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Trans Cultural Production

Special Issue Editors

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Introduction

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This issue of *TSQ* explores trans both in relation to and as a form of creative practice—a project that repeatedly brought the editorial team face-to-face with some fundamental questions. What does trans *look like*? Must it be apparent or easily legible? Through which strategies might we articulate the significance of the many ways culture makers explore and express issues of form, content, medium, technique, duration, reception, authenticity, and originality in relation to trans aesthetics or sensibilities? How should we approach the vexed politics of trans representation, with all the issues they raise about accuracy, inclusion, and accountability? How long a history can we imagine for what this issue of *TSQ* is calling “trans cultural production”? Gender expresses culture, and culture transforms the material world, including the materiality of our bodies; at what point, then, does it become analytically necessary to distinguish a particularly “transgender” creativity from a more pervasive drive to create cultural forms, including embodied selves? Who knows? We can’t say, after all, what dreams animated the artists who outlined their hands on cave walls by blowing pigment through hollow reeds.

The materials gathered here respond to these questions and open others, collectively embarking upon debate about the relationship of creativity to embodied experience in the contemporary world. One of our first editorial decisions was to focus on the present and the recent past, because we are currently witnessing an explosion of creative and critical work on and by trans subjects. It is too soon (and the phenomenon is too multiform and widespread) to venture a synthetic analysis of that work, but we can offer a few observations. First, we want to draw attention to a persistent tension between, on the one hand, the construction and representation of *individual* trans subjects and, on the other hand, concerns with making and representing trans *collectivities*. Second, we wish to stress the exciting range of divergent perspectives, methods, and priorities that are driving both practitioners and critics.

The bounded individual self is a cultural product of the modern West that has artifactual counterparts in the related creative forms of autobiography, portraiture, and the novel. One of the founding works of transgender cultural studies was Jay Prosser's 1998 *Second Skins*, which interpreted twentieth-century transsexual autobiographies as metaphors for and materializations of the narrative process of transition. Another was Susan Stryker's (1994) "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix," in which Stryker spoke back, in the first person, to the narrator of Mary Shelley's fictional autobiography. More recent literary scholarship suggests that the modern novel took shape in part through fictional autobiographies purporting to document the lives of people who transed gender (e.g., Saxton, Mance, and Edwards, forthcoming). In this view the narrative conventions that have dominated both subjectivity and fiction in the West since the eighteenth century have been entwined with representations of transgender experience—to the point that both the modern English-language story and the modern Anglophone self could be interpreted as inflected by trans cultural productions. If we understand modern Western modes of becoming trans as manifestations of a long cultural concern with self-creation and the resulting problem of interface between the individual and the collective, it makes sense that some of the foundational analyses of cultural production from a transgender-studies perspective drew so heavily on autobiography: the genre of autobiography takes the singularity of experience as its organizing principle and foregrounds the lone voice of its solitary self-creating subject. Yet at the same time, such narratives perform that voice's reach into the broader social world.

To take a classic instance, the 1968 paperback edition of Christine Jorgensen's autobiography (orig. published 1967) soon sold over 400,000 copies (Stryker 2000: ix). The proliferating story of that earnest trans self, told publicly and directly, contradicted widespread cultural ascriptions of "sex change" as an anticreative, nonreproductive cul-de-sac that doomed its practitioners to isolation if not social death. Jorgensen's autobiography and similar midcentury narratives drew on long cultural traditions of celebrating self-creation to create persuasive positive accounts of trans being. Such testaments to existence and survival helped to generate shared trans identity, community, and debate. In the visual arts, photographic portraiture mobilizes a similar gesture, and the photograph also played a central role in the cultural visibility of twentieth-century Western trans subjects. Indeed, many trans autobiographies include photographic illustrations. By the end of the century, trans and genderqueer photographers (e.g., Loren Cameron and Catherine Opie) were actively constructing an archive of affirmative images of themselves and their communities. An important contributor to this archive was Del LaGrace Volcano, whose more recent work is the subject of a new analysis by Eliza Steinbock in this issue.

