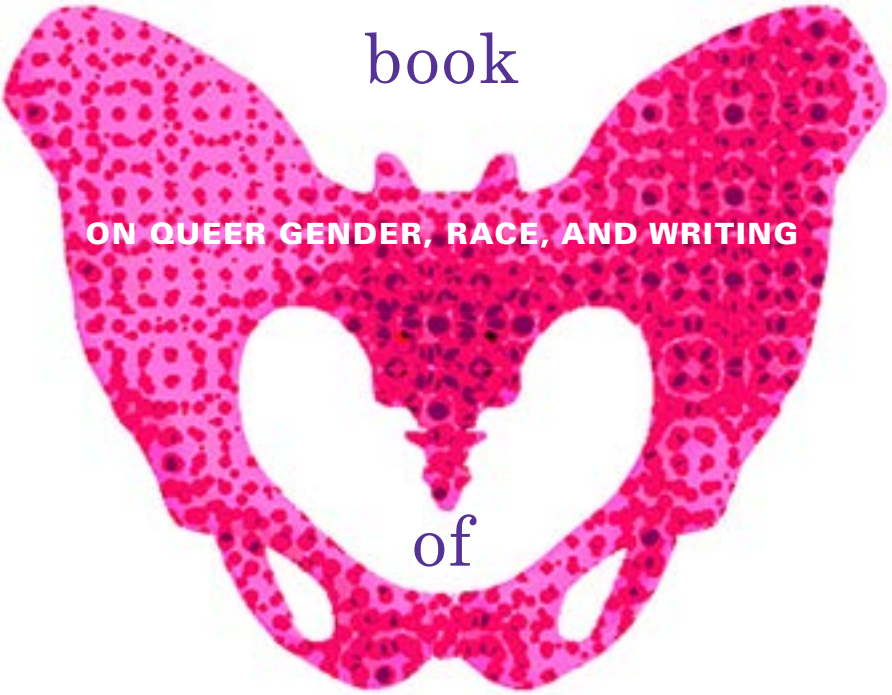
the small book of hip checks



erica rand

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THE SMALL BOOK OF HIP CHECKS

WRITING MATTERS! A series edited by Lauren Berlant, Saidiya Hartman, Erica Rand, and Kathleen Stewart

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the small book of hip checks

ON QUEER GENDER, RACE, AND WRITING

erica rand

Duke University Press
Durham and London 2021

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Aimee C. Harrison
Typeset in Portrait Text, Century Schoolbook,
and Univers LT Std by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Rand, Erica, [date] author.
Title: The small book of hip checks : on queer gender,
race, and writing / Erica Rand.
Other titles: Writing matters! (Duke University Press)
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. | Series:
Writing matters! | Includes index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020020628 (print)
LCCN 2020020629 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478010487 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478011484 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478013075 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Gender identity. | Queer theory. | Transgender
people—Identity. | Racism. | Sports—Social aspects. | Popular
culture—Study and teaching. | Creative writing.
Classification: LCC HQ18.55.R363 2021 (print) |
LCC HQ18.55 (ebook) | DDC 305.3—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020020628
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020020629

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the
Bates Faculty Scholarship Committee and the Bates
Faculty Development Fund, which provided funds
toward the publication of this book.

contents

acknowledgments

I say in the introduction that *Hip Checks* has either no origin story or a thousand. True enough, but it also has two. In 2012, Lauren Berlant invited me to speak in a series on queer experimental writing. I don't think they intended to deliver a hip check with that invitation. But the very idea that I belonged in such a series shifted the way I thought about my writing. It also spun me into writing hell until a talk emerged about my garish pink box. That talk anchors my introduction here—thank you, Annette, for letting me tell my version of our stories—just as Lauren's 2018 invitation to the Soup Is On: Experiment in Critical Practice brought me to the book's last two pieces. In 2013, Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker accepted my odd little submission "Hips" for the inaugural keywords issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*. That they called it lyrical and welcome in its deviance continued to keep me company as I remained stuck on hips, then realized I was stuck on hip checks and turned that piece into the "Terms of Engagement" section of the introduction.

Other pieces and bits began, improved, and took some unexpected turns as a result of writing and speaking projects undertaken for or with Chelsea Jones, Slava Greenberg, Raffi Sarkissian, Myron Beasley, Jongwoo Jeremy Kim, Chris Reed, Judith

Collard, Chris Brickell, Kirstin Ringelberg, Sarah Wald, Julia Lesage, and Chuck Kleinhans. An extra thank-you to those then graduate students on that list for their under-rewarded labors of organizing and sometimes blunt reminders that the cost of experiment is paid hierarchically. Early versions of writing for *Hip Checks* appeared in the journals *Liminalities* and *Jump Cut* and in the anthologies *Queer Difficulty in Art and Poetry* and *Queer Objects*. I also want to mention as generative the opportunity to present work at Elon University, the annual conferences of American Studies and SCMS (Society for Cinema and Media Studies), and three glorious conferences put on through the University of Arizona Institute for LGBT Studies: Queer Migrations (2014), Somatechnics/Open Embodiments (2015), and Trans* Studies (2016).

Alex Marzano-Lesnevich, Jay Sibara, Rebecca Herzig, Eithne Luibhéid, Carolina González Valencia, Cole Rizki, and Chris Straayer read parts or all of the manuscript, at least once. Their close readings and questions—Who are you as a character in the book? Are you practicing your own politics of citation? Can you find another (s)way?—made a huge difference. So did Duke's two anonymous reviewers. I turned in a manuscript I fancied to be further along than it was; engaging the macro and micro revisions they suggested made the book much better.

At Duke University Press, I thank also Ken Wissoker, who, into our third decade of this, could: act as enthusiastic as I needed him to be about the book that I, but apparently not he, thought I was writing; hang in through some convolutions as I sort of aimed it elsewhere (linear sections of concentric abstraction!); and stay open to the book I figured out I was writing that was not quite what he expected either. Thanks to Josh Tranen for help with many dimensions of manuscript preparation, to project editor Lisl Hampton for amazing and immensely generous support getting from manuscript to book, to Leslie Watkins for thoughtful and meticulous copyediting, to Aimee Harrison for the gorgeous book design, and to workers involved in making

books appear for Duke University Press whose labor does not travel with individual recognition. Thanks also to Scott Smiley for another wonderful index.

