



What's Next is the Past

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WHAT'S NEXT?



What's Next is the Past

By Lucas Crawford

The matter of “the past” is a complicated one for transsexual and transgender people, against whom “deadnames,”¹ outmoded selves, and shed skins are often wielded as tools; who are erased frequently from histories, even ones in which we have been pivotal (witness the depoliticization of Pride festivals² or the eleventh-hour exclusion of trans people from the proposed Employment Non-Discrimination Act³ legislation in the United States); and who often find in our pasts a number of experiences we might prefer to forget, from antipathy to zealots, assault to xenophobia—which is not to mention the friends or family who abjured us while we ached or who zigged when we zagged.

But your old name suited you so well!

It's like the person I knew doesn't even exist anymore.

Oh dear, I used to know her in college. She went by [] then.

Yet, an inability to absorb and narrate the past exhaustively is something shared by all, even if this appears in different ways and has different outcomes. Almost any cultural institution can be understood as a symptom of our collective angst when it comes to the necessarily incomplete project of recording, or even understanding, our lives and our culture. A few that come to mind include psychoanalysis; museums; attempts at “reconciliation” between people, including Indigenous people and settlers in Canada; urban renewal; commemorative sites; and, of course, autobiography. Even if such grappling with “the past” seems the domain of all of us, however, it is undeniable that cis people are often afforded the respect and dignity required in order to be interpreted as fully self-present, in the present. One of the legacies of being trans could be, then, that some of us are more aware than your average bear that the ability to seemingly erase one's pasts is both a structure of privilege and a myth.

In other words, the past never goes away, but some people are granted permission to pretend that it does. Accessing this pretending is

not one of my goals. I'd rather haunt the presentism of gender normativity, even if it means I'm more vulnerable to being haunted by my own pasts.

(Care to see a TERF⁴ blog post about me, which gathered up all my most unflattering online photos?)

Trans may be seen, therefore, as occupying a paradoxical relationship to this notion of “the past”: trans people are erased from history all the while others seek to pin us down exclusively in our individual histories. People use our pasts to say that we do not deserve to be treated with respect now, either because we are seen to have had *too much* privilege in the past, or because we disavowed our *lack* of privilege in the past, because we are seen to *still be* who we were in the past or because we are *no longer* who we were in the past!

Sometimes it seems that the main binary that trans people straddle is that of a rock and a hard place.

How trans pasts matter fluctuates and flexes in order to accommodate the cis needs of the day, to restore the veneer of authenticity to the myth of the unchanging body and its unchanging gender. In this milieu, it is only understandable if a trans person responds by insisting on the primacy of the present, by seeking to erase the past, or even by emotionally locating their “real self” in the future, that elusive place where access (to transition, health care, housing, a livable wage, and so on) and social viability tend to appear more abundant.

What a painful challenge it would be, then, to insist that “what’s next” is a turn away from today’s fever for trans futures. Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* is a polemic against the homophobic equations of queerness with social death and of childhood with innocent futurity; in this text, Edelman rejects the political tactic of queers becoming more future-oriented and socially acceptable by way of becoming “family-friendly.” Similarly, my hope for what is “next” for transgender—as a conversation through which numerous cultural anxieties are mediated—is that trans people of all sorts write stories and make media that make transgender anything other than a friendly token of a neoliberal future in which we have been fully absorbed into the mainstream or a tool through which gender normative melancholia and guilt are exorcised.

No trans person should have to challenge gender norms, especially when surviving can be daunting and dangerous enough. But, for me, at a time when trans heroes and safe trans characters proliferate—when the form of the socially acceptable and nonthreatening trans person is rapidly

cohering around us—it remains crucial to my own thriving that I see or make gender into something other than an immovable object. What’s next? Let trans pasts do anything other than shore up the feigned stability and predictability of cis futures.

This is an admittedly broad provocation. I conclude with three possible outcomes, which may be, even ought to be, different from your own. A new trans theory of the past could entail:

- A renewed interest in history, historiography, and alternative approaches to temporality and archives. Relevant thinkers and writers that come to mind include Susan Stryker, Ali Blythe, Trish Salah, Julian Carter, Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, C. Riley Snorton, Chris Vargas, and Kai Cheng Thom. I hope that more people might study the ways in which cis culture uses “the past” as a coercive temporal concept. Can we shape our own approaches to the past and to our pasts in a way that is less reactive to that coercion?
- A new valuation of aesthetic and humanistic approaches to transgender and a parallel historicizing of the recent consolidation of gender-related authority in the healing sciences. (As useful as these fields can be, their recent epistemic capturing of gender change must be situated and studied for its normative effects and potential damages.)
- A pause, a lingering, a breath ... during which we might ask questions about why the “transgender tipping point” took shape in the way that it has. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Thomas Kuhn reminds us that cultural beliefs do not grow steadily and progressively; rather, they shift suddenly. As he says, scientific knowledge switched suddenly from a geocentric model to a heliocentric model. If it seems, rather suddenly, that the world of pop culture revolves around transgender, we might ask: what is at stake in mainstream (and even LGBT) desires to see today’s “transgender tipping point” as a triumphant and inevitable arrival of truth and victory? Who benefits most from this telling of the story?

At this time of obsession with the latest transgender celebrity, movie, television show, or hero, can we be brave enough to say that we do not know “what’s next” at all? How *could* we know?

I hope that what’s next is a brand new past.

I hope that I will be surprised.

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Notes

1. For a nuanced take on the temporal binaries and paradoxes inherent in the violent act of trans-focused “deadnaming” (the intentional usage of a trans person’s former name), see Easton.
2. The depoliticization of pride festivals is now a well-known phenomenon, but for recent contributions to the discussion, see Peterson, Wennerhag, and Wahlstrom, and for the Canadian context, Dryden and Lenon’s edited collection.
3. For more on the history of employment rights for transgender people, see Broadus, and Bender-Baird.
4. Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist.

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