While trans autobiographies are shaped by generic conventions that work to isolate the trans subject as a unique individual, trans photographic portraits often function as evidence of a particular person's physical presence. However, photography's indexical function places the trans body in a double bind: it must declare its visibility, but in doing so, it initiates the diagnostic gaze that demands that the temporal process of transition be legible on the body. Alongside the legacy of the Enlightenment investment in self-creation, then, both autobiographies and photographic portraits reflect the diagnostic texts and images that powerfully shaped much trans becoming in a mid-twentieth-century medicalized Western context.¹

While autobiography and photography remain major practices of trans cultural production, they have increasingly been joined by other concerns and modes. Self-creation and self-representation are not the whole story of trans cultural production. In this issue, filmmaker Jules Rosskam, curator Jordy Jones, and conceptual artist Tobaron Waxman describe their explorations of form as direct rejections of the dominant expectation that trans artists will depict trans bodies and lives in uncomplicated realist or narrative modes. If the tale of the intrepid individual transsexual autobiographer emerged as the dominant figure for transgender cultural production, that is perhaps because, as Joanne Meyerowitz (2002: 67) suggests, the genre of transsexual autobiography, with its narrative of individual struggle against adversity and for self-actualization, is particularly expressive of the values of late modernity in the United States. There are other histories one could tell. Meyerowitz's work details the collective development of support networks, community newspapers, and magazines in US trans communities from the 1950s onward. In Quebec, Viviane K. Namaste (2004, 2005) has documented histories of trans women's individual and collective labor in burlesque, vaudeville, and other entertainments that today are associated with street life, sex work, and low culture. These are not often recognized as sites of trans sociality and cultural production, aesthetic innovation, and political resilience. Such alternative narratives underscore that trans cultural production also takes place at the local level and in ephemeral forms less easily recuperated and less frequently archived than the (often sensationalist) autobiographical narrative. Subaltern cultural production of this sort may nonetheless participate in other economies, as is evidenced in this volume by the subtle transvaluation of symbolic and economic capital performed by photographs of *mujercito* sex workers analyzed by Susana Vargas Cervantes.

As both the autobiographer and the burlesque dancer know, to produce culture is to demand an audience. The externalization of experience in the form of a film, a dance, an artwork, a poem, or a video calls for an array of viewers and readers—likewise, the artful deployment of an ensemble number, a comic

anecdote, or an erotic thrill. Yet the distinction between the maker and the recipient or consumer of culture is not always clear. As Laura Horak discusses, the vernacular form of the DIY transition video has exploded to become what is arguably the first form of truly mass cultural production by trans subjects. Easily accessible via the Internet, the archive of these images and stories grows daily in a collective expression of trans subjects' presence, difference, and multiplicity.

Cultural production is not simply a euphemism for art. Naming the fact that culture is not native or natural, but is the product of human effort, brings attention to the struggles through which it takes shape. A culture results from the interplay of the political, economic, and historical factors that establish value—both in the everyday modes and in the official forms through which a society represents itself to itself. Transgender cultural production is not only evidence for and generative of collective discourse around individual experience and social relations; it is also affective and epistemological movement embedded in and expressive of the material conditions that support and limit our imaginations about who matters and what is possible. As it looks to the trans practices of artists and communities, this issue necessarily contends with the ways in which culture and meaning are made in relation (often a resistant relation) to the distribution of available conceptual and material resources. For instance, the YouTube videos Horak discusses may constitute a collective sense of trans embodiment and experience, but she shows that they are nonetheless inflected by race, class, and geography, a situation exacerbated by the fact that Internet access is neither free nor universal. Similarly, Kareem Khubchandani unpacks the complexities of *hijra* theatrical self-representation in a cultural context informed both by the colonialist fetishization of that gender/caste tradition and by the current funding classifications deployed by Western NGOs.