At Bates, where I teach, the Bates Faculty Development Fund contributed to various aspects of this project, including by funding full-time summer research assistance from Grace Glasson (2013) and Carl Deakins (2018). I cannot overstate their contributions then and later, including Grace's transgenerational attention to the archival 1990s, which productively shifted my vague questions about queer porn of yore toward a tangible silicone object. More students, faculty, and staff than I can name I would like to name here. The Gender and Sexuality Studies Program has been a great institutional home in and from which to make coalition, solidarity, resistance, survival, and joy in times often difficult on campus and off. I am grateful, too, just to start, for my colleagues organizing as tenure ineligible and pretenure faculty and nonexecutive, including hourly, staff, as well as numerous people in and associated with the Africana and American Studies Programs, Outfront, the Office of Intercultural Education, and other groups housed within it, including the students who struggled with me in courses and thesis advising toward more decolonial practices. Since 2012 my thinking, teaching, writing, and life have been greatly enhanced by the chance to participate a lot and teach a little at the University of Oregon, where I presented work at the Center for the Study of Women and Society.

Some of these pieces came into being from my life as a skater and coach in figure skating communities based in Portland, Maine, and Eugene, Oregon. One came from my history as a 25-plus-year volunteer at Outright/Lewiston Auburn. All came about in the context of brutality—geopolitical, gender policing, racist, anti-Black, white supremacist, economic, colonialist, settler colonial, carceral. I wrote *Hip Checks* as a non-trans, white, non-precariously employed Jewish queer femme grateful to work from that position to learn, listen, act, write, and otherwise join

in solidarity with people bearing similar, different, and often more embattlements than I.

Not mentioned by name yet but for all of the above and more in work, thinking, organizing, play, family, friends, love, body, salvage, and mighty pleasures: Melinda Plastas, Holly Ewing, Leslie Hill, Sue Houchins, Ian Khara Ellasante, Emily Kane, Geneviève Robert, Denise Begin, Renan Oliveira Ferreira, Therí Pickens, Stephanie Kelley-Romano, Lisa Maurizio, Alison Melnick, Tiffany Salter, Stephanie Pridgeon, Francis Eanes, Raj Saha, Josh Rubin, Anelise Hanson Shrout, Jacqueline Lyon, Paqui López, Charles Nero, AK Wright, Danny Carmona, Yara Abdelhady, Joanne Kalogeras, Nancy Audet, Penny Sargent, KD Diamond, Dan HoSang, Karen Ford, Danielle Seid, Lynn Fujiwara, Sangita Gopal, Priscilla Peña Ovalle, Ellen Scott, Lauren Charles Stewart, Megan Burke, Ernesto Javier Martínez, Michael Hames-García, Danielle Seid, everyone who works at Wandering Goat, Sam Bond's Garage, and Coffee by Design on Diamond Street, Kristin Andrews, Ann Hanson, Elaine Pruett, Shannon Young, Ray Libman, Lynda Hathaway, Vicki Allen, Michelle Doyle, Scott Stackhouse, David Leonard, Anna Kellar, Marilyn and Stretch Graton, Vera and Gary Miller, Chen Si Wei, and many, many Rands, Gratons, Barabases, Suppanzes, Bessettes, Millers, Schankes, and Dorns, Jed Bell, Toby Beauchamp, Jill Posener, Jack Lamon, Hazel Meyer, micha cárdenas, Saidiya Hartman, Katheen Stewart, Jennifer Doyle, Miriam Abelson, Karma Chávez, Lise Kildegaard, Mary Ann Saunders, Samaa Abdurraqib, Daniel Katz, Elizabeth Fertig-Burd, Emma Holder, Kristen Nelson, Nyssa Bishop, Anjali Arondekar, Julia Trippe, Ker Cleary, Anna Schwartz, Sarah Holmes, Gabe Demaine, Wendy Chapkis. I miss you: Dawn Graton, Wickie Stamps, Susan Whitcher Graton, Sallie McCorkle, Chuck Kleinhans, and Scott Miller. Quinn Miller is the reason that "bicoastiality," "unimaginable," and "xoxoxo" are on my autofill; to mix some metaphors in the spirit of our queer ways, those are some bare bones of indelible.

This book is about writing, revising, and being thrown. Life is one thing, and then it's another. I drafted those two sentences before the COVID-19 pandemic and the uprising against anti-Black violence. Revising acknowledgments in May 2020, then June 2020, I could rewrite them daily. Saturdays distributing food with the Presente! Maine Food Brigade. Sunday evenings with the Spark/le Social Distancing the Fuck Up Adult Figure Skater Happy Hour. On the job with the Bates Faculty Staff Solidarity group. In the streets with #BlackLivesMatter and other movements led by BIPOC often queer and trans often young people to dismantle white supremacy, defund the police/militarization/ICE, fight racialized and gendered state and state-sanctioned violence in all forms. Every fucking day more loss, hell, travesty, bigotry, heartbreak, anger, coalition, and fierce love.

Hip Check

AN INTRODUCTION IN FOUR PARTS

1 • *Terms of Engagement*

HIPS

As racialized and classed markers of gender and sexuality, hips bear weight and meaning, fate and contradiction. Hips contribute to gender expression, attribution, pleasure, policing, frustration, misery, erotics, and joy. Hips occupy a place in the unfortunate system of classification that enshrines hierarchized biological features as the essence of racialized sex. They are called a "secondary sex characteristic" because they likely widen during estrogen-heavy puberties. Hormones appear to shape gender in the bone. Fat accumulations magnify differences. Colloquialisms exaggerate them. Women have hips, we say; men don't. People become pears or apples.

Yet where bone meets fat, supposed biological destiny meets notions of agency and control, of being or having been disciplined. A minute on your lips, forever on your hips: big hips can signal feminine excess or the insufficient restraint of people who are brown, "ethnic," zaftig, poor. It's common wisdom that hips can betray you—reveal who you are or turn on you, sometimes simultaneously. They may swish, switch, or sway as if they couldn't do otherwise, as if queer, femme, or hot mama were es-

sential identities, uncontrollable moving forces. Or maybe they don't do any of those things. My hips just don't move that way, you might say, in despair, pride, or relief.

