Transgender Traces: Techno-Bodies Through Time

BA History of Art (Single Honours)

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Abstract

This decade has witnessed the rampant visibility of transgender in popular consciousness, culture, and media. Consequently, transgender is being increasingly represented in visual culture and contemporary art. However, its recent insurgence must be examined with skepticism and at a critical distance. Past queer movements have taught us that difference is often fetishized, assimilated, co-opted, and then discarded by heteronormative hegemony. Instead of viewing transgender as a trend or trace, this paper advocates extensive, nuanced engagements with its ever-expanding spectrum of possibilities. Employing critical theory and various other queer methodologies and materials, *Transgender Traces* analyzes the emerging contemporary art practices of transgender artists Heather Cassils and Zackary Drucker in relation to vital historical and theoretical issues. Both artists perform a common thematic of *techno-bodies through time*, alluding to the diverse embodiments and durational experiences of transgender subjects. By recognizing the radically diverse plurality of transgender, rather than its reductive, tokenistic traces, *Transgender Traces* aims to contribute to discourse that critically re-values queer inclusion and visibility.

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Introduction: Revolutionary Love

'Trans women supporting and loving each other is a revolutionary act.'[1]

'You can't have a movement with one person.'[2]

- Laverne Cox

In June 2014, actress Laverne Cox made history by becoming the first transgender person to grace the cover of *Time* magazine, heralding transgender as 'America's *next* civil rights frontier' (Fig. 1, emphasis my own). Personally, this particular representation is noteworthy because of its lack of critical visibility of transgender in popular culture and media. Although "transgender" has become exponentially popularized since the early 1990s, its rising public exposure has yet to be questioned.[3] Also of interest is the implicit emphasis on the transience of the transgender movement. The use of the word 'frontier' is less-than-coincidental, echoing imperialist histories of American expansionism, marking transgender as just another border to conquer and cross. Through this representation, *Time* asks the perennially elusive question: *'What's next?',* tokenizing transgender as yet another trend for cultural consumption that leaves undetectable traces rather than a lasting impact.

Similarly, by representing the singular figure of a successful actress, *Time* crafts a celebratory, recuperative narrative about the acceptance of *some* transgender lives, while conveniently omitting the brutal realities of others. For the young, racialized, incarcerated, or homeless, visibility, although urgently necessary, can often be lethal. As queer theorist Heather Love writes plainly of negative affect, 'sometimes damage

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[1] Cox 2014a, quote from video.
[2] Cox 2014b, quote from video.
[3] For historical accounts of transgender's premier emergence in popular discourse, see Stryker 2006, p. 6 & Stryker and Aizura 2013, p. 2.

is just damage,' and should not be glossed over.[4] The simultaneous adulation and annihilation of transgender lives must be exposed. Transgender should not exist an isolated, atomized statistic of either death or popularity.

Instead of pinpointing singular icons to stand in for transgender communities, Cox magnanimously declares that 'there is enough spotlight to go around.'[5] Love should be generous and enduring, not conditional and selective. *Transgender Traces* thus explores the paradoxical poetics of loving slowly and painfully. It addresses transgender's complex experiences and embodiments through the contemporary art and visual cultural practices of Heather Cassils and Zackary Drucker. Both artists create representations of what I call *techno-bodies through time*: cross-temporal embodiments that confuse the fetishizing, progressivist tendencies used to normalize transgender subjects. My use of 'techno-bodies' accords transgender subjects with defiant agency in their processes of self-creation using various medical and artistic technologies.

Transgender Traces positions itself as a timely addition to the intersecting arenas of transgender studies, queer theory, and contemporary art. Divided into three main parts, it will begin by foregrounding transgender's theories of representation and its subjective and socio-political histories. This exegetic contextualization informs the remaining sections, which use critical theory to analyze two nascent practices of transgender in contemporary art. Rather than simply cohering transgender, *Transgender Traces* hopes to contribute to a critically coalitionary discourse, one that

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[4] Love 2007, p. 27.
[5] Cox 2014a, quote from video.

revolutionizes love by addressing the dissonant realities of *all* transgender lives without forgoing the longevity of collective care.

