

General Editor's Introduction

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Like any new transdisciplinary area, at the moment of trans studies emergence there were no conventions limiting what one could look at, no particular sets of methodological processes one must follow, no “proper objects” (Butler 1994). Before Sandy Stone launched the field with the appearance in 1991 of “*The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*,” the study of all things trans had pretty much been limited to pathologizing medical and psychiatric discourses (1991). After its publication, the horizons seemed endless. Since then, the truly transdisciplinary side of trans studies—distinct from the medical and psychological literatures, which, if no longer explicitly pathologizing, are certainly disciplinarily bound—has made possible the comingling of things that are not supposed to go together: biological and text-based disciplines, or the study of humans and the study of other animals, to give just two examples.

But it's difficult for a new area of inquiry to maintain its transdisciplinarity for very long. If it is to survive, it must adopt at least some of the conventions of a discipline. As institutional formations, disciplines matter in important and concrete ways. The differences between how disciplines organize the production of knowledge justify the existence of departments and programs, jobs, grants, and publication opportunities. Emerging areas of inquiry have no departments and no academic jobs, and fewer grant opportunities. If editors and hiring committees think the object of your research is weird, or if your evidence seems nonsensical, it's much more difficult to get published. Important work gets done in the institutional homes that disciplines offer. Without material support, the potential originality and importance of the work done by those swinging without a net may never be realized and recognized.

It's at this point that any transdisciplinary apparatus—in this case, trans studies—is at risk of solidifying, of foreclosing more possibilities than it opens up. Absorption into the institutional matrices of knowledge production can lead to regularizing the use of the concepts, the methods, and the kinds of questions

that first made it innovative. Over time, the specific practices that bind trans studies into a recognizable and increasingly legitimate area of inquiry get routinized. What were once particularly innovative moves can crystallize into necessary citations for newcomers. Canons form, antinormativity becomes normative, what was once new becomes derivative. Moreover, the mechanisms that produce distributive injustice in the academy, such as institutional prestige, private capital, white privilege, and location in the global north, begin to matter a great deal in deciding what work is seen, what work counts, what work must be cited. Rather than rejecting disciplinarity and all that it brings, then, it might be better to recognize that trans studies has by now consolidated into something, even if that something turns out to be (conceptually and methodologically) evasive, contingent, allergic to stasis. As Stanley Fish reminds us, “the fact that a self-advertised unity is really a grab-bag of disparate elements held together by the conceptual equivalent of chicken-wire, or by shifting political and economic alliances, or by a desire to control the production and dissemination of knowledge, does not make the unity disappear; it merely shows what the unity is made of, not that it isn’t one” (Fish 1995: 74). Indeed, by being aware of its proto-disciplinary status, we may be better positioned to avert the downsides of disciplinarity.

Another foundational trans studies text, Susan Stryker’s 1994 essay, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix,” with its depiction of noncompliant rage-fueled transsexual monsters, was an extraordinarily effective refusal both of genre policing—it was both performance and theory, narrative and analysis—and of the discourses (abjection, pathologization, false consciousness, even liberal humanism) that corralled trans subjectivity into reassuringly familiar forms (1994). Stone and Stryker produced their work outside the academy, outside of disciplinary structures, yet together they birthed a new (inter- or trans-) discipline. As trans studies grows in the academy, the task of *TSQ* is to ensure that devastatingly original work continues to grace its pages. That work may not look like what came before it. Indeed, it might even reject some of its foundational assumptions, just as our *Ur*-texts refused the discourses that preceded them. As part of this challenge, I invited two emerging scholars, Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, to give *TSQ* readers their take on trans studies thus far. As you will see, they do not pull their punches. Since this is a general issue rather than a theme essay, the contributions to this issue do not fall under any particular theme. Collectively, however, the assortment of subjects, authors, methods, and regions represented in this issue demonstrate the catholic approach to the study of gender that *TSQ* aims to preserve.

The publication of this issue marks an end to my tenure as general coeditor. *TSQ* made its debut in 2014, but my coeditor Susan Stryker and I had been working on bringing it into being—shopping around a proposal, developing

an editorial board, putting out our first call for papers, and getting articles in the production pipeline—since at least 2009. As anyone who has edited a journal will attest, ten years is more than enough time to devote to such an all-consuming project. While there have been the inevitable frustrations, delays, and mistakes—word-count screwups seem to be my particular specialty—I couldn't have had a better companion on this journey than Susan. In addition to her own brilliance as a scholar, as a coeditor she is absolutely unflappable, a freakishly fast writer of beautiful prose, and an awesome scout for new talent. I am also indebted beyond measure to the indefatigable Abraham Weil, our editorial assistant, who is starting a new job at California State University, Long Beach. I am delighted to be replaced by Francisco J. Galarte, who has generously agreed to join Susan as a general coeditor.

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It Will Feel Really Bad Unromantically Soon

Crippling Insomnia through Imogen Binnie's Nevada

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Abstract This paper reads insomnia in Imogen Binnie's queer/trans novel *Nevada* (2013) not as a body problem to be cured but as a valuable site of resistance to hetero, able-bodied norms. Binnie, however, depicts the daily effects of capitalism on regimenting sleep routines, rendering insomnia not as a glamorous all-night adventure but as a "boring" daily struggle, akin to Maria's exhausting experience of navigating trauma. Though this novel offers generic promises of self-discovery, recovery, and trans epiphany/catharsis, it inevitably frustrates all possibilities for its heroine's self-growth, thus challenging fictions about using self-care to "overcome" disability and gender-based violence. In exposing the narrative process by which insomnia is constructed, this crip reading of *Nevada* reimagines the representational possibilities for bodies that fail to sleep.

Keywords insomnia, Imogen Binnie, disability, crip, queer

This could be the beginning of an all-night odyssey, like *Eyes Wide Shut* or something.

—Imogen Binnie, *Nevada*

Imogen Binnie's queer/trans novel *Nevada* (2013) portrays disability as both traumatic and boring, a mundane experience of daily isolation. As a narrative that grapples with the everyday consequences of gender-based violence on trans women, *Nevada* presents twenty-nine-year-old Maria Griffith's strategies for envisioning but ultimately avoiding self-care. While Maria narrates her experience of living with a range of disabilities including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder, the culmination of feelings that Maria experiences (and disassociates from) all converge in her profound inability to sleep. *Nevada* thereby offers a narrative model for crippling¹ insomnia, of reimagining insomnia as an embodied difference that could be valued instead of cured.

Deaf studies scholarship proposes a conceptual shift from “hearing loss” to “Deaf Gain,” offering a narrative model that reframes disabilities as sites of power and possibility rather than as problems to medically fix (Murray and Bauman 2014: xv). *Nevada* plays with this representational opportunity for insomnia to be understood not only as a loss of sleep but also as something generative. As Maria reflects early on in the novel, “It’s an exhilarating feeling, when you’re so used to not being able to sleep, to decide ahead of time not to sleep. Like, it will feel really bad when you finally get properly exhausted—which will happen unromantically soon—but right now Maria is stoked” (21). While Maria’s conscious attempts at “figuring out who you are and what you want” (216) and at “learning or growth or whatever” (121) set readers up for an enticing trajectory of roman-à-cléf epiphany and catharsis, *Nevada* ultimately offers no personal transformations or pithy insights about post-transition gender self-actualization; nor does the novel deliver on queer² narrative expectations for downward spirals or tragic endings that readers of a “party as hell” (202) road-trip narrative might expect once the protagonist steals/borrows her girlfriend’s car and spends her “bottom surgery fund” (116) on \$400 worth of heroin. Although the narrative sets readers up for “romantic late-night adventures” (51), it delivers via substance use only “four hours of yay and then like three days of ugh. Plus, puking . . . It seems like more and more, as she gets older, that’s all that happens” (32). *Nevada* plays with readers’ narrative expectations, raising the question of what happens “when you take away the mystification, misconceptions and mystery” (4) created by media about trans women, and deal instead with representing the “boring” (4), “exhausting” (32) daily impact of gender-based violence.

My crip reading also frames Maria’s day-to-day experience of insomnia as a mundane but challenging negotiation that transcends the limits of both the medical and social models of disability.³ While the social model, which emerged in the 1970s, successfully critiques the medical model’s focus on cure and pathology, scholarship since the mid-1990s recommends more hybrid models that address the social model’s failure to account for embodied experience of pain.⁴ Crip theorist Eli Clare grapples with the promise of cure underlying the medical model. A narrative of cure, argues Clare (2017: 160), “dismisses resilience, survival, the spider web of fractures, cracks, and seams. Its promise holds power precisely because none of us want to be broken. But I’m curious: what might happen if we were to accept, claim, embrace our brokenness?” In reading *Nevada*, I center such challenges by drawing on A. J. Withers’s (2014: 116) radical model of disability that rejects the binary of the medical versus social model for overlooking how impairments themselves are biomedical constructs. The radical model offers a more complex move away from both the medical and social models to engage with unequal power relations under capitalism that frequently produce neither accessibility for

people who are disabled, nor a recognition of the lived experience of embodied suffering, but rather a plea for legal acceptance and normative social participation (116).⁵ I ask via *Nevada* what would happen if disability were regarded not as impetus for mere inclusion into existing structures but for creating anti-capitalist ways of living that hold space for the experience of fatigue, pain, longing, loss, and all the feelings that cannot fit neatly into frameworks of social belonging or cure.⁶ Maria's joy of existing apart from "rich trans women or boring trans women" (59) remains in conflict with her needs for safety, intimacy, and to "actually sleep" (45). Rather than resolve these contradictions, however, I draw attention to how Binnie's narrative further frustrates them. *Nevada* represents pain and suffering not to reduce these experiences to sites of pity or social constructions, nor to disregard the pain⁷ they cause individuals, but ultimately to critique existing power structures under capitalism that punish bodies whose needs—for functions like sleep—cannot be met.

In "cripping" Maria's experience of insomnia, I further apply these questions about disability to thinking through the medicalization of trans experience, asking what it would mean to analogously find generative—in opposing capitalism and neoliberalism—Maria's failure to conform to cisgender norms. Alexandre Baril (2015b: 68) draws on his own experience of disabled and trans embodiment to theorize how trans people have much to lose via "the risk of compromising their social status, job security, financial investments, family ties, friendships, romantic relationships and particularly their health to undergo treatments and surgeries." Baril cites a longing to live free of gender dysphoria and other embodied bad feelings that cis people do not experience.⁸ Toward complicating Baril's normative longing for a more "natural" (69) white, middle-class body that remains free to pursue "health" and "financial investments," I turn to Jasbir Puar's recognition that not everyone receives a racial, class, or national position that affords the capacity to become disabled: Puar (2017: 69) argues that it is reductive "to imagine disability as something that one acquires inevitably rather than something that is unevenly endemic to the quotidian realities of poverty, permanent war, racism, imperialism, and colonialism." While Baril laments that his body's capacities will never function in cisnormative or able-bodied ways, I ask what it would do to see these debilities as inspiring a recognition of how pain and loss are experienced unequally under capitalism.⁹ I therefore argue that narratives of individual responsibility for medical access and self-care cannot begin to address the complexities of our embodied problems. Instead, following Clare, I consider how grappling with the promise of cure might offer different kinds of narratives about what crip bodies *do*. If the focus of disability, and—as intersectionally and inseparably experienced by Maria—trans embodiment, is not self-care or cure, then what, I ask, does insomnia generate? What can we learn from different kinds of longings, sleep cycles, frustrations,

and uses of time that insomnia necessitates? I consider through *Nevada* how insomniac bodies hold the power to offset what Elizabeth Freeman terms “*chronormativity*, the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (2010: 3). Because *Nevada* refuses to provide the elements of time that Freeman identifies as “event-centered, goal-oriented, intentional, and cumulating in epiphanies or major transformations” (5), it instead opens a space for time to reject the future-oriented goals of “coupledom, family, marriage, sociability, and self-presentation” (xv) in order to narrate the value of life experience that includes none of these capitalist milestones. Instead I ask, what emerges from narratives and lived experiences of *gaining* the experience of unproductively staying awake?

Nevada upsets the queer coming-of-age genre in refusing to offer cumulative wisdoms about trans identity, instead framing transfeminine survival as an exhausting, day-to-day act of forcing oneself to wake up in time to “shave, pu[t] on makeup and get out the door” (29). Maria’s day is filled not with cathartic moments of trans revelation but with a nagging desire for respite from “thinking about being trans all the time” (110). Maria reflects how “trans women in real life are . . . at least as boring as everybody else. Oh, neurosis! Oh, trauma! Oh, look at me, my past messed me up and I’m still working through it! . . . There isn’t anything particularly interesting there” (4). Rather than finding her own story “interesting” like the stories of “trans women on television” (4), Maria instead narrates trauma as that which keeps a person “stuck in a state of perma-meta” (71) and involves increasingly “repressing and policing yourself” (74). Binnie thwarts the possibility for readers to enjoy a narrative progression from Maria as “energetic little college kid” (33) to self-actualized, post-transition trans adult. Resisting “bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time” (Freeman 2010: 3), Maria demonstrates a queer failure to move from “unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (Halberstam 2005: 3). From her disrupted sleep, Maria gains a relationship to time and to her nocturnal reflections on her gender that sets her outside of the body norms her middle-class whiteness capacitates her to assimilate.

Because Maria primes readers for “adolescent adventures” (89) and a “heroin bender rebirth ritual” (115), we might anticipate that Maria’s sleeplessness will offer vicarious pleasures of “awesome teenage irresponsibility” (15) and “loads of trashy fun” (4). But in the same way that *Nevada* disrupts “weird ideas . . . people have about trans women” (6), the novel challenges normative ideas about how bodies should function by also deromanticizing insomnia. Binnie depicts the mundane unglamorousness of attempting but failing to sleep. Maria grows frustrated by the redundancy of her own internal monologue about fatigue: “She’s exhausted and feels half-dead, but that’s really not new” (29). The list of causes for Maria’s insomnia is similarly uninteresting: “Usually sunlight, a car horn, her own

breathing, anything will wake Maria up” (29). Maria continues to annoy herself with her own story, even while recognizing that insomnia becomes a significant barrier to being emotionally present with her girlfriend, Steph: “Maria is trying as hard as she can to pay attention, but she’s tired. She can’t stay asleep at night. She wakes up grinding her teeth, or worrying about something totally productive like whether she’s really a straight girl who should be dating straight boys, or else she just wakes up because there’s a cat on her face, purring. Whatever. There are pictures of her from when she was five with bags under her eyes” (7). In circling back to childhood trauma, Maria connects her acquiescence to her exhaustion with its longevity. Following this logic, she similarly undercuts her own feelings about her overlapping struggle against both insomnia and trans stigma with their persistence.¹⁰ In doing so, insomnia actually opens up a possibility to undercut capitalism through rejecting the embodied norms it aims to maintain.¹¹

In witnessing Maria’s exhaustion, the reader is urged to consider barriers to Maria’s ability to function both in response to gender-based violence and lack of sleep. The threat of transmisogynist¹² violence makes Maria’s body physically unable to “actually relax” (50). Tensing up in response to her body’s memory of street harassment, Maria observes how now, in public, “nobody notices her. It’s funny. Nobody ever does any more. It’s just that when they used to, they were so vocal about it that still, to this day, you worry. Sucks. Whatever” (49). Shifting into the second person—justifying why “you worry” in response to “that sort of experience [that] leaves a mark” (49)—Maria defends her embodiments of anxiety and hypervigilance as valid structural barriers to sleep. The narrative links insomnia to the outcomes of resisting violence and of feeling “totally exhausted by it” (6). Although insomnia is certainly a challenge for Maria’s relationships, this persistent sense of exhaustion is constructed via the narrative as Maria’s immovable norm. Slipping between depathologizing both Maria’s nonnormative sleep and her non-cis gender, *Nevada* offers overlapping, intersectional possibilities for finding generative anti-capitalist body formations. In conflating Maria’s experience of insomnia with her experience of being trans, I read such slippages between gender norms and ability norms as a way of complicating narratives that foreground body normativity and conformity as solutions to pain. Thus, rather than finding a *cure* for either staying awake or for being trans, this novel suggests that insomnia is something powerful in what Maria gains—in moving differently through the world—rather than as a problem to be overcome.¹³

Capitalism, the novel’s “epic brutal punk rock defiance” (108) and “indie-punk DIY book snob” (9) sentiments repeatedly assert, is instead Maria’s central problem. While Maria’s insomnia is not *de facto* a limitation, Maria remains in an economic system whereby her success is measured through her ability to wakefully participate in nine-to-five employment and other forms of so-called

adulting. Unlike “grown-up” (29) Steph who “is up and gone before Maria wakes up” (29), “Maria has a specific job, but it’s boring, and anyway, she doesn’t really do it” (13). Maria shows up late and “hides in the bathroom” (40), where “she keeps falling asleep” (40) on the clock. As scholars have noted, workplace norms involving labor participation and full-time employment (without leeway for absence or lateness) are those that create a classification of disability, a label premised on postindustrial labor markets that medicalize those who cannot participate (Dyck 1998: 122; Withers 2012: 16).¹⁴ Capitalist expectations that prioritize workplace productivity—as preferable to the unpaid community support and care work Maria undertakes all night long online—constructs those who stay up late and sleep in as “irresponsible,” which happens to be Maria’s favorite state.¹⁵ Hiding from customers in the Irish history section of her bookstore, Maria spends her working hours “doing mental calculations about how to fit the word Irresponsible across her knuckles. IRSP NSBL?” (104). Even when Maria gets to work, “clear-headed” (66) with some sleep behind her, “she’s starting to feel tired already” (66), indicating the problem of the workplace in requiring a temporal duration of awakeness contingent on a full night’s sleep. Insomnia becomes a problem once it impedes Maria’s ability to responsibly function throughout her workday, to operate according to a capitalist logic and labor time.¹⁶ Insomnia makes Maria function in antithesis to capitalist workplace productivity, as she becomes “so tired, you’re past tired, time just drags, and if you can come up with a project to occupy yourself it’ll pass but you’re too tired to think of a project that doesn’t require too much energy” (40). Maria fails at capitalism because going to bed too late or waking too early means “you are going to be exhausted all day” (57). This sense of exhaustion causes Maria increased dread about sleep, rendering insomnia as a problem that must be cured in order for her to meet labor norms.

There are, however, moments in the narrative wherein Maria questions what it might mean to feel power in her ability to spend the entire night awake. Riding her bike in the opposite direction of home after she leaves work for the day, Maria muses, “Obviously you can’t ride all night instead of going home, you’ll get tired and bored and obviously there is work in the morning, but she decides to ride for a while” (20). Eschewing the confines of “work in the morning,” Maria depicts her bike as “a Pegasus or something. It’s trite to say you feel like you’re flying, but it’s like flying. She spreads her arms out like Kate Winslet on the bow of the Titanic” (83). Maria describes in detail her state of being “in love with her bike” (56): “She rides over the Williamsburg Bridge, which is never going to be boring, no matter how jaded she gets” (12). Maria “pumps her legs” (20) and propels herself around the city, feeling a sense of bodily autonomy and self-reliance—“when she is on her bike, she’s not tied to anybody” (56)—getting out of her head

and into her body in ways she is unable to do in much of her life. Maria revels in feeling “stoked” (21) about not futilely trying to sleep but instead using her body in nocturnal ways that feel more intuitive. Both a form of self-care and a tool of avoidance, Maria’s bike itself signifies the able-bodied capacity of her physical body to move through the city, to fill the nights with various forms of access open to Maria in the absence of sleep. The narrative pits bicycling as an activity in opposition to bedtime and capitalism. As a self-proclaimed “tough crusty bike punk” (85), who “makes a feral face” (82) at “boring-looking white guy[s]” (82) who hit her with their car doors before she bikes away, Maria explains how “you’re supposed to blow through stoplights to show how anarchist you are” (82). Biking, furthermore, is an activity suited not for capitalist efficiency but for pleasure; because “riding feels good” (82), Maria “just point[s her bike] in a direction and just trust[s] that she’ll get there” (82). Maria knows that unlike in daytime traffic, “riding a bike . . . at night totally rules” (20), gaining through insomnia a way of riding unencumbered by commuters.

While biking “in exactly the wrong direction” (82) from adult responsibility, Maria realizes that she must search for a balance between self-determination and self-care. Self-care in the novel, as in much of queer culture, is an ideal held in great esteem. The eleventh chapter opens as follows: “What she should do is pick up some vegetables, go home, make a stir-fry, and . . . get centered—lezzie” (44). Healthy diet, “vegan brunch” (14), moderation around substance use, and “Zen bike meditation” (79) are self-care goals that Maria repeatedly aspires to but ultimately rejects. Maria’s failures at self-care, like her inability to sleep, point to the misplaced responsibility bestowed on individuals to engage in *self-care* to undo structural, institutional-level harms. Maria, accordingly, finds power in “IRSP NSBL,” “dykey punk” (32) refusals to prepare for work, eat vegetables, or take her biweekly estrogen shot. Matthew Wolf-Meyer and Celina Callahan-Kapoor define self-care as an extension of “medical power” (2017: 84) that “focuses attention on the future, including the care of the self in relation to one’s longevity and health” (84) as well as the “intergenerational health” (84) of “children and grandchildren” (84).¹⁷ In linking self-care to “the burden of conformity” (94) and to “demands toward normativity” (94), they view insomnia in the context of self-care as creating a sense of alienation through narratives of individual responsibility for body noncompliance (93). Like *Nevada*, research in harm reduction raises these questions of how self-care, allegedly for personal benefit, can become alienating to one’s self. Kelly Szott explains this phenomenon by retracing the history of harm reduction, identifying how self-care becomes imposed as a public health measure in response to HIV, pressuring “individuals living in positions of extreme vulnerability” (2016: 182) to “self-manage” (182) in response to a “lack of available resources” (182). Szott traces “the neoliberal emphasis on personal blame” underlying why

and how public health narratives of self-care tend to look very different from community-driven activist approaches to harm reduction that center more holistic care definitions and beyond mere illness prevention (182). Zoë Dodd and Alexander McClelland correspondingly call for an anarchist approach to harm reduction, rejecting neoliberal mandates for individual responsibility in order to support community-driven forms of “mutual aid, spontaneity, trust, and collaboration” (2016: 95). Levi and Klein further discuss self-care in the context of gender-based violence, arguing: “Being transgender can substantially limit the major life activity of caring for oneself” (2006: 86). The imperative, then, that Maria feels to take her estrogen shot, moderate her substance use, and find stable housing and employment reflects the pressures she faces to access the white and class privileges that capacitate her to take individual responsibility for her own disabilities and trans medical needs. It is the absence of debility, in Puar’s terms, that bestows on Maria the privilege of even resisting capitalist labor norms, or of finding power in disability rather than having it foreclose the choices in her life. As Puar (2017: 92) asserts, “When disability is perceived as the result of the exceptional accident or when its cause is unknown, reclaiming disability as a valuable, empowering difference may be more possible than when debilitation is caused by practices of global domination and social injustice.” Puar (2015: 47) also analyzes how trans bodies are recruited through neoliberalism to become part of able-bodied, national norms rather than viewed as disabled or inassimilable bodies. It is, in fact, Maria’s capacity and location that creates an option for her to conceive her own “punkness” as giving her the option to either conform to or to rally against the white, able-bodied norms of middle-class New York. Just as her body requires sleep in order to function, Maria recognizes that she can also take estrogen regularly to intervene in her body’s hormone levels: “Her body is telling her, hey fucker, I am a trans body, you need to do the things that you do to take care of a trans body” (51). In Maria’s internal monologue that her body requires specific care because she is trans, *Nevada* conflates Maria’s insomnia with her trans medical access, again slipping between ideas of medicalized gender and disability access to consider what it might look like to “take care of” an insomniac body, of how to find power in wakefulness while still finding strategies through which to function in capitalism the next day. Yet, it is the evasion of self-care that provides Maria with joy about her survival, setting up an opposition between feeling good and functioning properly. When Maria breaks up with her girlfriend, she experiences a sense of freedom akin to the feelings of leaving town on a road trip: “I don’t have to take care of myself. Or sleep. Or bathe!” (83). The alleviation of pressure to engage in self-care grants Maria a sense of being “elated” (83), removing additionally the pressure to sleep.

While self-care is an option Maria can choose to reject, her body reminds her of its particular care needs by refusing to sleep at night and refusing to stay

awake in the day. Because Maria can't sleep in her own bed, she involuntarily falls asleep all over New York City: "She passes out on the train. . . . By virtue of never really sleeping deeply, always being tired, and having lived in New York for a long time, Maria has the New Yorker's sixth sense about subway stops. She wakes up as the train is slowing down for her stop, actually feeling kind of rested" (115). Maria allies herself with other New Yorkers who are also napping on the train, perhaps due to overwork, poverty, domestic-care duties, shift work, racism, and other systemic barriers to sleeping at night. When Maria and Steph get into a fight in their apartment that results in Steph's angry departure, Maria catches herself not fearing for the relationship but feeling excited for rest: "Steph stomps off and Maria is like, thank God. The apartment to myself tonight. I am going to take such a fucking nap" (40). Without the benefit of or nighttime option for "actual REM sleep" (45), naps are moments of respite that allow Maria's body to rest on her own schedule, often in public space instead of her own bed.

When, for instance, Maria naps mid-afternoon at a bar in Manhattan's Lower East Side, she is surprised that the bartender just lets her sleep, musing, "Maybe having a transsexual pass out at your bar for a couple hours is just the kind of gritty authenticity that a bar on the Lower East Side needs now that everybody's moved to Brooklyn" (112). In thinking constantly of how others perceive her and of what kinds of space her body takes up, Maria recognizes both the gender-based violence enacted against her as well as her complicity in systems including white supremacy and gentrification. Sometimes acknowledging and sometimes ignoring those who are displaced within Brooklyn once "everybody's" moved there, Maria pokes fun at "rich young white people like Maria [who] colonize Brooklyn history" (11). She nevertheless participates in the type of movement (and non-movement) across the city that her whiteness affords: "They're colonizing those normal people's neighborhoods, colonizing their experiences. It's pretty gross. Maria's aware that she's implicated" (12). Maria narrates New York City as a series of public spaces where she can pass out, "build a nest" (18), bike around, and engage in "an odyssey of city exploration as a metaphor for self-exploration" (37). Such exploratory opportunities showcase Maria's access to a variety of spatial and temporal privileges that allow her to cope with her insomnia through other forms of accessibility afforded to whiteness. Maria's brown friend Piranha also calls attention to the emotional space Maria consumes in their relationship without reciprocating care (91). Maria's public sleeping thus calls attention to the ways in which the effects of her insomnia are softened by her ability to move within and across the open city.¹⁸ Her apparent mobility is emphasized further as the narrative propels our heroine out of the city and across the United States in a literary enactment of a westward frontier narrative of self-discovery: the novel's relationship to sleeplessness

and to movement questions what kind of space white bodies occupy within an ongoing history of white settler colonialism, indigenous land theft, and environmental destruction that the finding-oneself-through-travel narrative requires.¹⁹ (Plot spoiler: it thus remains relevant that what Maria accomplishes on this journey is as unsatisfying as her self-care routine.)

Substance use in the novel affords both opportunities and barriers to Maria's engagement with others and with her own body. When Maria meets James, a twenty-year-old who reminds her of herself before she transitioned, the novel builds toward a moment of intergenerational connection where Maria might impart to this isolated rural youth some of the "wisdom" (176) she dishes out "night after night" (59) to questioning trans kids online. Yet when Maria and James finally get face to face, the two do not engage in conversation or "actual human interaction" (77), but instead they "sit [there] and hotbox the car" (181). Like James, who in previous chapters elects to "smoke until he can see through time" (141) rather than engaging with his girlfriend toward "figuring out his shit" (141), Maria uses substances in this interaction as both a bonding activity and a diversion from having to participate in conversations that neither mentor nor mentee are ready to undertake.

Although Maria cannot sleep for much of the novel, at the climax of the story, when Maria is about to "go talk to that girl and tell her that she's a girl . . . and totally learn something about myself, too" (176–77), Maria gets stoned and "falls asleep upright on [James's] futon" (187). James observes how Maria's "like a garbage bag full of wet leaves on his futon" (188), "sleeping like she's dead" (188) instead of "giv[ing] him the adventure in personal growth, or at least the cool story, that he was sort of hoping for" (187). Substances are notable for causing Maria additional avoidance and exhaustion, but also they provide a break from insomnia. Maria's love of all kinds of substances is connected to their ability to produce sleep: "Maria is aware that heroin totally rules. Like, being asleep rules, and being high on heroin is like being asleep times twenty. You just feel at rest" (92). After drinking, Maria similarly reflects, "Good work last night, whisky, too bad you can't make sleep as restful as you make it deep" (29). This capacity of substances to procure elusive sleep is one that Maria acknowledges is particularly enticing:

She has another glass of wine. Then she's asleep. She wakes up and looks at the clock. It's ten thirty and she's still exhausted. It occurs to her, half-asleep and bleary, that she might actually sleep through this night. It doesn't occur to her to slap herself awake, put on an album and get to work solving her life. She's so grateful at the possibility of actual REM sleep that she rolls over so no light can diffuse through her eyelids. (45)

While Maria spends much of her internal monologuing pitting substance use in opposition to self-care and self-actualization, the narrative actually offers multiple possibilities for the role of substances in enhancing Maria's ability to function by allowing her to cope and to relax. Substances, however, are never a cure for insomnia, as without them Maria's inability to sleep returns. Self-medication through substance use complicates the binary between self-care and substance use, care and cure, illustrating how the complex web of conflicting needs between ir/responsibility and sleep leave Maria feeling torn between "solving her life" (45) and feeling "at rest" (92).

Upon Maria's waking from her night of wine and "actual" sleep, the narrative poses a critical question about insomnia for Maria's readers to ponder: "She wakes up at around four thirty and feels rested. Do other people feel like this all the time?" (46). Because feeling well rested after a good night's sleep is a way of moving through the world that Maria rarely experiences, the question Maria evokes challenges the temporal ability to know how it should feel to be in a body that is normatively awake. Living in "crip time" (Kafer 2013: 25),²⁰ Maria can already foresee a crash in her newfound morning personhood as she anticipates the workday ahead: "She's going to be tired early, but that's totally great because maybe then she'll get on a normal sleep schedule, where she's too exhausted to move by eleven o'clock every night, and she wakes up totally stoked every morning at seven. No, five! And solves her life at Kellogg's! Every morning forever!" (47). While initially it might appear that Maria has found her epiphany in discovering her path to a "normal sleep schedule," she quickly becomes "tired and bored of being excited" (47), experiencing her newfound alertness as a type of mania that ceases to interest her. In fact, Maria finds this new embodiment baffling: "She puts on extra too many sparkles around her eyes out of zeal-ousness. Other people really feel this way regularly?" (47). Rather than aspire to live on an insomnia-free sleep schedule as other bodies do, Maria learns through experiencing rest how unusual it feels. Just as she cannot imagine the simplicity or mundane-ness of being cis or straight, Maria in parallel is confounded by the experience of time without fatigue, a reality that is not compelling but rather at once surprising and underwhelmingly normal.

In answering the question of what it could feel like for disabled, trans, and otherwise nonconforming bodies to become normal, *Nevada* toys with the storytelling possibility of replacing insomnia with early-morning zealously, of overcoming irresponsibility through "a grownup job" (29) and self-care, and of substituting "romantic, lonely adventures" (44) with intergenerational self-discoveries on the road with James. However, *Nevada* ultimately rejects such narrative possibilities, opting instead for a character whose contributions to an emerging trans literary movement call on her very inability to sleep. Rather

than conventionally connecting with other humans or conforming to heteronormative, cisnormative, or even literary-normative happy endings that produce healthy white bodies, marriage, gentrification, and so forth, it is precisely because she cannot sleep that Maria can take readers on the “all-night odyssey” (20) against self-growth that this novel playfully offers. In rejecting cures and sleep, Maria’s insomnia can be read as unassimilable, as powerful, and as generative in producing an exciting way of moving through the world in opposition to capitalist straight time and able-bodied norms.