Hips can seem hopelessly immutable in structure or malleable in shape and meaning, bringing formidable barriers or giddy thrills to projects of self-representation. When it comes to hips, all of the following can matter: the right belt, the right hormone ratios (that you come with or alter); stomach, shoulders, thighs, and butt; muscle, food, training; the uniform, the outfit; spandex, padding; disposable income for all of the above; ideas about essence, affinity, and culture working their way separately or together. What if I told you that I'm a natural with a hula hoop? What's that about? Or not about? The stakes include gender attribution and gendered pleasures. Maybe I want a soft curve or vertical hardness when you put your hands on my hips just so. The wrong hips can be anguish; the right hips divine. Hips don't lie, Shakira says.[1] That depends on what you mean by lying and if you have the resources to make hips speak for you.

HIP CHECK

1 *Point of inspection* Doctors, documents, demeanor. Straight lines and curves mixed up or matched up.

2 *Flirtation device* Notice me. Visual effects, maybe visceral. Occasionally physical: the old bump and grind.

3 *Sports move* Force an opponent off course by knocking them from the side with your hip. As with many moves, the appearance and legality of the hip check depend on the performer, the outfit, the beholder, and the rule book. The hip check can look like a battering ram hurling itself sideways or a tucked-elbow cousin of hands-on-hips sass. It can bespeak professional coaching or street smarts, finesse or brutality, finesse at brutality, calculated maneuvers or unexpected rage. Its force and effect can be spot-on or unpredictable, making cost, reward, and alibi difficult to guarantee.

Hip checks may jar you silently or come with the soundtrack of consequences: Take that! Thud, crash, ba-boom, score, expulsion, applause.

2 • *A Story Where an Origin Story Might Go*

In the early 1990s I received a garish pink box from a woman I came to love, as she came to love me, despite expectations that we wouldn't have anything to talk about. Her name was Leola, and we met because I was dating her daughter Annette. Annette and I came to love each other, too, but when we met, we were hardly aiming for in-laws. Both recuperating from "big stories," as my friend Paqui would put it, we didn't yet have energy for new ones. We did, however, have nicely compatible erotic tastes and a big interest in regularly available sex. We also liked each other a lot and, I think, some emotional comforts associated with having someone in the land of crummy two-by-two norms: a logical recipient of news (a person who, these days, would seem natural to text); a date on occasions when heart or custom called for it in a way we wanted to answer.

Thus, that Thanksgiving, we stopped by Leola's on the way to holiday dinner at the home of Annette's childhood friend Joanne, in Bangor, Maine, where Annette had grown up. Leola still lived there with her second husband John. She'd left her first husband, Annette's father, after accumulating the wherewithal to support herself by selling homemade crafts at flea markets. As Annette told it, her mother spent every spare minute hidden away in a closet-like workspace, sewing a thousand scrunchies or making other objects, like Christmas ornaments with knit balls forming the bodies of cute animals, that Annette had shown me before hiding them away.

I remember wondering aloud before the trip if Leola might give me something like that. Annette laughed: of course not. What would a woman who had raised six kids, whose school bus had been a hay wagon, even have to say to a city-girl dyke professor? As a Jew, too, I was frequently taken as an outsider

in Maine—foreign, exotic, maybe not white. Still, I wasn't so sure about Annette's prediction. Strangers tell me things all the time. But when we sat down to a full dinner at 10:30 AM, Leola's response to learning that we'd be heading to someone else's Thanksgiving, and I saw a hunting rifle casually propped next to the dinner table, I did think I had entered foreign territory.

As it turned out, however, Leola had a lot to tell me, particularly about Annette being queer. She'd known Annette was "different" since the age of four, she said, when Annette started refusing to wear dresses. Annette listened in shock. The information about her early gender presentation, though new, didn't surprise her. Annette saw herself as butch from birth. But her mother had never mentioned any such thing. Why would she be telling *me*? Annette was even more astonished to see me holding the pink box when she returned from the car, having gone to fetch some issues of *Our Paper,* a queer newspaper Annette worked on that she'd decided to show her possibly now-interested mom. Through the clear plastic bag that kept the dust off between flea markets, you could see the box in all its glory, bearing seemingly every marker of feminine fanciness that a glue gun might apply: folds of shiny pink material, which had a watercolor or tie-dye effect more visible on the inside; and, on top, lace, ruffles, ribbons, beads, and a glorious plastic flower—open, deep, and equipped for attraction.

It's hard to describe this box without sounding like I'm making fun of it. I'm not, though I distinctly remember trying not to laugh as I showed it to Annette. The morning had been so unpredictable. The box seemed at first a little hilariously over-the-top. Yet I loved it, from no lofty distance, and I knew that it was as extravagant in gesture as in embellishment. Leola had bought her independence dime by dime and still lived modestly. Parting with a labor-intensive item she'd made to sell was a big deal. It was a gift as substantial as our conversations, of which there were more to come—often, on subsequent visits, when she could get me alone. Once, before Leola and John moved to Ari-

zona, she waited until Annette walked off to tell me how much she loved her daughter, even if she didn't always show it because, in her opinion, the other five siblings needed more help and thus attention.

Why did Leola have so much to discuss with me? Maybe I showed up at just the right moment, when Leola finally wanted to acknowledge her queer butch daughter out loud. Maybe telling me the old family stories—the *new* old family stories—constituted a gesture of accepting me as a daughter-in-law. Leola, I think, mistook me for the equivalent of Annette's wife, and why wouldn't she? Annette, who hardly saw or spoke to her mother, had brought me home for the holidays. After this first success, Annette always brought me along. Leola never saw her without me.

Besides, Annette and I had the butch/femme thing going, which can offer the comforting familiarity of paired gender difference, at least to people who don't want to kill you after it signals to them that you're queer. Perceptions of commonality can enhance interactions even when those perceptions are inaccurate. And, really, when are perceptions of other people's genders or relationships—or even our own—exactly right? For instance, I saw Annette and her friend Joanne as two old-style white butches, dressed to hide the feminine curves that their dates had on display and in stylish contradistinction to those no-nonsense, straight white women who can confuse newcomers in states like Maine or Wisconsin, even newcomers like me with seriously refined butchdar. Over Thanksgiving dinner, however, Annette and Joanne talked about how happy they were to have traditional butch/femme roles behind them. Yet despite laughing off those old roles, Annette considered some butch/femme divisions of labor nonnegotiable and had already developed tricks to scam me, fearing incorrectly—preconceptions again—that they might offend my feminist tendencies. "I'll drive us to Bangor," she had said, "since you drove to my place." She really meant: "The butch always drives." She fooled me on

the driving for years until she had a bout of sciatica that required *me* to drive; Annette wanted to duck rather than be seen as the passenger.