While there has been an emergence of cultural and aesthetic work by trans artists in the last quarter century, it would be naïve to cast this sudden international visibility in terms that are purely celebratory. Rather than simply lauding the amplitude and frequency of this production, we are compelled to ask what resistances and negotiations have made this amplitude possible and which continue to attempt to suppress or commodify it. How do culturally dominant fantasies and representations of trans people inform or impinge upon trans self-representation even as they facilitate entry? What modes of cultural disappearance and dehistoricization do we engage as trans individuals present their selves, their work, and their community as if for the very first time? A visible international trans community political debate is emerging, and it is fueled by contentions about how such different geographies and traditions relate to each other in their practices. These conversations are yielding both a wider range of texts and images created by trans producers and a new reconsideration of superficially “non-trans”

topics through a trans critical lens.² Increasingly, the questions demanded by transgender studies are being asked of areas that have not previously been understood in relation to gender and are compelling a wide reconsideration of both biopolitics and necropolitics.

In this issue readers will find essays on canonical texts, high art, popular culture, street performance, and DIY filmmaking. All of these speak from, of, and to trans experience, but they offer no one statement about what trans culture is or should be. We interpret this heterogeneity as evidence of a thriving field that far exceeds our capacity to survey in one journal issue. We make no claims to be comprehensive in our editorial selection but trust readers to receive this work as a partial selection from

a wide (and ever-growing) range of possibilities. Ultimately, we intend the essays in this volume to convey possible routes rather than a comprehensive map, gaps in the selection indicating potential rather than exclusion. We hope that the range of cultural forms and media will spur future production in addition to bringing different media into dialogue about issues of shared concern. This volume offers rich thinking about temporality and the relation of the present to the past (Crawford, Eastwood, Horak, Steinbock); questions of alliance and connection across difference (Cowan, Kupperts, Waxman, Käng); and especially the status of the body in cultural production. When bodies were physically present as part of the production, what were they doing? What sort of sign was the body when it was represented? What did it exclude and imply? Given the magnificent range of bodies, morphologies, and inhabitations, how could any selection do justice?

This issue's cover, Math Bass's 2013 sculpture *Where Two Become One* (fig. 1), offers one visual answer. In its simplicity, the sculpture speaks to many of the enabling problematics of representation and categorization that drive the current state of trans cultural production. It offers no immediately recognizable trans iconography, but its conceptual parameters imbue this seemingly simple work with transgender capacity (Getsy 2014). Consisting of concrete casts of the inside of two pairs of jeans, upended, this two-part sculpture is both representational and abstract. The upside-down bodily forms, truncated at midthigh and waist, focus the viewer's attention on the place where the legs meet. Yet these



Figure 1. Math Bass, *Where Two Become One*, 2013, cement, life size.
© 2014 Math Bass

forms offer no positive evidence of the sexed body, reminding us that anyone can wear jeans who can fit inside a pair (and the gender assigned to jeans may be disregarded in favor of a chosen fit). The sculptures materialize the open, indeterminate potentiality of the intimate space inside the jeans. Their forms index the spaces bodies once filled (or once could fill)—indeterminate and “concrete” at the same time. This work calls forth the body but does not depict it, instead materializing a space for bodies to be imagined.

The title of the work, *Where Two Become One*, refers both to the crotch as the join between two legs and to the relationship of these two truncated sculptures. Placed together, these two objects compel viewers to compare and contrast, searching for similarities and differences between these spaces of imagined (but not imaged) sexual signification and desire. In English we refer to pants or jeans using a collective noun—that is, we speak of a single “pair” of jeans, which are, like the bodies invoked but not depicted, always plural. Consequently, Bass’s economic visual pun reminds us that here we cannot conceive of the singular without its constitutional plurality. Upside down, this work compels us to face the crotch (where two become one) only to realize that we are given no evidence for the sexed body, nor given a body at all. Instead, these pairs are themselves paired into one work. Any one of these terms always implies its own multiplicity—just like the very different kinds of bodies that could wear the jeans from which these were cast. In this work, the singular is constituted by the capacity to be plural, by its invocation of the many bodies that could occupy the space into which the concrete was poured.³ These sculptures can encapsulate what many trans cultural producers demand: consideration of the democratic plurality of bodies and genders and attention to the potentially endless proliferation of imagination, accommodation, and desire that exists in ongoing intimacy with the body’s concrete material forms.

