in social justice spaces and circulates as a form of virtue signaling, particularly among White folks on the left. As queer legal theorist Sarah Lamble points out, these necropolitical citations are too often “deracialized accounts of violence” that “produce seemingly innocent White witnesses who can consume these spectacles of domination without confronting their own complicity in such acts” (2008, 24). When such mentions of overkill are deracinated, they take part in a troublingly equivocal and definitively nonintersectional account of trans oppression. When race is mentioned, it is often as a means of performing an affective investment in trans of color survival that nevertheless evades considerations of complicity.

Poet and theorist Cam Awkward-Rich highlights the ethical vertigo that structures such forms of memorialization, writing that they are shaped by two “general claims: that it is important to keep the memory of individuals alive—to keep them with us—and that each entry on the list of the dead is an injustice” (2019). He calls our attention to the fact that such memorialization, focused on the brutal fact of death, misses the point: “What is unjust is everything that preceded the end. What is unjust is the terms of living. There is something deeply unsettling, that is, to the insistence that someone ought to be alive in a world that did little to support that life” (2019).

When we shift our attention from the brutal fact of death to the injustice that gives rise to trans arts of survival, we are forced to grapple with questions of complicity and care. What could have been done differently? In what ways have we been actively contributing to the unlivability of multiply marginalized trans
Surviving Trans Antagonism

lives? What ethos—what practice of living otherwise—might enable more liberatory forms of trans existence? What practices of care might ensure trans flourishing? What are the barriers we currently encounter as we attempt such care praxis? How do we destroy or surpass them?

In what follows, I try to provide a richer description of these barriers, prompted by the conviction that tarrying with them a while might bring us to a better understanding of how to work with and through them. I want our care webs to be as resilient as possible, which means I need to understand when, where, and how they come to tear. These webs so often begin to shred, or intensify in their desiccation, when we admit out loud that we’re trans, when we come to that significant caesura in a life. We lose family, friends, jobs, and our mooring in various social worlds. Aftercare is about how we live through what comes after this rending of webs.

A minimal definition of community might be this: folks who are reweaving.

In what follows, I do my best to ground myself in the everyday rhythms of the trans mundane in order to think through some of the materials, textures, and methods at work in this reweaving. I begin with meditating on the role care plays in the affective and political economies of the present moment, when trans lives are recurrently and brutally utilized as a political wedge issue in order to consolidate horrifyingly ascendant forms of ethnonationalism and the ongoing violence of neoliberal austerity. This produces forms of hypervisibility that wear us out, that cultivate hyperalertness and anxiety that, for so many of us, make getting out of bed and getting through the day difficult.

I’m interested in how we survive this, how we cultivate arts of living that make us possible in a culture that is alternatingly, depending on where you’re at and who you are, either thinly accommodating or devastatingly hostile. How are we showing
up for each other, and how come it sometimes feels so hard to do so? The language we have to describe exhaustion in the context of coalitional political work—burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, self-care—doesn’t quite grasp the complicated reality of working to make one another’s (deeply interwoven) lives more livable in the broader context of institutional disinvestment and systemic harassment and discrimination that produces mutually resonant forms of traumatization and triggering. I think through how we might begin to move beyond the rhetoric of burnout and toward a logic of postscarcity in order to do justice to the methods of collective support that we have spent decades actively inventing and elaborating—and to render them more robust.