Leola and I had girl talk: woman to woman, woman to femme, mother to daughter-in-law. It was all of those simultaneously, none of those exactly, and more than any of those, too. Fundamentally, we really liked each other. Besides, despite our differences, we had a lot in common, including one thing that brought me and Annette together: a big interest in sex. Annette's father told me during our very brief, one-time encounter that Leola had left him because he couldn't satisfy her sexually. I don't know if that was true, but I quite loved the idea. I'd come a bit late myself to the notion that it was OK for sex to matter enough to factor it into staying or going. But even setting aside his unsolicited opinion, Leola's interest was evident and hardly only hetero-marital. Once she told us about how she and John had accidentally parked their RV for the night right next to a cruising spot in the woods frequented by gay men. "What did you do?" I asked, expecting some account of disgust or disapproval, given how shocked she sounded. Nope. "We stayed up all night and watched!" she said excitedly. Like daughter, like mother, on more levels than I would share with her or that I will share with you.

Leola's final revelation to me came on a Thanksgiving three or four years after our first, when Annette and I visited Leola and John in Arizona, as soon as Annette and John had gone to retrieve our luggage. By then, the warmth all around was old news. Our roles were familiar, too. I'd long ago stopped offering to drive. I was awed but not freaked—although Annette was still flabbergasted—when Leola gave me a quilt representing exponentially more labor than the glorious pink box. I felt prepared for whatever Leola would tell me. I wasn't. "Don't tell Annette," she said, "but they found a lump down there." That was Leola's final revelation to me. It wasn't because she was dying imminently—she lived with cancer for another decade. Nor was it because I agreed to keep her secret only long enough for her to gift An-

nette with a stress-free vacation. Our time was done because Annette and I were done, at least in any way that would make Leola sort of my mother-in-law. Other lovers had come to occupy us, but no one could quite split up me and Leola.

3 • *Rethinkings*

I like a book with a good origin story, maybe two. But this book has either none or a thousand. It began, and begins, in the middle of rethinking: returning to some topics I've written about before; revisiting scenes that stick with me but also keep changing as I live with them, recount them, write about them, and live with them some more.

Like the scene in the story I just described, where I learned that I had misread Annette and her friend Joanne, who considered traditional butch/femme roles behind them, I told it, a lot like I experienced it, as a story of not-so-consequential misreadings that we all do and that are not always hopelessly embedded. That one gave way over a meal to better understandings that deepened over time, as I learned more about what Annette considered integral to her butchness, which depended on acquiring more familiarity with local knowledges in addition to greater familiarity with her, and as she learned that my feminism did not preclude enjoying butch chivalry.

Significantly, too, in this story, respectful engagement, collaborative learning, and good connections do not always depend on getting things right, and getting things right can occur despite misrecognition and along indirect paths. I didn't show up at Leola's wearing feminine frills. I'm not really that kind of girl. Neither was Leola, as far as I could tell. Yet you know when someone says, "Hey, that's really you," referring to clothing or something else that the speaker perceives to suit you well? Well, that ruffly pink box is really me. More important, it was really us, and it made us an us. It forged and stood for, sort of, what our connection would be about. Nicely, too, the complications of intimacy and connection in my story mess up typical boundar-

ies and barriers, including straight/queer dividing lines. Newish poster slogans like I LOVE MY GAY DAUGHTER don't really tell Leola's and my story when the straight one might be enjoying the spectacle of gay sex.

That version of my story still works for me. But I also now see that scene as marking my own privilege and enduring, sometimes willful, ignorance. I used to think of the contrast between showing and hiding curves primarily in terms of the erotic thrill for me. I loved how two people with so-called womanly hips could look in clothes like differently gendered creatures. I didn't really wonder if people hiding their hips—or showing them—ever wished their bodies were different. I didn't ask if they saw a mismatch between their gender identity and their body. Or about how that mismatch mattered, if it did: that it might be devastating, annoying, no big deal, fun, none of those, or several. That the match or mismatch might depend on the situation and that it might change over time, as mine would come to do several decades later.

Even when I did understand quite a lot, I still sometimes shoved that information away from my consciousness when it was convenient to do so. "Why did you decide to write a book on the meanest topic to ask trans people about?" someone close to me asked, more than once before I really heard it, back when I thought I was writing an entire book about hips. Semi-joking, but not. Hips can create a lot of problems for inhabiting and representing your gender. A trans man who became famous in mainstream media partly for the classic masculine V-shaped torso he had body-built for himself told me that he nonetheless hates his hips. A trans woman who likes her hips just fine recounted her grandmother's warning that she shouldn't expect to look female with those skinny "men's" hips. Never mind that the non-trans grandmother, who had no concern about being misread herself, had hips far from womanly by any measure involving protrusion. Hips bespeak gender bred in the bone, maybe more so than other secondary sex characteristics, as hips are called, because of the component that *is* bone.

Yet like all gender markers ascribed to biology, they require interpretation to function as such and aids to help the interpretation along. A butch standing there flashing a self-fashioned look with just the right deftly chosen pants *is* standing, can stand, can deploy at least some of the normative physical abilities that help to present legible conventions of queer gender. They have marshaled other, perhaps considerable resources to pull that look off, including time, money, learned skills, and comrades in gender, as well as resources to move about in it. Boundary policing can make it difficult or impossible for people who appear gender-nonconforming to venture onto the street, into a public bathroom, through airport security or a day at school. Virtually every day I was writing this book I could have written about a new incident demonstrating the vulnerability to microaggression, hostility, harassment, violence, and death related to being read as gender-nonconforming or trans.