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Notes

1. My approach to disability throughout draws on crip theory, which identifies how—much like heteronormativity and cisnormativity—the assumption that all bodies should be healthy and nondisabled sets up subjects to fail (McRuer 2006: 4). This crip model therefore prompts a reconsideration of the narrative tendency to value and aspire to able-bodied cultural norms.
2. Maria repeatedly identifies herself as both queer and trans, as she takes pride in her overlapping deviance of both gender and sexual norms, as well as in her relationship to queer culture and queer literary storytelling, a genre she continually self-references and plays with.
3. Baril (2015b: 60) critiques the social model for omitting self-described experiences of suffering; Tobin Siebers critiques the social model for failing to account for the complexities of disabled embodiment, calling for a more nuanced approach to understanding disability as a form of human variation (2008: 25); Liz Crow advocates for a “new approach which acknowledges that people apply their own meanings to their own experiences of impairment” (1996: 61); Wendell critiques the social model’s lack of recognition that social justice cannot eliminate all forms of phenomenological suffering (2001: 23); Wendell calls attention to how disability centers the humanness of suffering and illness as valuable aspects of the human condition but how rhetoric about suffering in relation to disability differs from that in relation to conditions of poverty or war (2001: 32); Kafer similarly challenges the social model for failing to account for instances where disability is caused by environmental toxins and other conditions of unequal access and resource distribution (2013: 158); Rice et al. survey the benefits as well as the limitations of the social model, outlining the ways the social model fails to include the embodiments and disembodied experiences, pains, and pleasures of many non-male, non-physically disabled people, calling consequently for an intersectional, feminist approach (2015: 516–17); Jasbir Puar critiques the social model and disability studies more broadly for sustaining narratives

- through which racialized, occupied, and colonized bodies transnationally are socially debilitated through mechanisms like war, occupation, and poverty (2017: 74).
4. Baril (2015b: 60) for instance, discusses how the social and the material are not distinct but interact; Anna Mollow engages with Clare and Wendell to call attention to the complex interaction between the personal and political experiences of who are disabled and ill and therefore want to be cured, conflicting experiences that become oversimplified by the limits of the social model, prompting a deeper examination of the ways that black women's suffering is normalized under racist constructions of health (2006: 76).
 5. "Disabled people are labeled as disabled" argues Withers (2014: 115), "because we are considered un(der) productive within the capitalist economy." Withers further investigates how the assimilationist politics of mainstream gay movements serve to pathologize those who fail to conform to gender or sexual norms and who are not recognized as able-bodied, "productive and useful" (124).
 6. HIV theorists address these cultural dimensions of illness stigma. See, e.g., Sontag 1989: 6; Morris 2001: 63; Long 2005: 30; Crimp 2002: 200.
 7. Margaret Price discusses the experience of pain as one prompting crip kindness and collective care, asking what might happen if bodies in pain, who are acting "bad," are "being witnessed and cared for" (2015: 280).
 8. Cameron Awkward-Rich takes up this consideration of narratives of trans-ness and depression, drawing attention to the inseparability of knowledge and pain, thereby asking what kinds of self-knowledge and theory can emerge from the experience of "feeling bad" (2017: 825); Clare (2013: 263) discusses the links between gender dysphoria and disability, advocating that we make space for "our ambivalence, grief, and longing, in ways that don't invite and encourage shame."
 9. Puar (2017: 25) outlines how disability narratives frame white bodies in the global north as deserving increased access to neoliberal participation while normalizing the harm and debility forced onto people of color across the global south and transnationally; capitalism, Puar argues, necessitates and profits from both disability and debility (65, 87).
 10. Wendell (2001: 26) also discusses labor norms and the narrowing of the definition of disability in order for employers to refuse accommodation to those not deemed to be disabled enough to miss work; like Mollow's analysis of literary representations of living daily with an invisible disability that is not recognized as a "legitimate" (2006: 76) barrier to social and workplace obligations, Maria's insomnia, like Awkward-Rich's characterization of depression, defies neoliberal social norms of "productivity and positive affect" (2017: 825).
 11. In intersectionally analyzing trans access and disability access pedagogically in spaces like campus bathrooms, Cassius Adair also observes how "normativity" interacts with structural access barriers to become "the precondition of access itself (2015: 467).
 12. Julia Serano's work (2007, 2013) analyzes the impact of transmisogyny—the intersection of sexism and transphobia—outlining how transfeminine bodies are subjected to gender-based violence not only for transgressing cisgender norms but also for embodying femininity in spite of not being female assigned.
 13. This narrative of valuing disability as creating different ways of moving through the world, rather than fixing impairments so that all bodies function in normative ways, is discussed by scholars including Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko (2009). As Mel Chen argues, sick and otherwise "contested" (2012: 7) states of being can challenge "the

- body's former fictions of integrity, autonomy, heterosexual alignment and containment, and wellness" (8). Loree Erickson's academic scholarship on her self-made "femme gimp porn" demonstrates how queer cultural productions can "create and find places where we are appreciated and celebrated for the very differences that are often used to justify our oppression" (2007: 42). In "Queer in the Clinic," Lance Wahlert and Autumn Fiestler (2013) undertake a reading of Thom Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats* that reframes insomnia as a valuable opportunity for queer connection.
14. Puar (2017: 75–76) identifies how the rights-based accommodation movement to reincorporate such bodies into the workplace fails because it attempts to "use capitalist logic to solve a problem largely created by capitalism," instead of reorganizing the workplace's very construction of capitalist space and time.
 15. Wendell (2001: 29) also discusses the connections between cultural understandings of irresponsibility and narratives of health, as individual blame is leveraged on those who are unhealthy as deserving to be so because of their bad choices or failures at self-care.
 16. Halberstam (2005: 3) draws on the work of queer theorists including Freeman and José Esteban Muñoz to critique capitalist productivity as a form of time that is both heteronormative and necessarily unpleasurable.
 17. Boucher et al. also discuss the cooptation of harm reduction from communities into public health programs, arguing that the population-level goals of surveillance and control can be antithetical to nonmedical aspects of community-building and agency valued by drug users themselves (2017: 2); Boucher et al. argue that individual *agency* is not analogous to models of self-care as neoliberal *responsibility* because drug users' holistic and communal care goals may vary from public or institutional understandings of what self-care and harm reduction can encompass, including the destigmatization and decriminalization of substance use (14).
 18. As Madhu Krishnan (2015: 679) observes about the literary representation of nightly movement across New York in Teju Cole's *Open City*, the unreliable narrator Julius's isolation and inability to connect with others around him subtly calls attention to the ongoing processes of colonization and displacement through which neoliberal violence is masked by Julius's apparent freedom of movement. This reading suggests both paying further attention to the limits of Maria's actual mobility and exposing how city space is informed by erased histories of forced migration from which Maria may benefit.
 19. In her reading of the road-trip genre, affect, and ecologies in *Nevada*, Seymour also positions Binnie's critique of the trans journey "home" as one that resists manifest destiny and acknowledges Maria's own role of white privilege in her relation to environment and space (2015: 7); Seymour's reading of the novel illuminates, via Maria's white privilege, her ultimate inability to intervene more significantly in terra nullius and Doctrine of Discovery settler-colonial understandings of an empty landscape on which North American "founding" narratives (and national land claims legally) rely (Vowel 2016: 236).
 20. Baril (2015a: 39, 41; 2016: 162, 167) also takes up Kafer's concept of "crip time" to investigate "trans-crip time," calling attention to how trans people (like trans-abled people) are only marked as deserving of health-care access if they remain productive and normative according to able-bodied norms; Wendell (2001: 21) also addresses the problem of time in relation to the life span, wherein young people who live with chronic illnesses and need to take time to rest are devalued in a culture that expects them to continue to contribute to caregiving and productivity.

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Transcryptums

An Ettingerian Reading of the Trans-subjective Landscape in Transparent

SHEILA L. CAVANAGH

Abstract This article brings the psychoanalysis of Bracha L. Ettinger to the question of mourning in the television series *Transparent*. As evident in the television series, and in everyday life, there is a troubling metonymy linking trans* lives with death. The appeal to death is often in stark contrast to the way trans* people experience their transitions as giving form to a new and invigorating commitment to life. Despite this, there can be something haunting and unspoken bothering familial relations post-transition. These cryptic experiences are well dramatized in *Transparent*. From a matrixial perspective, a transition always involves Others and choreographs intimate relations in conscious and nonconscious ways. Part of what happens post-transition is a non-cognized change in the matrixial web. Because so much of the matrixial is associated with metaphors of reproduction, life and death, it may be that the vocabulary of death (as metonymy of loss) is used to condense a vicissitude of unprocessed experiences in the matrixial. In other words, we lack ways to work through what has been changed in the relationality between intimate Others occasioned by a transition. The signifier “death” thus overwrites interpersonal familial relations. This article offers a way to understand and unpack the metonymic association using three key psychoanalytic concepts: the psychic crypt, the cryptic cariance, and the transcryptum. By bringing these concepts to the question of “mourning without loss” (van der Weele 2017) in *Transparent*, this article considers how transitions can enable a “working through” of unacknowledged familial trauma passed down between and within generations.

Keywords transgender, *Transparent*, Bracha L. Ettinger, psychic crypt, mourning, melancholia

The metonymy of death figures prominently in transgender (trans*) lives.¹ Trans* scholars have documented the pervasiveness of transphobic violence, the complexities of Trans Remembrance Day memorials (which sometimes fetishize lives lost), and the necropolitical (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013).² Too often, trans* lives are remembered and valued only after death in a neoliberal context that inequitably distributes the necessities, resources, and capacities for life. One has, in these instances, to die to have been regarded worthy of life. We know a lot about the way the socio-Symbolic reproduces imagery linking trans*

bodies, particularly trans* bodies of color, trans sex* workers, and Two-Spirit peoples to erasure, violence, and invisibility (Namaste 2000), but little about the psychic components and function of this metonymy. Too often, trans* people live in a state of exception (Agamben 2005) whereby their very being as subjects is in question. In this paper, I consider how the signifier (and reality) of death functions not as an inevitability, but as a placeholder for a loss. This placeholder is well depicted in the Amazon television series, *Transparent*, and can be understood in terms of an inter-familial “cryptic carriage” theorized by Bracha L. Ettinger. As I will describe in what follows, a cryptic carriage involves an incorporation of something painful and unspeakable that may, for some, be relevant to transitioning.

Ettinger is an Israeli feminist psychoanalytic scholar and artist who offers a formulation of trans-subjectivity (as distinct from trans* identity) and otherness that is relevant to the question of loss, mourning, and transformations. She posits a theory of the matrixial borderspace: an unconscious field of differentiation and co-emergence in a Femininespace of nonconscious difference.³ In the matrixial borderspace, we are tied to intimate and familial Others (non-I’s).⁴ The theory of the Feminine-matrixial is offered as a supplement to Lacanian psychoanalysis, which is, for Ettinger, Oedipal and thus predicated on objects, individuals, signifiers, phallic cuts, and so forth. The matrixial is focused on how we are ethically bound to Others, while the Lacanian frame places emphasis on an alienating, though subjectifying, phallic cut. We are all affected by the intersubjective landscape of individual subjects in what Ettinger calls the phallic axis of difference (of words, images, and individual subjects), but also by the matrixial landscape of partial-subjects in the intrasubjective landscape. While I believe both formulations are important, the Ettingerian focus on partial-subjectivity (as opposed to individual subjects) enables us to thoughtfully address elements of trans* subjectivity that are sometimes subject to pathologization. While Ettinger does not write about trans* people, her explication of trans-subjectivity is, in my reading, highly relevant to transitioning and to other elements of trans* embodiment. She understands the importance of individuality but adds another supplementary dimension to “being” that is cross-inscribed by Others and otherness. Unlike the Lacanian Symbolic, there are no whole or individual subjects in the nonconscious matrixial substratum. Ettinger thus speaks of the subject *as encounter* and the subject *as several* (more than one) in the matrixial.⁵

Using the Ettingerian analytic of partial-subjectivity, I consider an inter-relationship between trauma, interpersonal transformations relevant to transitioning, and what Abraham and Torok (1994) call the psychic crypt.⁶ The psychic crypt is a psychically invested trace that haunts the subject. Significantly, the

“psyche has the capacity to hold the phantom of an-Other in its own crypt” (Ettinger 2006: 164). The crypt is painful and *jouissant*. Because we do not know our ancestors but are, at least from the vantage point of the matrixial, cross-inscribed by their unknown, unrecorded, and unremembered legacies, we inherit psychic crypts. A crypt can inhabit the subject in a way that feels like a death in life. It can feel like an alien embodiment, a foreign appendage of sorts.

I begin with the case example of *Transparent* to illustrate how the work of mourning without loss (van der Weele 2017) can involve melancholic de-incorporation of a crypt and the formation of what Ettinger calls a transcryptum. A transcryptum is like a transcription of an intergenerational event outside personal memory but particular to the matrixial dimension whereby the signifier (word or image) does not reign. My Ettingerian analysis is not intended to perpetuate a socio-Symbolic equation linking trans* people with death. Rather, my intention is to undo the linkage. Let us remember that Judith Butler (1995) uncovered a melancholic component to gender identity and that we have passionate attachments to things that sometimes hurt us. Although trans* people do more than their fair share of grieving and “letting go,” due in no small part to transphobia, there is an Other asymmetrical formulation of grief that is sometimes experienced by those close to (and also at phobic distance from) trans* people that contributes to the troubling metonymy of death. In other words, for those borderlinked to trans* people, there is a loss of a fantasy about who the Other is (and was in memory). This cryptic feeling of loss is sometimes inaugurated by a transition. This is not to suggest that pre-transitional periods are ultimately cryptic. Nor is it to suggest that transitions are necessarily experienced by intimate others as ultimately mournful events. Certainly, non-trans* people can take pleasure in the Other’s transition. Moreover, a transition can be an occasion for celebration. Let us also be clear about the fact that unfinished mourning does not cause transphobic hate crimes.⁷

My contention is, rather, that in both the intersubjective landscape (involving individual subjects), and in the matrixial borderspace (involving partial-subjects), there is an impossibility of not sharing in the encounter-event(s) of transitioning. In matrixial terms, everyone undergoes a transition and it cannot be otherwise. From the vantage point of the matrixial, a transition is not (only) an individual event, but a shared encounter-event. The matrixial borderspace is trans-inscribed by multiple Others as partial-subjects. From the angle of the matrixial, a transition co-affects all partial-subjects in a shared web but in different and asymmetrical ways. We are, in other words, co-affected by the transitions of Others whom Ettinger calls our “partners-in-difference.” A partner-in-difference co-inhabits a shared familial or extra-familial web where we are trans-connected to Others. Unfortunately, we lack extensive vocabulary to narrate the affective and

aesthetic formations particular to the borderlinkings that touch, tie, and bind us to Others (as non-I's). What is lost and reconfigured in this shared (matrixial) space of difference is, consequently, difficult to articulate, let alone mourn when a tear or traumatic encounter-event occurs.

In what follows, I consider how part of what happens in the event-encounter of transitioning is a non-cognized change in the co-affective matrixial relation. Because so much of the matrixial is associated with metaphors of reproduction, life, and death, it may be that the vocabulary of death (as metonymy of loss) is used to condense a vicissitude of unprocessed experiences in the matrixial substratum.⁸ In other words, what is incited by the transitions of Others touches on the matrixial, which concerns nonconscious experiences of difference, transformation, and togetherness that are affective and aesthetic. The signifier “death” overwrites the complexities of the matrixial borderspace. The appeal to death is also, very often, in stark contrast to the way trans* people experience their transitions as giving form to a new and invigorating commitment to life. Some people even mark their transitions with a new birthday. While some trans* people may say that an older version of themselves has died, it must be stressed that there is a dialectical play of birth, life, and death in the matrixial substratum. In other words, there is no cut between “past” and “present” but rather a nonconscious link or connectivity within the matrixial subject.

Mourning and Melancholia in *Transparent*

To ground my discussion of the psychic crypt, I build on the poignant analysis offered by Simon van der Weele (2017) of the character Josh Pfefferman, the son of a Jewish trans* woman, Maura Pfefferman, in *Transparent*. Ettingerian psychoanalysis is shaped by intergenerational histories of trauma dating back to the Nazi Holocaust. As such, her writing on ethics, trauma, and metamorphosis must be read alongside a larger set of questions about loss and transformation.⁹ The phenomenon of mourning without an object (van der Weele 2017) is portrayed in *Transparent*. The character Josh dramatizes the subjective complexities of mourning without an object, which Freud famously characterizes as melancholia—the unfinished work of mourning. For Josh, there is something paradoxical about mourning a father he never had. His grief lies in abeyance because it does not have a proper object. He feels sad but cannot understand why; his mother (whom he imagined to be a father) is still alive and well and in his life. As van der Weele explains:

The loss that emerges [for Josh] . . . is an affectively felt loss that consists in what has changed in the wake of a transformative event between subjects, even if a peculiar continuity—that of sustained embodied presence of both subjects—prevents this loss from registering properly, or being cognizable at all. (2017: 621)

Moreover, Josh knows that what is for him traumatic (the loss of his father as fantasy) is for Maura (his mother “Moppa”) a life-affirming transition. If Josh were to mourn, would he negate Maura’s reality, her inner-felt sense of always having been a woman and his mother?

This significant question invites an Ettingerian inquiry into how the process of mourning without an object does not erase the Other (Maura’s identity as a woman, for instance), but can engender a shared transcriptum of an event-encounter co-affecting two (or more) partial subjects in a shared matrixial web. A transcriptum involves a co-affectively shared reconfiguration of a matrixial trace that has become a psychic crypt. Ettinger explains that the “transcriptum supplies the occasion for sharing and affectively-emotively recognizing an uncognized Thing or Event” (2006: 167).¹⁰ Transitioning can be one such way of making a transcriptum. To the extent that a transition functions to make a transcriptum, it involves the traumas of Others and cross-inscribes them to enable a decomposition of the psychic crypt. I am in agreement with van der Weele, who contends that the “claiming of our losses, ambiguous or not, as working through grief can serve to realign and strengthen our attachments in surprising and productive ways” (2017: 610). From a matrixial perspective, we have the conceptual tools to understand how a transition can strengthen a commitment to life in the inter-subjective landscape.

Josh and Maura descend from traumatic familial legacies saturated by unprocessed pain and trauma. Trauma, by definition, cannot be signified. It can, however, be apprehended in a matrixial alliance. In Jewish history, a great many lives have been tragically lost. This is clearly marked in the opening trailer depicting the Pfefferman familial ancestral legacy dating back to Nazi Germany. These opening trailers are saturated by nostalgia, melancholia, and something else that cannot be named but is unmistakably lost. Somehow, Josh’s feeling of having lost a father he never had is tied to the traumas of Jewish ancestors he never knew. However life-affirming the transition is for Maura, it is burdened by the heavy weight of ancestral history, familial tensions, and interpersonal dynamics depicted in the series. Among one such tension is the unspeakable grief and trouble Josh is having with his mother’s transition. How can Josh claim a loss that is subjective (unique and different for him), a loss that is, for Maura, more like a finding of something, namely her identity as a woman?

Maura’s transition touches everyone in the family, even as it is only one individual (as subject) who undergoes an actual transition. In Ettingerian terms, Josh and Maura are borderlinked in a shared matrixial web that is, in this instance, familial. In the matrixial web that binds Josh and Maura, tension is put on a shared string. But there is no language available to name the string, let alone the source of tension placed on it. What I would like to call the “cryptic-tie” has been

changed, but the reverberations of the change have yet to be cognized. More precisely, the cryptic-tie has yet to be made into a transcriptum.

The change enabled by Maura's transition can be understood by attending to the matrixial borderspace, which is, as Ettinger explains, a (Feminine) field of differentiation and co-emergence that does not leave individuals alone, untouched by Others (as non-I's). This trans-subjective zone is used by Ettinger to account for the matrixial elements of the subject. These elements of subjectivity yearn for expression and recognition. There are no individuals in the matrixial, only partial-subjects tied to Others (known and unknown) in nonparallel relations. Ettinger explains that we are inter-implicated in the lives of Others but in embryonic and amorphous ways. There is no trans-parental cause and effect in the matrixial. No (phallic) signs or symbols to directly represent the many minute metamorphic changes in the shared borderspace. There are only affects, aesthetics, and transphenomenological sensations (to be discussed in what follows).

In this Feminine space of difference, Josh and Maura co-emerge, co-affect, and co-relate to each other in nonconscious ways. Josh is "mourning without loss" (van der Weele 2017: 608). In more precise matrixial terms, Josh is negotiating "an-other kind of loss." An-Other kind of loss concerns the Feminine dimension, whereas the formulation of mourning without loss developed by Freud typically involves, or alludes to, something that can be (at least in phantasy) found (as in an object or subject). The latter Freudian formulation refers to the phallic landscape of individuals and objects, whereas the Ettingerian formulation refers to the way we are touched and affected by Others in a dynamic nonconscious borderspace.

Although van der Weele does not use the Ettingerian formulation of fragilization, it is apropos. We experience fragilization when our individual boundaries are crossed in the Feminine dimension. A metamorphosis touches and co-affects every partial-subject in a given web. Although metamorphoses are, ultimately, healing and subjectifying, they are, in Ettinger's words, also fragilizing. Something in the borderlinking has changed and Josh has been traumatized. The loss dramatized in *Transparent* affects Josh and Maura, albeit in different ways. There is an asymmetrical relation whereby the time and experience of loss is askance. Josh is mourning without an object because the trauma is not (only) in the intersubjective realm (whereby there are individual subjects), but in the trans-subjective realm, whereby an encounter-event with the Other (Maura) has already occurred but does not enter consciousness. This trauma cannot be seen or clearly demarcated. It is transmitted in waves, affective links, and visual impressions, bits and pieces of unassimilated suffering that are apprehended through "pulsational scansions correlating to phantasmatic alternations, which disturb visibility from within" (Butler 2006: 155). It should not surprise us that Josh's stifled feelings

cannot be put into words: they are cryptic. The character dramatizes what we might colloquially call “the lack of words to say it.”

What has been lost, or as I suggest, changed in the matrixial borderspace between Josh and Maura must be trans-scripted if the pain is to be laid to rest. This takes time, attention, and care with and alongside Others in the familial drama. It is not easy to circumscribe and trans-scribe a crypt. This is, in part, because the psychic crypt functions to undo meaning. It disorganizes language and obscures signification. In Lacanian terms, the crypt attacks the signifier. It can leave the subject(s) in an anachronistic abyss. The analytic task here is to recover meaning, to generate signifiers (the “words to say it”), which Abraham and Torok (1994) call cryptonymic analysis. Cryptonymy, as in cryptonymic analysis, refers to the theorization of the way subjects cannot assign words, language, or narrative to the link (or trace) that has become a crypt (or inaccessible mental grave). Without analysis and understanding, the crypt continues to haunt the subject and multiple Others in a matrixial (or familial) web. The crypt is haunting when there is a “gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life. The phantom is therefore also a metaphysical fact: what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (Abraham and Torok 1994: 171). The fragilization Ettinger discusses in relation to matrixial trauma has this haunting component to it and is, also, born of cryptic legacies. Certainly, the haunting in *Transparent* inter-affects the entire Pfefferman family.

Maura has, through her transition, altered something germane to the family crypt and Josh is painfully affected (haunted) by it, but does not know what to do about it. We may deduce that Maura is no longer willing to carry the family crypt as patriarchal head of the family. As a result, Josh’s position as the only son is, somehow, compromised. The cryptic carriage concerns the entire family and its disassembly is radically disorienting. By transitioning, Maura has somehow fractured the shell-like crypt and its shrapnel is felt by Josh alongside everyone in the Pfefferman family. No one knows what to do or how, exactly, to respond to Maura’s transition. But everyone feels, intuitively, that there is something more significant at stake than the transition itself.

If we are to understand this “something else” in terms of the psychic crypt, we must first acknowledge that the crypt is out of time and step with the actual event of Maura’s transition but is somehow intimately tied to it. In other words, the crypt that Maura carries pre-dates her, even as she is the one who must ultimately defuse it. The opening sequence in the television series takes us back in time to what cannot be directly enacted in the series—the trauma(s) of Nazi Germany, which is largely unspeakable. To the extent that something cannot be said and laid to rest, it must be carried. Ettinger suggests that we carry the weight of the Other’s suffering in the matrixial borderspace. In other words, we carry the

affective weight of unprocessed trauma and grief for Others (as non-I's) we never knew; Others from generations past concern us today. What is carried lacks coherence as a proper object (or subject). Inchoate assemblages of transmissions, sensations, and other matrixial phenomena, best understood in aesthetic and affective registers, are carried.

Let us remember that in the matrixial there are no individual subjects with identifiable "feeling states," only partial-subjects who experience transitive phenomenon that Ettinger likens to intuition and telepathy. (A good example of this matrixial telepathy is dramatized in the American science-fiction film and television series *Sense8*, created by Lana and Lilly Wachowski and J. Michael Straczynski. Eight characters with vastly different life experiences and in different geopolitical contexts are, in nonsensical ways, interconnected through shared visions, thoughts, and feelings. As sensates [homo sensoriums], the characters inhabit a shared cluster that I liken to a matrixial web. The characters come to each other's aid when they psychically intuit that another sensate is in danger.) Unlike the intersubjective landscape of object relations whereby there are five senses, there are other, less precise modalities of apprehension and perceptivity in the matrixial. In the matrixial there are intrasubjective traces, affects, aesthetics, and ways of relating that are significant but nonconscious.

These felt sensations of matrixial connectivity are inchoate and enabling but also traumatizing, from a trans-subjective perspective. What van der Weele notices in *Transparent* is that the "transitioning subject [Maura] realigns subject orientations to recast relations between them" (2017: 618). But these recastings are not easy. As van der Weele observes, Buzz (a character in *Transparent* who adopts a fatherly position in relation to Josh) equates Maura's transition with death. Although Maura is not dead (and does not die in the series), death is a "placeholder for something much more ambiguous and complex" (611). Although the idea that his father has died (articulated, albeit compassionately, by Buzz), does not (cannot) capture what Josh cannot mourn, it does, as van der Weele observes, enable Josh to cry. He begins to mourn and "work through" this something more ambiguous and complex that belongs to the matrixial.

In what follows, I discuss this "something else" in terms of the psychic crypt, the cryptic identification (including the cryptic carriage), transphenomenology, and the transcriptum as it relates to Josh. I give Ettingerian form to what Josh and Maura trans-scribe and, ultimately, heal in the inter-/intrasubjective netting.

The Psychic Crypt

Abraham and Torok (1994) were the first to develop the idea of the "psychic crypt" later explicated by Ettinger (2006) in terms of the matrixial borderspace. As

theorized by the Hungarian psychoanalysts, the psychic crypt is an inscription of loss, trauma, and unspeakable grief in the subject bequeathed by generations past (and sometimes present). The traumatic wound that becomes a crypt has no object. The crypt is shared across, between, and within generations. The crypt bequeathed by generations past and present is well depicted in *Transparent*. It is not incidental that the opening credits for *Transparent* include photos, old family film footage, and reenactments of Jewish ancestors in Nazi Germany since passed. The Pfefferman family dramas are depicted in relation to lost but conspicuously present ancestors whose Jewishness is marked. The lost ancestors haunt but also provide matrixial context for the characters.

The psychic crypt is not foreclosed in Lacanian terms. It is more accurate to say that it wonders. The crypt is, in other words, nomadic. Consider, for instance, that dysphoria comes and goes, it may frequent specific erotogenic zones but is not static. There may be a pre-symbolic (not pre-subjective) crypt unseen by Others but felt by the subject to be deadening. The localization of a crypt as alien embodiment is by no means unique to trans* people. Trans* identifications may, however, be one way (among others) to circumscribe, and thus, palliate a crypt. In other words, the scansion of a crypt may involve sexual identification. What counts as “gender dysphoria” may be a *jouissant* scansion of a psychic crypt. Something felt to be dead is thus circumscribed as “not me.”

The crypt is a psychic enclave whereby a traumatic intergenerational trace has been frozen. The presence of the crypt is not conscious although it causes psychic pain. The psychic crypt is an effect of an un-signifiable trauma that has been incorporated by the subject, even though the original traumatic event or phenomenon was not experienced by the subject concerned. The psychic crypt thus has a transitive, yet hidden, component to it. Significantly, the word *crypt* has more than one meaning. *Crypt* is an early fifteenth-century word for “grotto,” “cavern,” and “hidden vault.” It has also been used as a verbal adjective, “to hide.” It is associated with the root *krau*, to conceal or hide. *Crypt* in today’s vernacular refers to a vault buried underground. It has a material connotation as a noun but also conjures up the specter of something hidden or unknowable. There is something literal, figurative, and also ghostly (uncanny) about the crypt. The crypt involves a traumatic loss without an accompanying memory. The non-memory haunts everyone in Ettinger’s matrixial borderspace—it is curiously alive.

In her discussion of the matrixial borderspace, Judith Butler (2006: xi) agrees that the “dead did not obey the prohibition on life . . . the psychoanalytic law of foreclosure did not work, and the archaic scene of a nonunified psyche emerges visually through layers that cover and disclose a past that continues to haunt the life of the supposedly individuated adult.” The intergenerational

inheritance takes residence in the living-subject. Ettinger refers to this residency as a cryptic carriage. The crypt has a phantomlike component to it insofar as it haunts the subject. The phantom is the incorporated non-object. It is also described as a “rift” (Abraham and Torok 1994: 140). We have no direct-knowledge of the crypt or of the event-encounter that crystallizes it. We can’t forget or remember it. “This past is present in the subject as a block of reality; it is referred to as such in denials and disavowals” (159). The crypt is not alien or object. Nor is it exactly mine. It is, rather, a communal by-product of the *I* and the *non-I*—a legacy of uncognized event-encounters saturated by trauma and phantasy.

When the subject cannot introject (adapt to or fully acknowledge and/or mourn) a familial or extra-familial trauma or secret, there can be an incorporation of this trauma or secret as a crypt. The crypt is a localized site of affective transmission that interferes with desire and is, as such, difficult to bare. The incorporation is felt to be an alien identity. As such, the crypt might function as a scansion of a traumatic link to a non-I that must be de-incorporated. Unlike introjection, which is adaptive for Abraham and Torok (1994), “incorporation results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such” (130). Incorporation is unconscious (and can exert psychic pain) whereas introjection is conscious and adaptive. The difference is important. While the introjection of desires puts an end to objectal dependency, incorporation of the object creates or reinforces imaginal ties and hence dependency. Installed in place of the lost object, the incorporated object continues to recall the fact that something else was lost: the desires quelled by repression. “Like a commemorative monument, the incorporated object betokens the place, the date, and the circumstances in which desires were banished from introjection: they stand like tombs in the life of the ego” (114).

The “melancholic crypt is pushed to the periphery of the psychic apparatus: the body” (Abraham and Torok 1994: 164). Nonconscious awareness and acute-attunement to the psychic crypt can thus inhabit the subject-body in ways that are libidinal and somatizing. What is significant about the distinction between incorporation and introjection is that through incorporation the subject takes the Other (as love object) into their own body. This is an intrapsychic mechanism that is transitive and transphenomenological. Although not using the example of trans* identifications, Abraham and Torok (1994) describe a process whereby an Other has been incorporated into the self as a phantasy (unconscious fantasy). Through incorporation there is a “*demetaphorization* (taking literally what is meant figuratively) and *objectivation* (pretending that the suffering is not an injury to the subject but instead a loss sustained by the love object)” (126–27). As a result, the subject overrides the mourning process. But they are consequently overcome, psychically speaking, with a feeling of estrangement and bereavement.

Only by recognizing the loss in its entirety and laying claim to the part of oneself invested in what has been lost can one transform the overwhelming—seemingly existential—feeling of melancholia. Incorporation, in other words, is unfinished mourning.

The unacknowledged loss is buried alive in the subject as a crypt. There is a memory “buried without legal burial place” (Abraham and Torok 1994: 141). These cryptic carriages are not unique to the familial dramas depicted in *Transparent*. In fact, they are quite old, dating back at least to Ancient Greek theater. Consider, for example, the Sophocles play *Antigone*, the first play written in the Oedipal trilogy. Antigone insists on a proper burial for her brother, Polynices, in steadfast opposition to the law of the kingdom. Her uncle, King Laius, refuses to grant Polynices a legitimate burial. He regards Polynices as an enemy of Thebes, a traitor who should be left to rot and decompose in open air, alongside swine. Antigone, in direct defiance of the king, insists that her brother, whose unburied corpse represents the family crypt, be laid to rest. She tries desperately to bury Polynices by twice throwing Theban soil over his corpse. But both attempts fail. Antigone needs to end a traumatic Oedipal-legacy characterized by incestuous and patricidal transgressions. Burying Polynices will enable her to lay the family crypt, a devastating legacy, to rest. As she insists, through her actions and defiance of her king-uncle’s patrilineal law, the family crypt must be acknowledged and given a proper symbolic burial (Cavanagh 2017).

Likewise, the analytic task for trans* people and those they love may, sometimes, involve a symbolic burial of an Other’s trace that has fallen out of a signifying (and thus livable) generational chain. The phantomlike trace (that has become a crypt) can “persist through several generations and determine the fate of an entire family line” (Abraham and Torok 1994: 140). Antigone, in my Ettnerian reading, struggles to end the cryptic inheritance by burying her brother in opposition to the edict of the king. Is Josh (who is infinitely more likeable than King Laius) also unwilling to acknowledge, let alone lay to rest, a familial crypt that Maura somehow brings to light? Antigone wants to bury her brother, Polynices, as much as Maura needs to transition. The strength and willfulness of Antigone is, for me, mirrored in the many courageous acts of transitioning in the face of familial and societal prohibitions. The trans* community is nothing if not resourceful and resolute in their conviction that transitioning or, quite simply, “being” trans* or gender variant, is nonnegotiable: there must be a registration of existence, as such, in life. It should also be remembered that Butler (2002) reads gender variance in the character Antigone, who is not only a woman but also a man and masculine in the play. The matrixial does not respect Oedipal laws that enforce what trans* scholars call bi-gender culture. Antigone may be read as a trans-like character who, through her emboldened transgression into the realm of

the masculine, acts not only to repair a traumatic Oedipal legacy but also in the service of life and future generations.

In *Transparent*, Josh is struggling to recognize something that Maura (like Antigone) has already apprehended and buried in “Mort.” Not coincidentally, the old French term for *mors*, meaning “death,” is *mort*. (Interestingly, *mort* also refers to a “loose” girl or woman of uncertain or suspicious origin that, again, calls to mind Antigone.) If we read Maura’s transition as life-affirming, as indeed it is, what (or whose) life is she affirming, beyond, of course, her own? There is something unspeakably sad for Josh that is cross-inscribed in/with/by Maura’s transition. Interestingly, Antigone is, like Maura, a maternal figure, but neither character actually gives birth. The matrixial alliance is not about reproduction in a literal (or essentialist) sense; it is about co-affective and co-generative ties among the already living.¹¹

Antigone and Maura act transgressively in life-affirming ways. But the desire undergirding the acts are, at least from a phallic angle (adopted by King Laius and to a lesser extent Josh), difficult to understand. Just like feminist philosophers labor to understand Antigone’s radical act (Söderbäck 2010), feminist and gender-studies scholars labor to understand the desire inciting a wish to transition. Trans* studies and feminist psychoanalytic theory are, in my view, emerging partners-in-difference that have much to transcribe. What Ettingerian psychoanalysis brings to trans* studies is a way to understand the play of desire and trauma, in co-emergence and differentiation. Ettinger explains that “matrixial desire is an aspiration and an inspiration from a feminine *jouissance* toward the edges of a wider Symbolic” (2006: 113). This matrixial desire is attuned to the trans-subjective field and is, ultimately, life-oriented. In her discussion of Ettinger’s work on the Other sexual difference, Griselda Pollock (2006) speculates that Feminine desire might “signify something of profound importance for discussions of human subjectivity and indeed sociality” (22).

Similarly, trans* subjectivity and life-experience have something of profound importance to teach us about partial-subjectivity and intrasubjective ties. To the extent that Maura’s transition functions to trans-crypt (or bury) a shared familial crypt, it may be that Josh is not ready or perhaps able to recognize, let alone grieve, a traumatic inter-familial trace that descends from generations past. While van der Weele (2017) suggests that Josh’s cryptic mourning may seem to be at odds with Maura’s experience of her transition, there may, from a matrixial angle, be a shared but unacknowledged grief that is tied to or animated by (yet not germane to) the transition. In other words, Maura’s transition may be both a registration and a reconfiguration of a familial psychic crypt that Josh can acknowledge only with great difficulty. If such is the case, the affects and aesthetics of the transition involve, and co-affect, the entire Pfefferman family, albeit in

incongruous and divergent ways. Let us pause to remember that the desire to transition is not infrequently expressed as an urgent matter of life and death. But why a transition should feel so urgent and compulsory is a lingering psychoanalytic question that may be answered, at least in part, by attending to matrixial phenomenon relevant to a particularly onerous cryptic carriage. Although I do not suggest that transitions always involve cryptic carriages, some transitions may awaken what intimate Others cannot avow, let alone acknowledge, as psychic phenomenon co-affecting everyone in a shared space of difference. (Many of us, regardless of gender or trans* status, feel compelled, or called on, to bring difficult familial knowledge to light. Marginalized people in society are often called upon to bring difficult, often traumatic knowledge of loss, trauma, and difference to familial awareness and to public consciousness. The analytic of the cryptic carriage can, in my view, help enable us to understand the affective complexities of this ethical and political calling.)