This necessitates really grappling with questions of care—how we understand it, how we measure it, how we account for it. For far too long, both hegemonic and resistant cultural imaginaries of care have depended on a heterocisnormative investment in the family as the primary locus of care. Let me use a colloquialism from my years in the South: this ain’t right. Another colloquialism: this shit is fucked. To state the obvious: some of us have okay relationships with our families of origin, but a whole lot of us don’t. A lot of us don’t have families, full stop. We lost them somewhere along the way. They rejected us. We had to escape them in order to survive. We cobbled together some network of support, some other kind of care web, instead. We might call that a family, too—a family of choice, a family constructed through consent rather than accident and forced relation. But whatever our relationship to family—the word, the construct, the ongoing practice of building one—it’s also obvious that our ability to flourish is reliant on forms of care that outstrip the mythic purported providential reach of the family. One thing—maybe the main thing—I’m trying to do here is think about what care actually looks like in trans lives. This
Surviving Trans Antagonism

means decentering the family and beginning, instead, from the many-gendered, radically inventive, and really, really exhausted weavers of our webs of care. When I write about transing care in the central portion of this little book, this is what I’m writing about. Transing care also means grappling with the fact that the forms of family and kinship that are invoked in much of the feminist literature on care labor and care ethics are steeped in forms of domesticity and intimacy that are both White and Eurocentered, grounded in the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007). Acknowledging this intensifies the necessity of decentering dominant imaginaries of how care labor does and should operate and also raises the questions of how differentially racialized trans subjects are oriented toward questions of care in the context of kinship and kin-making.

I have also felt compelled to write about trans archives and historicity, because a common feature of trans arts of cultivating resilience has to do with turning to the historical record for proof of life, for evidence that trans lives are livable because they’ve been lived. Care enters here, as well, because we turn to the archive for the purposes of support and self-care, but in that turning we are also confronted with the ineffability and alterity of these personages—many of them only a trace, a suggestion, a minor life only lightly embroidered upon in the scraps to which we have access. How do we care for these traces of past lives that haunt us in ways that are loving, insofar as they offer a balm through providing evidence of past trans flourishing and joy, and terrifying, because they testify to the conditions of intensive violence that these subjects lived within and through? How do we care for these ghosts that take such care of us?

Finally, I look to the phenomenon of medical denials of care, with which too many of us are familiar. The most elaborate manifestations of trans care work have emerged from the communal history of redress in the wake of such denials. From the
Trans Care community support group to the trans newsletters detailing supportive medical professionals and gender hacks to the Yahoo newsgroups and listservs of the early internet to current forms of transition-related crowdfunding, we have a long history of building solidarity as a direct response to the vagaries of the medical-industrial complex. A text on trans care couldn’t not address this, as it’s the crucible through which so much of our connectivity has emerged. I don’t know what trans care webs would look like without this ensemble of practices—and I don’t particularly want to imagine it.

I REALLY DON’T CARE DO U?

In June 2018, photographers wrangled photos of Melania Trump entering a black SUV in McAllen, Texas—a site deeply affected by the Trump administration’s family separation policies—wearing a thirty-nine-dollar olive drab jacket from fast-fashion giant Zara emblazoned with white scrawled text that read, infamously, “I REALLY DON’T CARE. DO U?” In the media shitshow that followed, much was made of this phrase. Was she commenting on the policies wrenching apart migrant families entering the United States? Did she truly not care about the well-being of those families, especially the children who are directly, radically, and negatively affected by such policies, interned in dismal and unsanitary conditions for cruelly long periods of time? Was it evidence of a newly cultivated flippancy in relation to liberal and left-wing news media?

Whatever Melania’s intentions were, the jacket could not just be a jacket. The scene was far too semiotically rich for that. Even buying the jacket is symptomatic of Melania’s uncaring, given Zara’s well-documented history of labor abuses—labor abuses that have driven workers in Turkey to sew pleas for help into the clothing they produce (Girit 2017).
Surviving Trans Antagonism