Especially for people read as gender-nonconforming and/or trans and also Black, Brown, Asian, Latinx, and/or Indigenous. Race and racism figure always in the systems of power and oppression that affect gender self-determination, which Eric Stanley well describes as people's ability to "express whatever genders they choose at any given moment," whether they "firmly identify as one or more particular genders . . . [or] have a more shifting relation via their racialized bodies, gendered desires, physical presentations, and the words available to comprehend these intersections."[2] As Stanley also emphasizes, making the space for gender self-determination is a collective political project.

One small measure of the entrenchments that participants in that project confront is the perception and treatment of #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) protestors at LGBT Pride events. Despite having been designated as an Honoured Group by Pride Toronto, members of BLM-Toronto were categorized in both mainstream and mainstream queer media as criminal, terrorist, aggressive outsiders for holding a nonviolent sit-in at the 2016 Pride parade, where they demanded the disinclusion of police in the parade and more resources for Black queer and trans people.[3]

A year later, at the Pride march in Columbus, Ohio, police deployed what Deandra Miles itemized as "pepper spray, bicycles and the fury of anti-blackness" against nonviolent BLM protestors.[4] Miles, who faced felony charges, was among the arrested protestors who became known as #BlackPride4. The Washington, DC, group No Justice No Pride well characterized the implications of what happened to them: "The fact that . . . flimsy, politically-motivated charges even made it to a trial is disturbing, and demonstrates the significant obstacles faced by those seeking to undo the larger LGBT movement's collusion with systems of White supremacy, state violence, and predatory capitalism."[5]

The evidence and effects of racism can be direct or indirect, overt or submerged, always bearing historic traces at various removes from current conditions. The story I told about me, Leola, and Annette took place against a history of hostility to people of French Canadian descent whose ancestors, like Annette's, had immigrated to Maine. That hostility included a period in the 1920s of targeting by the Ku Klux Klan that some people link to contemporary prejudice and that contributed to shifting formulations of whiteness among white-looking people who lived, as all Maine residents do, on stolen Wabanaki lands.[6] *French* remained an ethnic slur, and many remembered discriminatory situations at work and school. Like the subtle distinctions I've mentioned between queer butches and those straight women who might jam your gaydar, racialized distinctions among people now classified as white could take a while to discern, too. Those were affected, and transformed, by such factors as sexuality and class. During the period when Annette and I were dating, anti-gay activists sought to position queer people as a category apart from economically struggling white people—many of whom were queer—arguing that protections from discrimination in the workplace would move straight people to the top of layoff lists. In Lewiston, where I lived, the racialization of French Canadian descendants would change again over the next decade, as several thousand people from Somalia with refugee status resettled in Lewiston. As advocates and foes

of their presence sought to make or fight off analogies between contemporary New Mainers and the immigrants from Canada who preceded them, they also, implicitly or explicitly, battled over the latter's hold on whiteness.

Hip Checks performs rereadings and redirections to think about the workings and interworkings of queer gender, race, and writing. The short pieces that make up the book range widely in topic, with three interconnected through lines. Primary among them is the entangled workings of pleasure, regulation, policing, and survival—the way that, for example, as I have started to discuss, the erotic enjoyment of queer gender and the tools we use to identify each other often depend on the types of appraisals frequently involved in policing gender binaries.

A connected through line involves conceptions about how people's outsides show or hide their insides. As many writers in trans studies and activism have noted, trans and gender-nonconforming people are often characterized as deceivers, hiding their gender assigned at birth.[7] Accusatory beliefs about opaque surfaces also fuel racism and white supremacy, as do presumptions that darker skin envelops corrupt or inferior mental and physical insides. "Inscrutable Asians" and "shifty Blacks" are just two of many racialized concepts making their way into discourses, policies, and practices. Besides figuring as bigotry, concerns about how people's outsides show or hide their insides appear in many other forms. These include narratives, many autobiographical, about people wanting their bodies to match their gender identities and a wealth of seemingly innocuous platitudes, such as "we are all the same inside." But what actually goes into ideas about how people's outsides relate to their insides, as if these were stable concepts? What and where are the insides, just to start? Garb covers skin. Skin covers all manner of internals, actual and conceptual: skeletons, organs; teeth, holes, nether regions; heart, soul, mind; identities, truths, delusions; what you have consumed or what has consumed you.

The final through line, which surfaced for me in relation to issues of self-fashioning and surveillance that recur in the

other two threads, involves what I have come to call cis-skeletal privilege. By that I mean having a bone structure and supporting physical characteristics such as fat distribution that facilitate the gendered shape you want to present. I use *cis* to signal matching and to gesture to the greater likelihood that non-trans people, who are often referred to as cis, have that match up, although the increasingly common usage of cis and cis privilege has also caused me to hesitate. Finn Enke has observed that these concepts often function to oversimplify both cis and trans. They may fix people in one or the other position, fail to suggest that the same people may occupy the same position in different ways at different times, and obscure ways that cis status and privilege depend on normative and exalted whiteness, abilities, citizenship, and other matters.[8] So, too, do cisgender identities. As Jian Neo Chen writes, they are stabilized not only "through identification with gender assigned at birth," but also with the differentially accessed and afforded "symbolic and social location provided by this identification."[9] Che Gossett cautions, relatedly, against measuring people in relation to norms of "men" and "women" without attending to the history of those norms. "Terms like 'cisgender,'" they write, "can't really account for how the gender binary was forcibly imposed on black and native people through slavery and settler colonialism."[10]

I work to avoid those pitfalls in one of this book's longer pieces about attempts to identify the remains of people without required documents who, driven to dangerous routes by US operations to deter their entry, die trying to cross into the United States south of Tucson, Arizona. Like all privileges, cis-skeletal privilege is an unearned advantage that can operate whether you are living or dead. People's identities are recorded, tracked, and tracked back through gender. As the generous intention to help return people to their loved ones runs up against the impossibility of gendering people merely from material and human remains, the situation exemplifies how better and worse directions in gendering can collide.

In my pursuit of these topics lies one reason for calling this book *Hip Checks*. I think of the hip check in the three senses articulated at the beginning, drawing on the evocative potential of putting the two words together and the history of the phrase: inspection (hip *check*; hips? check!), flirtation (notice me), and sports move (redirect). Hips are focal points in the understanding and enactment of race, sexuality, and gender, and many of the pieces included in this book involve hip inspection, explicitly or implicitly. Hips themselves, objects that touch hips, and movement involving hips: pelvic bones, shape-forming flesh, so-called men's jeans and women's unitards, hooping, hula, turnout, thrusting.