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As we began work on this special issue in November 2013, we hosted a public roundtable at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in which the coeditors, new media and performance artist Micha Cárdenas, and filmmaker Jules Rosskam discussed the present status and future prospects for trans cultural production. (The documentation of this event is available online on the website of the TSQ editorial office: lgbt.arizona.edu/tsq-main.) It was during that conversation and its Q&A that we realized how persistent questions of visibility and representation are, even while they are joined by other practices and avenues of inquiry. In response, we decided to include a range of different submission formats, opening the issue to critics, artists, and scholars alike. Full-length analytic

articles are complemented by shorter pieces: first-person accounts, polemical statements, notes from the field, and short essays. We felt it important to include at least a few contributions by makers to give a sense of the successes and struggles they have faced. These accounts vivify the historical and analytic discussions of trans cultural producers, keeping the urgency of these discussions present.

Four of our contributors mobilize divergent approaches to a trans poetics. Literary critics use the term *poetics* to refer not only to the theory of poetry but also to the ways in which the different aspects of any text converge to create effects on the reader. By extension, poetics can refer to the making of meaning through the manipulation of form and as such resonates powerfully with trans critical and embodied practices. Working with the colloquial phrase in which transsexuals who do not pass are said to be “read,” Alexander Eastwood raises methodological questions about historicist literary criticism’s limited utility for a trans reading practice. Eastwood brings these intradisciplinary debates into dialogue with two founding moves of trans representational politics: critiques of cis cultural critics’ “violent” deployment of trans figures and the injunction to proliferate visible genres of trans self-inscription (see Stone 1991; Namaste 1996). Reading fiction by Ralph Ellison and Tennessee Jones for their show of resonant affects rather than shared historical identities, Eastwood suggests that trans literary historiography may have less to gain by seeking the roots of an emergent tradition than by elaborating an affective poetics of reading.

Like Eastwood, Trace Peterson confronts the methodological and practical challenges of charting trans literary history, but while Eastwood rethinks reception in terms of readerly desire for affective connection across multiple/historical identity differentials, Peterson revisits and refuses literary studies’ hallowed distinction between close reading and biographical criticism. Peterson investigates the tangled roots of a US trans poetic aesthetic through an exploration of the work of three early practitioners: Samuel Ace, Max Wolfe Valerio, and kari edwards. She suggests that contending with trans erasure requires a con/textual historiography highlighting aesthetic and affective solutions to writing without tradition or social location. Toward that end, Peterson theorizes these practitioners’ similar poetic strategies for contending with biographical material, the habitability of a poetic “I,” and the inhabitation of genre.

Both Eastwood and Peterson engage with the binary logics and identitarian imperatives that continue to structure Western literary historiography but that trans lives and aesthetic practices frequently thwart or recalibrate, demonstrating both the affective and signifying labor of making a self and of making self in a work. In contrast, Petra Kupperts’s meditation on disability poetics disengages from literary critical concerns as well as from conventional identitarian boundaries on the self. Kupperts questions the extent to which any creative practitioner

must work in the absence of tradition and social location. Gently contesting conventional distinctions between nature and culture, cis and trans, disability and indigeneity, land and language, verse and body, criticism and creative writing, Kupperts's work mobilizes "the movement politics of trans," articulating a perceptual world predicated on confluence. What emerges is a hybrid poetic practice that does not seek roots but instead floats down the river, going with the flow of change.

The poetics of form and place, history and the way we remember change, are central to Lucas Crawford's "aesthetic transgenering" of Manhattan's High Line park. Crawford undertakes this transing in response to the way that widely circulated celebratory narratives of the neighborhood's gentrification abject the transsexual women who once worked and socialized in the neighborhood under its (prerenovation) shadow. Crawford blends discursive analysis of travel guides and blogs with autoethnography, original verse, and formal analysis of the park's design elements, performing his claim that "transgender embodiment is both poetic and architectural work, inasmuch as it is creative, spatial, transformative, discursive, and a matter of design." Like Peterson, Crawford insists that the erasure of transgender experience matters; like Kupperts, he emphasizes the generative interplay of material and textual creative forms and the potentially transformative effects of refusing to respect normative distinctions between different kinds of bodies.