Maura is, in my reading, the subject doing the difficult work of carrying, but also laying to rest, the family crypt in the television series. Certainly, the entire Pfefferman clan is locked in a cryptic melodrama they cannot resolve or indeed lay to rest. Maura's transition figures as central but she is, certainly, not the only character negotiating matrixial phenomenon felt to be cryptic. For instance, Ali, Josh's sister, has, in an awkward scene, sex by accident. The scene dramatizes the way Ali is, like Maura (who is depicted in equally awkward sex scenes), alienated in some way from her body, her sexuality and the Other (as sex partner). In fact, all of the characters are in some way alienated by something that lacks a proper object or name. The Pfefferman characters are not-relating to something (or someone) present, while relating to something (or someone) no-longer present.

Maura's transition, like Ali's eventual "coming-out" as a lesbian, seem to coincide with a reckoning or acknowledgement of something, but of what, exactly? The transitions, however different and asymmetrical, are spurred on by an identification with something that seems (at least from a phallic angle) to lack material substance. Maura now identifies as a woman, and Ali identifies as a lesbian, but there is, from the perspective of the matrixial, an Other, more significant cryptic identification that needs to be de-cathected. It is, in my reading, not the gender or sexual transitions that concern the Pfefferman family (they are quite liberal and socially progressive Californians leading relatively privileged lives), but the opening up and consequent de-incorporation of a shared familial crypt.

The Cryptic Identification

Psychoanalytically speaking, we can identify with a psychic crypt. Endocryptic identifications lead the subject to experience (often traumatic) affects that are not

germane to the subject's history (or anatomy) proper. This endocryptic identification "consists of exchanging one's own identity for a fantasmic identification with the "life"—beyond the grave—of an object of love, lost as a result of some metapsychological traumatism" (Abraham and Torok 1994: 142). The endocryptic identification allows the subject to bypass the mourning process and to maintain the status quo—life as it was before the loss. This produces an inner-felt schism or rift. The psychic crypt produces a "gaping wound of [and in] the [subject's] topography" (142), which can feel like a living death in life. We all incorporate lost objects to varying extents, but a crypt is made when there is no language to narrate and, ultimately, to mourn a life-bothering loss. This alien identity can "entomb" the subject and shape desire in ways that are out of sync with the subject's personal history.

The desire to transition may, in other words, be incited by a need to break open a psychic crypt that is incorporated as a (nonconscious) endocryptic identification that is (consciously) articulated through the discourse of gender identity. In other words, part of what trans* studies discourse and scholarship may focus on, at least in part, is a shared intrasubjective traumatism that needs to be acknowledged and, ultimately, healed. There is something significant, emotionally and affectively speaking, about gender—something ultimately relating to "being," that cannot easily, or perhaps ever, finally be said. What is salubrious and exciting about transitioning may be the decomposition of an otherwise painful cryptic carriage. To the extent that a transition can be liberating, the subject must, on some intrapsychic level, have freed themselves from something—something unspeakable. In other words, I am wondering if the act and art (Gozlan 2014) of transitioning may include, at least for some, the psychical work of releasing or dispersing something that was, prior to the transition, deadening.

Let us remember that the crypt is, by definition, libidinal, that it bears on ego-functioning and must at some level, concern sexual identification and desire. Might an inner-felt schism (or little death) central to an endocryptic identification be what, at least for some, drives a wish to transition? In such instances, the transition would involve a renewed commitment to life through a nonconscious avowal (and dispersion) of a psychic crypt. But more than this, a transition can promote healing in a shared familial web, especially when intimate others are willing to begin the work of acknowledging what is felt but not sayable in a given matrixial web. If this is true, transitions may, with care and attention by Others, re-orchestrate matrixial strings in a shared borderspace. The art, aesthetics, and affects, of a transition would thus involve a "working through" of a cryptic carriage formerly unrecognized or unacknowledged by Others.

This conceptualization of the cryptic carriage can also help us to understand the psychic traumatism(s) sometimes caused by using a person's given, as

opposed to chosen, name, or by using a person's assigned, as opposed to self-declared, gender pronoun. These name and gender misreadings are, not insignificantly, referred to as "dead-naming." To the extent that transitioning may involve the de-incorporation a psychic crypt, dead-naming may, in effect, feel like a re-assembly of an endocryptic identification.

Before I proceed, a few additional cautionary notes are in order. I am not suggesting that trans* subjectivity is inherently cryptic—quite the contrary. Certainly, many trans* people do not experience their identities and transitions as cryptic. But I am wondering if the affects and aesthetics of transitioning may at least for some be tied to, or moored by, the unprocessed traumas of generations past (and sometimes present). Although this is difficult to "prove" in any substantive way, the strong affect and transmissions of feeling in a given familial circle indicate that there is, very likely, something more significant than gender identity at stake in transitioning. My suggestion is based, in part, on the observation that there is nothing half-hearted or unsentimental about transitioning for those who transition or for those intimate others connected to trans* people. Moreover, people tend not to respond neutrally to a transition. Significant changes in one's being as a subject and in one's intersubjective circle are co-affected by everything associated with a transition. If transitioning were a simple matter of gender reassignment, non-trans* people would not be moved to such bizarre and regressive, let alone violent, enactments of transphobia! Nor would parents act as though their child has somehow been "lost" upon transition. In extreme cases, parents, and entire families, excommunicate their trans* relations. Such extreme disaffiliations must be understood, at least in part, through nonconscious psychical dynamics.

For those who transition, there is, very often, profound psychical engagement from what has changed. By celebrating second birthdays, adopting new names, and so forth, there is ample indication that something less than superficial is at stake in the change. Very often, people take distance from something symbolized by a given name or by an assigned gender pronoun post-transition. From a matrixial angle whereby the subject is accompanied by Others (non-I's), transitions are not individual but shared psychic events. To the extent that a transition involves something that has been changed, something that has, perhaps, for generations gone unnamed, unacknowledged and, consequently, unprocessed, it may involve an attempt to reconfigure an endocryptic identification as a live connective-link. If the transition enables the subject to desire and to produce new signifiers associated with one's being (as presence, not as a harbinger of death), it has a subjectifying (life-affirming) affect. It must be stressed that there is no one ideal way to transition. In fact, many trans* and gender-variant people do not transition (and do not frame their gender journeys as transitional events), but may, nevertheless, reconfigure a

cryptic trace. There is no given developmental sequence, exacting formula, or inherent linearity to what is commonly referred to as a gender journey.

Psychic phenomena linked to a cryptic identification has not previously been used to think about transitioning and gender journeys. Certainly, Abraham and Torok (1994) do not write about what we, from the vantage point of the present, call “transgender.” They do, however, refer to a dividing wall in the subject that calls to mind something trans* people sometimes experience, namely dysphoria: “The crypt perpetuates the dividing walls by its very nature. No crypt arises without a shared secret’s having already split the subject’s topography” (131). Topography here refers to psychic and bodily phenomena. Read in terms of trans* studies, I cannot help but ask if the subject’s topography, split by the crypt, may—at least sometimes—concern trans* embodiment and, perhaps, other atypical embodied psychic phenomena. Such phenomena may include that which currently exists in the *DSM-5* under the diagnoses of “depersonalization/derealization disorder,” “body integrity identity disorder,” “body dysmorphic disorder,” and so on. Of course, one does not have to live with a psychiatric diagnosis to live with a split topography. A split is, to varying extents, experienced by everyone. It should also be remembered that what enables an acutely felt and sometimes disorienting split topography is, in part, the Other’s refusal to avow, process, or apprehend something that concerns not only the subject’s identity, but something that concerns all co-inhabitants of a given matrixial web. In other words, what counts as an individual “pathology” is, from a matrixial angle, a shared traumatism that has taken residency in (at least) one partial-subject, even as it ultimately affects everyone in a shared matrixial covenant.

The ego feels the split and the fissure is felt at the level of identity, but no one is alone in the matrixial. The anxiety and self-consciousness analysts sometimes note in their work with trans* clients is, read through the lens of the transgenerational crypt, not (or, perhaps, not only) an affective property of the trans* subject. As Abraham and Torok (1994) note, “the subject heralds the love-object’s sadness, his gaping wound, his universal guilt” (136). Cryptic affects are bequeathed by an Other (or non-I) who was/is, for whatever set of reasons, unable to introject and work through their own loss, shame, and in extreme cases, dehumanization. What is more telling and worthy of further exploration is the way the crypt is accompanied by a failure or breakdown of language whereby there is no ability to play with the signifier for humiliation. The subject carrying the crypt aims to protect the Other from pain and humiliation accompanying unspeakable trauma. The cryptic carriage can thus be read as an attempt to care for and protect the Other (non-I) as subject of humiliation. Certainly, there are multiple scenes in *Transparent* where Maura tries to protect and care for Josh, even if she cannot protect him from a legacy of humiliation unfolding not before but in his blind spot.

If we follow the logic of the psychic crypt and the endocryptic identifications it involves, there will be, for the one carrying the crypt (and also for those intimately tied to the one de-cathecting a crypt), depressive affects bequeathed by generations past and present. Let us consider, for instance, that some psychoanalysts who work with trans* clients (Gozlan 2014) note that there is often a postsurgical period that is melancholic (or depressive in Kleinian terms). Sometimes this melancholia is about a significant Other who does not recognize a client's gender. Other times, the manifest sadness is about the need to accept what feels incomplete or imperfect about gender embodiment (associated with postsurgical scar tissue or premature hair loss due to testosterone injections, for instance). The transformative work of de-corporation must involve mourning. If we read gender or body dysphoria (in the broadest possible terms) as involving a cryptic carriage, it should not be surprising that people undergo a period of mourning without an object as van der Weele (2017) suggests pre- and post-transition.

The Transphenomenology of the Psychic Crypt

The radical act, art, and beauty of transitioning highlights what I have referred to above as the transphenomenology of the crypt. I am provisionally defining transphenomenology to include various embodied experiences shaped by non-conscious recognition of something cryptic or perhaps transitive, relevant to identity or corpo-Reality (the body mediated by the play of phantasy). This feeling of transitivity, a term defined by Ettinger (2006) as involving an Other non-phallic sexual difference, or otherness, may need to be avowed and incorporated by way of identification (something added), excised by way of de-incorporation (something removed), or some other combination thereof, as may be the case for those who are a-gender, non-gender, bi-gender, and so on. Transphenomenology, as the very term implies, involves transitive phenomena that we have yet to properly acknowledge, let alone understand, in psychoanalysis. Although a more complete analytic discussion of transitivity is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to note that in his introduction to *The Shell and the Kernel*, Nicholas T. Rand (1994) explains that there is a call to engage a collective psychology within the individual (166). There is an invitation, in his words, to listen to the “voices of one generation in the unconscious of another” (166). For Rand, we must reorient our thinking about “Freudian and post-Freudian theories of psychopathology, since here symptoms do not spring from the individual's own life experiences but from someone else's psychic conflicts, traumas, or secrets” (166). In the terms of object relations theory, the child-subject invests in the Other's lost objects or, from a Lacanian perspective, the desire of the Other—neither of which is visible or exactly memorable.

From an Ettingerian perspective, transitivity has a pre-discursive Feminine history in utero and, ultimately, enables trans-subjectivity. While gestation is

a metaphor for trans-subjectivity (and “becoming” more generally in Ettingerian psychoanalysis), trans-subjectivity must be read as a lifelong set of processes, affects, and aesthetics that relate to borderlinking in the Feminine substratum. This enables us to understand how we become libidinally invested in the Other’s traumatic traces through this primary Feminine-relation that is an “irreducible difference *inside* subjectivity” (Ettinger 2004: 84). There is a link or trace to the becoming-Other that is, for the becoming-subject in utero, embodied. Matrixial phenomena involve the “I with/for *some* others(s)” (2006: 116). (“This I with/for *some* other(s)” is, in essence, the Other sexual difference of concern to Ettinger.) *Being* in, with, and for some Others has a transitive component that is, in my view, a basis for thinking about the transphenomenological from a matrixial perspective.

Cryptic identifications are transitive because they require a subject to carry the “crypt of its other’s *non-I*(s) for/in place of them,” even as this carriage is not “part of the *I*’s individual history as a separate whole subject, and not even a product of an intersubjective relationship or of a symbiotic nondifferentiation” (Ettinger 2006: 165). We carry events and encounters had by Others that they themselves cannot remember: specifically, traumatic events that are un-processed. The crypt solidifies as the “result of a traumatic loss without a memory” (2006: 164). For some, the traumatic loss without a memory is embodied. My supposition is that the crypt may be registered and ultimately circumscribed as/in/through identification with an Other sex—regardless of the definition this Other sex takes in the phallic economy of gender, identity, and bi-gender culture. It is, in other words, the trans-subjective relation that matters more than the gender (or sexual) specificity of the transition from the angle of the matrixial.

The co-presence of Others and otherness in the subject is not regressive (or psychotic) from a psychosexual developmental standpoint. It should also be said that transitive identifications do not involve appropriation. Likewise, the presumption that trans* people “appropriate” the gender of the Other sex (not assigned at birth) is erroneous. The traumas bequeathed to us have already been dispersed into an unrecognizable form (Butler 2006). How we intercept, and remake, a cryptic inheritance involves our own unique curatorial processing. Identifications are linked to the drives and to the libidinal structure of the subject. From the perspective of the matrixial, endocryptic identifications involve aesthetic experience, co-affectivity, and transphenomenological sensations that are not properties of any-One subject—they are shared.

Transitioning and Transcryptums

Ettinger contends that when we trace a crypt we can make a transcryptum. Tracing a crypt is, for Freud, impossible because it is subject to primary repression. It is equally impossible for Lacan because the trace does not exist (it ex-ists) in

language and thus, can only “appear in the Real as hallucinations” (Ettinger 2006: 165). Ettinger (2002), by contrast, argues that the crypt can be traced as a transcriptum. A transcriptum is a mapping or, rather, a grooving of the multiple, otherwise cryptic, traces and inscriptions in the subject. Transcriptums are created by copoiesis within the subject and without the subject. Ettinger further explains that “in psychic transweaving, the human capacity to seize and give meaning to cross-scription finds its meaning by engraving a transcriptum” (2010: 10). By tracing a crypt, we invite and enable Others to apprehend an unknown Thing that bothers the subject (and their intimate Others). The recognition “gives body to a memory of the Real consisting of virtual strings and memory traces of oblivion of the Other and of the world” (Ettinger 2006: 167). We make a transcriptum when we share, exchange, turn, and refold interpsychic strings tying us to Others through nonconscious matrixial memories. In so doing, we enable the play of matrixial desire for aesthetic differentiation in the borderlinking.

The transcriptum concerns the gaze and what cannot be seen and signified in the Symbolic but can, nevertheless, be felt. As an “image, a sign, a symbol, or text” (2006: 168), the transcriptum will, when intercepted, make sense. If we consider transcriptums from a trans*-studies perspective, they make trans-sense. Consider, for instance, what trans* writers call “trans genre” (Ciecko 1998; Prosser 1998; Petrilli 2005; Salah 2009, 2010): crossing or exceeding the terms of a given genre. A transcriptum is necessarily trans-textual. It writes and reconfigures a crypt in matrixial terms because the matrixial includes, by definition, more than one subject: partial-subjects co-inhabit matrixial webs. For a transcriptum to be made, the Other’s pain must be recognized and remembered. We must move through, across, and beyond time, memory, language, age, and culture.

By transcribing a crypt, “an unsymbolized event belonging to someone else” (2006: 166), we create a lacuna, as evident in the melodramatic scenes in *Transparent*. The “someone else” is not One (or alone) in the matrixial. Likewise, Josh and Maura are not alone in the family drama. Ettinger is, in essence, inviting us to “recognize something for my *non-I(s)*, something that has never been cognized by them, nor yet by myself. I need to remember what I have never forgotten, and to find inside me traces of memory that I have never carried and have never lost” (2006: 165). Josh and Maura and, perhaps, the entire Pfefferman family, are looking for something or someone(s) they cannot remember but, in terms of the matrix, cannot forget. The search is cryptic but with time, care, and attention to Others and otherness it can be inscribed.

Art, not coincidentally, is Ettinger’s main example of a transcriptum. She refers to art-working as a space of offering, a “space of a potential future offered always in a certain now” (2009: 16). By viewing transitions in terms of art-working, we can imagine how Real-traces beyond words and memory can be trans-scripted.

Art-working is, for Ettinger, the “processing of a Thing that engenders the becoming into subjective existence of an-Other; it is an Event that induces becoming in transsubjective co-emergence and co-fading” (2006: 165). What emerges in trans* subjective choreography, body-art and transitioning can be apprehended as new configurations and/or affirmations of gender. What fades, from the perspective of the matrixial, may be endocryptic identifications linked to Others as/in/through a nonconsensual sex assignment at birth. The change in the borderlinking, transcribed over time, with care and attention by Others, makes a transcriptum.

Transitioning can thus be read as a copoietic transcriptum. It is an invitation to wit(h)ness, to register a live-link that alters the weave of a given matrixial web. Ettinger writes, “engravings of affected events of others and of the world are unknowingly inscribed in me, and mine are inscribed in others, known or anonymous, in an asymmetrical exchange that creates and transforms a transsubjective matrixial alliance” (2001: 128). But it is not only a transition that can transform the trans-subjective matrixial alliance. Trans* cultural production, theory, autobiography, art, and literature all function to reconfigure cryptic traces. Trans* subjects, as artisans, do important cultural work by making transcriptums. They cross-inscribe traces (2006: 167) involving Others and otherness that strengthen commitments to life.

Conclusion

If transitioning is an artistry of the body that engages traces bequeathed by the Other, it is not only an individual act (although it is this); it is an operation on the socio-Symbolic that implicates Others who are, sometimes unconsciously, touched by the change. If we read transitions as involving a transcriptum—a matrixial message trans-inscribed, if you will—they are life-generating matrixial communications. There is something active, creative, and authorial on the part of the transitioning subject that demands to be read. The aforementioned gender misreadings and dead-namings are painful, in part, because they indicate a refusal on the part of an Other to read what has been trans-scripted. Hence the necessity of recognizing what is Real in the matrixial (beyond the signifier) for the self-subject, yet unseen by an Other.

The artistic-work involved in making a transcriptum annuls the cryptic carriage so that the one carrying the burden of unprocessed trauma for an Other (as non-I) can commit to life. De-incorporation of the crypt is an act of self-care and survival. Analytic writing on the crypt is, not insignificantly, developed in relation to extreme human suffering in, for example, war, genocide, forced migration, poverty, death, and so forth. The acute somatization of suffering through a cryptic identification affects not only the individual (as carrier of a dead-link), but a community

of Others in the matrixial borderspace inter-implicated in the formation of the crypt. Trans* positive recognitions and care for intimate Others (known and unknown) are the healing and ethical call. By recognizing Maura and doing the work of mourning the idea of Mort (a father he never had), Josh will affectively respond to the pain and suffering of his ancestral Others whom, in the reality of the present, he knows without memory. Reality is where the cryptic secret is buried.

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Notes

1. I am provisionally defining trans* in the broadest possible terms to include those who undergo a social and/or medically assisted transition. I intend, also, to include those who are gender variant and undergo a “gender journey” that they may describe in terms of a transition.
2. See, for example, Sarah Lamble (2008) who argues that the Remembering Our Dead project erases a multitude of factors leading to trans* deaths including racism, incarceration, deportation, etc.
3. The Feminine is not a synonym for feminine gender identity in Ettinger’s theory of the matrixial. The Feminine is an internal space of difference that does not generate signifiers (words or images). It operates through co-affecting and aesthetic fields in the matrixial borderspace. Building on Lévinas, Ettinger explains that the Feminine is the “irreducible difference inside subjectivity: precisely what makes it human” (2006: 190).
4. The *I* and the *non-I* are names for the partial-subject and its Other. The *I* and *non-I* exist in shared psychic spaces. There is contiguity without symmetry between the *I* and *non-I*. “The *I* is a pulsating pole of co-poiesis. The *I* and *non-I* are pulsating poles of co-poiesis along a shared psychic string” (Ettinger 2006: 193). Together, these fields with their multiple *I*’s and *non-I*’s form matrixial webs.
5. There is, as Ettinger notes in the pre-birth encounter, an assemblage of incestuous links that are non-phallic and Feminine. She terms this a “matrixial covenant of severality” (Ettinger 2006: 104). In Ettingerian terms, subjectivity involves an “interlaced subjectivity” (2006: 197) (unconscious and Real) that coincides with the intersubjective landscape.

6. I provisionally define transitioning as involving psychic, aesthetic, affective, and embodied changes associated with a process, or set of processes, whereby a subject affirms their gender identity. A transition may be socially orchestrated through, for instance, name and gender-pronoun changes. It may also involve medical support through, for instance, gender-affirming surgeries, hormone therapies, etc. A transition may, for indigenous peoples, involve a host of other processes specific to a given subject's native history, community, culture, traditions, language, and spiritual practices.
7. I would, however, suggest that the refusal to acknowledge loving trans* people can enable aggressive disassociation and establish a larger context for transphobic hate and violence.
8. The matrixial substratum "inscribes a paradoxical sphere on the Symbolic's margins" (Ettinger 2006: 105). What Ettinger calls the pre-birth incestuous relation between mother-to-be and subject-to-be gives rise to the matrixial substratum in the Real.
9. Metamorphosis is a matrixial variant on "metamorphosis." The former involves a process of "joining-in-separating with/from the other" (Ettinger 2001: 104). In matrixial encounter-events, partial-subjects co-emerge and co-fade in/through/by metamorphosis. In other words, there is a change in borderlines and thresholds established through metamorphosis. Through metamorphosis the "limits, the borderlines and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing for the creation of new ones" (Huhn 2000).
10. For Ettinger, the effect of a transcriptum is to lift a primordial amnesia, concerning a cryptic carriage, so that there can be a "working through" in a Freudian sense. Ettinger's notion of "transcriptomnesia" is developed in dialogue with Freud's writing on infantile amnesia. Transcriptomnesia involves the "lifting of the world's hidden memory from its outside with-in-side" (Ettinger 2006: 167). Put succinctly, the transcriptum is the "occasion for that memory, enfolded in amnesia, to come to light" (2006: 168).
11. Although the alliance of concern in my discussion of *Transparent* is between Maura and Josh (a woman-mother and a man-son), Ettinger famously says that a father and son can also be a Woman. A Woman is, for Ettinger, a condition of transitivity. She is not a person, a gender or an identity but the "site, physically, imaginatively, and symbolically, where a feminine difference emerges, and through which a 'woman' is interlaced as a figure that is not confined to one-body, but is rather a hybrid 'webbing' of links between several subjectivities, who by virtue of that webbing become partial" (2006: 141). A woman is, in the matrixial, more than One and to be understood in relation to an Other sexual difference (as opposed to male-female opposition and phallic difference).

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On Trans* Epistemology

Critiques, Contributions, and Challenges

BLAS RADI

Abstract This article explores the contents and differential traits of (a) trans* epistemology, as a way to contribute to a dialogue fundamental both from a scholarly perspective and from the point of view of trans* advocacy. The first section offers a brief introduction to trans* studies, highlighting some key aspects in relation to an epistemology rooted in philosophical reflection. The second section presents some of the main critiques trans* scholars have advanced in relation to the processes of knowledge production and its products. The section then moves on to some of the field's main constructive proposals in this respect. The third section builds on the concept of "cis" and "cissexism" to offer considerations on the nuanced relationship between critique and positive contributions, and on the resistance on the part of cis people to being named as such. Finally, the work offers some closing remarks in relation to the specificity and challenges of (a) trans* epistemology.

Keywords trans* epistemology, epistemic violence, cissexism

Although trans* epistemology as such cannot be said to exist as an established scholarly field, it is also evident that "epistemological concerns lie at the heart of the transgender critique" (Stryker 2006: 8). The aim of this article is to explore the contents and differential traits of (a) trans* epistemology, as a way to contribute to a dialogue that I believe is fundamental both from a scholarly perspective and from the point of view of trans* advocacy.¹

In order to consider the development of this field, I make use of the critical tools provided by philosophical analysis, with a particular focus on epistemology. I understand epistemology as the branch of philosophy that deals with the study of the nature, scope, and sources of knowledge, as well as its conditions of production, structure, and validation. It is an especially rich framework to systematize the contributions of trans* scholars to knowledge production, and to reflect on the specificity and challenges of this field. In this respect, the philosophical approach of this work, and the fact that it brings South American perspectives into the conversation, distinguishes it from other scholarly engagements with this

subject.² In this introduction I will begin by tracing the context of production of my research, which will also allow me to lay out the particularity of its contributions. I will then include a few clarifications related to the use of sources, the choice of terminology, the scope of my proposal, and finally in relation to the theoretical frameworks I will be working with.

First, in relation to the trajectory that brought me to these issues: my research area, practical philosophy, allows me to couple my two affiliations, scholarly inquiry and trans* activism. Within this broad scope, I work on theory of knowledge, applying the tools provided by critical epistemologies to the development of a trans* epistemology. This is an epistemology that does not renounce theoretical precision or a practical commitment to improving the life conditions of trans* people. In fact, my own research trajectory speaks to this, as it had to begin with a struggle to make the academic spaces of my university accessible and inhabitable for trans* people.³ This concrete work on institutional conditions resulted in a resolution issued by the School of Philosophy and Literature of the University of Buenos Aires, whereby it recognized the name and pronouns of trans* people in 2010.

Many years later, however, the academy is still strikingly unwelcoming for trans* perspectives and scholars. The areas and projects dedicated to the study of gender and sexuality are perhaps the most reluctant to be affected by trans* approaches, and the most hostile to them. In many cases, queer theory has functioned as a label that both guarantees the inclusion of trans* people as objects of inquiry and hinders their very participation in these same academic spaces (Pérez and Radi 2016; Namaste 2000). As a result, research in the field of trans* studies can be quite solitary, marginal, and with scarce opportunities for dialogue, even more so given that the epistemic communities in which trans* studies has achieved some degree of institutional acceptance have traditionally been disinclined (or even resistant) to incorporate perspectives from the South. In relation to this, although this article does not consider the institutional dimensions of trans* epistemic marginalization, I believe it is urgent to look into the systematic exclusion of trans* people from institutional spaces of academic and theoretical production, as I have done elsewhere. Moreover, this analysis should not be separated from a more “abstract” epistemological approach (if such a thing is possible).

The choice of bibliographical sources included in this work speaks to such obstacles, as well as to other problems I will address in the following sections: the fact that trans* epistemology is not an established field; the obstacles trans* people find for their recognition as knowledge producers; the difficulties of access and continuity in the academy; and finally, the fact that trans* studies as a scholarly field is strongly rooted in the United States, and its production is not translated and is scarcely circulated in the rest of the world. I am aware that this

article does not cover the totality of the existent bibliography on the subject. To include such a literature review would be to cede scarce available space to the very sources that have obstructed trans* studies in this area. Rather, I am interested in offering an analysis of trans* epistemology from different perspectives, and privileging trans* contributions in doing so.⁴ At this point, it may be useful to briefly explain the reasons (ethical and epistemic) that I have chosen to prioritize the writings of trans* scholars over other voices, instead of using trans* as a corpus to be analyzed through the categories developed by cis scholars. First, I intend to level the epistemological playing field, opening a space at the philosophical banquet for those who have historically not been invited—or who have been on the menu. Second, I consider that these contributions result in an improvement of intellectual work at the epistemic level. Strategies such as the ones I am suggesting here may seem in accordance with the logic of standpoint theories, as it could be said that trans* people are experts in their own lives. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that trans* expertise goes well beyond their lived experiences. In the words of Cianán Russell, trans* scholar and activist at Transgender Europe:

We, as those who spend our lives dissecting the constructions and impacts of sex and gender, are experts on the functioning of this construction. Cis people have much to learn from us about who *they* are, because we see them from the outside. Their studies of themselves, without an ability to see or understand all of the ways they benefit from the social construct of gender, are inherently limited. (Russell 2018)

It is important to define terms, however briefly. *Trans*, *trans**, *trans-*, *transgender*, and *transsexual* are not equivalent or interchangeable words. There have been attempts to subsume them under a single category by proposing “umbrella terms,” but there seem to be as many umbrellas as there are terms. Throughout this work, I have adopted the term *trans**, not as a way of homogenizing the specificities that distinguish these (and many more) categories from one another, but rather as a way of evoking a multiplicity that is not limited to trans* women and men, but rather includes all those identities whereby a person does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Although certain aspects of my analysis may allude to specific groups (e.g., some authors refer specifically to transgender people, others to transsexuals), I believe that the lines of inquiry developed in this work, related to the production of knowledge, apply to all trans* people. By this I do not mean to suggest that all trans* people go through the same experiences, but that the specific considerations that give shape to this article are inclusive of all people who do not identify

with the gender assigned at birth. This is why I will not draw internal distinctions within the trans* community: at this incipient level of research, what follows applies to the entire trans* community, although, without doubt, it could certainly be enriched through intersectional approaches that take into account multiple axes of subjection, such as class, nationality, or age.

Far from discouraging intersectional developments, then, I believe we must advance more nuanced work, able to deal simultaneously with various relevant distinctions. Still, in dialogues with trans Latin American and Asian activists and scholars, attention has been drawn to two interesting points that I think are worth mentioning here, in order to understand the ways in which such distinctions are often understood. First, the dominant discourse on racial politics in the United States is seldom useful to understand how racism operates in Latin American and Asian communities. The race binary can be as oppressive as the gender one, and it sometimes constitutes more of an obstacle than a useful analytical tool to understand oppression. In practice, it can have a deleterious effect, since it distorts critique and contributes to (and even justifies) the marginalization of non-afrodescendent people of color. Second, contrasting sectors of the trans* population in terms of which one is “more” exposed to violence suggests the existence of a comparison on a conclusive empirical basis, the results of which are followed—or should be followed—by an order of priority in our attention. However, such empirical basis is noticeably absent. In the case of many Latin American countries, to date there has been no systematic study focused on trans people assigned female at birth. In Argentina, for example, all the research capable of providing information on sociodemographic data and violence records against trans* population has focused on *travestis* and trans women. This lack of data and, far beyond that, the lack of appropriate mechanisms and criteria to obtain it, are examples of gender-based violence that, paradoxically, work to support the idea that it is unnecessary to develop policies that also include this population. Note here the circularity of this argument: (a) there is no research that reveals the experiences of violence suffered by trans men and other people non-conforming with the female sex assigned at birth, therefore, (b) they have none of the relevant problems that would make studies on this subject necessary.⁵

Finally, although I will be offering some general statements, by no means am I suggesting that trans* studies, feminist theory, and/or queer theory are three homogeneous fields. On the contrary, each of them offers an array of contributions and concepts with their own inner debates, tensions, and rivalries, as well as diverse engagements with the other two fields.

This work is divided into four parts. In the first one, I offer a brief introduction to trans* studies, in which I will have a chance to outline my own understanding of the key aspects of the field, particularly in relation to an

epistemology rooted in philosophical reflection. The second part consists of an examination—surely partial and tentative—of the main critiques trans* scholars have aimed at the processes of knowledge production and at its products. It then moves on to some of the field’s main constructive proposals in this respect. The third section builds on the concept of “cis” and “cissexism” to offer a specific consideration of the nuanced relationship between critique and positive contributions and of the resistance on the part of cis people to being named as such. Finally, I offer some closing remarks in relation to the specificity and challenges of (a) trans* epistemology.

A Brief Introduction to Trans* Studies

Trans* studies constitute an interdisciplinary, socially committed field of academic study whose advent is usually placed at the beginning of the 1990s. It is interwoven with contributions from the humanities, social sciences, psychology, natural sciences, and the arts. In Susan Stryker’s words, its scope includes “anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood” (2006: 3).

Trans theorists do not focus their interest solely on the analysis of “the transsexual phenomenon,” which in fact is revealed as the result of gender normativity, but look precisely into the operations through which such normativity is carried out, and the social hierarchies it consolidates.

The emergence of this disciplinary field entails a critical commitment with respect to biomedical research and is closely connected to the contributions of feminist theory,⁶ gay-lesbian studies, and queer theory. At times, that relationship is fraught with friction. In fact, the work usually mentioned as foundational of trans* studies, “*The Empire Strikes Back: A Postranssexual Manifesto*” by Sandy Stone (1991), is a response to the sadly famous diatribe against trans people from the perspective of radical lesbian feminism. Stone questions a set of colonial discursive practices that she attributes both to epistemologies of (white male) medical practice and the rage of radical feminist theories. She also points at their limitations: “Each of these accounts is culture speaking with the voice of an individual. The people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals themselves” (12). With this setting as a background, the “Manifesto” calls for the building of trans narratives originating “from within the gender minority itself” (13).

The fact that it is trans* people speaking out after a long history of academic objectification is seen as the central feature of trans* studies (Bettcher and Garry 2009: 1). Again according to Stryker, just as disability activists said in the 1970s and 1980s, “Nothing about us without us.” What’s most significant is creating an opportunity for the privileged and powerful kinds of knowledge production that take place in the academy (about trans topics or any other area that involves people) to be not just objectifying knowledge, what we might call “knowledge of,” but also “knowledge with,” knowledge that emerges from a dialog that includes trans people who bring an additional kind of experiential or embodied knowledge along with their formal, expert knowledges (Stryker 2014).

Even if it is too soon to talk about “trans* epistemology” as a specific field, it is clear that trans* studies has been suffused with epistemological concerns from its very beginning. In the following section I will offer a systematic presentation of some of them.

How, Then, Can the Transsexual Speak? If the Transsexual Were to Speak, What Would They Say?

The title of this section draws on the question asked by Sandy Stone in her “Manifesto.” As we have seen, raising the voices of trans* people is one of the crucial points in this field of study. Within the context of this work, I will apply Stone’s question especially to the realm of epistemic activity, and ask, What have trans* people said and what do they say about the process of knowledge production?

The reply I put forward is structured in two moments. First, I retrieve some of the main critiques voiced within trans* studies against the processes of knowledge building and the products derived from them. I use the analytic distinction between processes and products, and include issues such as who can speak, at whose cost, through which mechanisms, and in the name of what interests. Second, I mention a few contributions, forwarded by various trans* authors, that are more constructive in nature.

Read in the light of the epistemic question mentioned above, the work of trans* thinkers provides a detailed view of the network of unequal relationships in the production of knowledge. We can begin by looking into epistemic objectification. Several trans* researchers have questioned the fact that the inclusion of trans* people in the process of knowledge production does not acknowledge them as bearers of relevant understandings, but only as objects and instruments of analysis (Cabral 2006; Stryker 2006; Bettcher 2009a; Namaste 2009; Raun 2014). In what follows, I intend to examine the modes of objectification, under the premise that the problem lies not in objectification in itself (in a sense we might avow that we are all objects), but rather the way in which it unfolds in these cases. There is a clear difference between people being treated as objects “in a context or a manner

that does not deny that they are also a subject,” on one hand, and “being treated as mere objects—where ‘mere’ signifies a more general denial of their subjectivity,” on the other (Fricker 2007: 133).

The use of trans* people as objects or instruments of analysis is a clear example of mere objectification. In these cases, objectification is the counterpart of epistemic disavowal and disqualification, built on mechanisms that have also been exposed and questioned by this perspective: infantilization, pathologization, devaluation of moral integrity, and identification with patriarchal threats, to mention only a few (Stone 1991). Disdain for trans* subjects, and the discrediting of knowledge developed by them, is common within the academy and beyond it.