I also use *hip checks* in the title to signal one of the book's key critical and organizing practices. I pull here from the most common meaning of hip check as a sports move, which I find both imperfectly and superbly suited to my purposes. Being hip-checked knocks you off-balance. If you are moving, it knocks you off course, "re-routing" you as the National Basketball Association (NBA) handbook puts it about that kind of move. Where the hip check grates against my intention is that I am not after the reader as an adversary or competitor. Far from it. I write within a vision of collaborative thinking and strive to approach my engagement with others, in life and writing, from generosity of spirit. Thus my excitement, for example, in found commonalities with Annette's mother Leola, my attention to how people might get things right while getting a lot wrong, and my desire to look from different perspectives, to avoid common critical moves that trounce or diminish others, and to view self-satisfaction or imagined superiority as an occasion to rethink rather than rest.

That's all true. But it's also misleading, at least to the extent that it conjures gentle, rosy sweetness, evacuated of power. When I read it back, it sounds like relationships where no one ever gets pissy or sex where no one's ever on top. That's not me, and it's not this book, which is why I like the hip check. My aim

here is both to disrupt your paths of thinking/feeling/movement and to advocate for openness to what being hip-checked might deliver, despite or because of sometimes being painful, because of or despite sometimes being pleasurable. What hip checks don't deliver—unless someone is trying to flatten you, the opposite of my goal—is a fixed destination. I like that, too. Instead of leading you through a directed line of argument, I want to regularize interruption and practices of changing direction.

In coming to these goals, I built on experiments in writing that have occupied me for the past several decades and especially the past five years. I say *experiment* even though it sounds more intentional than what usually occurred. I would embark on a project, like a book chapter or conference presentation, with a traditional plan in mind. Then I'd get stuck. I couldn't write the paragraph where I lay out the topic, thesis, and roadmap: what it's about, what I argue, how I get there. Or the sentence beginning "This talk concerns" or "I argue that" didn't come. Or the introductory anecdote or example had reached five, seven, or fifteen pages with no immediate end in sight.

Eventually, a solution would come to me. I use that syntax, and cliché, deliberately, setting myself up as the recipient rather than the forger of a solution. That's how it generally felt: not like I had crafted an answer, but like it had appeared. Suddenly I'd know that the material in the introduction needed its own chapter. Or it needed a short piece of its own that *chapter* couldn't describe. Or that instead of the fluffy yellow dress stashed in childhood grief that I'd long wanted to write about, I needed to focus on the garish pink box from Leola that the dress brought to mind. One feminine concoction with a giant plastic flower led me nowhere outside myself. The other brought me to complications of queer gender, intimate relations, and improbable connections across seemingly formidable divides.

It usually took misery and, if a deadline loomed, desperation, to understand that I could switch things up, sometimes even in ways that I had switched things up before. I think that's partly because departure from academic conventions raises freighted

issues of presentation, inspection, and regulation. Heft versus fluff: Who will you think I am, what will you think of me, will I get a job or lose even a precarious livelihood, if I forego traditional signs of intellectual muscle, like proving an argument, or if I abandon respectable language when I think something else works better? Don't swish. Walk this way. Common displays of doing serious work, besides being steeped in white supremacy and class elitism, often sound like proving you're not a sissy or a girl in a sketchy value system where being either of those things is bad. Against this fraught tradition—which I reinforce and reward every time I plop topic, thesis, roadmap into a grading rubric—I had trouble retraining myself. I kept forgetting what I could do differently. Or I would get hooked on an alternative that worked for one project but not another or for someone else.

Hip Checks shares my effort to make muscle memory of experimentation. It is a product of trying, tweaking, and sometimes abandoning a number of thinking and writing practices—thinking and writing, writing as thinking—focused on alternatives to argumentation and, as the project developed, on revisiting, rethinking, and redirection. The book of super-short pieces shifting direction between them became a book of mostly short pieces that may change direction within them. My idea for stories followed by second takes on them generated, instead, an occasional device. It worked for my story about Annette and Leola. But other tales I had marked for retelling often knocked me sideways as I reworked them, seemingly in several directions at once. Also, initially I was keen on boxed asides but gave them up, one by one, then altogether. They spilled in from the peripheries too often for remaining enclosures to make sense. "Why are some sentences in a box?" to quote one mystified early reader. In addition, as I discuss in more detail later on, the race and gender politics of boxing particular content proved more unwieldy than I had anticipated. Eventually I figured out that I wanted to pursue, model, and, ideally, inspire the embrace of redirection, revisitation, and interruption rather than one choreographic move designed to facilitate them.

To this end, besides including wide-ranging pieces and several more re-presented stories, the book shifts focus, sometimes abruptly, from one piece to the next. If you read from front to back, you will find, for example, a Super Bowl ad with submerged trans content—which itself got hip-checked by a #MeToo accusation—right before a piece about a feminist science fiction writer's embarrassment to be caught wearing men's jeans. I juxtapose them because they think in different ways about assessing audiences for cultural meanings.

But I'd be equally happy if you read around in the book rather than sequentially. A bit further along, a piece about an informal survey of how people my age remember the sex scene that was passed around middle school as "page 27 of *The Godfather*!" revisits cultural interpretation. An essay about lavender dildos of queer yore picks up on two earlier pieces that foreground gendered white supremacy. One concerns the stigmatization of figure skater Debi Thomas for competing in a unitard while Black, thirty years before a version of that stigmatization happened to tennis star Serena Williams. It could be great to have already read that piece, to read it later, or to return to it. Or to head somewhere else: to find other connections between or among pieces, to unearth your own version of page 27, to turn toward other people, objects, or texts entirely before, I hope, coming back for more.