Eliza Steinbock also explores an analogy between the trans body and an aesthetic medium in her examination of the significance of the negative in Del LaGrace Volcano's 2011 photographs collectively titled *Herm Body*. Steinbock interrogates the materiality of the photographic process—that is, the actual production and use of negatives to make prints—as a generative metaphor in Volcano's self-representation of herm's aging body. Situating Volcano's recent works in relation to the dubious history of medical representation of intersex people, Steinbock argues that Volcano shows how such negative traces can be productively restaged. Volcano's photographs do not shy away from difficult feelings but rather use them to ruminate on the possibility of a representation of the trans body that speaks to its complex histories.

In an interview with Dominic Johnson, contemporary conceptual artist Tobaron Waxman notes the widespread expectation that trans artists will in fact represent trans bodies, and especially their own. Complicating that expectation has been immensely generative for Waxman's practice, much of which uses body-based media (e.g., hair, skin, the human voice) to explore issues of separation and boundary maintenance that are pertinent not only to the gender binary but to racial, religious, and national identities.

Kareem Khubchandani also explores the activist potential of creative refusals to respect normative distinction in his account of *Because We Have a Voice Too*, a play presented at Bangalore's Queer Pride celebrations in 2012. In this instance, street performers staged solidarity between *hijras* and transmen who unite across lines of gender identity, class, and caste in opposition to their common oppressors: NGOs, foreign funders ignorant of the lived conditions with which transgender people contend, local law enforcement, and sexually predatory cismen. Though *hijras* and transmen are imagined in different relations to Indian indigeneity and face different mechanisms of exclusion from middle-class employment, both struggle to survive in a system that devalues people "who identify as women [or] who are perceived to be women." Khubchandani's brief analysis shows how a piece of political theater can propose and enact a shared transgender identity for the purposes of resistance.

Political theater mixes with fiction in T. L. Cowan's layered theorization of the "transfeminist kill/joy." Cowan interrogates the persistence of wishes for trans-excluding feminist happiness by attending to their interruption through expressions of rage and love in the fiction of Ryka Aoki, performance art by Mirha-Soleil Ross, and a cabaret act by the Fully Functional Cabaret, a trans women's performance collective. Highlighting the articulation of feminist transmisogyny with persistent racism and sex-worker stigma, Cowan reads the transfeminist kill/joy as political aesthetic and transformative resistance in several registers. Cowan draws on recent work in affect theory as well as longer histories of womanist-/feminist-of-color critique to argue that these transfeminist artists interrupt feminist feelings of conviviality and pleasure predicated on their exclusion while they also engage in the reconstructive and reparative praxis Chela Sandoval terms "a hermeneutics of love."

Khubchandani and Cowan overlap in offering a trans vision of a feminist solidarity that rests neither on shared gender identity nor on the exclusion of difference. Despite their shared activist orientation toward art making, where Khubchandani sees political potential in a collective transgender identity gathered under the queer umbrella, Cowan both theorizes and amplifies critiques made by Aoki, Ross, Red Durkin, Sara Ahmed, and others to highlight specific political violences of whorephobia, racism, transmisogyny, and classism that have subtended and arguably enabled the appearance of queer feminist collectivities.

The earliest transsexual critique of queer/feminist instrumentalization of trans figures is likely Namaste's 1996 challenge to queer theory's "tragic misreading" of the race, class, trans, and sex-work politics at play in the death of Latina trans sex worker Venus Extravaganza. While that critique has been extended and reiterated by more activists, artists, and scholars than could be named here (including Eastwood in this issue), in substantial ways it seems to be unregistered

by what Jasbir Puar (1996) aptly characterized as the homonormativity of US queer theory.⁴ Distancing her analysis from Anglo–North American taxonomies, both activist and juridico-clinical, of transgender, Susana Vargas Cervantes describes photographs of Mexican *mujercitos* drawn from sensational journalism, showing how these images document a process of subject formation that does not depend on the kind of coherent alignment of gender, sexual identity, and practice conventional in North American accounts of the performative self. Rather, she suggests that *mujercito* images record the way that Mexican selves come into being in a pigmentocratic and socially stratified cultural context. Further, Vargas Cervantes suggests that through images filled with signifiers of class and skin color privilege, *mujercito* sex workers perform the signifying work that affectively registers the desirability and possibility of *mujercito* lives.