We can understand “mere objectification” as a conjunction of objectification and epistemic discredit. In practical terms, a relationship of epistemic dependence is established whereby the bodies, sexualities, and genders of trans* people are turned into matters whose credibility requires the opinion of various (cis) intellectual authorities. In this way, trans* people become mere objects of analysis. This division of intellectual labor is manifest in the types of contributions each one is allowed to make: while trans* people produce autobiographic testimonies, their interpretation is reserved for other people who examine those narratives with suspicious zeal (Raun 2014: 26).⁷ One of the most extended academic dynamics related to mere objectification is what the Puerto Rican intellectual Ramon Grosfoguel has called “epistemic extractivism.” This idea follows the concept of extractivism as applied to natural resources and is defined by the author as “the plunder, robbery, and appropriation of resources from the global south . . . for the benefit of demographic minorities in the planet, which are considered racially superior, and compose the global north . . . and constitute the capitalist elites of the world system” (2016: 36). The logic of epistemic extractivism works through looting, appropriation, and commoditization of knowledge produced by underprivileged communities, for the benefit of the most privileged ones. Some examples of the *modus operandi* of this model of epistemic extractivism can be found in the disregard for research on the prevalence of HIV among communities of trans* women carried out before the Internet era (Namaste 2009: 13), and in most research on transsexuality and gender identity, which suggests that trans* people have made no contribution at all to the field, while using their ideas without pointing to their source. Epistemic extractivism tends to exploit and register patents—under an alien brand—for the epistemic resources of trans* populations.

At the same time, the configuration of these unequal relationships also involves the epistemic practice of *othering*: the definition of a group as the author’s own, as opposed to another one, implicitly excluded and inferior. On the basis of linguistic markers in written texts, scholars have been able to ascertain the various

ways in which the researcher “‘others’ the trans interviewees and specifically dis-identifies herself with them, and assumes that the reader does the same” (Raun 2014: 18). In other words, writings mark a certain “us” and a certain “them,” thus facilitating processes of dis-identification *vis-à-vis* “them,” whereas “us” includes the writers and their prospective readers.

The conceptual approach of trans* narratives has also been (and still is) questioned. Titles such as “Tragic Misreadings” (Namaste 2000), “Undoing Theory” (Namaste 2009), and “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance” (Bettcher 2014) anticipate these questions that, although with dissimilar reach, share the critique of a mismatch between theories of transsexuality and the daily lives of trans* people. In Namaste’s words,

Research and theory . . . are preoccupied with issues of origin, etiology, cause, identity, performance and gender norms. These questions are not unwarranted. But our lives and our bodies are made up of more than gender and mere performance, more than the interesting remark that we expose how gender works. Our lives and our bodies are much more complicated, and much less glamorous, than all that. They are forged in details of everyday life, marked by matters not discussed by academics or clinical researchers. (2000: 1)

According to this critique, such appeals to transsexuality ignore the daily life of trans* people and leave out the most urgent matters in their agenda. The mention of drag queen practices to illustrate the constructed nature of gender is a paradigmatic case of this theoretical use. Because these perspectives overlook the most pressing issues for trans* communities, they have a distorting effect on their realities (Namaste 2000, 2009, 2014).

The same case illustrates the other form of objectification mentioned earlier: instrumental use. Through this theoretical approach, trans* people are used as a means to an end, which is often alien to them. Some interpretations of the murder of Venus Xtravaganza, one of the main characters in the documentary film *Paris is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston, 1992), serve as an example of the “tragic misreadings” mentioned in Namaste’s work. She questions in particular those that highlight gender, social class, and race as the determining reasons for the murder, while eluding the transsexual status of the victim and her situation as a sex worker. And all that, despite the fact that acknowledgement of violence against transsexual people is explicit in *Paris is Burning* (Namaste 2000: 13).

Paradigms on transsexuality are open to similar critiques, as their stereotyped and overarching representations have proven unable to record the vast diversity of trans* identities and experiences and have become, on the contrary, instruments of scorn and exclusion. It is quite common to find critiques of the

biomedical construction of the “wrong body” insofar as it neglects the identities of those trans* people who are satisfied with their bodies, do not judge them as a mistake, are not interested in modifying them, and do not see themselves as diseased. But the *anti-binary* paradigm that presents all trans* people as sharing a position (and life experience) opposed to the gender binary makes a similar mistake: it tends to marginalize those living within it (Bettcher 2009a: 29).

Both the “wrong body” paradigm and the “anti-binary” one share underlying meanings cast in a colonial logic of interpretation, that is, a logic that forces trans* people to use a language that is alien to them (Namaste 2005: 7). In the first case, concepts such as “true transsexualism” and “gender dysphoria” are part and parcel of the conceptual universe of transsexuality and contribute to delineate the “disembodied” model of trans* existences. Uneasiness about one’s own body, denial of physical pleasure, and refusal or postponement of any active sexual experience operate as markers of transsexuality and (circularly) as its condition of possibility (Meyerowitz 2002: 159; Valentine 2007: 58). The second paradigm builds on a different conceptual constellation: “disobedience,” “dissent,” “transgression,” “subversion,” “antinormativity,” and “counter-hegemony” are concepts that account for a number of expectations of social change invested on trans* people that work, yet again, as demands and clues for understanding them. The change from one normative model to another presupposes the establishment of new normative criteria, with their own underlying commitments, fantasies, binaries, and policing. In these terms, according to Mauro Cabral, “if we focus on who transgresses what and how much, the oppression of the gender system is transferred to dissent, and while we are not judged by the binary system, we are judged by the dissident system” (pers. comm., 2017).

“If being transgender is subversion, why does this *travesti* paint her nails? If being transgender defies the binary, why do you use a male name?” Cabral ironizes on the emancipatory promises projected on trans* people (2006). The approach geared around the subversive/normative axis (what Pérez [2017] has called “the sex-gender-revolution series”) assesses whether trans* people are sufficiently radical or not and criticizes those who do not defy the binary, heterosexuality, or patriarchy.

When the results of these evaluations are “positive,” trans* figures are idealized as a “symbol of a rupture of the binary order, or as a metaphor of cultural anxieties, without considering their everyday reality and their constant need to negotiate in a dichotomous world” (Suess 2014). When they are evaluated “negatively,” the lives of some (or all) trans* people are criticized for being “heteronormative.”

The readings of Thomas Beatie’s masculinity and pregnancy as instances of reproduction of heteronormativity are a clear example of the latter.⁸ Tobias

Raun analyzes these approaches and offers a number of interesting considerations. First, he revisits Beatie's biography within the same interpretative framework adopted by the readings he critiques, but arrives at conclusions opposite those that interpret Beatie's life as heteronormative. Raun considers that in any case, Beatie seems to present a questioning of male pregnancy as an oxymoron. He is asking why carrying a baby per se is considered a feminizing act, thus trying to reformulate the assumed causal connection between certain (reproductive) bodily capacities and their gendered signifier. Read in this light, Beatie is not reproducing heteronormativity, but rather renegotiating what fatherhood could involve (Raun 2014: 21).

The author also points to the inadequacy of a conceptual grid that focuses exclusively on evaluating the normative/subversive character of identity claims. Lastly, he criticizes the ethical and methodological implications of research on trans* people done by those who are not trans* (Raun 2014).

The path we have followed so far describes a tendency to objectify the categories and methodological tools used to deal with trans* issues. It also provides a catalogue of practices of epistemic violence, including de-qualifying and disapproving trans* epistemic subjectivity; objectifying; canceling epistemic authority, as well as a division of intellectual labor; instrumentalization; academic extractivism; misreadings; and colonial appropriation. Although it is possible to draw methodological contributions from critical approaches—and without minimizing the transformative potential of critique—it can also prove useful to complement them with a constructive movement in which theoretical tools can be designed to transform the process of knowledge production. In the remainder of this section, I wish to highlight some contributions in explicitly constructive terms.

Several authors in trans* studies have devised suggestions aimed at those who carry out research on trans* issues or subjects. For example, philosopher Jacob Hale formulates fifteen “suggested rules for non-transsexuals who write about transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism or trans” (Hale 1997); Mauro Cabral and Joaquín Ibarburu develop twenty epistemic principles that should guide any approximation to trans* and intersex issues (Cabral 2006); and Viviane Namaste (2009) lists principles that should operate as guidelines for research. In general terms, these contributions turn a history of epistemic violence into a series of positive suggestions to be used by those involved in our field of study.

Hale's rules date from 1997 and have not lost their relevance. In fact, Raun retrieves them within the framework of his research on the ways to develop an analysis on trans* people with “respectful curiosity” (Raun 2014). Some of the most conspicuous points in Hale's rules are “Approach your topic with a sense of humility: you are not the experts about transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or trans _____. Transsexuals are. . . . Interrogate your own subject position. . . . Don't erase our voices. . . . Don't totalize us. . . . Don't uncritically quote non-transsexual 'experts'” (Hale 1997).

Consider also the “Theater of Operations” collective, a playful/political project of male trans and intersex activism carried out by Joaquín Ibarburu and Mauro Cabral in 2006. One of the products of this initiative was a catalogue of dos and don’ts linked to political action and research, which stated among other things:

If you plan to start doing research on trans and/or intersex issues please remember that neither of them are virgin and unnamed territories, waiting to be discovered, broken and colonized. . . . Learn how to recognize those who lived in that place before your arrival and also recognize that we were not waiting for you in order to start existing. . . . Remember that both trans and intersex are terms that include very different subjective experiences. Do not reduce them to stereotyped narratives, or use those narrative stereotypes as parameters of authenticity. . . . Although your contribution can be very important to open certain spaces to our participation, please do not turn it into your “cause.” We need allies and companions, not medieval or Amazon cavaliers. . . . We are as old as history. Do not turn us into a metaphor or example of the new times, neosexuality, biotechnological advances or the decline of the Father’s name. . . . Strive to remember our existence even when we are not your central theme. A world in which there are only men and women and only conventionally masculine and feminine bodies, is a place with no room for us. (2006)

On a similar note, Namaste posits four principles to which she grants axiomatic certitude. The first one establishes the need to develop meticulous empirical research. The second demands that the knowledge obtained will be of use to the communities under study—and makes it clear that determining its usefulness is not in the hands of anyone outside the community (Namaste 2009: 25). The third one requires that the people referred to in the research project should have a say in each of its aspects: the weight of their voice should be equivalent to that of external researchers. This includes defining the questions, gathering empirical data, analyzing results, and presenting the conclusions. This principle is very important because, as we have seen, “partnership” is usually understood as the community offering full access so that researchers may obtain data in reply to the questions they have posed (Namaste 2009: 25). Last, the property principle establishes the community’s right to preserve the secrecy of its knowledge.

The point in each of these proposals is to counterbalance the epistemic marginalization of trans* people by acknowledging their subjectivity and epistemic agency, and by calling on researchers to explicitly state their “situation” in the research work underway. I will briefly focus on this latter point to highlight an additional conceptual contribution of trans* perspectives.

The call to specify one’s place in the research can be traced back to the feminist proposal to question the claim to knowledge “from God’s perspective,”

linked to traditional rhetoric on scientific objectivity. Situated knowledge stands in opposition to this approach that, in Haraway's words, "mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation" (1991: 188). Against this "conqueror perspective" that sets its mediations as transparent, the situated, embodied, and partial view offers a perspective that neither promises nor claims transcendence, nor does it allege to encompass everything from anywhere. Rather, it takes responsibility for specifying its own coordinates. The interests of research and the particular moment in history, as well as culture, race, social class, sexuality, and gender are among the markers involved in a point of view that is no longer the anonymous and invisible perspective of scientific authority. The contribution of trans* studies adds another crucial marker to class, race, gender, and so on: the theoretical category "cis." This brings us to the next issue I would like to address.

Did Anybody Say *Cissexism*?

Cisgender, *cisexual*, or simply *cis* are terms coined in the 1990s within the trans community. Since then, they have been adopted especially by trans* activists and researchers who value their theoretical and political potential. Many things can be said about these terms,⁹ but on this occasion I have chosen to highlight a few relevant elements involved in their use as new resources to "situate" knowledge. First, I return to the context of their production: it is the trans* community that uses the power to name and, especially, to name those who have traditionally named it—that is, cis people. Second, the use of these terms implies a radical change in perspective: cis as "someone who lacks the attribute of being trans*" substitutes the paradigm in which trans* people are those defined negatively by comparison with a new paradigm that situates trans* as the point of departure from which the difference is established. Third, they display the restrictions of a narrow view of gender and grant complexity to the map of power relations: gender is more than cis men and women, and the map of oppressor/oppressed subjects can no longer be read exclusively in terms of (cis)men/(cis)women. Last, these terms provide tools for interpretation that, for the first time, allow us to grant meaning to a number of previously unclassifiable collective experiences. Such is the case, for example, in "cis privilege" and "cissexism," which are crucial concepts in making sense of experiences of marginalization—epistemic, in this case—and in placing its agents in a network of unequal relationships, such as the field of production of knowledge. Notions such as "patriarchy," "homophobia," or "heteronormativity," on the contrary, are opaque lenses for these ends.

How does this reflect in the epistemic analysis referred so far? First of all, it should be said that by organizing issues of trans* epistemology in terms of critiques and contributions, in no way do I intend to suggest that the problems

addressed so far have been solved by these or other proposals. In fact, I believe there is an ongoing feedback between these notions: while the constant cases of epistemic violence highlight the need for conceptual reflection and methodological recommendations, such reflections and recommendations occupy a very marginal place in their epistemic communities. Consequently, even in circles where the term *cis* is widely used, many researchers are unwilling to be questioned by it (see Vergueiro Simakawa 2015; Cabral 2014; Aultman 2014, 2015). In the words of B. Lee Aultman, who is currently working on the development of an epistemology of trans* political resistance, trans people are frequently murdered and dispossessed by virtue of being “outed” as trans, yet cisgender activists are still complaining that the word *cis* is derogatory. In this way, dominant groups “take up space” in the larger discussion of trans epistemic agency by discrediting the very language trans people use to describe their social world (Aultman 2015: 8).

It has been held, for example, that the word *cis* is inappropriate because if all genders are performative and there is no ontological hierarchy among them, then *we are all trans**.¹⁰ This kind of interpretation tends to dissolve the map of power relations organized around the cis/trans axis by making it illegible. The impact of this distorting effect, however, is limited to the map, while the field is left unaltered, as power relations still find people who do not identify with the gender assigned at birth in a disadvantaged position.

This invitation to discredit *cis* as a category of analysis (a “cistemic operation,” in the words of researcher Viviane Vergueiro Simakawa [2015]) responds to what epistemologies of ignorance have exposed as mechanisms of production of ignorance.¹¹ In particular, it might be useful to consider its similarities with “color blindness” as a strategy that proclaims indifference toward race:¹² “we all bleed the same color blood,” “we are all brothers,” as well as “we are all trans*,” are ignorance-producing mechanisms. The first two cases express a worldview that tends to detach white people from their responsibility and complicity with racism. Its logic is as follows:

People who are prejudiced see color and make unfair judgments based on color. To be absolutely certain that we are not making unfair judgements based on color, we should ignore accidental properties, such as color, and just see people. Color blindness is essentially a form of ignoring that equates seeing, naming, and engaging difference with prejudice and bigotry, and not seeing, naming, noticing, and engaging difference with fairness. (Bailey, in Sullivan and Tuana 2007: 85)

The case in point here responds to a similar logic. Its rhetorical strategy allows people to refuse to consider the existence of cissexism or the fact that they may be moral accomplices in sustaining it, while proclaiming their own innocence. In a

context where being trans* has material and symbolic consequences in people's lives, this formula places privileged individuals at center stage because they respond to their need to feel at ease with themselves. It keeps injustice in the shadows, allowing us to avoid acknowledging ourselves within this structure and, consequently, as occupying a privileged place in situations of social unfairness (which, in itself, is a privilege). Additionally, thanks to it we can neglect the fact that one might be contributing to the perpetuation of that injustice. Therefore, these strategies, instead of dismantling cissexism, reinstate it.

Danger, Allies in Sight

I would like to devote the last section of this work to a few considerations on the specificity and challenges of (a) trans* epistemology. Through an example, I hope to articulate such reflections with what I have said so far.

In 2015, queer scholar Judith Butler visited Brazil and Argentina and took part in events that raised considerable controversy. For example, the seminar in which she participated in Brazil, First Queer Seminar: "Culture and Subversion of Identities," was biting renamed Queer Cisminar ("Cisminario" in Portuguese), due to the stark contradiction evident in the fact that a seminar on the "subversion of identities" was being organized by a hardly subversive human lot: white, well-to-do, and, of course, cis academics (*Akntiendz Chik* 2015).

Some attendees questioned the curator, Richard Miskolci, on the absence of afrodescendents and trans people, pointing at "the motivation of researchers to continue studying these groups without having them speak about themselves" (dos Santos de Sant'Ana 2016). Miskolci (a queer theory and subaltern studies scholar) offered a very interesting answer with which he sought to justify both his own presence and the absence of trans* people. First, Miskolci, as a cis, white, upper-class male scholar from Brazil, argued that he had reasons to be there because he suffered violence by virtue of his research interests. Secondly, he pointed out that

I am not speaking for others, but with others. To speak *with* is a political position, above all, in a society that always plays us in confrontation, in violence, in conflict and dividing us, taking away our strengths, our political-intellectual potential. And it's my vision. As for speaking for the other, I think of Spivak, let's take Spivak, Spivak's idea is this: the subaltern cannot speak because he has no voice. You can sometimes bring people in and give the microphone to them and they lack vocabulary (Miskolci, quoted in dos Santos de Sant'Ana 2016).

After this event, various conferences and conversations were organized around Butler's visit to Argentina. One of them focused on identity politics and resistance processes, with an agenda that included work on gender identity issues,

considering “the overlapping of gender, sexuality, race, and class regimes of oppression.” The people invited to participate in the dialogue, however, were as unrepresentative as in the “Cisminar.” Cis interviewers and Butler presented, among other things, harsh criticisms of Argentina’s Gender Identity Law. This law, sanctioned in 2012, was internationally recognized for three main reasons: (1) because it fulfils its objective of guaranteeing the right to change name and gender markers in the ID, and the right to free and universal trans-specific health; (2) because it does so through a progressive, nonjudicial, nonpathologizing procedure; (3) and because to a great extent it is a result of the political and intellectual work of trans* people. However, from the moment of its passing to the present, Butler and other cis scholars have found fault with the law because it does not meet cis people’s expectations for transgression. I will engage briefly with this case as it offers an interesting example of the epistemic practices mentioned above.

Argentina’s Gender Identity Law establishes the right to gender identity and recovers the definition provided by the Yogyakarta Principles:

Gender identity is understood to refer to each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms. (Signatories to the Yogyakarta Principles 2007)

In these terms, the law establishes, among other things, the possibility of accessing an ID change through an administrative procedure (that must be expeditious and free, and does not require bodily modifications or a legal representative) where psychiatric diagnosis is not only unnecessary but actually forbidden. It also enables anyone to change the information on their document without surgical or hormonal requirements, it establishes free and universal trans* health coverage, and includes in these rights children and migrants.

Meanwhile, in the eyes of its critics this law “reinforces the gender binary” because our country’s legal framework recognizes only men and women. Unfortunately, these critiques have been more popular than the responses they have received, which have emphasized that: (1) the law does not refer to any gender category whatsoever; (2) gender binary is not reduced to the mere categorial question; (3) by not requiring bodily modifications (that is, by recognizing for example the existence of men with vaginas and women with penises), can we continue to speak of binary (in the same terms, at least)?; and (4) the law was designed to ensure recognition of trans* people’s gender identity, not to embody the emancipatory fantasies of cis theorists.

Far from being an isolated anecdote, this is a story trans* scholars from all sorts of academic spaces and disciplines have experienced over and over again, both in the South and in the North: our knowledge being ignored, our production being judged under alien standards, our voices being excluded. But what does this example tell us? First, it expresses the relevance of a concept such as *cissexism*. As I contended before, other lenses such as homophobia or misogyny are unable to grasp the specific types of violence that these situations exert on trans* people. Cissexism, on the other hand, serves as a powerful epistemological instrument to interpret this academic landscape, and perhaps also to design alternative ones. Second, this example brings us back to where we started, that is, the claim of “nothing about us, without us”—a claim that, although in this article is only a few pages away, in reality has involved a rich and complex journey that is now more than twenty-five years old. And third, this example may serve to illustrate a specific quality of trans* epistemologies that I wish to explore in closing.

The traits of epistemological analysis undertaken within trans* studies speak clearly to the legacy of critical epistemologies, and in particular to its direct kinship with feminist epistemologies. Many of the authors cited here use the conceptual tools of indigenous knowledge, feminist theory, transfeminism, postcolonial studies, epistemologies of the South, and critical race theory. In this sense, we could think of a trans* critical epistemology. But would the specificity of trans* epistemology be due to the fact that it studies and develops trans* issues? Or should we say that what defines it is that it is carried out by trans* researchers? In either case we would be assuming what and who is trans*, as well as what their concerns are.¹³ On the other hand, we would be taking for granted the existence of a direct causal relationship between a particular gender identity and a certain way of constructing knowledge. Stances such as this are difficult to support, particularly if we think about it with Haraway. After all, according to her “the positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation”; and “there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated. Identity, including self-identity, does not produce science; critical positioning does” (1991: 191, 193).

Other possible lines of response might be that trans* epistemology is defined by a particular approach (a “trans* approach”) or, maybe, a specifically trans* method, or a *corpus* of trans* contributions. I believe these alternatives provide more fruitful resources to delimit the field of trans* epistemology as well as to reflect on its connection with other epistemologies. At this stage, we can only outline possible research paths that should be followed in greater detail, in order to understand what trans* epistemology is, or can be.

In the first place, I believe there is an issue derived from what has been under scrutiny here, that is most evident in the example provided just now. It

marks a difference between trans* epistemology and other critical epistemologies, and faces the former with a number of specific challenges. Intellectual opponents of feminist epistemology, epistemologies from the South and epistemologies of ignorance can be clearly identified as such, even as epistemic and political rivals or “enemies.” Androcentrism, colonialism, and racism do not share on the projects of these critical epistemologies, and this is evident even in the most basic approaches to the field. Meanwhile, such differentiation is not that simple in trans* epistemology.

By examining the discussions held by the authors mentioned in this paper, we will find that their arguments are not exclusively targeted at representatives of epistemic conservatism. Many of the main controversies place them in opposition to Butler, Halberstam, Raymond, Preciado, among others, and to the local reappropriations of these authors. In other words, we discover that trans* academics—and activists—engage in debates with exemplars of queer theory, gay-lesbian studies, and some feminist groups (affiliations that often overlap). Consequently, I suggest that one of the specific challenges of trans* epistemologies is defined by the tensions with these epistemic communities. While self-subscribed to emancipatory and radical epistemological projects, some of our more contentious interlocutors act out the practices listed in the inventory of epistemic violences described above. Trans* epistemologies, then, must find ways to struggle not only with their obvious enemies, but also with those who present themselves as natural allies.

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Notes

1. A previous version of this paper was presented at *Mil Pequeños Sexos*, July 2016, Buenos Aires, Argentina. This work would not have been possible without Moira Pérez, the lucidity of whose comments during the translation process led me to strengthen my proposal.
2. Bettcher (2009b), Aultman (2015), and Nicolazzo (2017) have particularly interesting contributions that focus on self-knowledge and first-person authority over one’s own gender. Initiatives in the realm of activism that present trans* people as “experts in their own gender” seem to follow the same principles. Self-knowledge and epistemic authority are extremely important issues, particularly considering the global institutional context

that tends to disprove those knowledges and assign epistemic authority on the subject to different state agents, such as doctors and judges. Having said that, in this article I will adopt a somewhat different perspective, which includes the issue of self-knowledge but as one aspect within a broader epistemological consideration. This is because I will consider knowledge at large, and trans* people have a lot to contribute beyond the understanding of their own gender.

3. Sarah Ahmed (2012) has noticed how certain groups within the academy are pushed to invest part of their energy and time (and, as a consequence, precious years that other people devote entirely to academic work) in making their institutions livable for themselves and their peers. In line with what I expect to show in what follows, this work is unrecognized both politically and intellectually, as it is not regarded as knowledge production.
4. By “trans* scholars” I refer to trans* people—that is, people who identify with a gender different from the one assigned at birth—who are, at the same time, committed to a certain theoretical framework, in that their intellectual production can be inscribed within trans* studies.
5. For further analysis of this problem of hermeneutical void in relation to certain sectors of the trans* community, see Pérez and Radi, forthcoming.
6. At this point, it is convenient to state that not all feminisms are targeted by this critique and that, as we shall see further on in this article, in many cases there are intellectual, political and cultural affinities that result in enriching discussions. Over the past few years, in particular, *transfeminism* has come up as “a movement by and for trans women who see their liberation intimately linked to the liberation of all women” (Koyama 2003: 244).
7. It is not my intention to ignore the value of testimony in the development of trans* knowledge. In fact, I understand autobiographic production as a form of knowledge production, and a valuable tool of social intervention. Nevertheless, within the context of this work, I wonder if it functions as a double-edged sword, making autobiography the only outlet available for trans* reflections since the room for intervention is significantly diminished.
8. In 2008, Thomas Beatie decided to give birth to his own children and he was popularly known as “the pregnant man.”
9. These terms are not in use in all regions, and they have received multiple and varied definitions in different contexts. Additionally, communities use them freely and give them their own content. Thus, for example, we find communities that use them indistinctly; others that distinguish *cissexual* and *cisgender* based on medical taxonomies such as *transsexual* and *transgender*; others that seek to erase the usage of the term *transsexual* altogether, given its pathologizing origin; and others that use identity categories different from *transsexual* and *transgender*, which often involve cultural, class, and/or race factors. In some cases, definitions use ideas that were already present in classical definitions of *trans*, such as “conformity” or “alignment”; references to reproductive organs have also been adopted (see Serano 2007; Aultman 2014). There are regions in which *transgender* is used as an umbrella term, while in others it was not a familiar term until foreign texts started to be translated, and it still functions as a foreign word unable to make sense of the local context, often being resisted. Here I can only point at these variations as different naming strategies, as it is beyond the proposal of this essay to offer a specific

- analysis of this topic, which could nevertheless show how semantic variations affect the domain of discourse and might be relevant to an analysis of how privilege operates daily.
10. A similar stance—defended, among others, by authors coming from queer theory such as Halberstam (1994) and Preciado (2008)—has been—and still is—the target of severe criticism, particularly from trans* people, as well as from queer theory itself (see Prosser 1998; McKee 1999; Cabral 2014; Radi 2015). Although Halberstam and Preciado identify as trans, I hope it will be clear from this work that doing trans* epistemology is far more than the identity of those who produce it.
 11. In view of the definition of epistemology given at the beginning of this work, the notion of an epistemology of ignorance may appear counterintuitive. It is true that the history of this discipline records how much philosophers have said about the ways in which we come to know things; but it also proves how little has been said about ignorance and its effects on the production of knowledge, epistemic credibility, and social injustice. The field of epistemologies of ignorance (on which, due to the extension of this paper, I will not be able to elaborate) focuses on analyzing this complex phenomenon. In general terms, it could be said that one of its main aims is to identify the various expressions of ignorance by examining the ways in which it is produced and maintained, as well as the role it plays in knowledge practices (Sullivan and Tuana 2007).
 12. “Color blindness” stands as one of the socially authorized mechanisms of ignorance, and illustrates to what extent white privilege and complicity with white hegemony may hide behind a moral screen.
 13. By posing questions such as these, I do not intend to seek the *genus* and the specific difference of each concept; rather, I display them for the purpose of stressing the difficulty of outlining their implicit horizon. The issue of who is trans* is of the utmost relevance, for example, for the design of public policies, and for access to their benefits. In my country, for instance, for some years now a law has been under debate that would establish a quota of trans* employees in public service. As an affirmative-action policy, it seeks to bring justice to a historically disadvantaged population. But in order to advance it, advocates and legislators must face the uncomfortable question of who will count as trans*. Will it be those identified with a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth? Those who live socially by it? Those who identify as trans*? Those who change the last letters of their name? People who were expelled from their households and the educational and health systems, and had to resort to prostitution as their only possible means of survival? Each alternative would result in a completely different policy and is (perhaps inadvertently) at the service of different understandings of what *distributive justice* is and/or should be.

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The Atmosphere of Trans* Politics in the Global North and West

YV E. NAY

Abstract This essay scrutinizes the conundrum of recent trans* politics in the Global North and West. Although this trans* politics has achieved important social changes for some gender-variant people, it at the same time participates in neoliberal notions of equality. In addition, while constructing a seemingly legitimate subject called *transgender*, this politics perpetuates colonial violence. This article suggests a turn to *atmospheres* as a crucial term to reassess this quandary. With a focus on discomfort, this article explores ways to decolonize and deprive transnational trans* politics in the Global North and West. It argues that such an approach might open up ways to consider trans* politics as an imaginary that would enable fragmented realities, bodies, and selves to become legible and articulable and thereby also make it possible to name the constitutive violence that is at work in politics under the purview of *trans**.

Keywords global transgender politics, politics of affect, mood, empathy, discomfort

For several decades now, a wealth of local, regional, and transnational trans* communities, networks, and organizations have been emerging in different parts of the globe to counter the worldwide discrimination of *trans** people in diverse facets of life. Since the 2000s in particular, political activism initiated by trans* people and their allies has raised the awareness of politicians, legislators, and the general public regarding the challenges facing trans* persons. As a result, innovative legislation on gender recognition has recently been adopted or is currently being drafted in various jurisdictions.¹

This article takes as its point of departure this specific moment in recent trans* politics in the Global North and West, a version of politics that rapidly grew strong, expanding from its predominantly local dimension to an increasingly global movement with transnational impacts. This version of trans* politics is pervaded by ideals of success and goal orientation and considered as progress for an assumed trans* community. However, as trans* activists and scholars aptly caution, these politics need not only be celebrated as progressive achievement for gender-variant

people. On the contrary, this version of trans* politics should also be seen as assimilatory professionalization that normalizes and flattens out the differences among the divergent needs of various trans* people. Building on this critique, the purpose of this article is to explore the question, how can trans* politics—particularly transnational trans* politics from the Global North and West—address current injustices without falling prey to the ultimately counterproductive accommodation associated with neoliberal notions of equality? And, furthermore, how can these injustices be contested without perpetuating colonizing violence in the process of constructing a seemingly legitimate subject called *transgender/trans** that is bound up with questions of nation, geographical position, and citizenship and is thus intertwined with racism, xenophobia, and class privilege?

In response to this dilemma, I argue that thinking affect and politics together as imbricated may help reassess the conundrum of trans* politics acting from a privileged position predominantly located in the Global North and West. I suggest that taking into account the affective entanglements of politics under the purview of *trans** opens a way to consider politics as an imaginary that enables fragmented realities, bodies, and selves to become legible and articulable. It also makes it possible to name the constitutive violence that is at work thereby in such trans* politics. This leads me to explore discomfort as an atmosphere in privileged trans* politics located in and acting from the Global North and West. Such an atmosphere may enable kinds of change that work against a politics that is unilateral, policy oriented, assimilationist, additive, and that elides plurality.

The Euro- and US-centric Regimes of Knowledge in Trans* Politics

Awareness among the general public of the challenges facing trans* persons, as well as the legislative achievements in confronting these challenges, are predominantly associated with the global trans* politics of institutions such as the European Union. However, this politics is a result of trans* activists' increasing challenge of the state's power regarding the regulations of legal and medical gender assignment. Trans* activists more and more use the courts to hold their governments accountable for discriminatory practices with regard to trans* people's needs. As a result, the Council of Europe, for example, recently stated that "severe violations of human rights occur in relation to legal gender recognition" (Council of Europe 2015: 1) and called for a diminishing of those specific forms of discrimination that trans* people face. The regulation of *transgender* within legal, medical, psychological, and public realms has been addressed in reports and surveys recently commissioned by political entities in the Global North and West. For example, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published a report in 2014 on the multiple forms of discrimination against trans* people in all European Union member states (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights FRA 2014), which

underscores the results of previous surveys (Whittle, Turner, and Combs 2008; European Commission 2012; Balzer and Hutta 2012). Particularly striking forms of discrimination cited in that report include violence; harassment; the widespread lack of gender recognition under the law; and the often lengthy, complicated, and pathologizing procedures necessary to obtain legal gender recognition, as well as difficulties in accessing appropriate general health care and gender-confirming treatment (see also Hammarberg 2009; International Commission of Jurists 2007; United Nations OHCHR 2012). As the Council of Europe points out, these reports aim “to provide law-makers with information on the challenges that transgender people currently face” (Council of Europe 2015: 1).

Indispensable as this recent, publicly highlighted role of transnational institutions is in the fight to enable and improve lives for many trans* persons, it has several limitations. To begin, the role recently taken on by these transnational institutions often eclipses the decades-long grassroots activism of trans* people that served as precondition for such institutional politics (see exemplarily Stryker 2008; Baumgartinger 2017; Wilchins 2017). Furthermore, informed by Euro- and US-centric regimes of knowledge, these policies are steeped in colonial violence. This is evident if we scrutinize the politically commissioned reports themselves on which the European Union’s transnational politics regarding trans* are built. The imperative to examine these documents is prompted by the cautionary remarks of Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah (2014), who point out the importance of questioning the steady growth of politically commissioned research on trans* and to analyze the politics aligned with this research. Accordingly, it is crucial that the European Union’s official statements be examined to ascertain what they refer to when reporting on trans* and gender-variant lives. What political notions of *transgender* are these reports producing? And what are the effects this term has when it circulates in the global trans* politics of supranational entities such as institutions of the European Union?

The term *transgender* as employed in this commissioned research commonly denotes a broad range of gender-nonconforming people. Such subsumption of the multiplicity of gender variance calls for critical inspection. In doing so, I align my considerations with existing research in transgender studies, which insists that the historicity and cultural contingency of this term be borne in mind (Roen 2006; Gramling and Dutta 2016; Stryker and Whittle 2006; Stryker and Aizura 2013; Stryker and Currah 2014; Stryker 1998). As transgender studies scholars assert, the generalizing use of the category *transgender* in the Global North and West has increasingly subsumed cross-cultural variations in nonconforming gender embodiments under an ontological Euro- and US-centric category, a category that is bound up with narratives of modernization (Beollstorff et al. 2014; Aizura et al. 2014). In this regard, David Valentine (2007) points out that, as a category,

transgender is often imagined as a form of progressive modernity that restores outmoded conceptions of gender, sexuality, embodiment, and identity (see also Davidson 2007). Accordingly, it cannot be understood as a “modern” innovation but must be regarded as deeply embedded in political and economic dominance.