The jacket felt like a hyperdistillation of the callousness of Trumpism, a glib summation of the kind of affective orientation one would need to cultivate in order to speed headlong into the apocalypse, screamingly denying climate change, cultivating xenophobia, White supremacy, and neofascism, laying the juridical groundwork for the rollback of queer and trans rights and abortion access, metastasizing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), proliferating carceral archipelagos. A complete disregard for questions of social justice, a shrug in the face of compounding natural-cultural disasters, and, at the center of this whirlwind, a four-letter word that has, in some ways, come to stand in the place of traditional partisan orientations: care. Do you care or don’t you? Melania doesn’t, obvi. Melania the metonym, the well-groomed avatar of the neoliberal far right, but also, within some leftist fantasies of rescue, the trapped and long-suffering wife in need of saving from the Big Orange Bully. As long as Melania can be convinced to care, there might be hope. It’s a matter of convincing her to regurgitate the bait she took, to extract the lure from her mouth, to make an escape, to cultivate disloyalty to her abusive captor, to heal from her Stockholm syndrome. If she can only manage this, she might be convinced to care again. She might shrug off the yoke of glib dismissal and cultivated detachment and rediscover empathy and human warmth once more. It’s worth noting that the avowedly feminist clothiers at Wildfang produced a T-shirt by way of response that read, in the same font, “I REALLY CARE. DON’T U?” and that their website description for the product begins “Hey Melania.” Call out or call in?

Care is deeply political. Its circulation as an affective shorthand for leftism—crucially consolidated in the discursive maelstrom surrounding Melania’s jacket—alerts us to this. To stand on the right side of history is to care. To be committed to social justice is to care. Self-care is imperative for those in the political
trans Care
trenches of the left—we spend so much time caring for others we forget to care about ourselves, but we can’t care for others effectively if we don’t attend to our own needs sometimes. Self-care is warfare, after all, as Audre Lorde (1988) reminds us. We actively care for folks—as social workers, sex workers, teachers, parents, service workers, nurses, nonprofit hustlers—but we also care about others in the abstract. We are able to pragmatically prioritize the greater good; we are not, ostensibly, wholly dominated by the vicious id of self-interest. We are able to place ourselves in another’s shoes: to care is to empathize enough to grasp and service the needs of another, and to do so willingly. Care is supposedly uncoerced, given freely, by a person with enough agency to decide that they will expend resources—energetic and/or financial—on an other, in the interest of and in service to an other or others.

Do u care or don’t u? In the affective economies of the present, this might be the animating political question.

Defined Out of Existence
Fast-forward four months. It’s Sunday. I’m in bed. My partner brings me coffee, tosses me my phone so I can look at the news. And there it is, in the New York Times. The Headline: “‘Transgender’ Could Be Defined Out of Existence under Trump Administration.” I read in shock, even though I should know better, even though I do know better than to be this nonplussed. The strategy being deployed by the Department of Health and Human Services under Trump—interpreting gender as reducible to biological sex, where biological sex is wrongly understood to be radically dimorphic and grounded, fundamentally and irrevocably, in the aesthetic appearance of the genitals at birth—is old hat. I lived and taught in the southern United States for years; I’ve listened to conservative politicians repeat this idiocy over
and over again in order to attempt to push through transphobic legislation. I’ve always balked at this reasoning, in large part because I have an intersex condition (partial androgen insensitivity syndrome) that means my own body was never—at the biological level and, indeed, at the genital—neatly “male” or “female.” The effort to rhetorically recode biology as binary is a direct denial of the biological diversity and exuberance of bodies, and the biologists already know this.

The impact of the headline comes, I think, from the phrase “defined out of existence,” which conflates the nominal with the existential in a way that seems to grant a bit too much force to the power of discourse. To be made juridically illegible is a form of erasure and exclusion, to be sure, but it’s not as if we’ll stop actually existing on account of how we’re interpellated by Health and Human Services. Though I teach, often, about the historicity, contingency, and politics at play in the emergence of trans identities, there’s something ineffable about transness that exceeds the terminological and the identitarian. Surely there have always been other bodies that move in the way ours do; surely other epochs have known the wildness and beautiful dissidence of trans gestures. I want to toss my phone across the room. But instead, I read the article out loud to my partner, cuddled next to me in bed, beneath a pink duvet with little black and white polka-dotted ponies on it. Then, we make breakfast and clean the house—two trans mascs in love, in sweatpants, continuing on with the business of existence, in all its banality, on an autumn Sunday. I rake up leaves and think about what the redundant alarmism of the news cycle is doing to my adrenals. I think about how acculturated I’ve become to being discursively defined out of existence, and not just by conservative administrations.