In addition to shifting topics between pieces, I also shift directions within them while working explicitly to rethink common hip-checking analytic moves, such as, "WAIT, but!" That issue emerged for me when a friend, responding to some material in a draft, suggested that my "WAIT, but!" habit, which I had not recognized as a habit, stopped rather than facilitated movement. He asked me, using his own hip metaphor, whether I could "find another (s)way." I discuss throughout *Hip Checks* how both my writing and I have been hip-checked—by feedback, by events, and, eventually, by my own body. Toward the end of drafting the manuscript, hormonal changes related to aging compromised the visibility of the curvy hips that had

helped me long ago find butch/femme erotics and made for my relationships with Annette and Leola. I first experienced that shift as the theft of my natural queer gender, despite recognizing full well that nature, itself culturally ascertained as such, does not hand anyone gender. I close the book (almost) with my account of grappling with that disruption of my cis-skeletal complacency. The effects of doing so transformed the whole.

While I see this book as a series of hip checks, I also think of it in terms of hip openers. Hip openers are exercises, stretches, and postures that help you move toward more flexibility against some surmountable and some insurmountable limits, often figuring out which are which in the process. They can help you unstick some habits, turn on your heels, and point your feet in several directions at once. This book invites you to open out from the hips, to look here and then there, to think about things in one way and then another, to take this path and then that, and to think about the directions—directions you take, directions you give, directions you do or do not follow, the times you turn or turn around, and how those change where you go next.

4 • *Edits Out Entered In*

Writing involves editing out. That last sentence started as "Writing involves editing, which includes editing out." I made a mundane change, unremarkable, though *mundane* threatens to obscure the aesthetics, politics, and call to neurotypicality hinted at in many writing directives: clean it up, smooth it out, be precise, don't wander, generate uninterrupted flow. For me, *mundane* also obscures immense satisfaction. I love the kind of editing that's like canceling out in fractions mixed with the old game show *Name That Tune*. I ~~originally~~ thought I needed seven words for that first sentence, but ~~it turned out that~~ I ~~could make that point in~~ needed four ~~words!~~.

I want to tell you about three more substantial deletions. They were substantial not always in size, but in the issues involved and my struggle over them—take out, put back, rewrite, relo-

cate, again, again, again, again later—and because my decisions around them fundamentally shaped what you read.

The first deletion I want to mention is that, despite being highly critical of arcane academic words, I sometimes censored language that better conforms with my ordinary speech habits even when it seemed more precise. For example, I deleted the phrase *fucked-up shit*, which I had used earlier in the introduction as an umbrella term for barriers to gender self-determination. It seemed the perfect term, bringing meanings from the rich histories of the parts and the whole. *Fucked-up* has had broad usage for the messes both out there and inside of you, referencing big structural nightmares and personal problems. *Shit* has such evocative potential that I could go on about it for pages. (Deletion within this tale of deletion: I tried repeatedly to shorthand it here.) Together they beat anything else I could come up with. Conversational or formal, cleaner or cruder, the alternatives seemed less accurate, too wordy, or metaphorically strained.

But even though *fucked-up shit* seemed unbeatable, I abandoned it. I feared losing readers from the get-go, readers who prefer more professional language, take slang or swear words as lazy, or are justifiably wary of being talked down to. Even more, I feared looking like the annoying poser I myself despise, trying to sound younger, more hip (anachronistic slang deliberately chosen), maybe differently raced. I did not want to risk losing you at hello. Later you will come across conjugations of *fucked-up*. By then, I hope, I will have sufficiently enticed you to stick with me. I have some faith in my wiles.

My second deletion: On the way to abandoning all text boxes I deleted one that I started writing about Prince soon after his death on April 21, 2016. I love Prince. When he died, I was a week away from performing a figure skating solo to his cover of Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You." His falsetto queered up the rink each of the hundred-plus times I practiced it. Queering it up is also one reason that Prince's song "If I Was Your Girlfriend" appeared frequently on mixes I played over the rink loudspeakers.

If I wrote about Prince, I could linger with him, offering a memorial tribute, on topic, to someone who had died of chronic hip pain acquired in the service of performing queer gender. The musician Sheila E., for example, long close to Prince, accompanied him on his *Purple Rain* tour in 1981 and later mentioned as one likely source of his pain the way he jumped off of stage risers wearing platform heels.[11] I also liked the idea of finding a visual and textual way to mark the jagged interruptions that seamless writing usually masks. Right here, when I was writing this, Prince died. Of course, "right here" would be a fiction once editing changed what and where "here" had been, but the insertion could make the point. More abstractly, I liked the idea of presenting a text as jagged, as hip-checked, as gender and sexuality can be. They are not always about finding your place on a continuum, to evoke a common metaphor. Ideas, events, and interactions can make or remake your course.

I gave up my text box in progress partly because Prince overspilled it. To begin with, everything I told you needs complicating. Hard landings can hurt you whether you're in heels or not. Stigma and racism can get you even if you have Prince's resources. As Lorraine Berry emphasizes in "Prince Did Not Die from Pain Pills—He Died from Chronic Pain," medicating chronic pain is grossly hampered by the mischaracterization of dependence as addiction and by racism, which contributes to the characterization of unsanctioned drug use in terms of criminality and to race-based disparities in how people respond to the physical pain of others.[12] Jay Sibara calls the assumption that Black people in particular feel less physical pain "a widely documented prejudicial belief about Blacks that has contributed both during and after slavery to labor exploitation, abusive medical experimentation, denial or reduction of disability benefits, under-allocation of pain-management medication, underdiagnosis and treatment for depression, and harsher criminal sentencing compared to that which whites receive, among other likely effects."[13]

In fact, the pelvic region figures prominently in the history of disregarding the pain of Black people, who have often been characterized as superhuman and insufficiently human simultaneously. J. Marion Sims (1813–83), inventor of the speculum and "father of modern gynecology," performed surgical experiments, without anesthesia, on three enslaved Black women, Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey.[14] In "How to Measure Pain I" from *Patient*, a book of poems situating her own medical ordeals in relation to theirs, Bettina Judd writes: "Can you imagine anything / worse than this? / If the answer is no, ask again."[15] Sims was trying to treat vesicovaginal fistula (VVF), a rupture between the walls of the vagina and urinary tract caused by a huge injury to the soft tissues of the pelvis. As C. Riley Snorton writes, the pelvis, besides being a site for medical experimentation dependent on the condition of chattel slavery, "was also a critical site for producing racial hierarchies among nineteenth-century anatomists and sexologists intent on finding bodily 'proof' of black inferiority."[16] An interest in racial differentiation by pelvis continued well into the twentieth century. It was one component, Sally Markowitz argues, of addressing sexual difference in ways that directly or indirectly naturalize white supremacy.[17]

I also reflected about the possible implications of presenting Prince's death as a break in the dominant flow rather than as part of it. Prince, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and me, I used to say, all born in 1958! Part of the joke was my gross lack of similarity to three pop megastars. But let's slice it another way. Prince, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and me: only the white people live to turn sixty. A text box might appropriately delimit my sadness. But the racial disproportion in death dealing, affecting even two Black men with the riches to evade many harsh effects of racism in the carceral state, is integral content for the book.