The use of this category elicits the question of how the notion *transgender* circulates within a colonizing project that grasps gender variance within predominantly white, Euro- and US-centric frames of reference and regimes of knowledge. This is evident in the following excerpt from the mentioned Council of Europe report: “The emergence in Europe of the right to gender identity is a positive development and may represent a model for future national legislations” (Council of Europe 2015: 1). While the Council of Europe should be lauded for advocating the legislative implementation of self-determined gender assignment for trans* people, a measure also recommended by the European human rights commissioner (Hammarberg 2009), the mode of how it does this must be questioned. For, at the same time as it seeks to address the problem, this statement also consolidates the idea of Europe as the “vanguard” of human rights as well as a “model” for the “future” of trans* rights. What is problematic about the latter is that trans* rights thereby become a crucial element of what appears to be constitutive of so-called liberal democratic nation-states. Such calls for trans* rights as generalized “human rights” (Council of Europe 2015: 1) has an impact not only on European nation states; it also operates on a global scale. By acting on, defending, and enforcing trans* activist claims to self-determine one’s gender as a “universal” right issued by allegedly “avant-garde” European institutions, such trans* politics reconstitutes and consolidates the colonial idea of Europe as the locus of “modernity,” “progress,” and as the “cradle of democracy.” As postcolonial and decolonial theory have shown (see for example Spivak 1988, 1990; Mohanty 1988; Bacchetta and Haritaworn 2001; Massad 2007; Puar 2007; Kulpa and Mizelińska 2011), such approaches both anchor and proliferate violent colonial regimes. Statements such as these by the European Council propel the power to assert European global politics. Supranational institutions such as the Council of Europe thus produce and consolidate a notion of *transgender* that allows them to advocate for “justice” and thereby take on a role of “vanguard” for human rights while reproducing violent colonial regimes of knowledge. This has manifold consequences for the ways of living and of specifying gender variance in nonprivileged contexts within and beyond the Global North and West. As such, transnational politics using the universalizing term *transgender* refers to a legal, medical and political regulation of gender-variant expressions that secures rights for some trans* people at the expense of others, while reifying the inequity of participation in resources, and of recognition, representation, and survival (Aizura et al. 2014; Beollstorff et al. 2014).

However necessary it might be to continue engaging with such politics of “universal” human rights for trans* people, it is important—particularly from a perspective of politics from the Global North and West—to address their violent impacts as well as the conundrum of this currently strong transnational presence of trans* politics. To do so, I focus on the affective entanglements of trans* politics; that is, I shift the perspective from the politics of recognition and rights to the affective dimensions of trans* politics.

The Affective Entanglements of Trans* Politics in the Global North and West

Research from affect studies shed some light on how emotions and affects inform politics. Also referred to as the “affective turn” (Clough and Halley 2007): this strand of research takes affect, emotion, feeling, and sensation as significant matters of concern. In line with feminist, queer, and postcolonial critique, affect studies illustrates how emotionality and rationality, or subjectivity and objectivity, have been attributed to certain individuals in order to establish gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classed hierarchies (Lorde 1984; Ahmed 2000; Skeggs 2005; Puar 2007; Butler 2009; Berlant 2008; for an overview, see Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Baier et al. 2014). Conceptually, my approach to the affective entanglements of trans* politics is based on what Raymond Williams (1977) has called “structures of feeling.” Williams’s influential work understands culture as feelings that are entangled with regimes of power—not as “feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (Williams 1977: 132). I furthermore conceive of affect as the crossover between body and mind, “inside” and “outside,” the self and the “other.” Like Sara Ahmed (2004), instead of asking what emotions *are*, I rather focus on what they *do*—that is, on how they contribute to the constitution of “inside” and “outside,” of the self and the “other.” In this regard, Ahmed writes, “In my model of sociality of emotions, I suggest that emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So, emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made” (Ahmed 2004: 10). Thus, individuals do not possess emotions, but emotions direct the ways in which the self is placed in relation to the “other.” Put differently, the “inside” of the self is established only through the exchange of emotions with its “outside.”

This conceptualization allows us to view affect and emotion as both intimate and impersonal. In terms of trans* politics, this conceptualization blurs the clear-cut divide between the individual inside and the social outside of trans* lives. Discrimination and violence against trans* people, the obstacles to recognition of trans* people, and the lack of public awareness of trans* persons’ lives, persistently evoke various feelings. Whatever those feelings might be, they are,

however, neither purely individual nor solely socially induced, but are rather reciprocal. Thus, when we consider a so-called feeling of “being” trans* and feelings involved with a gender-variant expression as neither intrinsic nor as socially induced and assigned, it becomes possible to interweave the “inside” and “outside” of the self. In this way, affect can be understood as saturated by regimes of power and, conversely, regimes of power can be understood as pervaded by affect. Drawing on these insights from affect theory brings into focus the formative force of affect for politics, which makes it possible to consider emotion as a political resource for trans* politics. Accordingly, trans* activism is to be conceived as an affectively saturated atmosphere rather than the accumulation of feeling individuals. In order to reassess the conundrum of trans* politics, I underscore the importance of moods in trans* politics as an important addition to the felt experiences of trans* individuals. To begin, I scrutinize the structure of feelings of trans* politics and its repercussions on a global level. In doing so, I consider a further site of trans* politics that promises to address the problem of marginalizing particular trans* lives that the supranational institutions mentioned above fail to address and recognize adequately. This political critique can be illustrated by recourse to the work of C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013). While other postcolonial and antiracist scholarship primarily focuses on feminist as well as gay and lesbian politics, Snorton and Haritaworn examine the global entanglements of trans* activism, which makes their research particularly salient for the present argument.² A central feature of their work is to point out trans* politics’ attachment to hate crimes against trans* people. While Snorton and Haritaworn condemn the violence (often resulting in death), they question the politics that addresses these hate crimes. This violence is made visible by transnational-scale political projects, such as the community-building rituals of the Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR), or statistical surveys like the Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) Project that systematically collects data on the killings of trans* people worldwide. In their critical analyses of these projects, Snorton and Haritaworn reference a form of power that Achille Mbembe (2003) calls “necropolitics,” a term he uses to describe a regime of power that puts one part of a population to death while it strengthens the vitality of another part of the population. As Snorton and Haritaworn demonstrate, the politics targeting hate crimes paradoxically fosters the bio- and necropolitical implications of trans* mortality and trans* vitality. Accordingly, the mentioned projects on deadly violence, particularly against Black trans* women and trans* women of color, lay the foundation for and are utilized by privileged white trans* activists who live in metropolises in the Global North and West (see Haritaworn 2015). When certain white trans* activists assume politically leftist and queer-feminist positions—by engaging in struggles in the name of queer diversity, by fighting for the recognition of trans* persons, in

confronting the violence against trans* people of color—they use hate crimes against Black trans* women and trans* people of color as a resource to achieve political aims that primarily serve to increase their own visibility, safety, and vitality.

Haritaworn furthermore shows how this activism is enmeshed with racialization and ethnicization, as white trans* activists in the Global North and West locate the subject who afflicts trans*phobic violence in the figure that is both of Islamic faith and economically precarious. Thus, through their affective attachment to the trans* deaths of predominately Black trans* women and trans* people of color, trans* activist campaigns against violence also draw strength from the widespread racist panic around Muslims' alleged homo- and trans*phobia. As Snorton and Haritaworn argue, these actions do nothing to fundamentally alter the conditions under which the vitality of the lives of trans* people of color are compromised; instead they instrumentalize the deaths of trans* people of color for their own purposes.³ Rather than serve the well-being particularly of Black trans* women and trans* people of color, their deaths function as a vital resource for the development and global expansion of homo- and trans*normative political projects.⁴ Such an affective political attachment to hate crimes by white queer-feminist and trans* politics in the Global North and West consolidates the idea of Europe as “progressive.” It does so by turning trans*ness into a symbol of “freedom,” thereby legitimating imperial wars against the so-called terror, and by accompanying such wars with restrictive and racist migration regimes in “Western,” “secular,” and “liberal” nation-states.

Against the backdrop of this research, I suggest that the structure of feelings of privileged, predominantly white trans* activism and transnational-scale trans* politics in the Global North and West that argue for a commitment to address the needs of the most vulnerable and disenfranchised trans* individuals and groups is based on affective attachments that enable collective political action and at the same time coconstitutively performs racist, xenophobic, anti-Islamic, and classist violence. This affective structure lays the foundation for the lived atmospheres within trans* politics in the Global North and West. Focusing on this growing form of political action—and on how this version of politics is informed by the force of affect, initially as it manifests itself in attachments and finally in atmospheres—makes it possible to see the circulation of emotions within trans* politics as both stabilizing and unsettling for political action and social change.

The Atmosphere of Discomfort and the Imaginary of Trans* Politics

In light of these findings that show the limits of political action and social change in present trans* politics in the Global North and West, the question is, how—from a position of trans* activism in the Global North and West—can we think of an atmosphere in trans* politics that undoes the colonial violence and imperial

gesture outlined above? And, given the present remarkably violent constitution of trans* politics, how can we conceptualize such an atmosphere while both taking seriously the conundrum of transnational trans* politics in the Global North and West and rejecting political apathy? What affects might be generated in order to rework trans* politics and communities in the Global North and West so that we question the conventional understanding of politics as progress rather than produce a seemingly neat solution to this conundrum?

My questions allude to the political potential of affects, which I want to frame by referring to a critical approach to the so-called affective turn (Hemmings 2005; Leys 2011). In line with this critical perspective, I argue against positions that consider an unequivocal understanding of affect as a promise for liberating politics as well as for a paradigm change that renews theory. Therein I follow Clare Hemmings, who argues that affect is a politically crucial force for connecting individuals, yet still questions “its proponent’s over-investment in its positive capacities” (Hemmings 2015: 149).⁵ Taking a multivalent approach to affect allows us to see it as bound up with gendered, racialized, and classed regimes of power. As queer, feminist, and postcolonial work within affect theory has shown (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2011; Cvetkovich 2003), affect is a moving force in the creation of attachments to and in the production of the normative, while also maintaining the potential to transform norms.

Expanding this approach into the evaluation of trans* politics touched on above, I home in on the ambivalence of affect: while, on the one hand, affect may offer alternative moods in current politics, on the other hand it may also reinforce existing regimes of power. This is evident if we consider empathy, an effect that constitutes the moving force for political action within the structure of affect of the trans* politics of European institutions as well as of privileged, white queer-feminist activists in metropolises of the Global North and West. The Council of Europe’s report, with its plea for novel legislation that enables the self-declaration of one’s gender, for example, empathizes with trans* people’s distress concerning the gender they were assigned at birth, and with their legal struggles to adopt their self-determined gender. Likewise, the politics attached to trans* deaths that Snorton and Haritaworn analyze feels for the marginalization and fatal violence against trans* people of color. Both of these empathic attachments implicate processes of violent colonizing and imperial hierarchization, exclusion and othering, even as they simultaneously propel vital communities of trans* activists. The ambivalence inherent in such empathic ways of conducting politics and building communities warrants further scrutiny.

Feminist and postcolonial theory has shown how empathy and compassion are built on a historical hierarchy of categories of the privileged “here” and the marginalized “there” (Berlant 2008; Dhawan 2013; Hemmings 2011; Spivak

1988, 2012). Supposedly suffering “others” are fixed in a site located beyond the “innate here” of the privileged. The latter may, for instance, reify those in the Global South as racialized “other,” of an “other” faith, as socioeconomically precarious, and/or as “illiterate.” Under these conditions, empathy transports a powerful hierarchy that involves referring to the “other” through sentiment, which leads to a hierarchical classification of the self and the “other.” This critique of politics that takes empathy as the fulcrum for transformation, is apt. First, the notion of empathy assumes a reciprocity of those expressing and those receiving empathy. Empathy reifies rather than erodes the hierarchy between the self and the “other.” Second, it is problematic to deal with disregard and rejection by solely focusing on intersubjective encounters and on the reflective capacity of the empathetic subject. Doing so largely conceals the functions and effects inherent within relations of power and dominance. Thus, failure to recognize the historical and political grounds for a lack of response to this reciprocity, and relying on the self-reflexivity of the empathetic subject to resolve the problem of hierarchy-creating knowledge regimes, apprehends, according to this critique, transformation as individual and the individual as rational. This simultaneously assumes the existence of and reifies the illusion of a coherent, autonomous and rational subject, instead of acknowledging the subject as dependent, vulnerable, emotional, and ambivalent.

The question that therefore arises is—in political mobilization and practices that aim to address the actual injustices that face trans* people—How can we avoid colonizing moves that coopt and unify? How may we conceptualize relationality in a way that neither presumes reciprocity nor views political activism through the lens of individuality, but instead views relationality as solidarity that takes the form of decolonial and deprivileging practices—that is, that purposefully disrupts structures of colonization and privilege?⁶

In order to think about this question in the present moment of trans* politics, I suggest referring to the potential of affects notwithstanding its ambivalence. We are currently in the Global North and West in a political time of empathy fatigue and increased racism, sexism, and homo- and trans*phobia that a newly established nationalist, fascist, and right-wing politics explicitly endorse. The fatigue of empathy with the marginalized and disenfranchised goes hand in hand with a seemingly paradoxical growth in the range and intensity of emotional expressions legitimated in the public sphere. Emotions are perceived, as Elaine Swan suggests, “to provide a privileged source of truth about the self and its relations to others” (Swan 2008: 89). There is a conviction that emotional knowledge is direct and therefore more legitimate and real than other ways of knowing. In other words, feelings are truth and truth is felt. In the face of this present moment, I suggest thinking about collective political practices to fight discrimination, violence,

and death—if we are trans* activists in a privileged position—on the basis of an undoing of the belief that emotions provide truth. I want to argue that neither empathy nor critical self-reflection can provide a “true” way to endorse a political commitment to the various needs of gender-variant people. However, even as we must critique our inherent connection to the continued justification of imperialism, as Nikita Dhawan (2013) argues, referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, there is no escape from the colonial legacies of “justice” and “human rights,” which we at the same time cannot not want. We have to learn to see ourselves as part of the problem, which, however, not only entails an acknowledgement of complicity wherein we need to dismantle the processes that convert us into advocates for justice and rights; following Dhawan I suggest that solidarity is based on giving up the illusion of sovereignty (Dhawan 2013: 149). Relating this to privileged trans* politics would mean a decentering of our desire for “justice” by renouncing the performance of the empathic, self-reflective, and “vanguard” trans* activist. This, however, doesn’t mean that trans* activists from a privileged position should not engage in trans* politics despite the dangers of reification. But my point is that, while engaging in the fight for the various needs of gender-variant people, privileged trans* politics in the Global North and West must forfeit their “vanguard” position.

I argue that focusing on the potential of affect might help to question the illusion of sovereignty, which needs to disrupt the intactness and coherence of the privileged, Western, white, autonomous subject and body and thereby enables us to forge new views on the complicities of trans* politics. Emotions and affect are, however, not to be interpreted as a lens for getting closer to reality but rather as a crucial element through which power is felt, imagined, and contested (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2000). Referring to the violent power dynamics in the examples of trans* politics delineated above, I suggest that privileged trans* politics in the Global North and West might instead resort to a sense of discomfort, rather than focus on empathy with the figure of the generalized trans* person or with the figure of the trans* person afflicted with deathly violence. Instead of thinking trans* politics from a presupposed coherent trans* identity or shared feelings, I propose picturing trans* politics in the Global North and West as based on a desire for social change that entails a feeling of discomfort. Yet, I do not grasp discomfort as a feeling in a strict individual sense, that is, as a so-called “authentic” emotion that functions as a preexisting foundation for politics (Berlant 2000). Instead, I propose seeing discomfort as a mood that constitutes an atmosphere.

Taking as point of departure the critical approach to affect outlined above (combining a focus on the force of affect with the critique of the so-called affective turn), I propose that discomfort be conceived as a mood. Discomfort, like other moods, is neither raw sensation nor pure reason but an ambience through which one moves, something akin to the flavor of the present. In their comparison of

mood and affect, René Rosfort and Giovanni Stanghellini note that moods “often manifest themselves as prolonged feeling-states” (Rosfort and Stanghellini 2009: 258) and are less volitional or transitory than affect. Mood is often used to grasp an orientation to the world that causes the world to come into view in a certain way. In this sense, a mood becomes an affective lens that impacts how one is affected. Being in a certain mood makes the world appear in a specific way. Martin Heidegger’s analysis of mood and attunement (*Stimmung*) suggests that mood is ontologically prior to the exercise of will and cognition. He writes: “Attunements are not side-effects, but are something which in advance determine our being with one another. It seems as though attunement is in each case already there, so to speak, like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves in each case and which then attunes us through and through” (Heidegger 1995: 66–67). A mood, I suggest, constitutes an overall atmosphere that paves the way for ideas, helping to determine what will matter or not.

Taking mood as the crucial term to scrutinize the conundrum of transnational trans* politics in the Global North and West shows how in particular an atmosphere of discomfort can animate activists to pursue a certain path of inquiry and political action. At the same time, the process is reciprocal and dynamic—i.e., styles of thinking and acting, in their turn, also promote and sustain moods. From this perspective, trans* politics in the Global North and West is paved by an atmosphere of discomfort—an unease with and suffering from current legal regulations for gender-nonconforming people as well as the deadly violence against trans* people—that in turn reinforces colonial and imperial hierarchies. Thereby prevailing trans* politics consolidates precisely the feeling of discomfort it aims to fight. Understanding discomfort in trans* politics in the Global North and West as an atmosphere circumvents the problematic implications associated with the feeling of empathy touched on above. In its dynamic reciprocity, mood is neither solely an individual feeling nor only a firm ontological foundation that presses on individuals, but both simultaneously. Or, as Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman write, the concept of mood avoids such binaries. Mood emphasizes, instead, “its role in modulating thought, acknowledging a dynamic and interactive relationship between reason and emotion. Mood is tied up with self-understanding and shapes thinking rather than being stifled by thinking” (Felski and Fraiman 2012: vi).

Hence, if a thing can appear differently depending on the mood we are in and that surrounds us, then—putting it in Sara Ahmed’s terms—“moods matter as the how of what appears” (Ahmed 2014: 14). In this sense, an atmosphere of discomfort can restrict the sovereignty of the above-mentioned politically legitimate subject position *transgender/trans**. Discomfort as an atmosphere can foster the acceptance of the ambiguity of knowledge, feeling, and judgment within trans* politics in the Global North and West, without necessarily giving up the

possibility of seizing agency under the purview of *transgender/trans**. Discomfort does render trans* activism plural, ambivalent, insecure, and unstable, but it does not make such activism dispensable. If actual injustices toward trans* people are to be addressed from a perspective of trans* politics in the Global North and West in a less-violent manner, discomfort as an atmosphere might help to think solidarity as a feeling—with or not—with others, a feeling that does not become clear cut or distinct in a romanticizing harmonic way. Along with one's sense of what things mean and how they matter, moods inform one's felt connection or lack of connection with others. Referring to Heidegger's German term *Stimmung*, which is translated not only as "mood" but also as "attunement"—a term that underscores the relational aspect of adjusting oneself to a certain mood—Ahmed (2014) astutely carves out the ways of resonating or failing to resonate with others. To be attuned to one another is to share in mood. A lack of attunement, or misattunement, estranges some from others.

By pointing to discomfort as an atmosphere in conceptualizing hegemonic politics, I want to underline the feeling of seemingly paradoxical unease with attunement *per se*. An atmosphere of discomfort, notably in privileged trans* politics in the context of the Global North and West, would thus mean sensing ways of being out of sync with the present world without assuming therein a harmony but nevertheless aiming at a world where misattunement would not be considered troublesome. Against this background, I suggest that we reassess affective solidarity in transnational trans* politics in the Global North and West as a sense of forging and being in a mood of discomfort with the present world, including one's own strategies of political engagement, without expecting self-affirming reciprocity in political attempts to bring about social change. As a consequence, and according to Ahmed (2014), moods are not necessarily social or bring people together. The mood of discomfort is thus both an obstacle to, and potential catalyst for social change.

I conclude that the possibility to decolonize and deprivilege trans* politics in the Global North and West does not lie in an identity-based logic of inclusion. Instead, a decolonize and deprivilege trans* politics rather focuses on discomfort in political solidarity, while striving for collective social change. This discomfort within the context of trans* politics of the Global North and West might make it possible to challenge and politicize the violent conditions in which this politics is embedded. This, however, entails reconceptualizing trans* politics as an imaginative power rather than as an ideal form of political organization for social change. Taking the atmosphere of discomfort as a starting point in order to engage in decolonizing and deprivileging politics would hence not promote any kind of universal political aims. Instead, the atmosphere of discomfort as a starting point might sharpen our awareness of the limits of liberal politics of progress that

ascribes to an imperial logic. Only then might it become possible—in the words of Aren Z. Aizura, Trystan Cotton, Carsten Balzer/Carla LaGata, Marcia Ochoa, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2014)—to “decolonize the transgender imaginary” in knowledge production and political action. As an expression of violent power formations, the atmosphere of discomfort readily points to the decolonizing potential of individual and collective politics and to potentially new forms of taking action. This affective politics, however, is a ceaselessly ongoing process of formation and realization. Thereby such affective politics resists defining a universal solution for a definitive progression toward reaching an end goal; instead, it opens up a way to consider trans* politics as an imaginary that enables fragmented realities, bodies, and selves to become legible and articulable and thereby also to name the constitutive violence that is at work in trans* politics in the Global North and West. This might forge a collectivity that is necessary but impossible. A perspective from atmospheres of discomfort complicates easy notions of alliances along the lines of class, race, and gender and challenges the idea of collectivity while it warns against romantic notions of solidarity. I thus conclude borrowing Dhawan’s words: “Our solidarity efforts are indispensable and yet inadequate” (2013: 163).

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Notes

1. Such novel legislation is based on the self-declaration of one’s gender and does not require applicants to undergo complicated pathologizing and costly procedures for gender reassignment. For an overview see, for example, Amnesty International (2014).
2. Extraordinary research in the field of postcolonial, antiracist theory focusing on gender and sexuality includes the illustrative work of Massad (2007); Puar (2007); Kulpa and Mizelińska (2011); El-Tayeb (2003); Yılmaz-Günay (2011); Kuntsman (2008); and Gunkel (2013), to name just a few.
3. See also Yılmaz-Günay 2011 and Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014.
4. See also Dean Spade (2011) for the regulation of trans* people in the form of databases as a form of violent administration that distributes vitality while contributing to necropolitics.

5. My argument also relates to the work of Lauren Berlant, who problematizes the politics of “true feeling” (Berlant 2000), a politics that, in a nonambivalent manner, grants emotions an explanatory value and status for politics.
6. Here, I refer to Gayatri Spivak’s (1990) call for the need to “unlearn one’s privileges.”

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Understanding Socio-Legal Complexities of Sex Change in Postrevolutionary Iran

ZARA SAEIDZADEH

Abstract Sex-change surgery has been practiced through a medico-judicial process in Iran based on Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic juristic legal opinion (fatwa), which he issued just a few years after the Islamic revolution, in 1982. According to the Iranian legal system, judges can refer to the fatwas as a source of decision making if there are no stipulations on the matter within existing legal codes. In this article, I elucidate the divergent legal opinions on sex change among Islamic jurists in Iran and how this has amounted to different legal practices by judges in the country. The lack of law has generated difficult—and in some places impossible—conditions for trans persons to undergo sex-change surgery. According to Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa, and by drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted in Iran, I argue that sex-change surgery is not obligatory, opposing those who believe homosexuals in Iran are forced to undergo it. Trans people who decide to do so see it as a way to complete the transition, which indicates the importance of body materiality. Using the information gathered during interviews with trans persons in Iran, I examine bodily experiences during the process of transition, in which I have identified three phases: self-recognition, passing, and rebirth. These analyses show that transition does not happen at once or suddenly, it rather takes a long time and may continue after sex-change surgery, which is only one part of it.

Keywords sharia, Iranian law, trans, sex-change surgery, process of transition, social embodiment

Gender Identity Disorder (GID) as a concept entered the Iranian medical system in the 1930s. This subsequently led to the performance of the first sex-change surgery in the country, on an eighteen-year-old trans woman (Najmabadi 2008: 24; Kariminia 2010: 50). Sex-change surgery is the translation of the Persian *amal-e-taghir-e-jinsiyat*, which is used in Iran to refer to the surgical procedures of mastectomy and hysterectomy in female-to-male cases and removal of the testicles and penis in male-to-female cases for the legal gender transition.¹ Sex change has been permitted under Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa since 1982 through a medico-judicial process for the legal change of name and gender.² Despite its long practice, the

steady flow of mainstream Anglophone Euro-American media coverage about Iran, which tends to portray sex-change surgery as the product of the Iranian state's sexism and homophobia, has been growing since the early 2000s. As other scholars have shown (see Bucar and Enke 2011: 302), this kind of coverage is usually accompanied by explicit or implicit Islamophobic ideas implying that Muslim states are uniformly oppressive on the issues of gender and sexuality. These commentaries are also orchestrated with a transphobic tone suggesting that sex-change surgery is an oppressive act specific to patriarchal societies (Thirani Bagri 2017). Indeed, assumptions that the increasing number of sex-change surgeries in Iran are connected to the Iranian state's ban on homosexuality often appear in Western media. For example, the *Guardian* published an article claiming that transsexuals [sic] in Iran suffer from a lack of awareness, which increases psychological pressure and therefore the number of operations (Tait 2005). Moreover, it proclaimed that sex changes and transsexuality are legalized and funded by the Iranian state in order to force gender- and sexually nonconformist people to fit into the binary gender system (Tait 2007). Both the BBC and human rights organizations outside Iran similarly allude to the same idea: that the lack of information on sexuality and the demonization of homosexuality pushes lesbians and gays into having psychiatric, hormonal, or surgical treatment (Batha 2014). Therefore, they blindly undergo sex-change surgery (Hamidani 2014).³ Other documentaries produced inside Iran also depict trans persons either as oppressed homosexual individuals who are forced to undergo sex-change surgery or as exotic objects of investigation for the media (Shakerifar 2011: 333).⁴ It should be noted that these assumptions are infused with homonormative ideas that presuppose that changing sex reinforces heteronormativity and fail to consider that many trans persons who choose to fully transition go on to live as gays or lesbians. One must bear in mind too that homophobic policies existed in countries in the West until just a few decades ago. For instance, being a homosexual was one of the conditions for undergoing sex-change surgery in the early 1990s in the United States (Sullivan 2008: 109).

Talking about transsexuality in Iran is imbued with parallel discussions on homosexuality for several reasons—first, due to the criminalization of same-sex conduct by the Islamic Penal Code and the medicalization of transsexuality. Second is the lack of legislation addressing either sex-change surgery or the legal status of trans persons. In addition, the scarcity of sociological research on issues relating to Iranian trans people has led to assumptions that misrepresent the social realities.

By drawing on forty-two semi-structured interviews with trans persons, activists, jurists, lawyers, and surgeons in Iran between 2014 and 2017, this article first seeks to shed light on trans people's bodily knowledge and experiences to

illustrate how they understand sex-change surgery and its impact on their lives as part of their transition;⁵ and second, it provides a nuanced account of how Iran's laws and legal system continue to fail to fully recognize trans people's status in society. Thus, it argues that sex-change surgery is neither obligatory for trans persons nor forced on homosexual people in Iran. In contrast, while documenting that the majority of Islamic jurists oppose Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa, this article reasons that the Iranian law and legal system, as well as the wider society, take every possible precautionary measure to stop people from undergoing sex-change surgery. The questions are (1) How is Ayatollah Khomeini's legal opinion—fatwa—on sex-change surgery recognized and implemented by the Iranian judicial, legal, and medical systems? and (2) How do trans persons in Iran experience the process of transition and social embodiment, particularly in relation to their interactions with the judicial and medical systems as well as the family?

In the first half of this article, I contextualize sex-change surgery and trans embodiment in postrevolutionary Iran before turning to my findings. I then reflect on the article's theoretical premises, which are inspired by Nancy Fraser's concept of (mis)recognition and Raewyn Connell's work on social embodiment. In the second half, I analyze the fatwa and the medico-judicial process of transition and discuss how trans people in Iran go through the process of transition before and after obtaining certificates for sex-change surgery, and also after undergoing surgery.

The Terms

The terms *transsexual* and *transgender* have only recently entered the Persian language and are translated as *tarajinsi* and *tarajinsiyati* respectively.⁶ The trans persons whom I interviewed define *tarajinsi* as someone who wishes to change their sex through surgery, while they generally refer to *tarajinsiyati* as a state of being in which a person does not conform to gender binaries but does not want to undergo the surgery either. The Persian Academy of Language and Literature has recently ratified these translations of transgender and transsexual as medical terms within the realm of health care. The academy describes *tarajinsiyati* as: "a status in which the person's gender identity is discordant with their biological sex and culturally defined gender roles, which results in gender discontent, cross dressing and finally the change of gender."⁷ It defines *tarajinsi* as "a quality or characteristic in a person who embodies *tarajinsinegi* that is known as a form of gender identity disorder." That said, the English term *trans* and the acronym TS are used to refer to people who wish to undergo sex-change surgery by both the Iranian trans population—including my research participants—and those who work with trans populations in Iran.

The current literature around the issues of sex-change surgery and transsexuality in Iran are framed by two main discourses. The first discourse prevailing inside Iran is the medical and religious discourse (Sarcheshmehpour and Abdullah 2017; Ahmadzadeh et al. 2011; Javaheri 2010; Kariminia 2010, 2012) which focuses on GID—*ikhhtilal-e-hoviyat-e-jinsi* in Persian.⁸ This discourse sees transsexuality as the status of a person who is not content with his/her physical makeup or gender roles assigned to them according to their biological sex, or who suffers from gender dysphoria (Kalantari 2011: 77). Sarcheshmeh and Abdullah (2017: 65) note that “transsexuals in Iran have been classified as people with gender identity disorder that is treatable by surgical remedy.” The recent medical literature in Iran (Vahedi et al. 2017: 43) has reflected on Gender Dysphoria drawing on both the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (*DSM-5*), of the American Psychiatric Association and the International Classification of Diseases, 10th revision (*ICD-10*), both of which define and classify transsexuality as a mental disorder, explaining gender dysphoria as an urgent feeling of discomfort with one’s sexual anatomy and a desire to live as the opposite sex.⁹ Translated into Persian as *malal-e-jinsi*, this definition literally means “sexually discontented” in English.¹⁰ This term is relatively new and has been circulating in the media and newspapers for the past few years.¹¹

The second central discourse, which I refer to as the human-rights discourse, is debated outside of Iran (see Mohsenian-Rahman 2015; Jafari 2014; Bahreini, 2008, 2012; Carter 2011) and tends to characterize sex-change surgery as being forced on people by the Iranian Islamic state in order to assimilate them into the heteronormative gender order. This discourse is usually used to condemn the Iranian state for its breach of human rights, especially the rights of sexual and gender minorities. Sepideh Mohsenian-Rahman (2015: 4) maintains that members of the LGBT community in Iran are pressured by what Farah Jafari (2014: 39) calls the clerics’ “policing of sexuality” to undergo surgery in order to gain acceptance and recognition in society. Such arguments not only overlook the bodily experiences and knowledge of trans persons about gender and sexuality but also disregard the complexity of the social and legal implications of sex-change surgery in Iran.

In a recent groundbreaking ethnographic study in Iran, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014: 242–44), an Iranian-US professor of history, women, gender, and sexuality studies at Harvard University, argues that the legal legibility of transsexuality has enabled parents to save face by representing their trans children as clinically problematic. Najmabadi suggests that this was not previously possible in Iranian society due to the lack of vocabulary and the limitations of language, making it difficult to distinguish between homosexuality (illegal) and transsexuality (legal). At first, she sees transsexuality as a legal and constructive tool that benefits homosexuals, but then she maintains that trans is a state-defined category

that has had the paradoxical effect of positioning homosexuals as “abject” (301). She argues that the illegality of same-sex practices and the marriage imperative push lesbians and gays toward transitioning in order to be able to marry their partners and, in some cases, salvage a threatened same-sex relationship (269–70). Najmabadi argues that it is the performance of different activities (applying makeup, cooking, doing laundry, focusing on clothes, driving, doing heavy work) that creates the sense of being a man or a woman more than genitalia (283). She draws on Iranian trans persons’ narratives, which uphold the contention that they decide to transition because of their conduct, including sexual, which consists of situated daily activities that are dependent not on the body or psyche but on the specific location, space, and time at the intersection of numerous relations (297). Najmabadi theorizes the identity of trans people as being something that does not arise from within one person, but whose meaning is constituted discursively within specific contexts. She adds that different powers from state and non-state institutions compete and collaborate over shaping this conduct and the person’s sense of being in the world (298). In contrast with Najmabadi’s argument, I argue that, although sex-change surgery is widely practiced in Iran, trans as a gender is not defined or addressed by Islamic law, nor it is recognized by Iranian law as being a legal matter; however, a medico-judicial procedure has been introduced by the judiciary’s internal circular for managing the process of undergoing the surgery and the legal change of name and gender. I agree with Najmabadi that medical justification has to some extent changed families’ attitudes toward trans persons from repugnance to a more humanitarian position. However, as my findings suggest, sex-change surgery remains largely abhorred by families, to the extent that they would prefer their children to be in same-sex relationships rather than undergoing the surgery. I maintain that the legal misrecognition of transsexuality has not only generally made the social lives of trans persons more difficult but that this misrecognition has also affected other gender identities. Unlike Najmabadi, I believe that the process of embodiment both before and after the surgery illustrates trans people’s understandings of their gender as being enmeshed in the material body and their innermost true self. This is not to deny the importance of the discourse in shaping belonging, but to emphasize that trans persons’ practices of gender do not necessarily serve the aims of the state, psycho-medical discourses, or religious discourses. Trans persons’ embodiment and practices of gender demonstrate the ways in which they struggle to be recognized, by (re)defining their gender and gender relations. They struggle to be recognized as normal members of society without being preoccupied with the formation of categories through a politics of identity.

Theoretical Premises

In contrast to queer theory, which neglects trans people’s experiences of material and social embodiment, my research moves beyond the question of how trans

people transgress or uphold the gender binary and instead focuses on how they experience their own lives, which allows me to reflect on the concepts of status recognition and social embodiment.

Axel Honneth (2002: 500) states that the Hegelian approach to recognition implies that individuals appropriate one another's perspectives because they want to be recognized and judged well by others. This moves human beings toward universality, the universal condition for human relations to self, which could explain the Western misrecognition of trans people in Iran. In other words, the universal representation of trans forecloses the pluralism which is evident in trans people's embodiment (Hines 2007: 76).

I adhere to Nancy Fraser's definition of recognition; she maintains that we should treat recognition as a matter of social status, so instead of a group's specific identity, it is the status of group members as full partners in society that matters, because misrecognition is not about downgrading a group on the basis of identity; it means, rather, a social subordination that prevents people from participating in social life (2001: 24).