Dredge Byung'chu Käng describes the K-pop cover-dance scene in Bangkok's gay bars, showing how Thai "sissies" (*tut*) embody an aspirational pan-Asian identity by adopting a specifically Korean femininity. Carefully situating *tut* cover dancers both in the local genderscape and in the larger socioeconomic order, Käng insists that dancing a national culture is as significant as embodying a gender and shows us in detail how a particular kind of trans gender performance is also a performance of race and nation. Like Vargas Cervantes's account of *mujercito* photographs, Käng's essay demonstrates the ways in which marginal and popular cultural fields are traversed and striated by collective performances that are both libidinal modes of self-inscription and self-actualization and trans-cultural movements of identification across difference.

Filmmaker Jules Rosskam also explores the margins of popular culture in a piece considering nonnormative form. Rosskam's most recent film refuses narrative closure, linear time, and unified character development—which in turn has led to its confused rejection by the major LGBT film festivals. Rosskam takes aim at the dominance of narrative and autobiography in trans culture, arguing that conventional cinematic forms are inadequate to capture the open-ended possibilities of trans lives and relationships and pointing to their dominance as an aesthetic restriction on an audience's ability to imagine trans experience in a more open-ended and capacious way.

In contrast, Laura Horak argues for the potency and efficacy of the highly conventional autobiographical transition narratives that circulate on YouTube. Arguably the most widespread form of trans cultural production in terms of the sheer numbers of makers and viewers involved, the populist form of the YouTube vlog has become a central form of cultural production by and for trans youth. While Rosskam explores experimental structures to free trans representation from a contradictory narrative structure that demands singularity, Horak

contends that the repetitive form in these video diaries of transition encourages trans youth literally to see themselves as part of a vast community.

The issue concludes with the past. In our “Archives” section, we offer an excerpt from a 2001 interview with San Francisco–based artist and activist Jordy Jones, whose curatorial vision was influential in shaping a vision of trans art in the 1990s and into the new millennium. While it is primarily a snapshot of a particular place and time, this piece also reminds us of the temporal disjunction between art worlds and academic worlds: the former move much faster than the latter, so that ideas and phenomena conventionally dated to their emergence in scholarly publications are sometimes a decade old before they are described in print. With its mix of practitioners and academics, this volume offers a view of recent trans cultural production and of its burgeoning scholarly literature. In the time it took to produce this issue, we have already seen further increases in the range and energy of cultural work and learned of emerging new scholarship. Such developments are exciting reminders of the work yet to be done, the histories yet to be told, and the ongoing process of creative change that takes trans experience as its foundation.

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Trish Salah is assistant professor of women’s and gender studies at the University of Winnipeg. She is principal investigator for *Towards a Trans Minor Literature*, a Social Sciences and

Humanities Research Council–funded initiative to develop critical frameworks for reading trans literatures. Recent essays appear in *Trans Activism in Canada: A Reader* (2014), *Muslim Women, Transnational Feminism and the Ethics of Pedagogy* (2014), and in the inaugural issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2014). She is the author of *Wanting in Arabic* (2002 [2nd edition, 2013]), a Lambda Literary Award–winning book, and *Lyric Sexology, Vol. 1* (2014).

Notes

1. Contemporary dance offers a usefully different approach to personal narratives of trans becoming. See Carter 2012.
2. On the latter, see, e.g., Getsy 2009 and Getsy 2012, both of which are revised and expanded in Getsy, forthcoming.
3. For further consideration of the way that solitary bodies can invoke multitudes, see Carter, forthcoming.
4. For an earlier discussion of the relationship between trans figures, poetics, and queer feminist theory, see Salah 2009. For a discussion of the relation of transmisogyny, classism, and whorephobia to cultural capital, see Salah 2013.

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