A couple of days later, I enter the women’s, gender, and sexuality studies seminar room at Penn State. I work here. Issues of Signs ranging back to the mid-1970s line the walls. I remem-
ber interviewing here, being sat in this room between meetings (so many meetings—the endless interview stream that is the audition for the tenure track) and scanning the shelves, feeling comforted by the gravitas these back issues lent the space, the sense of material feminist history that bound volumes that you can actually hold in your hands affords. The collection, of course, peters out towards the end of the 1990s, on account of the internet. I realized that the feminist print that is present and tangible in the room ends at the moment that coincides with the emergence of “transgender” as a shared and increasingly legible way of referring to trans folks, outside of (or, more accurately, to the side of) more strictly medicalized nomenclatures. I know that there is no robust literature on transness on these shelves.

*The feminist history I can grasp is a history where I am only obliquely present.*

I do know that, somewhere in the stack, there is Donna Haraway’s essential two-part essay from 1978, “Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic,” where she asserts, in a ground-clearing moment that makes space for what we now call feminist science and technology studies, that “women know very well that knowledge from the natural sciences has been used in the interests of our domination and not our liberation” (22). Trans people know this, too, deeply. The false claim of biological sexual dimorphism gets weaponized, over and again, in ways that aren’t only, or aren’t just, misogynist but strategically wielded against trans folks to indict us as deceptive, false, constructed, fake, bad mimes, impersonators. The Real is Biological is Dimorphic.

I’m leading a graduate seminar in gender and sexuality studies the semester that I’m defined out of existence. Some of the students I’m working with are reeling from a transphobic screed published by a tenured faculty member at the same institution and are, in a sense, seeking refuge from his course by studying
Surviving Trans Antagonism

with me. Some of these students are trans, some aren’t; most all of them have a kind of fragility and brittleness to them, the kind of affect you cultivate when you can’t trust the world to see you, to hold you. I’m particularly attuned to the ways this fear manifests among those students who are trans-identified. Most of us, of necessity, have cultivated a deep skepticism of cis professors and university administrators (and, let’s be real, of cis people more generally). We’re always waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the microaggression to hit; it’s a state of hyperalertness that’s exhausting and exacerbated by the fact that we’re consistently told we’re too sensitive, that our frustrations are outsized in relation to the slights we perceive. I accept the fact that these students have come to work alongside me, in part, because I won’t misgender them, at least not consistently or intentionally. I certainly won’t wield the rhetoric of “free speech” and “reasoned debate” as a justification for doing so. I won’t attribute the insistence of students to be referred to by the correct gendered pronouns as an example of “toxic call-out culture.” I won’t do these things because I understand that they render the classroom an unnecessarily harmful space. I won’t do these things because, whatever my critiques of identity and the institutional regulation of gender might be, that doesn’t prioritize theoretical rightness over the well-being of actually existing human beings. I won’t do these things because I understand how your throat seizes up when you’re consistently misrecognized in ways that mark you as aberrant, inauthentic, hysterical—an irrational paragon of the rights of the particularly minoritized, to be appeased, perhaps, but never taken seriously. To be dismissed as one who does “grievance studies.” When I was in graduate school, I was subject to this line of reasoning, as well—a dismissal of intersectionality arrived, from one of my committee members, in the form of his often-repeated phrase “But who will speak for the left-handed Lithuanian lesbian?” I cringed then; I cringe now.
I am aggrieved. These students are aggrieved. Grievance is not adequate grounds for dismissing a critique. More to the point: one might actually learn something by studying grievance, particularly if the form of grievance they are quickly moving to dismiss as unworthy of study is one that seems minor. Misgendering, when done by a cis person, might be a small misstep made in the course of a day—unfortunate, perhaps, but really no big deal. Misgendering, when it happens to a trans person, is equally routine, but the felt impact couldn’t be more disparate. Because when it happens to us, we are being told that we, as Eva Hayward so powerfully puts it, “don’t exist” (2017, 191). Being told we don’t exist—despite all the obvious indicators that we, in fact, do—operates as an “attack on ontology, on beingness” (191). This form of ontological attack slips too easily into a justification for harm; it is a way of marking trans populations as subhuman—thus expendable, disposable, dismissible, even killable. Because it has happened to most of us regularly, for quite a long time, each time it occurs resonates down the long corridor of a life, echoing each other moment wherein this denial of existence has happened. This is the case for all of us, I’d wager, except those who are particularly good at forgetting, those who have cultivated it as a special talent, a superpower. Forgetting: another trans art of survival.