Nancy Fraser problematizes identity-based recognition by focusing on the social status through which the struggle to achieve "parity of participation" occurs. She suggests that misrecognition should not be associated with distorted identity, because this puts pressure on individuals to conform to a group's culture and consequently the misrecognized group must construct an identity of their own (2000: 112–13). Therefore, she maintains that "the identity model lends itself too easily to repressive forms of communications, promoting conformism, intolerance, and patriarchy" (113–14). Viewing misrecognition as a damaged identity emphasizes the psychological over social institutions and interactions. Therefore, it is difficult to envisage social change if we make identity the object of recognition. The subordinating institutionalized patterns that constitute some groups of people as normative and some as deficient result in denying some members of society the full status of being able to participate with the rest of its members. The redress, she suggests is to de-institutionalize subordinating social patterns (1997: 280).

The notion of embodiment refers to the processes through which social locations such as class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, along with collective values, become embedded in the flesh-and-blood body (Stergiou-Kita et al. 2017: 155). My specific use of the concept of social embodiment is inspired by Raewyn Connell (2011: 1370), who explains that it is a collective process through which "the body is enmeshed in social dynamics, and social dynamics in the body." Many post-structuralist feminists have focused on the Foucauldian tradition, which addresses the existence of the body as arising from discursive practices (Gange and Tewksbury 1999: 60). Connell (2010: 10; 2012: 868) focuses on narratives of

embodiment in order to understand trans as neither a syndrome nor a discursive position, but a life trajectory that arises through social embodiment. According to Connell (2009: 108), social embodiment is an actively changing historical process, not a matter of fixed categories of bodies. Embodiment is a process that goes on throughout life, and the central concern of trans people is about recognition and the relationship of this embodiment to recognition (108). Connell argues that, in order to recognize trans persons as members of society, it is necessary to understand their practices of embodiment. My findings suggest that social and legal misrecognition of trans is the result of misrecognizing trans embodiment. Connell maintains that recognition is denied in patriarchal ideology, where the state opposes recognizing trans embodiment, especially trans women's, which is considered a form of fake femaleness (2012: 873).

Both Connell and Fraser understand gender as a social relation, as distinct from those who construe it as an identity or a cultural inscription. According to Fraser, recognition is about the value of various practices and therefore cannot be universalized. Connell maintains that practices of gender are the multiple gender configurations that start from structure and continuously bring social reality into being through time and space. Therefore, transsexuality arises from changing gender relations within structures. This involves authority relations, economics, and emotional attachment, which Fraser postulates as recognition and redistribution. The process of social embodiment that Connell represents as collective, through which the body becomes enmeshed in social dynamics and vice versa, could be explained as parity of participation in social life, with emphasis on experience rather than difference, as Fraser explains.

Methodology

The emergence of queer theory during the early 1990s as a result of lesbian and gay academic work in cultural studies aimed to destabilize or transgress the normalization of certain categories of gender and to create space for fluidity within the gender binary system. However, the transgression of gender norms is resisted by those trans people who identify as heterosexual and follow conventional gender roles (Monro 2005: 32–33). Indeed, in queer studies much focus has been on the cultural norms rather than questioning how these norms are constructed (Richardson 2007: 458). This explains why my research sits at some distance from queer studies and falls more within the framework of trans* studies. With reference to Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008: 12), I use trans with an asterisk as a methodologically meaningful concept not to refer to trans as a gender category but to emphasize its existence across categories rather than seeing trans solely in relation to gender.

The production of knowledge about social reality, especially on gender and sexuality, cannot be studied either outside geographical and cultural specificities or in isolation from the global world. Therefore, a transnational perspective is required (Aizura et al. 2014: 314). In this vein, I follow Connell's (2014: 212) concept of southern theory, helping me to acknowledge the strength of people's knowledge in the global south, which is colonized through the process of knowledge production in the global north. Connell (2012: 864) explains that the majority of transgender research in the late twentieth century focused on trans identity and the construction of the subject through discourses within cultural studies. However, in trans persons' lives, dealing with social institutions from the state to the medical profession and family is more than an identity problem (see also Namaste 2000, 2005).

This article draws on data from a larger qualitative PhD project for which I conducted forty-two semistructured interviews during two fieldwork trips to Tehran, as well as telephone interviews with people in Iran (please see table 1).

I began my fieldwork by contacting a surgeon at the Center for Protection of Iranian Transsexuals (Mahtaa) in Tehran, who introduced me to trans persons and others. My status as a student of gender studies as opposed to a journalist or human-rights activist was the main reason why people trusted me and participated in my research. As for the mobile/telephone interviews, Mahtaa introduced me to some of its members through confidential messages via WhatsApp. I used Skype to make the interview calls rather than my mobile/telephone or the university's number to prevent eavesdropping or compromising the safety of Mahtaa or the research participants (Skype n.d.). I have paid special attention to the ethical dimensions throughout the research process, mainly to protect the confidentiality of the participants' information, for their safety as well as mine. Pseudonyms are used for trans participants, except for the professionals who wished to use their real names. I conducted the interviews in Persian, transcribed them in full, and then translated into English only the parts I have used in my study. The qualitative nature of the research and limited size of the sample population do not

Table 1. Interview details

<i>16 Face-to-face interviews, 2014</i>	<i>16 Face-to-face interviews, 2015</i>	<i>10 Telephone interviews, 2017</i>
7 trans men: 5 postoperative, 2 preoperative	1 surgeon 1 cleric	5 trans women: 2 preoperative, 3 postoperative
5 trans women: 2 postoperative, 3 preoperative	1 journalist 1 trans activist	5 trans men: 3 preoperative, 2 postoperative
1 psychologist	1 NGO director	
2 surgeons	1 lawyer working on trans issues	
1 trans activist	9 general lawyers 1 trans man lawyer postoperative	

allow for generalization, but the research does provide in-depth insights into the complex phenomena of gender and sexuality in Iran. As Bryman (2012: 406) puts it, interviews with a small number of individuals may generalize a theory, not a population; indeed, analytical generalization is itself a means to develop theories. I have employed thematic analysis to interpret the interview transcripts. The limitations of the research include my selective choice of interview quotes. Moreover, the translation of the interview transcripts from Persian to English has been challenging due to lexical discrepancies between the two languages. Any errors are mine, not the research participants.⁷

Finding 1: Legal Complexity of Sex-Change Surgery within Islamic and Iranian Law

The fatwa that allows sex-change surgery follows the medical justification of transsexuality, which is defined as an incongruence between the body and the soul. However, unlike the Western medical discourse of the “wrong body,” the Shia Islamic school of thought conceptualizes the (healthy) body as dissonant with the (wrong) soul. Nevertheless, the cure for this dissonance is to bring the body in line with the soul, for it is not possible to change the soul (Kariminia 2010: 25). Medical jurisprudence is a newly developed research tradition within Shia Islamic jurisprudence through which Islamic scholars investigate newly emerging issues under Islamic law. This, according to Kariminia (2010: 31), shows the dynamism and flexibility of Shia Islamic jurisprudence to keep up with modern medical and technological developments.

Islamic jurists have since Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa begun to express divergent legal opinions, resulting in a plurality of fatwas and judicial practices with regard to sex-change surgery in Iran. The proponents of such surgery base their arguments mainly on a specific rule of Islamic jurisprudence that specifies everything is *halal* (permissible) under sharia, unless it is forbidden through the Quran or the Prophet Mohammad’s traditions, or *hadith*.¹² Here, a distinction is made with homosexuality, which is forbidden in the Quran.¹³ The majority of jurists argue that sex-change surgery is not permitted¹⁴ under sharia, because to alter God’s creation by disfiguring the human body’s organs is not lawful (Saeidzadeh 2016: 12). In a phone interview in November 2015 in Tehran, Hujatul Kariminia told me:

The freedom of Islamic jurisprudential thought in Iran has allowed for diverse opinions among jurists. Trans persons should ask about the opinion of the *marja’-e-taqlid* they follow. If he does not allow sex-change surgery, they should obey that, unless their life is in danger, then they can disregard the opposing fatwa and pursue the surgery.¹⁵

This contradicts what trans persons experience in the judicial system, as I will explain below.

The Persian term *taghir-e-jinsiyat* (sex change) is mentioned in three of Iran's procedural laws: the Civic Registration Law amendment of 1986 (art. 20:14), which allows change of name and gender on the birth certificate for people who undergo surgeries on the basis of a court order; the Family Law Bill amendment of 2011 (art. 4), which states that family courts have the authority to handle issues related to sex changes; and the Laws on Military Service Medical Exemption in 1985 (section 5, art. 33:8), which cites the English term *transsexuality* as a psychosexual deviation and grounds for permanent exemption from compulsory military service.¹⁶ This is, however, changed in the regulation to the terms *TS* and *GID* to mean forms of psychological diseases.¹⁷ Some nonclerical legal scholars have expressed their dissenting opinions about Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa. Naser Katuzyan, a very well established legal scholar and lawyer known as the father of legal science in Iran, argues that sex change is not legal under Iranian law because it is against the public interest. Therefore, it is not possible to agree to changing one's gender as it is not allowed to legally change one's Iranian nationality (Barikloo 2003: 71). He perceives gender as an attribute similar to nationality; irreversible according to Iranian law because a change in the body and ultimately gender confuses the law and creates chaos in society, disrupting cultural values. Therefore, it is not surprising that Iranian law does not address either transsexuality or sex-change surgery.

The plurality of legal opinions among Islamic jurists as well as legal scholars has not only led to judges denying the rights of trans persons to legal changes of name and gender but has also amounted to the misrecognition of trans persons' status in society, preventing them from social participation.

Despite the conscription regulation amendment (2011) replacing "psychological disease" with "glandular disorder," many interviews with trans persons indicate that the conscription exemption is granted in practice on the basis of psychological problems. In a telephone interview, Daniel, a twenty-six-year-old postoperative trans man who underwent the medico-judicial procedure in 2014 in Tehran told me:

The military exemption card is still given to us on the basis of psychological problems, unless one can convince the endocrinologist to diagnose a glandular disorder, which happens in only one in a thousand cases.

Describing transsexuality as moral deviancy denotes an individual whose psyche and body are deemed transgressive by the law.¹⁸ In most places, the law's definition of sex relies on biology. As a result, gender identity in legal discourse has

been understood as a psychological element of sex (Currah 2009: 248). Therefore, it is the psychological element of the sexed body that is deemed to deviate from the law's conception of gender.

Finding 2: Sex-Change Surgery Is Neither Obligatory nor Forced on Homosexuals

In 1967, Ayatollah Khomeini—who was exiled to Turkey by the Pahlavi regime—issued a fatwa in Arabic that claimed that sex-change surgery is not prohibited under sharia (Khomeini 2006: 992; translation mine). The English translation says: “To change one’s sex from a man to a woman and from a woman to a man through surgery is not hindered in Islam. And if a woman feels she is masculine or if a person feels they have the desires of the opposite sex, and can change their sex, but are biologically a man or a woman, it is not obligatory for them to change to become the opposite sex” (Kariminia 2012: 104). He reaffirmed his opinion in 1982 by adding the condition of approval by a reliable doctor. Ayatollah Khomeini neither forbids sex-change surgery nor imposes it on individuals with same-sex desires. Trans-friendly Islamic cleric Hujatul Islam Mohammad Mehdi Kariminia (2010, 2012) argues that permission for sex-change surgery under sharia is dependent on two conditions: absolute necessity (*zarurat*) for the well-being of the Muslim person, and realness (*haghighi*).¹⁹ Thus, permission for surgery cannot be given to a person who is not trans, and the surgery is not obligatory for a trans person who does not want it, unless the person’s sexual activities involve same-sex relations, which are sinful. In this case, the surgery is necessary (Saeidzadeh 2016: 13). In 1987, the legal office of Tehran’s judiciary issued an internal memo for the Legal Medical Organization (LMO) stating that proceeding with sex-change surgery is not a problem under Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa. The internal circular issued by the judiciary to regulate the process of changing name and gender by undergoing surgery is not a legislation with legal power or a substantive law. It is, rather, an institutional ruling that has the potential to be repealed very easily.

Based on my fieldwork in 2014, the current medico-judicial process in Tehran—which is not the same as in other cities—for sex-change surgery and the legal change of name and gender involves thirteen sessions of psychiatric treatment, which begin with a visit to a general psychologist, who issues a referral to the Tehran Institute of Psychiatry (TIP). A committee of experts comprising sexologists and psychologists carries out genetic and hormonal testing and psychiatric evaluations. If the committee is satisfied that the person suffers from GID, a referral is made to the LMO, where a group of doctors confirms the GID diagnosis and grants permission to obtain a certificate for sex-change surgery from the administrative court at the Ministry of Justice. If the psychiatric sessions prove that the person is not “afflicted” with GID or is believed to be a homosexual, further psychotherapy treatments are prescribed. The legal change of name and gender is

possible only after the surgery by filing a request at the district family court. The judge sends the person back to the LMO for physical/body examination in order to confirm the completion of the surgeries: mastectomy and hysterectomy in female-to-male cases—no phalloplasty is required—and the removal of the testicles and penis in male-to-female cases. If the judge is satisfied,²⁰ he refers the person with the order to the registry office for the legal change of name and gender on their identification documents. Daniel indicated that, depending on the city and the judge, the legal process of changing name and gender varies.

Luckily, I proceeded in Tehran and the court did not give me any trouble, but I have heard from other people that there are judges who give you a hard time. They ask for unreasonable evidence to decide on your case. For example, in Rasht, judges ask for affidavits from the Friday prayer's Imam and the people in your community, police clearance, drug and alcohol tests, and physical probing. Especially the genitalia, to make sure you're not intersex. They make these things up.²¹

As a result of status misrecognition—in other words, misrecognition of trans embodiment—no unified legal procedure for transition is regulated across the country before or after sex-change surgery. For example, in the cities of Shiraz and Mashhad, people have to begin the process (before the surgery) at the family court in order to be referred to the LMO for psychiatric assessment.²² In Kermanshah, the certificate for sex-change surgery is issued by the public and revolutionary court, *dadsaray-e-omumi va enghlab*, where hormone therapy is obligatory along with psychiatric sessions.²³ Razi, a twenty-two-year-old post-operative trans man who obtained his certificate for sex change surgery in Kermanshah told me:

In order for the court to give me the certificate for sex-change surgery, I had to provide a letter of permission from the LMO as well as the endocrinologist certifying a year of testosterone injection. This had a very bad effect on my body. Testosterone gave me second-degree cervical cancer, which I got to know only after my hysterectomy surgery.

Mahmood Reza, a twenty-nine-year-old trans man, had been rejected by the committee of the LMO in Shiraz because his family were not present at the psychiatric sessions. This is not required when people apply in Tehran. The distribution of resources, and the provision of facilities for people who go through the process of transition, is not egalitarian. The institutionalization of sexual norms and the denial of parity participation for sexual minorities is approached differently in different jurisdictions.

Hanieh, a thirty-four-year-old trans woman (preoperative at the time of interview in 2014), obtained her certificate for sex-change surgery at the age of nineteen (1995), but she had not yet undergone any surgery. She recalled:

Tehran used to be hell during the late 1990s; it was not easy like it is today. At that time, they needed my father's permission for the surgery, but he did not allow it, so I couldn't do it. Now that there's no need for my dad's permission, I have no money to do it.

Since 2011, the Social Welfare Organization (SWO), or *Behzisti*, in Iran has started to help trans people, as GID falls under the same category as “socially injured” individuals—runaway girls, homeless women, and addicted persons.²⁴ The *Beshisti* provides subsidies of up to 50 million IRR (\$1,500), while the average cost for the surgeries is estimated to be around 200 million IRR (\$6,500) in Iran. Many interviewees said that the small amount of money, which does not even pay for the costs of visits to psychologists or surgeons, is not worth several months of bureaucratic paperwork. Mehran, a thirty-four-year-old trans man, however, did go through the pain of the bureaucratic paperwork, but was refused by the SWO on the grounds of his educational level. He explained, “They told me I’m not eligible to receive financial support, because I hold a doctoral degree; but I was poor and jobless, yet they refused to help me.” He eventually found a way to have surgery without financial support from the state.

Mohsenian-Rahman (2015: 4) holds that the certificate and the surgery for trans people are a tradeoff for obtaining rights and state subsidies. However, based on the interviews, I argue that the certificate not only medicalizes trans people into institutionalized subordination, but also denies them social status, which results in loss of jobs and families. I will talk about this below.

Finding 3: The Surgeries Are Part of the Work of Transition

The process of trans embodiment involves medical, legal and social transitions, which are all entangled with one another.²⁵ Obtaining the certificate for sex-change surgery is very important for trans persons in Iran, whether or not they decide to undergo medical transition, because the certificate permits them to appear in public following the opposite sex’s dress code before undergoing surgery, as I will explain here by outlining their embodiment in three phases.

Self-recognition

For my research participants, the process of trans embodiment starts with realizing their differences in relation to gender norms at an early age. Most remembered behaving and acting unconsciously against what was actually expected of them,

from choosing the color of their clothes to playing with different toys. Many developed feelings and sexual desires toward persons of the same sex during their teenage years. Therefore, they were confused and inclined to believe they were homosexuals; many got involved in same-sex sexual relations. In order to be accepted by their families and society more generally, they said that they forced themselves to conform to the gender roles they were expected to have, suppressing their feelings and desires, or hiding their bodies. The idea of contradictory embodiment (Connell 2009: 107) is relevant here; this conceptualizes how trans persons experience various contradictions in their lives for a long time before, and even after, transition: passing as a boy, a woman, a gay man, a lesbian woman, and so on. Taraneh, a postoperative trans woman, explained that same-sex desire is the first sign of being trans:

I lived as gay for several years before I realized I'm a transsexual, because homosexuals don't wear makeup and a gay person doesn't like to look like a woman. I couldn't identify with their feelings and desires because I wanted to put on facial makeup and look like a beautiful woman, which distinguished me from being a gay.

Most trans participants reiterated that it took them several years to make sense of their own lives; to finally self-identify as trans, and to come out to their families. It was also mentioned that they usually received information and knowledge about trans from the Internet, close friends, films, documentaries, books, and journals. According to most of them, the biggest challenges start after coming out as trans, because they have to prove themselves to their families—to the extent that trans women struggle to show they are not gay, and trans men try to prove their manliness as family-minded, the provider for their family, and even demonstrating a high degree of prejudice (*gheyrat*) toward women.

The process of social embodiment occurs, or rather develops more intensely, after self-recognition. It is at this point that almost every trans person I spoke with said that they could not bear to live with their original genitalia, especially during private moments—for example, in the bathroom. Hossein, a twenty-six-year-old trans man who had not had surgery at the time of interview in 2014 said:

I hate my body; it has not yet been possible for me to go to the bathroom and look at myself. I haven't washed myself with open eyes for years.

Pary, a twenty-nine-year-old trans woman (preoperative at the time of interview in 2017), also noted:

For me, having a penis is a form of disability and I have accepted to bear with it. I don't look at it. To me, it's an extra, useless piece of body flesh.

Hanieh, a preoperative trans woman (at the time of interview), stated:

My surgeon said to me that an artificial vagina is like the palm of a hand from which you only urinate, but I will do this surgery even if only one day is left of my life; I want to die as a woman.

Passing

Once a person receives the certificate for sex-change surgery, it is valid for a lifetime because it is not dated. This was emphasized by many people, including Razi, who said, “The certificate does not have an expiry date. One can use it forever.” The fatwa allows surgery for trans persons who receive the certificate and feel ready to undergo the surgery. Otherwise, they can live as their desired gender by carrying the certificate for as many years as they want. Many factors, including families’ discontent and financial problems, may delay the surgery.

Niaz, a thirty-one-year-old preoperative trans woman, has gone through hormone and laser therapy for six years, which have changed her body, according to her, to have a more “feminine look,” but she goes to work in men’s clothing. She conveyed this complexity in this way:

I mostly appear in my men’s outfit in public, but people think I’m a woman who is cross-dressing as a man. I’m usually in a woman’s outfit when I’m at home or partying in private places, but once I was driving in a woman’s dress in Babol when the police asked for my documents. I said I am a TS [trans]. He asked his superior through his walkie-talkie and let me go, but asked me nicely to carry “the certificate,” which I have not obtained yet, to avoid any further inconvenience.²⁶

These experiences bring into question the claims made by some feminist theorists (see Raymond 1979; MacKenzie 1994; Hausman 1995) that transsexuality is primarily a product of medical and surgical technology.

In a society like Iran, where dress code is a strong marker of gender identity, it is very difficult to transgress the gender order even if permitted to do so. The hegemonic patterns of masculinities and femininities are very strictly inscribed on bodies. Therefore, it is not easy to live a gender with a body that does not conform to its sex. For many people, the certificate is the proof to show that they do not identify with their current gender.

Raha, a forty-one-year-old self-identified trans woman who lives in Kerman,²⁷ told me that it took her ten years to undergo the surgery (which took place seven months before the interview in February 2017) after she got the certificate. She reiterated:

My family was concerned about what people would think of them if I changed my gender. Unfortunately, we [Iranians] live for others. Customary traditions did not let me live with the certificate, and I did not want to live as opposite to my biological sex before the surgery, because I was certain that I would have the surgery one day.

During all these years, she lived her social life as a man because of her job as a lawyer, and also because of the family's *aberu*, but finally at the age of forty, she felt ready to undergo the surgery. This clearly illustrates the long process of embodiment.

All the interviews with trans persons whose families were against the surgery reported that the main reason for their opposition has been the family's *aberu*, which literally means "face water" in English. For Iranians, *aberu* is an important element of family, social, and professional prestige. "It involves honor, respect and esteem. Therefore, it is considered as a value, something that is desirable, protected and appreciated, sometimes even more than that of a human life" (Zaborowska 2014: 114). Pary, along with some others, said that her brothers had threatened to kill her if she underwent the surgery, because it would take away the family's *aberu*. This is in contrast with Najmabadai (2014), who argues that families forbid their children from undergoing sex-change surgery due to limitations of language to distinguish between homosexuality and transsexuality. Najmabadi's focus on the language and discourse fails to account for the importance of each individual's relationship to their body, embodiment, and gendered practices.

Rebirth

Sex-change surgery in Iran entails the removal of the gonads (ovaries in the female body, and testicles in the male body) and removal of the uterus and breasts. Phalloplasty, also known as the last operation among trans persons, is an optional procedure. Thus, gonadectomies are obligatory for the legal change of name and gender; however, there are no legal or medical policies or regulations addressing the types of surgery or the sterilization of trans persons. My research participants tended to suggest that their embodied experience is not dependent on which genitalia they happen to have and that their embodiment is not limited to that. It is rather the fleshy material in which they live. Mahmood Reza told me that he has been using a hormone blocker, but that it is not good for his body. He said:

My real self is a man, it's not enough to change the surface of the body, or to dress differently. I would have still gone for the surgery if I didn't live in an Islamic country.

For Amir, a twenty-nine-year-old preoperative trans man, his body had been a problem since puberty. He explained:

I hate being feminine, and it's not possible for me to accept giving birth to a child and be a mother.

As Marc Lafrance (2007: 266) states, trans bodies have tended to be used by some feminists (see Hausman 1995) as metaphors for the consolidation of the gender binary and the triumph of surgical medicine. In this way, the materiality of bodily life is overlooked. That is why trans theories (see Namaste 2000) have emphasized the experiences of trans-lived bodies. Razi burst into tears as he was telling me:

Just after the surgery, I said to myself that twenty years of agony is over. The amount of joy I felt from not feeling my breasts on my chest was something I had never experienced.

The surgery is not pleasant. It continues to deny social status, but most trans people I have interviewed understand it as the only way to achieve inner peace, by bringing the body closer to the soul. For example, Raha, who completed her surgery at the age of forty, said:

Sex-change surgery put an end to the nightmare that I was living in through all these years. It felt like waking up from a dreadful dream and starting a new life.

Daniel emphasized:

I regret that I was not able to have the surgery earlier. I started to live when I was twenty-six years old [after the surgery], while twenty-six years of my life had already passed.

Life can also become more difficult after surgery; institutionalized subordination and challenges remain in different ways. It often destabilizes a trans person's being as a human. According to the interviews, those who choose to keep their jobs, professions, family, and children and to live in the same neighborhood after the surgery usually do not have an easy life. They are pressured to become invisible by either leaving their hometowns or living hidden behind their prior gender after the surgery. Razi declared:

After the surgery, I was under so much scrutiny. I couldn't take the heavy looks of people toward me at work, so I left my job. I couldn't even walk out of the house without feeling terrified. Even my family couldn't appear with me in our neighborhood. All of these things pushed me to leave the city and move to Tehran.

Families of trans persons in Iran are generally against the surgery, mainly because of the *aberu*. It does not matter that it is allowed under Islamic law. It is against Iranian cultural traditions. As a result, many trans persons who do not have the support of their families go through covert surgeries (Saeidzadeh 2016: 19).

Conclusion

The current debates on sex-change surgery in Iran are too focused on scrutinizing why it is allowed under Iran's Islamic state, to the extent that they fail to examine how the medical, legal, and judicial systems treat trans persons and shape their lives, both before and after the surgery.

Transition in Iran has been represented as state-sanctioned, legal, and sometimes forced on homosexuals. By drawing on my interviews, as well as legal and jurisprudential documents, I have argued that sex-change surgery is not legislated by state, nor it is deemed obligatory under Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa. The situation is much more complicated. Moreover, the interviews indicate that trans persons choose whether to undergo surgery as part of their transition process after obtaining the certificate for sex-change surgery. If they choose to go through with it, they undergo considerable risk to themselves, in contrast to what the Western media and scholarship suggest.

Despite having a legal system that follows civil law, the Iranian parliament has neither legislated on sex-change surgery nor addressed transsexuality within the legal codes. The lack of legislation on sex-change surgery has been tantamount to the exercise of personal interests by the judges, which has in turn affected trans persons' lives. Moreover, the legal misrecognition of trans persons' status has amounted to social misrecognition, leading to inferior status at the institutional and individual levels. Moreover, I have reflected on the experiences of trans persons during the process of embodiment in three phases—self-recognition: before the certificate for sex-change surgery; passing: after the certificate for sex-change surgery; and rebirth: after undergoing surgery—in order to shed light on how trans persons understand sex-change surgery in the social process of embodiment as well as during medico-judicial transition, and how this affects their lives. I have shown that those who undergo sex-change surgery are not passive victims of patriarchy being forced to normalize their bodies within a heterosexual matrix; rather, they reconstruct their own subjectivity through the process of transsexual embodiment (Sullivan 2006: 558).

By bringing Nancy Fraser's concept of misrecognition and Raewyn Connell's view of social embodiment into the dialogue, I have shown that the process of gender transition and the surgeries associated with it involve various practices of gender that are contextually specific in time and space. Thus, trans persons' embodiments take shape through their struggle for the recognition of their status as full members of society.

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Notes

1. I refer to sex in relation to surgery, because the research participants describe body modification as changing their sex rather than gender, while I use gender to address the legal change, because it is people's gender, which is legally recorded based on their birth sex, that needs to be changed. Indeed, it is the legal gender that inscribes people with different legal status in society.
2. *Fatwa* is the legal opinion of a qualified Islamic jurist in response to a Muslim question about everyday life matters (Kamali 2008: 174).
3. BBC Persian TV aired a documentary with the same purpose, which created much controversy among trans people in Iran. *Under the Blade of Gender (zir-e-tigh-e-jinsiyat)* shows the Iranian homosexual asylum seekers in Turkey who claim have been forced to undergo sex change.
4. Examples of these documentaries are *Inside Out* (2005), directed by Zohreh Shayesteh; *The Birthday* (2006), directed by Negin Kianfar and Daisy Mohr; and *Be Like Others* (2007), directed by Tanaz Eshghian.
5. I follow Susan Stryker's (pers. comm., September 6, 2016) definition of trans. She maintains that "trans is an inclusive concept and does not stand alone, but it attaches to [persons]." Further, "trans is about crossing boundaries, it is moving across, pulling and transforming. . . . Trans is a mobilizer of category." But, in this article, I focus on trans persons who seek surgical transition. I have used transsexuality not as a medical term, but to refer to persons who wish to change their sex either through surgery or hormones, which were also used by trans persons in this research.
6. *Tara + jins + i* creates an adjective *tarajinsi* or "transsexual." *Tara + jinsiyat + i* creates an adjective *tarajinsiyati* or "transgender."
7. Academy of Persian Language and Literature, "Approved Words" (in Persian), s.v., "tarajinsiyati" and "tarajinsi," accessed October 20, 2017, www.persianacademy.ir/fa/word/.
8. GID is translated into Persian as *ikhtilal-e-hoviyat-e-jinsi*. *Ikhtilal* means "disorder"; *hoviyat* translates as "identity"; and *jinsi* in Persian means "sexual."
9. As of 20 June, 2018, ICD-11 declassified transsexuality as a psychiatric illness and placed it in the chapter titled "Conditions Related to Sexual Health" as a type of gender incongruence.
10. *Malal* refers to a feeling of psychological discontent, and *jinsi* means "sexual" in Persian.
11. Because of this, the name of the only NGO in Iran was changed from the Association for the Protection of Gender Identity Disorder Patients to the Association for the Protection of Gender Dysphoria Patients at the end of 2015.

12. According to Kariminia there are nine contemporary *marja'-e-taghliids* who allow sex change surgery, including Ayatollah Safi Golpayegani, Ayatollah Yousef San'ei, and Ayatollah Mousavi Ardabil.
13. See *Sura Shoara*: verses 165 and 166, *Sura Asra'*: verse 32.
14. For example, Ayatollah Yousef Madani Tabrizi opposes sex change through surgery (Mir-Hosseini 1999).
15. *Marja'-e-taghliid* is a grand Ayatollah whom Muslims follow on everyday life matters, and he has the authority to issue fatwa.
16. The Laws on Military Service Medical Exemption in 1985 (section 5, art. 33:8) read: "Behavioral disorder (psychological imbalance), and bad temperaments are not acceptable according to military principles. This includes moral and sexual deviations such as 'transsexualism' that results in permanent exemption from military service."
17. The 2001 amendment to the Regulations on Military Service Medical Exemption, section 5, art. 33:12.
18. A comparison could be made here with A. Sharpe's proposition (2007: 388) that the abnormal individual is constructed as a monster who transgresses the law, and that these transgressions might show themselves in challenging the legal taxonomy. For Sharpe, monstrosity is a kind of irregularity that questions the law and is therefore overlooked by it. She explains (2007: 386) that the monster is accommodated by the law as a result of breaching the law and nature, and the way the law deals with it is to deny it or place it outside the law.
19. Kariminia is an Islamic cleric well known in Iran for his extensive activities raising awareness about trans issues, including writing his doctoral thesis on the topic (later published as Kariminia 2010).
20. Some interviews showed that judges ask for drug tests, police records, or the testimony of a cleric in order to permit the legal change of name and gender.
21. Rasht is a city in northern Iran, close to the Caspian Sea.
22. Shiraz is in southeastern Iran and has a population of nearly 2 million. Mashhad is located in northeastern Iran, is the country's second most populous city, and is the second site of sex-change surgery in Iran.
23. Kermanshah, the largest Kurdish-speaking city, is in western Iran.
24. The Department of Social Affairs, the office of injury, or *asib*, acts as a crisis-intervention center. There is only one center in Tehran, located on the eastern outskirts of the city (*Navab*), where psychological therapies are provided.
25. I borrow the term *work of transition* from Raewyn Connell (2012: 870).
26. Babol is a city in northern Iran, Mazandaran province.
27. Kerman is a city in southeastern Iran.

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After Trans Studies

ANDREA LONG CHU and EMMETT HARSIN DRAGER

Abstract This dialogue contends with the state of trans studies today. While the authors differ in their levels of optimism for its future, they both agree that if trans studies is to survive, it must be able to articulate a fresh set of reading practices distinct from, or even at odds with, those of queer studies. Revisiting Sandy Stone's field-defining 1991 essay "The Empire Strikes Back," they note that trans studies paradoxically begins with a call to abandon the figure of the transsexual, imagined solely as a normative medical category. In contrast, the authors argue that the critical value of the transsexual lies precisely in her being an *obstacle* to romantic narratives of antinormative queerness. **Keywords** transsexual, transgender studies, narrative emplacement, gender clinics, antinormativity

Andrea Long Chu: Let's face it: Trans studies is over. If it isn't, it should be. Thus far, trans studies has largely failed to establish a robust, compelling set of theories, methods, and concepts that would distinguish itself from gender studies or queer studies. Susan Stryker (2004) once wrote that trans studies was "queer theory's evil twin." She was wrong: Trans studies is the twin that queer studies ate in the womb. (The womb, as usual, was feminism.) What everyone knows is that queer theory has never had any qualms about arrogating gender as one of its primary sites of inquiry, and reasonably so, since trying to study sexuality without studying gender would be manifestly absurd. *Queer* has, from the get-go, described both gender and sexual deviance, and what's more, gender *as* sexual deviance and sexuality *as* gender deviance. From this perspective, trans studies is just an embarrassing redundancy—junk DNA.

In trans studies, there is nothing like the rich conversations about queer temporalities that took place in queer theory in the mid-aughts, or like the recent debates over Afro-pessimism in black studies, both of which owe a lot to polemics (Edelman 2004; Wilderson 2010) and their subsequent fallouts. Instead, we have warmed-over pieties. This is what happens when a massive offload of queer methods and concepts with the label TRANS hastily slapped over their expiration dates meets an influx of political capital courtesy of the current transgender identity

politics. The result is something like church. But what matters, from the perspective of theory building, is strife. I'm very conservative when it comes to discipline formation. We need a small number of very good monographs that we can really yell at each other over. Can you think of a single significant debate in trans studies today? Bickering is everywhere, but true disagreement, the kind that births theories, is rare. Why are we so nice to each other? I think a lot of us are itching for a fight. "On Liking Women" (Chu 2018) was a desperate attempt to be disagreed with. In that regard, it's largely failed.

Emmett Harsin Drager: I cannot offer you the disagreement you are looking for, except perhaps to say that I do *not* think trans studies is over, in fact, I think it's potentially at a very exciting crossroads. I think that some of the most cited texts about trans people and in trans studies have been the work of non-trans (i.e., cis) scholars recycling the same citations, concepts, and metaphors.¹ What cis scholar is going to intervene and say, "Hey, I think we have this concept of dysphoria all wrong"? That's just not going to happen. Instead we get the same arguments for bodily autonomy, the radical potential of body modification or even worse, arguments from cis folks as to why social transition is as meaningful and transformative as medical transition. And even among trans scholars that are here in the field, no one wants to talk about how anti-climactic surgery really is or how dysphoria maybe never goes away. That would be seen as undermining our gradual march toward "progress." You cite Edelman as an example of the type of polemic we need. We are in the era of the trans child. It would be absolutely unfounded to imagine a trans studies scholar saying that perhaps, actually, trans children should not be given hormones. As a field we do not allow for those kinds of disagreements. Everything must be "gender affirming" (whatever that means).²

Trans studies is not over, but it does need to learn to stand on its own, not as an addendum or a hyphen or an asterisk to something else. I think that is exactly what we are here to discuss, how to make something out of this junk DNA.