Text boxes, at a minimum, visually circumscribe what they highlight. As I reconsidered my plans, I thought about a review of my last book, *Red Nails, Black Skates*, by Angeletta K. M. Gourdine, a professor of African diaspora studies, English, and women's and gender studies. Gourdine found my treatment of race,

which I had considered substantial and integral, to be "in essence footnotes."[18] While I don't fully agree with her assessment, the vast distance between her assessment and mine showed me that I had a lot to do both in practicing and in conveying the centrality of race in my work, including attending to the racial politics of form and placement.

The third deletion I want to mention involves a friend's post about being gay/trans/gender-bashed while walking home from a queer bar. I found out the next day on Facebook, where I'd seen their selfie the night before, displaying genderqueer style for a night on the town. Their detailed account, in conjunction with the picture, concerned precisely the pleasure and risk in working your hips to present a gender expression that does not match what your body traditionally signals. My friend gave me permission to write about it and, more importantly, seemed enthusiastic about the prospect. They were actively spreading the word themselves. Besides participating in care shifts while they recuperated, I could help in their project of spreading the word.

But consent and enthusiasm do not guarantee someone's response to the published account. Writing about someone else always risks missing or mistaking the details that matter. For example, I never would have guessed one detail that Annette felt misrepresented by in the draft I showed her of my story about her and Leola. Because I hadn't explicitly described her stowing away her mother's crafts after showing them to me, she thought readers might imagine them out on display. A butch, Annette said, would never decorate with such frilly items. While I could easily, and happily, edit that problem away, I could not thereby control either readers' responses to the text once printed or her own. I can't even always predict how I will respond to what I write about myself, once it's out there, after time passes, when I can more vividly conjure readers, when I can't take it back.

Working my way to this deletion helped me think through other matters that I discuss later in the book about representing violence and oppression. These include the contradictory politics of witnessing, which can both illuminate and exacer-

bate spectacles of injustice, and the politics of citation. For example, while I could have employed many examples and texts to discuss the entrenchment of racialized obstacles to gender self-determination, I used the protests and analyses by #BlackLives Matter activists around mainstream Pride events. Focusing on resistance to oppression, rather than only subjection to it, and on theory generated within, not just about, resistance—and I do not intend here to separate academics from the streets many of us rise up in—I worked also toward the projects of separating criteria for who has smarts from academic gatekeeping.

I thought a lot as I was writing this book about how to abet expansive life and liveness in the face and exposition of opposing forces. I hope that, as a result of what I took out and put in, you will find life-dealing hip checks here.

notes

Hip Check: An Introduction

Parts of this piece appeared in "Hips," keyword for *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 98–99.

1 Shakira, "Hips Don't Lie," on *Oral Fixation, Vol. 2* (Los Angeles: Epic, 2005).

2 Eric A. Stanley, "Introduction: Fugitive Flesh: Gender Self-determination, Queer Abolition, and Trans Resistance," in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), 11.

3 Ali Greey, "Queer Inclusion Precludes (Black) Queer Disruption: Media Analysis of the Black Lives Matter Toronto Sit-in during Toronto Pride 2016," *Leisure Studies* 37, no. 6 (2018): 662–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2018.1468475.

4 Deandre Miles, "Facing a Complacent Campus: A Lesson in Discomfort," *Emory Wheel*, September 6, 2017, http://emorywheel.com/facing-a-complacent-campus-a-lesson-in-discomfort.

5 "Free the #BlackPride4," *No Justice No Pride*, February 12, 2018, http://nojusticenopride.org/free-the-blackpride4.

6 Mark Paul Richard, *Not a Catholic Nation: The Ku Klux Klan Confronts New England in the 1920s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 204–6.

7 See Toby Beauchamp, "Introduction: Suspicious Visibility," in *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 1–23; and Talia Mae Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Trans-

phobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): 43–65.

8 A. Finn Enke, "The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies," in *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*, ed. A. Finn Enke (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 69–70.

9 Jian Neo Chen, *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies in Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 16.

10 Che Gossett quoted in Christina Ferraz, "Queerstions: What Does Cisgender Mean?," *Philadelphia Magazine*, August 7, 2014, https://www.phillymag.com/g-philly/2014/07/08/queerstions-cisgender-mean.

11 Antoinette Bueno, "EXCLUSIVE: Sheila E. on Prince: 'He Was in Pain All the Time, but He Was a Performer,'" *ET Online*, April 22, 2016, http://www.etonline.com/news/187302_exclusive_sheila_e_says_prince_was_always_pain.

12 Lorraine Berry, "Prince Did Not Die from Pain Pills—He Died from Chronic Pain," *Raw Story*, May 6, 2016, http://www.rawstory.com/2016/05/prince-did-not-die-from-pain-pills-he-died-from-chronic-pain.

13 Jay Sibara, "Disability and Dissent in Ann Petry's *The Street*," *Literature and Medicine* 36, no. 1 (2018): 1–26, 2.

14 Terri Kapsalis, *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 39–41.

15 Bettina Judd, *Patient* (New York: Black Lawrence Press, 2014), 8.

16 C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 19 and chapter 1 throughout.

17 Sally Markowitz, "Pelvic Politics: Sexual Dimorphism and Racial Difference," *Signs* 26, no. 2 (2001): 389–414, especially 406–9.

18 Angeletta K. M. Gourdine, review of *Red Nails, Black Skates: Gender, Cash, and Pleasure on and off the Ice*, by Erica Rand, *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 1 (2014): 191–94, 194.

1 • *If Men Don't Have Hips*

1 Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), definition of "Hips," in glossary of "The Rules of Flat Track Roller Derby," January 1, 2020, https://rules.wftda.com/90_glossary.html.