In seminar, a few days after The Headline, while discussing C. Riley Snorton’s then-new Black on Both Sides (2017), the conversation inevitably, inexorably turns to that Times story. What we talk about, perhaps more than any other aspect, has to do with the callousness of the alarmist tone the lede takes. Doesn’t the editorial staff understand that we’re living in a state of affective oversaturation, dominated by ambient angst and hyper-alertness?
Fall Out Boy Is Trans Culture

The header image that ran alongside this *Times* article is a protest shot. The two figures most clearly in focus, at the front of the crowd, appear to be trans masculine (though I have no idea how either one identifies). Both are light-skinned, with dark hair and dark eyes. One has a trans pride flag tied around their neck, thick black-rimmed glasses, a slightly fuzzy shaved head, and a septum piercing. The other is slightly taller, with a grown-out fade (left shaggy on top, the exact same haircut I sport while writing this), and they are wearing a Fall Out Boy shirt. This last detail matters. For me, this shirt was a punctum, for sure—that photographic detail that doesn’t belong to the conventions of the image-genre (this is a protest image—it’s giving us sad-mad and righteous trans folks in a moment of mass resistance); it could have been any shirt, but it was *this shirt*, and “that accident . . . pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (Barthes 1981, 27).

Fall Out Boy fandom is a strange beast that I’ve never quite been able to comprehend; I was too old, too feminist, and too much of a political punk by the time they became popular to be at all interested in them, given that their fan base, in the mid 2000s, seemed to be composed primarily of White suburban tweens and teens. Kelefa Sanneh, reviewing a 2007 show, sets the scene for us: “It was a breezy Tuesday night here at the Nikon at Jones Beach Theater, and the stands were filled with screaming teenagers and a few nonscreaming parents. . . . All night long you could hear the high, trebly sound of teenage adulation, and if you went anywhere near the teeming merchandise tables, you could hear a different but not unrelated sound: cha-ching!” They rose to fame after some years of languishing in the Chicago-area punk and hardcore scene, in other bands (notably, their drummer was in an antiracist political hardcore band named Racetraitor who released an album
entitled *Burn the Idol of the White Messiah* in 1998). Feminist rock critic Jessica Hopper, a veteran of the Chicago punk scene, writes about the ascendancy of mainstream-radio-friendly emo in a scathing 2003 essay in *Punk Planet* entitled “Emo: Where the Girls Aren’t,” noting that “as hardcore and political punk’s charged sentiments became more cliché towards the end of the 80s and we all began slipping into the armchair comfort of the Clinton era—punk stopped looking outside and began stripping off its tough skin only and began to examine its squishy heart instead, forsaking songs about the impact of trickle down economics for ones about elusive kisses. Mixtapes across America became laden with relational eulogies—hopeful boys with their hearts masted to their sleeves, their pillows soaked in tears. Punk’s songs became personal, often myopically so” (2015, 15).