For me, the problem of trans studies has been a problem of narrative. I have been highly influenced by scholars who think about the role of narrative in historical inquiry. As Hayden White (2000) has argued, all historical inquiry is shaped by narrative emplotment. An historical project must take the form of a plot; it is at its very core a story: a romance, a tragedy, a comedy, a satire (7). In David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004), he argues that the postcolonial is trying to use the same toolkit, or as he calls it "problem-space," as the anti-colonial. He suggests that while romance, a genre about triumph, was necessary for anti-colonial resistance, tragedy is a more apt genre for describing postcolonial modernity. In trans studies, it seems to me that we are telling a story of our victimhood (tragedy) or a story of our resistance (romance). I am much more interested in a satire, a genre about how truly disappointing and sometimes even boring it is to be a trans person

in this world. As White (2000: 8) argues, histories told as satires “gain their effects precisely by frustrating normal expectations about the kinds of resolutions provided by stories cast in other modes.” This is our task, to write a trans satire.

ALC: I think you’re exactly right to say that trans studies has a narrative problem. Or, I would suggest, trans studies has inherited queer studies’ narrative problem. As *queer*, as an analytic, has reached a point of analytic exhaustion, queer-studies scholars have had to entertain other vehicles for the romantic fantasy of criticism as a radical political act, which *queer* has sheltered for the past twenty years. The big secret about trans studies is that its working definition of *trans* is just “queer, again.” So this is what trans studies *could* offer: a safehouse for queer studies’ endangered “political optimism,” as Robyn Wiegman (2012) puts it. This is why most trans-studies scholars are, in fact, just queer-studies scholars especially susceptible to fads.

Consider, for instance, the paper that most scholars cite as their “method,” in that introductory phase of a book, chapter, or article where scholars are most anxious to look as if they’re taking a strong theoretical position: it’s the introduction to a ten-year-old special issue of *WSQ*, whose editors reject “the implicit nominalism of ‘trans’” in favor of “the explicit relationality of ‘trans-,’ which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix” (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 11). The basic idea is that transgender people, as a narrow identity group, can be a methodological stepping-stone for thinking more expansively about boundary crossings of all sorts: not just transgender, but also transnational, transracial, transspecies—you get the picture. And so the editors gift us with *transing*, queering’s unasked-for sequel. Like most sequels, it’s just *the same damn movie* with a few plot elements lightly rearranged. Anyone who says differently is lying. Do we seriously imagine that any graduate student from 1998—plucked, by the power of imaginative thinking, from the windowless basement cubicle where she takes refuge from the male professors who stand too close to her at holiday parties—do we seriously imagine that such a graduate student, having been asked to describe what it means to “queer” something, would reply, “Oh, it’s about *firm boundaries*, and *stability*, and also *fixedness*.”

But *trans satire*, I think, has the potential to become a real, substantive methodology—not rejecting narration as such (which is impossible), but trying to learn how to write without optimism, or maybe how to be optimistic without being hopeful. Then again, I do suspect that writing without optimism is also impossible, insofar as I am persuaded by Lauren Berlant (2011: 1–2) that “all attachment is optimistic, if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene.” Perhaps what I mean, then, is writing without *political* optimism, that is, writing without the subsumption of all

optimistic attachment under the sign of the political. Call this a bitter optimism, maybe. Bitterness feels right to me as one of the primary critical affects of trans satire as we're imagining it here—not cynicism, which is a way of titrating bitterness until you can't taste it anymore, but real bitterness, the bitter disappointment of finding out the world is too small for all our desires, and especially the political ones. I know I'm bitter. I get the sense you are, too.

EHD: Trans studies' political optimism has been grounded in the figure of the posttranssexual. Trans studies has been largely shaped by "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1991), in which Sandy Stone tells a story about the university-based gender clinics and the development of a differential diagnosis ("gender identity disorder"). In Stone's version of the story, patients desperate to sneak past the medical gatekeepers, would rehearse and perform a false or inauthentic record of their lives in order to qualify for sex-reassignment surgery. They would circulate among themselves copies of Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in order to know what to tell the doctors in their intake interviews. Stone tells this story in order to highlight the rehearsed nature of trans self-narrativizing and autobiography and in doing so she gestures to questions of authenticity. She is concerned specifically with the collapsing of "emergent poly-localities" (293) into one, medicalized narrative/discourse. Stone describes the trans body as "a genre—a set of embodied texts" (296). For Stone, medical hegemony reduces a multiplicity of lived experiences, embodiments, and identities into one story of transness (the "wrong body" narrative), one trajectory of embodiment (medical transition), and one identity category (the passing transsexual). Stone's manifesto calls for the transsexual to "forgo passing, to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud," and in doing so, embrace transsexuality as an intertextuality, a multiplicity of genres (299).

This history of the gender clinics, as Stone tells it, provides the foundation for a set of binaries that have become the core "problem-space" of trans studies for the last thirty years: authenticity versus inauthenticity, medical identities versus vernacular identities, and the transsexual versus the posttranssexual (i.e., the transgender). I don't think Stone intended to create these binaries, but regardless, this is how her article has shaped years of scholarship about trans genders, lives, and identities.³

Stone is specifically calling for a new kind of transsexual: a posttranssexual—or as I would argue, a nontranssexual. In her manifesto, a foundational text for the field, she urges us to tell our stories differently from the medicalized transsexual, establishing at the very foundation of trans studies the disavowal of the transsexual. And trans studies scholars have been myopically preoccupied with proving that we are no longer *that* ever since. There's an abundance of trans writing out there that I would describe as diagnostic, in the sense that the authors

will choose whatever trans autobiography or memoir or television show is popular at the time and demonstrate how it is different from trans narratives in the past (see, e.g., Beemyn 2006; Rondot 2016). Perhaps unwittingly, these authors are following the call of Stone by attempting to diagnose a narratological shift in which we go from being the medicalized story that Stone outlines, to a new kind of polyvocal, intertextual, recalcitrant posttranssexual. This is very much in the vein of the romantic genre. And in our diagnosis, we always want to prove that we are on the “right” side, or I would say, the “woke” side of the narratological shift.

For me, this project of incessantly trying to prove that we are no longer the medicalized transsexual is the very place where trans studies has lived and will die. It is an obsession with resistance and radicality that has severely limited our ability to fully understand trans pasts and presents. And this is why I am interested in returning to the fraught figure of the 1960s and 1970s transsexual, specifically the US gender-clinic patients or aspiring patients, to try to create a more robust history of trans that is not rooted in these binaries of vernacular versus medical and authentic versus inauthentic, but rather is full of messiness, contradictions, disappointments, and unexpected outcomes.

ALC: And it’s no accident, I’d add, that the transsexual is the only thing that *trans* can describe that *queer* can’t. The transsexual is not queer; this is the best thing about her. Take Agnes, the pseudonymous transsexual woman who famously posed as intersex at UCLA’s Gender Identity Clinic in the late fifties in order to obtain access to vaginoplasty. Agnes’s case was chronicled by Harold Garfinkel ([1967] 2006) in an article that’s now taught in trans studies courses. (It’s the sixth entry in *The Transgender Studies Reader*.) Agnes is regularly celebrated as some kind of gender ninja: savvy, tactical, carefully conning the medical-industrial complex into giving her what she wants (see, e.g., Preciado [2008] 2013: 380–89). What no one wants to talk about is *what she actually wanted*: a cunt, a man, a house, and *normal fucking life*. Whatever intuition she may not have had about gender as a “managed achievement” was put toward a down payment on a new dishwasher (Garfinkel 1967). If there’s anything Agnes “reveals” about gender, it’s that actually existing normativity is, strictly speaking, impossible. Norms, as such, *do not exist*. (If *Gender Trouble* knew this, it did a poor job explaining it.⁴) That doesn’t mean that norms don’t structure people’s desires; what it means is that the desire for the norm consists, in terms of its lived content, in *nonnormative* attempts at normativity. Agnes was a nonnormative subject, but that wasn’t because she was “against” the norm; on the contrary, her nonnormativity was what wanting to be normal actually looked like. Like most of us, Agnes was making do in the gap between what she wanted and what wanting it got her.

We can argue, and people have, about whether queer theory is possible without antinormativity (Wiegman and Wilson 2015). But whatever comes after

trans studies—can I suggest transsexual theory?—will be impossible *with* anti-normativity. The most powerful intervention scholars working in trans studies can make, at this juncture within the academy, is to defend the claim that transness requires that we understand, *as we never have before*, what it means to be attached to a norm—by desire, by habit, by survival.

EHD: I think you're precisely right about this idea that transsexuality is perhaps a key to understanding norms and how they function, which is exactly what I was trying to say about the pitfalls of only looking for stories that are of resistance or "radical politics." What interests me about the historical impulse is how much it is motivated by a deep desire to find people in the past who may have looked and lived like us. This is a project of finding community across time.⁵ But, I ask, what do we do with the historical figures that we find that don't live up to our expectations? We want to find the Sylvia Riveras and Marsha P. Johnsons, but more often than not, we are going to find people that deeply disappoint us. What is our responsibility to them?⁶

For this reason, I was recently quite inspired by Finn Enke's *TSQ* piece "Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s" (2018) in which they ask why, despite all the various complexities of 1970s feminism, it is collectively remembered as simply noninclusive, antitrans, white feminism? Enke urges us to pay attention to collective memory and how often it is more a reflection of the present than of the past. They wonder, why we are so "perversely attached" to a legacy of second-wave feminism that frames this time as only a place of injury and victimization for trans people (17). I echo this by asking, why, as a field, are we so perversely detached from the transsexual? Despite the many heterogeneous, multiracial, multiclass, and transnational individuals who sought sex-reassignment surgery at the university-based gender clinics, somehow, these transsexuals (or aspiring transsexuals) are remembered quite monolithically, as white, middle-class, heterosexual (aspiring) trans women.

What I find so compelling about Enke's argument is that these moments, this history, *our* history "deserve[s] an analysis informed by a larger archive" (Enke 2018: 17). The fortunate thing about the university-based gender clinics of the sixties and seventies is that, due to their university affiliation, they have left behind staggeringly large archives. In regards to transsexual history, we can hardly complain of erasure and archival lack.⁷ My own research into the clinics has found university collections to be rich sites for inquiry that challenge some of the core beliefs of trans studies (e.g., the very notion of "medical" identity).⁸ "As historians and filmmakers have shown, trans women's and men's own words are readily available; it's possible to find and amplify the perspectives and lives even of people no longer with us, and to know them for their work and play, not just as lightning rods for transphobia" (Enke 2018: 12).

Just as you are interested in the question of what we do with people in our communities who have “bad politics,” I am interested in what we do with figures of the past that are disappointing to us because they fail to live up to some kind of “radical” litmus test. This is really where our projects meet and overlap, in questions of negative affect and bad objects.

ALC: And there is no object worse than a woman. That’s an operating assumption in all of my work. The problem with the transsexual is that she—and paradigmatically she *is* a she, especially if we’re talking about twentieth-/twenty-first-century US culture more broadly—carries all the baggage of gender with her. Like many women, she overpacks. The problem with the transsexual is that she’s always been too much of a woman. It’s hard to make something as politically dowdy as a woman into a cover girl for that trendy new metaphysics you’re hawking (see Hayward and Weinstein 2015; Colebrook 2015; Puar 2015; Bey 2017). It’s become quite fashionable in the past twenty years to talk about *queerness* or *blackness*, and more recently *transness*, in an ontological way, often in Heideggerian tones. At the same time, it remains the case that being dumb enough to write a book about *womanness* would get you bounced from all the cool academic clubs faster than you can say “intersectionality.” I am not arguing that anyone *should* be writing about womanness; I am simply pointing out that no one *could*, even if they wanted to, at least not if they wanted to get a job or a book contract in the current academic climate. Meanwhile, trans studies remains a field in which two men can sit around and debate the merits of *woman* as a political category (Green and Bey 2017). (Spoiler alert: They have their doubts.)

I was flipping back through Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” ([1985] 1991) recently, and I was reminded of how much antipathy she has for woman as a political category in that essay. (It’s a sign of the times, for sure: she’s writing in the early eighties, reacting against the thing we’ve been taught to call “cultural feminism,” though I’m skeptical of that taxonomy.) The cyborg, as a new “myth,” is intended as a way *out* of women, out of the universalism of the seventies, and potentially out of gender, period: “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world” (150).

And, of course, Sandy Stone was Haraway’s student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Haraway’s influence is all over “The *Empire Strikes Back*,” which Stone (1991: 284) explicitly acknowledges. (“A Cyborg Manifesto” will actually make it into *The Transgender Studies Reader* in 2006, despite trans people playing no role in the essay.) I agree with everything you’ve already said about Stone’s essay: I, too, harbor great ambivalence here. I note the connection between Stone and Haraway just to say that *posttranssexual* is not just an attempt to disavow transsexuality; it’s also an attempt, like *cyborg* before it, to be *post-woman*. The claim is right there in her citation of *Gender Trouble*—just as, for Butler, butch/

femme cultures both recall and displace heterosexuality, so, for Stone, the transsexual both recalls and displaces womanhood: “In the transsexual as a text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries” (296). This is a *very* nineties move. Nothing could be more nineties than finding a figure that “reveals” the inner workings of gender.

I point this out because this suggests to me that what’s happening in that essay is *not*—appearances to the contrary—that Stone is telling some authentic truth about the way it really feels to be transsexual (as she claims); what’s happening is that Stone is, like most scholars of gender in the nineties (and the aughts, and our own decade), molding her object to fit her theory, which is not by coincidence the same as the then fashionable theory. In other words, the basic narratological *form* of the medical discourse—what Stone calls a “plausible history”—has in fact remained largely intact. All Stone’s done is switch out the original *content* of that history (disease, diagnosis, cure) for a different content, namely, the prevailing elements of gender theory in the nineties (performativity, disruption, transgression). In fact, she’s laying the groundwork for the long-standing intellectual move in which the trans person, just through the act of existing, becomes a kind of living incubator for *other people’s* theories of gender. (Jay Prosser [1998] warned us about this in the late nineties. No one listened.)

EHD: This connection between the posttranssexual and the cyborg is an important one. The cyborg comes to be a stand-in figure for futurity, flexibility, techgender, hypermodernity, etc. and because the cyborg is essentially the posttranssexual, the transsexual is then relegated to the past. She is archaic and anachronistic.

It’s quite interesting how the exact same medical procedures and technologies that have been utilized by the transsexual take on a completely new set of meanings in their posttranssexual rebranding as “gender confirmation surgery.” In the same vein of “things people warned us about that we didn’t listen to,” I think we can turn to Nikki Sullivan’s essay “Transmogrification” (2006), in which she warns against hierarchies of body modification. Not only do these hierarchies of moral judgements about good and bad types of body modification exist in dominant culture, they also take their own form in counter- or subcultures. Specifically, what I find to be key about Sullivan’s argument is her critique of the idea that some types of body modification are made to reflect free will, critical thinking, and subversive politics while other types of body modification are made to symbolize indoctrination, false consciousness, and the status quo.

Despite the fact that Sullivan’s essay did make it into the first *Transgender Studies Reader*, it seems most folks might have skipped that chapter; Sullivan didn’t make the short list of texts that get cited ad nauseum in trans studies. Moral

judgements about body modification run rampant in queer and trans studies, all in the name of antinormativity politics. It's really sort of incredible to me, the vitriol that queer theorists have for phalloplasty. If your body modification looks too much like the original "transsexual medical genre," your queer cred is toast. So I guess *that* is something I'm bitter about—the way the transsexual body is the battleground for politics. And you know, it isn't just politics, it's also how body modification is taken up in theory. How can the *exact same* procedures sometimes symbolize, for queer theory, the Ghost of Genders Past and other times be the very foundation for new materialist theories of mutability, becoming, and enmeshment?

ALC: I'm very glad you bring up the new materialisms. For the purposes of this dialogue, I'll be agnostic about the new materialisms as a general trend: like all academic trends, some of it is good, more of it is bad, and most of it is boring. But I will say, without reservations, that the new materialisms represent the worst possible direction for trans studies to go in. In trans studies, which is so poor in theory to begin with, new materialist–style work somehow manages to take up a disproportionate amount of space while also, quite frankly, *not making a lick of sense*. That's always a scary claim to make in the humanities; the risk is always that one, having failed to comprehend the argument, is imputing that failure to the argument itself. The fallout is that we are very bad at calling bullshit. But bullshit there is. Do I dare to give you an example?

Sure. Take a 2015 article by Karen Barad published in *GLQ*. In this article, she assures us that she is not taking up trans "in an appropriative embrace of the latest theory trends" (413). Then she writes things like this:

Matter is a wild exploration of trans* animacy, self-experimentations/self-re-creations, not in an autopoietic mode, but on the contrary, in a radical undoing of "self," of individualism. Ever lively, never identical with itself, it is uncountably multiple, mutable. Matter is not mere being, but its ongoing un/doing. Nature is agential trans*materiality/trans-matter-reality in its ongoing re(con)figuring. (Barad 2015: 411)

Trans is doing zero theoretical work in this essay; it is employed here purely as an au courant garnish on the same argument Barad has been making for years. I can prove this to you easily. Here's Barad in *differences* in 2012, doing her thing:

Every level of touch, then, is itself touched by all possible others. Hence, self-touching is an encounter with the infinite alterity of the self. Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is. Polymorphous perversity raised to an infinite power: talk about a queer intimacy! (Barad 2012: 212–13; italics removed)

Now here she is making the exact same claim—she’s straight-up recycling sentences, which she admits to in the notes—in 2015 (I’ve italicized the new bits):

Every level of touch, then, is itself touched by all possible others. *Particle self-intra-actions entail particle transitions from one kind to another in a radical undoing of kinds—queer/trans*formations.* Hence self-touching is an encounter with the infinite alterity of the self. Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is. Polymorphous perversity raised to an infinite power: *talk about a queer/trans* intimacy!* (Barad 2015: 399).

Well, which is it, Karen? Is matter queer or is matter trans? Both, of course, because for her, like for most people who claim to be working in trans studies, *queer* and *trans* are obviously synonyms. If I sound angry about this, good. I am.

But let’s try to be nice trannies for a second. What work gives you cheer these days?

EHD: I am excited about Kyla Schuller’s new book *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (2018) for the ways it pushes back on some of these theories of re(con)figuring and (un)doing that you and I both find so maddening. Through a history of science, she argues that impressions and impressibility (the ability to affect and be affected) are baked into the very structure of biopower and therefore the modern concepts of race, sex, and species. “Contemporary frameworks that seek to contest biological determinisms with flexible materiality do not escape the political legacies of liberal humanism—rather, they unwittingly recapitulate the conceptual apparatus of the biopolitics of feeling” (11). I am interested in the implications of what she is saying as it relates to trans theory, specifically the ways in which “trans” as both a prefix and verb has been used as a theoretical shortcut out of fixed binaries of the human. Schuller’s argument is that plasticity was actually at the very core of racial science, biology, and heredity. The ability to be affected, to change and adapt and enmesh with one’s environment, was actually seen as a marker of “civilization.” In this framework, transing (i.e., boundary crossing) loses its purchase on radical politics.

ALC: As I’ve said, I can’t abide transing. Verbing does not a theory make. But if we had to hang on to it, transing should be a methodology that would start from the premise that everyone’s gender is a political disaster and refuse to fix it. I’m inspired here by Marissa Brostoff’s (2017) recent essay on Caitlyn Jenner in *differences*—easily one of the best pieces of trans studies scholarship I’ve read in a long time, maybe ever. The claim is basically that Jenner is unwittingly engaged in a camp performance whose object is queer politics itself: just as the drag queen once revealed the

fragile conventions of gender for Butler, so Caitlyn Jenner, with her timid, half-assed attempts at “trans activism” in her short-lived reality series *I Am Cait*, now reveals the fragile conventions of *the political as such*. It’s a beautiful essay and a shrewd argument. I want more work like this, work that refuses both the pomp of antinormativity and the circumstance of the posthuman for something slower, smaller, more tuned in to the ways in which ordinary life fails to measure up to the political analyses we thrust upon it.

Of course, at some point, that line of thinking takes you out of the academy altogether. (’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.) We’ve joked, in planning this dialogue, that if we *really* wanted to upend the pieties of the field, we’d ditch the topic we selected and just speak candidly about our lives as transsexuals, the way we might talk over dinner or text message. Of course, we can’t do that, not just out of academic decorousness, but because the pages of *TSQ* would catch fire before letting readers read something truthful about what being trans actually feels like.

I exaggerate. A little.

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Notes

1. When I say trans studies I refer to the medical, cultural, aesthetic, and political theory that has come about since the creation of transsexual and transgender as identity categories in the mid-twentieth century. If *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker and Whittle 2006) and *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (Stryker and Aizura 2013) are to serve as examples of how trans studies is being constituted and understood, then we can see that a large bulk of the “canonical” texts in the field come from non-trans scholars. There are sex-ologists and clinicians like Harold Garfinkel, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Harry Benjamin; feminist theorists like Janice Raymond, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler; and queer scholars such as Gayle Salamon, Heather Love, and Marcia Ochoa. As Andrea says in this dialogue, trans studies is full of “queer studies scholars especially susceptible to fads.” I challenge you to give me a list of every tenured trans scholar you can think of—don’t worry, it won’t take long, especially if you make it a list of trans of color scholars (I know

this because C. Riley Snorton once posed this challenge to me and I don't think I got beyond the number four). However, I should also mention that I am a member of a Facebook group of over five hundred trans-identified scholars currently working on their PhDs around the globe. Perhaps this is where some of my optimism about the future of trans studies is coming from.

2. I wrote this just weeks before Jesse Singal's (2018) piece on trans kids came out in the *Atlantic*. In that article Singal is making some of the interventions that I was claiming are impossible to make. While I think the article is mostly a heaping pile of garbage, a few of the questions he raises about trans kids are important. I think we need to be critical about who's treating trans kids, the clinical advice and options they're offering, and the role of (cis) parents in this whole process. However, the moment Singal's piece came out, it was quickly brushed aside, with Singal's cisness providing an easy out. Rather than engaging with any of the content of the article we could quickly dismiss him as a transphobe and move on. Nothing to see here!
3. I think one of the clearest examples of how these binaries have been taken up can be found in Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005: 53): "The production of categories is also different in different spaces: expert-produced categories ('the homosexual,' 'the invert,' 'the transsexual') are ultimately far less interesting or useful than sexual vernaculars or the categories produced and sustained within sexual subcultures." It seems that at the core of Halberstam's work is the intention to expand gender beyond any kind of binaristic thinking through highlighting gender-expansive identities; unfortunately, this is always done at the expense of the medicalized transsexual.
4. To be fair, Butler is well-aware in *Gender Trouble* that "gender norms are . . . impossible to embody." This impossibility is, in fact, the driving force of gender performativity as a "stylized repetition of acts" ([1991] 1999: 179). Yet her implicit assumption throughout *Gender Trouble* and later in *Bodies That Matter*, is that approximations of the norm can be divided into those that reconsolidate the norm and those that displace or resignify it. What is never adequately explained is how these two categories are to be told apart. The criterion for distinguishing them *cannot*, after all, be that the first set is normative whereas the second set is not; on the contrary, if norms are impossible to embody, then *both sets are nonnormative*.
5. In Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval* (1991: 1), she puts forth the concept of "a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between on the one hand, texts, lives, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other hand, those left out of current sexual categories now." Nayan Shah (1998) also writes about this desire to experience affirmation and validation in the face of alienation through history, specifically in a kind of seeking that is also rooted in race, ethnicity, and nationalism/diaspora.
6. These same questions can be asked about the detransitioners that Singal writes about, who we are so quick to dismiss because they do not fit into the narratives of transness that we want to tell.
7. In my own project I explore this question of historical erasure, specifically as it relates to the restricted and redacted case files of transsexual gender clinic patients. I follow the lead of scholars such as Anjali Arondekar (2009) and Abram Lewis (2014), who suggest that this notion of lack and erasure, when it comes to archives of gender and sexuality, produces a methodology of recovery, in which we are always looking for that

which is missing in the hope of bringing it to light. This can be compared to Eve Sedgwick's (1990) "epistemology of the closet," a mode of thinking that upholds a binary of hidden versus revealed. This binary prevents us from more complex reading of the archives.

8. Perhaps this all could have been avoided if we had just listened to our queer historians:

But it would be wrong to assume, I think, that doctors created and defined the identities of "inverts" and "homosexuals" at the turn of the century, that people uncritically internalized the new medical models, or even that homosexuality emerged as a fully defined category in the medical discourse itself in the 1870s. Such assumptions attribute inordinate power to ideology as an autonomous social force; they over simplify the complex dialectic between social conditions, ideology, and consciousness which produced gay identities, and they belie the evidence of preexisting subcultures and identities contained in the literature itself. (Chauncey 1982–83: 115)

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Questioning Authority

Changing Library Cataloging Standards to Be More Inclusive to a Gender Identity Spectrum

AMBER BILLEY and EMILY DRABINSKI

Abstract When a library adds a book to its collection, it adds a surrogate record for that book in the library's catalog. To get this record the library will either download it or create a record for the book from an international bibliographic record database. Authors have records too. These are known as *name authority records*. Recently the standards for creating these records changed to allow library catalogers to record more personal information about authors in authority records. This includes information about gender. There began a collective effort by a handful of catalogers to revise the new instructions so that binary gender was not encoded into the metadata of library records. This paper outlines the developments, results, and implications of this work.

Keywords library catalog, gender identity, metadata, bibliographic record data

Libraries use metadata schemes to describe and organize materials in order to facilitate access. This is foundational to—and inextricable from—the library project. Without classification and cataloging schemes, books would simply be in a pile; each time a user wanted to retrieve a particular book or books on a particular topic or by a particular author, they would have to sort through the pile at random. Metadata—data that describes the book in a number of different ways—makes it possible to search more precisely. When users enter a title or author into an online library catalog, they are using metadata to pull a book from the middle of the stack. These structures also enable serendipitous browsing. They describe individual titles, but also build syndetic relationships between them, collating like with like on library shelves so that readers who locate one book about the history of transgender identities will find all the others on the same shelf.

When a library adds a book to its collection, it adds a surrogate record for that book in the library's catalog. To get this record, the library will either download it or create a record for the book from an international bibliographic record database. Authors have records too. These are known as “name authority records.”

An accumulation of authority records in a single database is called an “authority file.” The most widely used authority file in the United States is the Library of Congress Name Authority File (LCNAF). Library catalogers create new name authority records for all new authors and contribute those records to an international authority record database.

Metadata also ensures the maintenance of difference, preserving the boundaries between items that are like each other in some way but not identical. For example, two books might share the same title, or two authors might share the same name. “Authority control” is a term used in library science to describe the process of ensuring that every author in a library’s collection is uniquely recorded in the catalog and disambiguated from authors with similar names. Authority control determines how we tell one author (e.g., Smith, Jane) from another (e.g., Smith, Jane, 1982–) in the library catalog by establishing parameters for the creation of authority records to contain a unique primary name for every author.

While these systems are necessary to enable access to materials in library collections, they are also subject to critique. Ostensibly objective and simply descriptive, all knowledge organization schemes reflect the ideologies from which they emerge. For example, the Library of Congress Classification shelves materials about bestiality near those about transgender people, and shelve both under a broad umbrella of deviant lifestyles. What might seem a set of category errors to individuals from these communities is embedded in the system and on the shelves as uncontested reality. In turn, the system reproduces those assumptions about the way the world works as patrons browse shelves and catalogers describe books. This has implications for trans people who are marked as *similar to* and *different from* on shelves and in the dominant systems that organize people and things in information environments around the world. Activist catalogers have worked to change the ways that materials by trans authors and about trans experience are represented in these settings.

An Evolution of Library Cataloging Standards

For more than 175 years, libraries have followed fairly straightforward sets of standards and instructions to create descriptions of the books and other resources held in their collections, as well as rules on how to record information about authors, subject headings, and assign classification numbers. A brief (and incomplete) history is as follows: Antonio Panizzi issued his *91 Rules* for cataloging the books at the British Museum (now the British Library) in 1841. Charles Ammi Cutter published his *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog* in 1876. The American Library Association published their *Condensed Rules for an Author and Title Catalog* in 1904. The *Paris Principles* from the 1961 International Conference on Cataloging

Principles outlined the functions and structure of a library catalog (International Federation of Library Associations 1961). The first edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* was published in 1966 jointly by the American Library Association, the Canadian Library Association, and the (British) Library Association. The ISBD(M), *International Standard of Bibliographic Description Monographic Publications*, was issued by the International Federation of Library Associations Committee on Cataloguing in 1974. The second edition of the *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* (AACR2) was published in 1978 to bring the cataloging rules in line with ISBD. The *Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records* (FRBR) was published in 1998; the *Functional Requirements Authority Data* (FRAD) was published in 2009, and the *Functional Requirements of Subject Authority Data* (FRSAD) was published in 2010. This new “functional requirements” family was not necessarily rules, but recommended data models that introduced entity-relationship modeling theory for information-systems design to library metadata. AACR2 remained the primary cataloging code until 2010, when it was replaced by the *Resource Description and Access* (RDA). RDA follows the recommendations and entity-relationship models outlined in FRBR, FRAD, and FRSAD. In 2017, IFLA published the *Library Reference Model*, an approach that unifies and reconciles FRBR, FRAD, and FRSAD into a single model. RDA is expected to be updated to adhere to this new IFLA standard model in 2018.

RDA was adopted as the new primary cataloging standard by the Library of Congress in 2013, and ushered in new ways of describing library resources and the people associated with those resources for all libraries in the United States. One major change in particular was that RDA introduced many new attributes for describing people. Prior to RDA, catalogers created name authority records solely in order to disambiguate and construct a unique primary name for indexing. With RDA, catalogers are now asked to create contextualized biographical sketches in addition to constructing the unique name string for indexing. When they describe people they have the opportunity to include much more personal information:

- Name of the person
- Date associated with the person
- Title of the person
- Fuller form of name
- Other designation associated with the person
- Gender
- Place of birth
- Place of death
- Country associated with the person
- Place of residence, etc.

- Address of person
- Language of person
- Field of activity of the person
- Profession or occupation

This more richly detailed record anticipates future search-and-retrieval systems where the authority files themselves will be searchable. For example, researchers will be able to retrieve all records for authors who write in English, or who come from France. For the first time, catalogers are being asked to describe and classify people.

RDA is different from all earlier standards because it is based on theoretical data models—FRBR, FRAD, and FRSAD. This data model facilitates linking of library records to other data forms that are not held in the library. RDA enables library data to be linked to data elsewhere on the Internet. For example, a patron might search for information about Kate Bornstein on the Internet. With RDA, search results can include links to Wikipedia articles and documentary film clips as well as books by Bornstein held in the library. In other words, RDA facilitates search and retrieval that is both more complex and much vaster than the card catalogs envisioned by Cutter and earlier models of information organization. That theoretical model has material ramifications that are actualized both in the everyday practical task of cataloging library resources and by the creators (or contributors) of those resources through applying the instructions in RDA to library catalog records.

Addressing Binary Gender in Cataloging

Such a change in practice has particular implications for the description of the gender of authors. In its initial formation, the options available to catalogers for marking gender was binary: male or female, with a third option, “unknown.” For catalogers informed by queer and trans theory and experience, this binary gender rule was an alarming, if accurate, reflection of dominant ideologies around gender. The rule invited catalogers to assess and assign gender through the use of book jackets or information found on the open web, information that cannot be assumed to be accurate. For example, the hip-hop artist Big Freedia was misgendered as “female” in his Library of Congress name authority record¹ even though she identifies as a male and uses pronouns fluidly (Welch 2011). Encoding gender also assumed that binary gender was both universal and eternal, not subject to change as ways of thinking about gender identity shift in geographical space and chronological time. Finally, the rule left out transgender and nonconforming identities altogether, as if these authors did not and will not exist at all. There was much debate in the library cataloging community on library listservs that exposed a level of ignorance and transphobia in the profession. In 2014, Amber

Billey, Emily Drabinski, and K. R. Roberto addressed in depth the problem and the professional discourse of the binary gender bias in RDA Instruction 9.7 on recording gender in name authority records.

What followed was a collective effort by a handful of catalogers to revise the RDA instructions so that binary gender was not encoded into the metadata of library records. To change the specific RDA instruction 9.7 for recording gender of persons, a proposal was submitted to CC:DA in February 2015 to add the term “transgender” to the list of gender-term options defined by RDA instruction 9.7. This would list the options as “Male, Female, Transgender, and Unknown.” The proposal was accepted by CC:DA, and so it was sent to RSC for their summer 2015 meeting. This proposal was actually deferred, and the broader topic was discussed at the November 2015 meeting. A new proposal was submitted to the RSC at this meeting to continue to allow catalogers to record gender about authors but completely remove the predefined terms for gender as outlined in RDA instruction 9.7. Terms for gender would instead be decided by local cataloging communities. This change means that each individual cataloging community can define its own terminology for describing gender in name authority records. This reverting to local control acknowledges the highly contextual nature of gendered language, enabling cataloging communities to use—or not use—geographically specific terms for gender categories. The deprecation proposal was accepted and the rule was updated in February 2016. The new rule reads as follows:

9.7 Gender

9.7.1 Basic Instructions on Recording Gender

9.7.1.1 Scope

Gender is the gender with which a person identifies.

9.7.1.2 Sources of Information

Take information on gender from any source.

9.7.1.3 Recording Gender

Record the gender of the person, using an appropriate term in a language preferred by the agency creating the data. Select a term from a standard list, if available.

Record gender as a separate element. Gender is not recorded as part of an access point.

This means that a local cataloging community can determine the terms they want to use for recording gender for people, and that gender will never be recorded as part of a unique name string. So, something like *Billey, Amber (female)* will not be recorded as the unique name string in the LCNAF in an RDA-based authority record. Since the rule was changed, a task group within the Program of Cooperative Cataloging

crafted best practices to be used by North American catalogers for recording gender in name authority records for persons. These best practices are currently under review by the cooperative membership. The task group expects these best practices to be formally adopted by the cataloging cooperative in fall 2018.

Implications

Since the authority record is independent of the bibliographic record, once an author's authority record is changed, then works associated with the author's authority record will link to author's current/correct identity. However, this change in RDA could have implications outside of library data management. The LCNAF data is openly published as linked data on id.loc.gov and is used for data reconciliation and normalization by other open datasets such as Wikidata, ORCID, the Virtual International Authority File, the International Standard Name Identifier database, and most likely many other unknown databases. With all this data reuse, it's impossible to control changes to data across all the platforms. This is why advocacy continues within the library community to encourage recording personal information such as gender only when absolutely necessary to disambiguate or contextualize information about the author.

Conclusion

Gendered norms are maintained and reproduced in systems and structures usually by people to whom binary gender is normal, natural, and obvious. In library systems, this was certainly the case in the initial rollout of RDA. Binary gender was an obvious way to differentiate authors from one another, and an essential component of describing who people are. For catalogers and classifiers who understand and experience gender in a different way, this rule needed to be contested. While largely invisible to users of library collections and catalogs, the change to the RDA rule adds transgender people to the project of information description and access while producing a useful story of one way that dominant systems can be resisted and changed: deliberately and slowly, by the people who administer them, one rule at a time.