Preliminary Notes on Method

An immediate concern I faced when conceptualizing this paper was that I do not personally identify as transgender. In a field of study so intricately bound up with the lives of its subjects, I was diffident about my adequacy at understanding key transgender issues. Moreover, I did not wish to reproduce the very hierarchies of ethnographic and academic subjugation that I intended to critique. Within the exclusive hierarchies of academia, transgender individuals are often theorized as 'possessing something less than agency,' and are, ironically, 'the people who have no voice in this theorizing.'[6] In this respect, theorist Jacob Hale's concise, and necessarily curt, *Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals* served to preemptively condition my relaying of personal transgender narratives. Specifically, Hale admonishes writers to foreground, not fetishize, transgender lives and experiences.[7]

In order to prioritize significant personal voices existing outside the academy, I adopt what several theorists have described as a 'queer methodology,' one that 'scavenge[s]' and pastiches eccentric methods and sources in a de-hierarchized manner in order to discuss its equally deviant subjects.[8] Similarly, Halberstam's use of 'low theory' also 'refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing' in 'high'

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[6] Stone 1987, p. 229-30.
[7] Hale 1997, pp. 3, 13.
[8] Halberstam 1998a, p. 13, Puar 2007, p. xv, Hale 1997, p. 13.

academic discourse.[9] These methodologies pave the way for my usage of ephemeral, popular cultural texts by figures such as Cox in order to relay personal, yet pertinent, transgender narratives.

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[9] Halberstam 2011, p. 16.

Conclusion: Urgent Technotopias

'Realness is about...being OK in the nuance, the messiness of figuring out who you are when you may not have the answers yet.'[10]

- Janet Mock

Halberstam trenchantly ruminates that 'difficult narratives…require difficult forms.'[11] Similarly, the wayward methodologies and materials employed throughout this paper allow for an appropriate redress of equally capricious, unknowable transgender subjects. Often, however, transgender people are qualified and dehumanized, forced to reductively simplify their complex identities in order to satiate fetishizing gazes. This is reflected in how transgender is often perceived in popular consciousness in terms of binary extremities, as either man or woman, alive or (often) dead, celebrated or castigated. Invoking the coalitionary politics of 'revolutionary love' outlined in the introduction, transgender should instead be thought of as a vast spectrum of legitimate embodiments and experiences, not as isolated, sterile categories. Indeed, Cox observes that 'there is not a universal trans experience.'[12] Rather, like her peer Mock, Cox advocates for the recognition of every transgender individual's narrative. Only by doing so can we begin to treat, and consequently represent, transgender with humanity, agency, and plurality.

Acknowledging the transgender spectrum's entirety is a necessary, albeit difficult and contradictory, process. Both Cassils and Drucker attest to such complexities through diverse representations of techno-bodies through time. Utilizing a varied arsenal of

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[10] Mock 2015, quote from video.
[11] Halberstam 2005, p. 111.
[12] Cox 2015, quote from video.

representational technologies, both artists perform and capture the politicized plualities of transgender embodiments, buttressing claims for unknowability, corporeal dialectics, and posttranssexuality. Echoing the fluidity and vastness of a spectrum, their bodily representations are volatile and precarious, resulting in unresolved tensions. Halberstam theorizes these states of turbulent liminality as 'technotopias,' representations of identity through 'decay' and 'detachability.'[13] Paradoxically, the most certain thing about transgender is its uncertainty. Thus, transgender representations are, for Halberstam, the clearest manifestations of 'permanent dislocation.'[14]

The vast undecidability of transgender embodiments is matched only by the multiplicity of its temporalities. Cassils and Drucker's techno-bodies navigate confusing time-warps, tedium, and abrupt annihilations, further fragmenting the transgender experience. Above all, as evidenced in Darling's attempts to re-connect with her idols and Cassils' concrete memorial to fallen lives, the obsolescence of transgender legacies fuels the urgency of this project. There are too many stories to tell, and too little time to tell them. The infinite permutations of techno-bodies through time makes the task of legitimizing the complexities of the transgender spectrum seem endless and impossible, one that, as Mock's epigraph attests to, might not provide closure.

Despite these impasses, *Transgender Traces* hopes to incite discourse that valourizes the unpredictability and plenitude of transgender's technotopias. In these discursive

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[13] Halberstam 2005, p. 124.
[14] Ibid. See also p. 109 for Halberstam's discussion of an 'aesthetic of turbulence' that offers 'critical reinvention[s]' of the transgender body through spatio-temporal disruptions.

arenas, time and patience must be invested in order to validate an array of embodiments and experiences, from the occluded to the opulent, the ephemeral to the eternal. Given the evanescence and enormity of the transgender spectrum, their narratives need to be urgently salvaged and articulated, before all that remains are transgender traces. Although disillusionment and failure seem imminent, the artists, theorists, and subjects foregrounded in this paper demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness by discovering latent dislocations, generating radically heterogeneous affects, meanings, and vitalities in the most unlikely of contexts.