There was a gender politics to this sea change: the women that appeared in the lyrics of those bands that came to represent this shift in the public eye—Dashboard Confessional, Brand New, Something Corporate, and, yes, of course, Fall Out Boy—were mere ciphers for sexist sentiment. Hopper writes that “girls in emo songs today do not have names. We are not identified beyond our absence, our shape drawn by the pain we’ve caused . . . our actions are portrayed solely through the detailing of neurotic self-entanglement of the boy singer—our region of personal power, simply, is our impact on his romantic life” (16).

This means, also, that Fall Out Boy belongs to a genre that places the heartaches, trauma, and heroism of boys at the center of each song; their charm hinges on the overwrought purple prose of front man Pete Wentz, who—at least in his younger years—possessed a kind of *Tiger Beat* by way of *Maximum Rocknroll* charm; he was juvenile, erudite, and the public persona he performed was honestly kind of campy. Their most well-known tracks are anthemic in the ways that Broadway musicals are; they consistently shift between baritone and falsetto registers.
 Surviving Trans Antagonism

(Patrick Stump, their guitarist and lead vocalist, has an undeniably impressive upper range); and they repeatedly violate the generic conventions of emo-pop-punk—which hinge on the performance of a certain kind of emotional earnestness, a direct delivery of a sad boy’s wrought internal monologue on the vagaries of romance—in order to inject a heftier dose of the theatrical. All of this was part of why I didn’t—and don’t—particularly enjoy listening to them. But I’m not a teenage trans masc. And I kept coming back to that image, kept thinking about the T-shirt, kept wondering whether or not there might be a kind of trans specificity to Fall Out Boy fandom.

I agree with Hopper—emo is a genre where girls have nearly zero specificity or particularity. It is a genre where they are mere romantic tropes—heartbreaker, psychotic ex, current obsession. The male protagonist possesses all of the emotional complexity. He is the definitive lead in the pas de deux. But, for AFAB (assigned female at birth) folks, the utter irreality of the feminine might be deeply appealing. It’s much more difficult to resonate with (or be triggered by) a thinly wrought love interest who, as Fall Out Boy’s career-making song “Sugar, We’re Goin Down” puts it, is “just a line in a song,” especially when that figure is juxtaposed with the narrator’s self-proclaimed “loaded God complex.” The boy at the center of a Fall Out Boy track is gamely and selfishly working his way through minor emotional devastations, centering his sexuality (however problematic or cringeworthy these narratives are, replete with boys “wishing to be the friction in your jeans”), and being eminently braggadocious and narcissistic—he’ll be your “number one with a bullet.” He’s stationed directly at the center of a completely solipsistic universe. No matter how insufferable this kind of guy is in reality, I would have killed for a fraction of his swaggering self-confidence as a kid. Repeated drafts from that reservoir might have made getting through high school just a little bit easier.
I really, really do not enjoy listening to Fall Out Boy, but I do my best to empathize with this baby trans masc, regardless. I dilate on what might lead them to love a band I loathe, on how that band might speak to transmasculine fantasies and desires, even if I find them politically and ethically suspect. This, too, is all about care. Sometimes young trans guys annoy me in precisely the ways that Fall Out Boy annoys me. But I want them to have their clueless and self-involved boyhoods. I want them to be able to take the long road through navigating toxic masculinity, to sloppily grapple with it the way that other boys get to do. I want them—I want all of us—to maintain the kind of wide-eyed silliness and unabashed enthusiasm that we associate with childhood but that, in fact, only the most privileged and unharassed kids get to experience. I don’t want trans kids entering adulthood already suspicious, already untrusting, waiting for the other shoe to drop, already skeptical, burnt out, tired. I want them to experience what Justin Vivian Bond calls the “luxury of normality”—an experience of youth where they are “no more, no less interesting than anyone else. No more exciting or exotic than any other healthy high school kid . . . able to experience the same dramas, heartaches, and joys that any other kids would have to go through, no more and no less” (2011, 132–33). I want them to have trans elders to turn to, and I want them to have the chance to become trans elders themselves.