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Note

1. Library of Congress Name Authority File, s.v. "Big Freedia," accessed July 11, 2018, id.loc.gov/authorities/names/no2013076308.

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Excerpts from *The Dawn of the Bad Trans Women: Stories, Fragments, and Lives of My Transgender Generation*

PORPORA MARCASCIANO

Translated by SERENA BASSI

Excerpts from *L'aurora delle trans cattive: Storie, sguardi e vissuti della mia generazione transgender* (*The Dawn of the Bad Trans Women: Stories, Fragments, and Lives of My Transgender Generation*), by Porpora Marcasciano. Rome: Alegre, 2018, 25–32, 101–2, 171–74.

Translator's Note

In June 2018, a long-awaited (re)translation of Mario Mieli's classic *Elementi di critica omosessuale*—a queer pushback against the seventies straight Left—came out for the Anglo-American market with the title *Towards a Gay Communism*. In February of the same year, italo-queer counter-publics had excitedly greeted the publication of Porpora Marcasciano's *L'aurora delle trans cattive* (*The Dawn of the Bad Trans Women*), a radical critique of contemporary assimilationist trans politics. In the 1970s, Marcasciano and Mieli were two key figures of the Gay Liberation movement, a theoretically sophisticated and lively chapter of the Italian radical Students and Workers movement that has been virtually ignored by historians of LGBT movements and twentieth-century Italy alike. After she came out as transgender in the 1980s, Marcasciano went on to become a tireless campaigner for trans rights and one of today's most beloved queer public intellectuals. Mieli's and Marcasciano's books have a lot in common in spite of the forty-one years that separate them: they both intersperse accounts of their own lives with social, cultural, and political analysis; they both humorously

deploy a rhetoricity that borrows from underground queer slang to put forward a lucid political critique; and, most important, they are both motivated by a radical vision of queer politics as an alternative way of structuring society.

But the two books are also different in some important ways. First, Marcasciano's story of the transformations that have invested national life in the past fifty years is told from the perspective of a trans woman and stems from a deliberate political choice to recover trans lives, placing them at the very center of our idea of social history. Second, as the book's subtitle suggests, this is as much one person's life as it is the biography of a transgender generation—the story of a marginal subculture and of its idea of society. Third, and perhaps most important, Marcasciano's book relates the past to the present: in an era of supposed transgender liberation through the attainment of legal rights and media visibility, the narrator addresses us directly, explicitly asking us to not forgo the legacy of the “bad trans women” who have built the movement. I chose to translate excerpts of *The Dawn of the Bad Trans Women* for *TSQ* to give anglophone readers a sense of the integral role that trans women have played in the queer movement in Italy from the very start, but also to help tell *another* story of transgender liberation and bypass the anglo-normativity of LGBTQ publishing, which typically leaves little room for queer texts in translation.

Chapter 1: The Dawn of our “Wonderful Adventure”

(. . .)

The first time I saw a trans woman—two, actually—was toward the end of the 1960s. I remember when it was that I met these two strange characters because it was during a family trip to Naples, when my family were shopping for my older sister's wedding, which took place in 1969. In the old Upim department store—a top shopping and cruising destination—I met them for the first time. And it was from up close. I was standing in line at the checkout with my family when one of the heavy doors opened—suddenly and lightly—as if it weighed nothing at all. The door was being delicately and gently pushed open by two peculiar maidens, who greeted the shoppers and shrieked: “Good morning. . . . Here we come, the variety show stars!” Slender, totally blonde, extra tight pants, heels so high they could reach the stars—the same stars they *knew* they were. Then my sister pulled me toward her and whispered in my ear, in a knowing tone, “They are men, they are men!” The girls heard and, as they passed us, they turned to my sister and said in Neapolitan dialect: “*Ue' ue' peccere, que r'e . . . nun te fai capace!* (“Hey, little one . . . what's wrong? Are you not down with it?”). And it was hard to “be down with it,” when we just had no tools to make sense of those two. According to common sense, they just didn't make *any* sense. They defied social logics entirely and did not fit within any given cultural model.

(. . .)

Pino had been talking to me about the *femminielli* and their rituals for a while, but I was fairly indifferent to his stories. One night he came to pick me up, announcing that we had been invited to a wedding between *femminielli*. I was not there for the ceremony itself, but I did go to the flamboyant banquet that followed it. The celebration was attended by about thirty people, many of whom were transvestites. Pino and I were some of the first people to get to the pizzeria, which meant I had the honor of being there for the entire ritual. Guests arrived, handed over their gifts and greeted the bride profusely and theatrically, who was wearing a striking white dress. When we arrived, she greeted Pino loudly: “The Professor is here! Good evening Professor, it is our pleasure!” Then she turned to me: “Little one, pass me the glass. Oh Virgin Mary! She is so beautiful this little one, she really is a woman, a *little* woman, ‘a *femminiella*!”

The only thing I remember about that night was how impatient I was. I wanted to run away from that strange scene, a hilarious yet foreign spectacle. Once again, the deeper meaning of what I had witnessed was hard for me to capture and comprehend. Clearly, like in all beautiful tales, my relationship with the *femminielli* was only starting then. A few years after, my relationship with Valerie and Antonella—‘a *Merdaiola*—gave me the instruments I needed to better understand something within me that I was struggling to bring into focus. The *Merdaiola* (I am using the nickname with which she was best known in the *femminielli* community, because it is the one that suited her best and because it was the most beautiful) introduced me to the wonderful world of the *femminielli*, which had already started changing then. It was transforming into something else. The little, contained, ancient world of the *femminielli* was already being replaced by another world—an oversized, postmodern world. You could say that replacement was a move away from the *femminiella* to the category of the trans woman—but also, I guess, from the *femminiella* to the cis gay man.

I let that world seduce me. I immersed myself in it. I let myself travel toward that new world like Alice in my own Wonderland. Initially, I was afraid of upsetting an ancient reorder of things, so I tiptoed my way into that world, holding a lantern and observing in silence. Just like all the other “worlds apart” (the worlds of those who were excluded from society and separated off from reality), it was not so much other people who pushed the *femminielle* out; it was they who consciously separated from the mainstream world. The reason for that is obvious, really: the walls and borders between our world and mainstream society were defensive; we raised those walls to protect our territory—the only place where we could survive and not break. I then started getting to know, respect, share the codes and rules of that world. I was starting to grasp its structure and interpret the gestures of its inhabitants. I slowly started to communicate with their language, a slang made out of words, sayings, gestures, rhymes that normal people

would not understand. All the inhabitants of that fairyland had their own nicknames, which made them unique. Nonetheless, they'd all rather celebrate their name day than their birthday. On their name day, they would all celebrate the saint whose name was on their birth certificate and on their ID: Ciro, Gennaro, Antonio, Giuseppe, Raffaele. To this day, *femminielli* communities continue to keep their code unaltered, referring to themselves with male pronouns in certain situations and female pronouns in others.

I can still remember the day I was “baptized.” It was a true initiation ritual, spontaneously put together and orchestrated by my new housemate, *Merdaiola*, who moved in with me and stayed for two years. Those two years turned out to be an essential school of life for me. About ten Neapolitan *femminielli* who lived in Rome were invited to our home for coffee, which in Naples is a symbol for friendship. The ceremony, which began in the early afternoon, went on until late at night and ended with an opulent ragout-based dinner. During the long, languid afternoon, the baptism ceremony attendees talked about me as the new arrival—making comments and sharing impressions, advice, and recommendations as to what aesthetic and surgical transformations I may need. Throughout the afternoon, Sasà, also known as Messalina, slowly combed my hair and did my makeup. This routine took hours, as we kept drinking coffee—a lot of coffee—as if it was water. Every so often, Messalina would take a few steps back to take a good look at me. Really, she was looking at her work of art, as she was sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes.

I must confess that the result was amazing, I hardly recognized myself in that fabulous reflection I saw in the mirror. . . . *O' miracolo!* I was amused and fascinated as I looked at that new version of me, so much more similar to what I always was in my dreams. In those moments, I felt for the first time that my *trans/formation* was not just possible but, likely, doable. I moved, in a clumsily self-conscious way, among those ladies whose *trans/formation* was much farther along than mine.

The attendees to my initiation ceremony were not sure about one thing: my name. It didn't work, it just didn't work, according to them. So they transformed it into more accessible versions: Porpa, Porpitiello, Polverina or Spolverina. I was center stage, and on the sides they were all chatting and gossiping. We spent that afternoon talking about the trans women we knew at a point in time when we were setting out to conquer the world. At that point, our world was finally coming in from the cold and we were excited. That pushed us to think, speak and act, and it felt like time was never enough for all the ideas we had.

In that smoky room where the air was thick with hair spray and the scent of caffeine, we told each other stories, legends really, about the women in our community. There was that story about Saionara, who went to Florence to Dr. Luccioli

to get a nose job, but it didn't turn out as well as Miss Seven Evenings's, because Saionara had had it done twenty times already, and at that point there was nothing left for the doctor to work with. Because Miss Seven Evenings was a lot younger, her face looked like Carrara marble yet to be sculpted, which was why we all looked up to her. Another one, Muscella, had had so much work done that it became a financial investment of sorts. She was much cleverer than all of us and went to London to the best gender-reassignment doctor in Europe, but she'd had to take out a loan from a loan shark. Another story was about La Scatulara, who, two months after her op in Casablanca, opened her window one morning and began shouting that she had finally reached an orgasm with her newly acquired vagina: "You can come with it! You can come with it! I came so hard, my cunt is the best!" She was so excited that her girlfriends thought she was going mad and, kindly and understandingly, called up an ambulance for her. Messalina, who had her op done in England, was far more composed and, with no yelling, showed her vagina by appointment to all her acquaintances. All she asked of her attentive observers was that they go and spread the gospel—that is, tell everyone how perfect her "cunt to die for" was. I remember very well when she came over to ours for a visit with her mum and her handsome brother. She was lying on my bed showing off her catheters and vaginal dilators, as she explained what it would all look like eventually, much to everyone's excitement. Messalina's mum was waxing lyrical about her daughter while frequently inviting her son, who was trying to feel us girls up, to leave the room because this was "a woman thing." La Pechinese had even organized a huge party that would culminate in a public viewing of her new vagina, with hundreds of invitees. Those were extravagant but ancient rituals that brought the community together and held our world together. Barbara—poor girl!—had no time to enjoy her new vagina, because soon after her op she was killed. Some say by a lover who went mad because of the huge physical transformation of his favorite girl. Others say it was a burglary.

In order to understand and interpret that fantastic world (its language, codes and rituals) that ran parallel to that of normal people, you needed the right tools. I had found a secret passage in and I was delving deeper each day, learning new tricks with much joy and excitement. Gradually, I was learning the vocabulary, the turns of phrase, the gestures, the numeric codes and all the other ways with which the *femminielli* endowed that fabulous parallel world with meaning.

Twenty-one was what we called ourselves, because in the Neapolitan *tombola* it stands for "woman," while *seventy-one*, also known as *totore*, meant "man." In our jargon, butch lesbians were *a' totore*. People who were a bit slow and didn't quite get it were *twenty-three*. *Forty-four* was jail, and you could use it for people who were inside. *Fourteen* was the drunkard and *sixteen* was the ass (*'o vascio*), while *twenty-nine* stood for the phallus.

Chapter 3: Trans Boheme

(. . .)

For years we'd say "I *do* trans" to mean "I do sex work." Prostitution was so enmeshed and entrenched in the trans experience that just mentioning the word would automatically make you think of sex work, and the other way around. So the exact meaning of *I do trans* was "all that we were allowed to do and be"; it implicitly referred to what was reserved for us—and yet not provided for nor given to us—for our survival and our resistance. Prostitution was the foundation of our existence; everything else about the trans experience revolved around it. Prostitution was work, vocation, theater and drama, the means *and* the end, a ritual, a rule, our mark. It was our identifying mark. For us, prostitution was a place and it became the way we organized time, even though it remained a non-place entrenched in unofficial time. For a trans woman, living without selling sex was unthinkable. This was true in Italy as it was in many other parts of the world. Few of us recognized how crucial and useful prostitution was. Trans women more frequently thought of it as an irreversible sentence—an ancient imperative that you could only accept. Nonetheless and in spite of it all, the fabulous ladies had transformed that sentence into an opportunity for an extraordinary performance. And with that performance, they were able to convey their own pride at being trans.

We need to remember that there never had been trans visibility before trans sex work, at least if we understand visibility in a collective sense, as a commons. Understood as a collective experience, visibility can transform a marginal identity into a recognizable and intelligible category of human experience. Those were the years when the trans female experience and prostitution became intertwined for the first time—through new forms and new modes. It may seem ridiculous today—unacceptable even—but then trans recognition happened *through* and *because of* prostitution. People understood—and unfortunately assumed—that the place and the time to meet trans women was the night, under the proverbial lamppost. Because at the start they were few, those few were a novelty, and they became legendary right away. You'd go to see them as you would the Winged Victory of Samothrace or the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, with admiring excitement. But by day, that feeling would be repressed, turning into contempt. In the years of their debut in Italian society, trans sex workers were nestled in the cityscape like beautiful monuments—completely at one with the dramatic scenery. In Rome, in Via Veneto, Porta Pia, Caracalla; in Florence, on the Arno riverbank; on the *belvedere* in Corso Vittorio, in Naples; in Sempione park in Milan and in Turin, by the Valentino palace and off the main street, Via Po.'

As I drew nearer to them and my heart started to beat faster, I would see the figures of those wonderful creatures take shape from afar. That was the world where I met many girlfriends with whom I would later euphorically bond. (. . .)

All many of us did during the day was wait for the night so we could go to *that* place—the “corner” or “the lounge” as we called it. For all of us, the street was the most familiar environment, the most comfortable, the place where we felt we truly belonged. Even though it was outdoors and public, it felt like the most private and personal place. Between the girls there was closeness, intimacy, and solidarity. And it could not be any other way, because our world existed outside social impositions and rules. None of us would even dream of crossing the fence that had been built all around us to separate us from the rest of the world. As one of the characters in *Priscilla* says: “I don’t know if that ugly wall has been put there to stop us getting out and isolate us, or to stop them getting in so that we stay safe.” Our world may have been walled off from the rest of society, but within those narrow confines we could find far more solidarity, political consciousness, and sense of belonging than is available to trans people today. Today’s extreme individualism encourages people to place one’s own transition at the center of the universe, while obsessively remarking how entirely normal transitioning is. The world of trans women as we knew it was miles apart. It was something of a commons.

Chapter 5: MIT

The first meetings of the Movimento Italiano Transessuali were rather eccentric and dominated by the elder trans women. These women were matriarchs who seemed to be entitled to whatever they wanted and could get away with pretty much anything. They practiced “the honest profession” whenever and wherever they wanted, without having to account to anyone. (. . .) Antonellona “the Buildress” was always around. She was a former boxer and usually wore a tight (pink or pastel blue, her favorite colors) top that highlighted her massive build. She was infamous for her brute force, which would explode unexpectedly, abruptly—a way for her to exercise her power in the community. Those outbursts of anger were Antonellona’s trademark. She was one of the first trans women I remember who was a parent. She had a daughter who would boast to her classmates: “My dad has tits, my dad has tits!” For that reason, one day the Buildress was called in by the School’s Board of Trustees, who wanted to find out exactly what was going on.

It was the Buildress who got me signed up for the MIT steering committee. That meeting was, as always, loud and charged, the air full of cigarette smoke. I was sitting quietly in my corner with Marilina, Antonia, Fabiola, and Lucrezia, my closest girlfriends. I remember that at one point I very shyly intervened in the discussion: I spoke instinctively and I kept it short. I hadn’t even quite finished my sentence when the Buildress came up to me and faced me, with her hands on her hips, looking like a sugar pot, and staring at me intensely. I was suddenly overwhelmed by the fear that she would slap me right in my face, and my stomach churned. Instead, in a decisive and authoritative tone she asked all the other girls

to be quiet: “You girls all shut up now, I like how this young lady talks. What’s your name? Porpora! What the fuck is that? She’s called Porpora, check *her* out! Let me hear you talk some more!” I wanted to disappear, I’d turned red and orange out of embarrassment. I did not know what to say anymore, I had suddenly forgotten what I had said earlier on, too. The Buildress kept shouting in my face: “Come on, talk!” Then she turned to Roberta Franciolini, who was then the Chair of MIT in the Lazio region: “Robè, this girl knows how to talk, we have to give her a role in MIT.” Roberta did not have to hear that twice and, before I had even had a chance to say what I thought, she had my life all planned out for the next few months.

(. . .)

Another time Manuela “the Pussy,” who had recently had a boob job done, wanted to show it to everyone, show it off even. She started walking up and down the room excitedly, with the straps of her dress purposely loosened and her sexy body on display. She moved past the other girls, acting full of herself and cocky. The third time that Claudia Schiffer look-alike walked up, Big Deborah, who was sitting with the girls for the meeting, punched her in the face from her seat. She punched her with such force that the Pussy landed on the other side of the room. After the punch, Big Deborah rubbed her hands together and said: “Will she please just fuck off now, I have had tits for fifteen years!”

Our meetings went on, rowdy, loud and smoke filled as they were. A recurrent topic of discussion was our relationship to lawyers who had to defend us in court. Today, lawyers who work with transgender people deal with legally changing names, filing for new documents or with the recognitions of similar rights. Back then, lawyers who dealt with trans issues mostly worked on releasing a trans woman from jail who had been arrested for obscenity or for insulting a public official. The latter was the most frequent trans crime, even if it was rarely actually committed.

(. . .)

Not much is left now of the first years of MIT: a few worn-out documents, manifestos, meeting minutes, and many memories of the witnesses who survived up to now. Our life was hard and ruthless; the effects were visible both in our bodies and in our minds. Few of us managed to dodge the bigger obstacles and get to today in one piece. The “black wave” of heroin and AIDS took a devastating toll among trans women and other minorities. In the mid-eighties, more and more of my girlfriends had that absent look that spells out addiction. We no longer focused on our body, we focused on destroying it. Because of drug addiction, tricks, deals, and scams became the defining traits of our spaces. The circulation through underground markets of large heroin consignments (which I maintain was a planned political maneuver) hit the vulnerable and the dreamers among us, bringing the cultural and sexual revolution of the previous years to a sudden halt.

The Value of Thinking Intersex Otherwise

MERIDITH KRUSE

Intersex Matters: Biomedical Embodiment, Gender Regulation, and Transnational Activism

David A. Rubin

Albany: SUNY Press, 2017. 211 pp.

Across *Intersex Matters* David A. Rubin calls on a wide range of parties—including medical practitioners and feminist scholars, as well as human rights activists and everyday people—to upend their habitual modes of perception and “think intersex otherwise” to enact a range of valuable ethical and political goals. Acknowledging the term is contested, Rubin defines *intersex* in their introduction as “people born with anatomies that defy received understandings of the nature of sexual difference” (1). Thus, in contrast to the common medical tendency to view intersex as a biological abnormality fixable via surgical normalization, and departing from a widespread scholarly view of intersex as a peripheral issue only of concern to a small group of minorities, Rubin gives sustained attention to the ways “intersex lives, bodies, narratives, theories, and activism materialize and become meaningful” (4). This alternative approach enables Rubin to productively revise a host of key concepts, including embodiment, racialized gender, sexuality, health, normality, and human rights. Rubin not only illustrates the central role played by the medicalization of intersex in the formation of the sex/gender distinction but also shows how thinking differently (i.e., genealogically, intersectionally, trans-nationally) about intersex can yield a valuable reworking of many of the core terms within Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS).

In their first chapter, “‘An Unnamed Blank That Craved a Name’: A Genealogy of Intersex as Gender,” Rubin establishes the book’s genealogical and

theoretical framework by excavating an account of intersexuality's underappreciated role in the production of gender as a concept in Western biomedicine and feminism (16). Following Foucault, Rubin clarifies that genealogy opposes itself to history as a search for origins and instead focuses on "conditions of emergence and force relations that shape diverse and discontinuous embodied histories" (21). As an analysis of the will-to-knowledge, Rubin astutely notes that the method of genealogy is particularly valuable to oppositional fields such as WGSS as it makes intelligible the buried exclusions by which dominant historical formations constitute themselves.

In this first chapter Rubin specifically traces how the psycho-endocrinologist John Money, via his biomedical research at Harvard in the 1950s, created the notion of "gender role" (masculine and feminine gender as distinct from sex and as something capable of being socially constructed) to deal with the unruly material heterogeneity of intersex bodies. Linger over a paragraph from Money's "Lexical History and Constructionist Ideology of Gender," Rubin keenly observes that, "The 'unnamed blank that craved a name' to which Money refers in this passage can be read as a displacement of the biological instability exposed by intersexuality. . . . Money used gender role to name and thereby semantically fill (or cover over) the void left by sex's lack of conceptual and referential unity" (33). Rubin shows, then, that decades prior to Judith Butler's radical reversal of the sex/gender distinction in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Money presumed (albeit for normalizing purposes) that socially constructed gender could organize sex. Thus, rather than continue to see intersex as overdetermined by the sex/gender differentiation, Rubin provocatively argues that we should reverse this view given that, historically speaking, intersexuality actually "preceded and inaugurated what we would today call the sex/gender distinction" (22).

In a fascinating twist, Rubin subsequently points out that second-wave feminists such as British sociologist Ann Oakley drew directly on Money's sex/gender distinction and his idea of gender as a social construct in the 1970s to counter the patriarchal notion "anatomy is destiny." In doing so, however, these early feminists failed to acknowledge the foundational exclusions of Money's notion of gender and often inadvertently reified the conservative idea that binary sex forms a preexisting, biological foundation for cultural expressions of gender. It is precisely this assumption that later feminists, such as Kessler, Fausto-Sterling, and Butler, will upend by demonstrating, in various ways, how the cultural view of sexual dimorphism as a natural ideal *distorts* our reading of the actual biological diversity of sex while simultaneously masking this move. Extending this insight, Rubin makes the powerful claim that it is therefore important to view gender as "a historically and geopolitically situated technology of subjectification and subjection whose intelligibility as a binary system is contingent not only on the erasure of

the racializations of sexual dimorphism in Western science and culture but also on yet *another* erasure: of the medicalization of intersex, trans, and gender non-confirming subjects” (22).

In their second chapter, “Intersex Trouble in Feminist Studies,” Rubin focuses directly on the past two decades of feminist and queer scholarship on intersex. Here Rubin argues that queer feminist methods of deconstruction, exemplified by Kessler, Fausto-Sterling, and Butler, should be valued for their ability to apprehend the uncertainties intersex bodies provoke, productively rethink sex/gender and nature/culture distinctions, and interrupt heteronormativity’s equation of genitalia with sex and gender (16). However, in addition to praising these authors, Rubin shows how their scholarship can fetishize intersex alterity and entrench intersex exceptionalism in ways that mirror similar problems in some contemporary scholarship. As a result, Rubin encourages a more nuanced approach to Kessler, Fausto-Sterling, and Butler’s work that can appreciate its poststructuralist tools while taking care to avoid replicating the all-too-common tendency toward intersex essentialism and fetishization.

In chapter three, “‘Stigma and Trauma, Not Gender’: A Genealogy of US Intersex Activism,” Rubin traces a genealogy of the intersex movement in the United States and rethinks intersex critiques of WGSS, queer theory, and feminist scholarship. In particular, Rubin revisits the bold decision of US-based intersex scholars and activists such as Chase, Dreger, Herndon, Koyama, Rosario, and Karkazis to argue, contra queer feminist scholars and in line with the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), that intersex is a matter of “stigma and trauma, not gender.” Analyzing this move, Rubin contends that in making this claim, intersex activists and scholars problematically erase the genealogical links to the medicalization of intersex and also figure the materiality of intersex experience as somehow divorced from gender regulation and other manifestations of biopower (17). Departing from these scholars, Rubin contends that, rather than dismiss feminist and queer theoretical tools, such work should be valued for its capacious interpretive resources, which enable us to situate the medicalization of intersex and activist responses in relation to biopolitics and geopolitics as well as recognize the limitations of neo-liberal models of subjectivity and political reform for reimagining intersex.

Rubin’s fourth chapter, “Provincializing Intersex: Transnational Intersex Activism, Human Rights, and Body Politics,” extends and deepens the genealogy of intersex activism initiated in chapter three. In this section Rubin now explores how debates about intersex are “shaped, challenged, and interrupted by geopolitical power relationships, global activism, and transnational feminism” (17). To do so, Rubin examines two key events in the history of intersex activism: (1) ISNA’s failed attempt to lobby for the inclusion of unnecessary intersex surgeries in the US Congress’s 1997 federal ban on female genital mutilation (FGM) and (2)

ISNA's influence on two 1999 decisions by the Constitutional Court of Colombia to revise the definition of informed consent and limit doctors' ability to perform normalizing surgeries (17). In their analyses of these events, Rubin pays special attention to how human-rights discourse, US imperialism, biopolitics, and neoliberalism shape the locational politics of intersex activist projects situated in specific national contexts. Importantly and provocatively, Rubin contends that the transnational regulation of sexed bodies occurs not only through the globalization of Western biomedical models of sex/gender normativity but also through the circulation of human-rights discourse and imposition of US neoliberal democratic frames of subjectivity. Here Rubin calls on human rights activists to revise their sense of intersex by reflecting on how a juridical frame, while often touted as inherently liberating, can, in fact, produce regulatory effects that enhance other repressive geopolitical and biopolitical measures. Rubin concludes this chapter by highlighting the admirable work of intersex activists and scholars in Colombia and other nations who have successfully contested "the US-centrism, unmarked whiteness, and imperialism of western/global northern intersex human rights campaigns" (18).

The final chapter of *Intersex Matters*, "Intersectionality and Intersex in Transnational Times," explores the historically nonexistent relationship between the feminist paradigm of intersectionality and the field of intersex studies. Here Rubin notes two unfortunate trends: intersectional scholarship often fails to address how intersex might reconfigure the grounding presuppositions of intersectionality as a theoretical framework, while intersex studies rarely account for the role of racialized gender, nation, and sexuality in the medical and social management of intersex in specific geopolitical locations (18). To address both gaps, Rubin considers how intersectional perspectives can help "expand, complexify, and refine" our sense of intersex while, at the same time, intersex might spark a "rethinking of the premises of intersectionality" (18). Working toward these two goals, Rubin conducts a discursive analysis of media representations and scholarly and activist accounts of South African professional runner Caster Semenya. Here Rubin shows the contestations over Semenya's story were as much about "racialized gender and sexuality, imperial history, and national context" as they were about intersex and the politics of sex and gender (18). For this reason, Rubin argues that Semenya's story was never entirely her own but rather became a vehicle for the appropriative agendas of Western and non-Western elites, which were both complicit in the silencing of subaltern speech.

Rubin concludes their book with an important reflection appropriately titled "Thinking Intersex Otherwise: Disorders of Sex Development, Social Justice, and the Ethics of Uncertainty." In this last section Rubin ruminates on the 2005 proposal by a coalition of Western-trained medical experts and activists to

rename intersex conditions with the acronym DSD, for “disorders of sexual development.” While the medical community has largely embraced DSD terminology, some activists and scholars have raised concerns over its political and ethical implications. Rubin helpfully situates this debate within the context of (1) contemporary reterritorializations of empire, (2) processes of neoliberal restructuring, and (3) the retooling of biopolitical technologies of corporeal regulation (18). This enables Rubin to demonstrate how DSD nomenclature reinforces a “medico-scientific attempt to pin meanings and bodies down and to control and obscure the uncertainties about embodiment that intersex bodies expose” (18). To counter this process Rubin proposes an “ethics of uncertainty” as a vital tool for challenging the medicalization of people of atypical sex and for thinking intersex otherwise. Thus, even in this final chapter, we find Rubin not only identifying problematic pathways but also offering constructive resources for forging alternative, more ethical, routes. Importantly, following Derrida, ethics is linked here to making the world more hospitable for “people whose anatomies call intersexist, heteronormative, masculinist, transphobic, white supremacist, and ableist technologies of gender regulation into question” (151). Rubin emphasizes that enacting such ethics will require ongoing critical reevaluation of the politics of embodiment on both local and global levels as well as learning “to be open to the boundless, the incalculable, and the uncertain” (152). While some might dismiss such a proposal as merely an abstract, theoretical ideal, Rubin’s impressive exemplification of such an ethics across the pages of their book proves otherwise and renders this text worthy of widespread engagement by scholars in trans*, intersex, women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, and beyond.

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Unweaving Colonial Frames, Restorying Indigenous Potentialities

MARK RIFKIN

Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory

Qwo-Li Driskill

Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016. xii + 212 pp.

One way of approaching the question of nonnormative Indigenous genders and sexualities on lands claimed by the United States would be to seek to document the presence of such identities for a variety of peoples, attending to the differences among them as well as the complexities of change (particularly in the wake of Euro-conquest). There are classic studies that do such work (e.g., Jacobs et al. 1997; Lang 1998; Roscoe 1998), but Qwo-Li Driskill's *Asegi Stories* does something else. While pointing to archival markers of the presence of what currently might be termed Two-Spirit people in Cherokee history, Driskill reaches beyond that project of documentation to explore possibilities for renarrating Cherokee pasts, presents, and futures within what they term an "*asegi* imaginary" (99). While the term *asegi* is a Cherokee word that most directly means "strange," Driskill observes, it is "being used by some Cherokees as a term similar to 'queer'" and can serve as a means of indexing and recalling "those stories rendered strange by colonial heteropatriarchy" (6), and Driskill uses the phrase *asegi aquadanto*, or "strange-hearted person," as a form of self-identification (4). Telling *asegi* stories involves marking and challenging the ways settler frameworks have sought to limit possibilities for Cherokee self-understanding and modes of relation, especially with respect to what can be characterized as forms of gender and sexuality. (Although, Driskill cautions, "One of the problems with some contemporary scholarship on 'gender' and 'sexuality' among Native people is often an assumption—unconscious or not—of the existence of these things we now call 'gender' and 'sexuality' in the

first place” [41–42].) The book offers a sustained critique of the ways colonial normativities have been imposed on Cherokee people and, conversely, the ways Cherokee people have sought to inhabit those norms, even if doing so served as a strategic means to protect Cherokee sovereignty. Driskill also powerfully explores potentials for restorying Cherokee peoplehood, historically and in the current moment, so as to increase capacities for engaging and affirming Cherokee modes of being and belonging that only appear “strange” from the perspective of colonially inscribed formations.

In this way, the book is of a piece with recent scholarship in trans studies that seeks to explore in expansive ways the genealogical, ideological, and institutional conditions of possibility for contemporary configurations of gendered violence. Dean Spade’s *Normal Life* (2015) and C. Riley Snorton’s *Black on Both Sides* (2017) come to mind as the kinds of arguments with which Driskill’s work implicitly is in dialogue. Those studies move outside of trans identity as such to address how technologies of gender making and enforcement broadly figured are constituted through the layered and crosscutting matrices of extant administrative networks and procedures (Spade) and the enfleshment of black people as fungible potentiality through which to make possible white becoming (Snorton). Driskill insists on the importance of attending to settler colonialism as a central formation of contemporary power, arguing, “Two-Spirit critiques point to queer [and also, implicitly, trans] studies’ responsibility to examine ongoing colonialism, genocide, survival, and resistance of Native nations and peoples as well as radically engage with issues of gender and sexuality” (37). Native peoples cannot simply be added to analyses that themselves do not explicitly engage with settlement and the possibilities for Indigenous self-determination, and the first chapter offers an analysis of the ways contemporary queer studies either marginalizes Native peoples or appends them to conceptual and political itineraries that have little to do with Indigenous self-understandings and horizons of collective imagination and struggle. Reciprocally, Driskill consistently marks the ways that forms of heterogendered violence are crucial to understanding what settler colonialism is and how it functions, observing, “What scholars, activists, and artists are arguing is that homophobia, heterosexism, misogyny, and gender binaries are central to the invasion and occupation of Indigenous lands and the marginalization, genocide, and oppression of Indigenous people. Resistance, then, must centralize gender and sexuality as a central site of radical social transformation” (10–11).

Chapters 2 and 3 address such histories of Euro-American domination and Cherokee responses to it. Driskill offers an episodic discussion of Spanish and English colonial engagements with Cherokee people from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, highlighting how “within dominant European worldviews *all* Cherokees were characterized as gender-nonconforming and sexually deviant” in

ways that validated acts of aggression, murder, rape, enslavement, and the seizure of Cherokee territories (41): “Colonial heteropatriarchy maps gender and sexuality onto Indigenous bodies in order to find routes into and through our homelands” (89). Driskill then turns to Cherokee reactions to Euro-American “civilization” efforts in the pre-removal period—the first decades of the nineteenth century. Tracking changes in Cherokee political and economic formations that worked to centralize governance and institute patriarchal principles, Driskill shows how some Cherokees engaged in “a concerted effort to minimize Cherokee women’s centrality to Cherokee community and culture, [by] attempting to ‘normalize’ Cherokee gender, sexuality, family, and marriage customs to correspond with dominant Euro-American models” and by “adopting chattel slavery and Euro-American styles of nationhood and governance” (114). These discussions of Cherokee history shift focus from the recovery of heretofore unacknowledged kinds of persons—historical actors that could be characterized as queer or trans—to the colonial politics of normativity mobilized against all Native people(s), that target Indigenous social systems as dangerously deviant and that give rise to Native normativities, which seek to blunt the force of settler invasion by adopting dominant Euro-American ideologies of sexuality and gender.

The final two chapters, though, address how forms of *asegi* imagination vitally contribute to the survival and flourishing of Indigenous peoples. As Driskill notes in the Introduction, “While Two-Spirit critiques hold Native nations and people accountable for misogyny and homophobia, they simultaneously see Two-Spirit people and traditions as necessary—if not central—to national and decolonial struggles” (33). These last chapters further develop this claim through discussion of processes to “rebeautify and remake the erotic for all Cherokees” (137), exploration of the uses and abuses of notions of “tradition” in contemporary Cherokee discourses, and interviews with a range of Cherokees who identify as Two-Spirit or queer.

Overall, the book aims to increase the capacity to envision and realize sustaining Indigenous lifeworlds while marking the centrality of gendered violence in historical and continuing settler efforts to constrain, erase, and eliminate potentialities for Native being and becoming. As Driskill suggests, drawing on a recurring split-cane basket metaphor, “we have to unweave the strands of stories that have created the cultural memories we currently carry” (102). The concept of *asegi* provides a powerful touchstone for the intellectual value of Indigenous nonnormativities in telling alternative stories to those naturalized as the real in dominant heteropatriarchal formations. Although it does not explicitly offer a sustained engagement with scholarship in trans studies, then, *Asegi Stories* can contribute significantly to such work in its foregrounding of settler occupation, Indigenous self-determination, and the gendered matrices animating both.

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