Trans (gender) trouble
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ABSTRACT
In this essay, we tease out and implicate what we term the queer (cissexist) theoretical imagination suggesting an incommensurability of sorts between that of queer theory and that of trans subjectivity. The incommensurability renders a reductive framing of transness, in cissexist terms, that privilege transgression (often of a superficial sort) of gender over basic trans, transgender, and transsexual survival and wellness. In the end, we encourage nontrans scholars to theorize, in greater detail, the queerness of nontransness and the material means by which cisness secures its hegemonic cultural power.

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Our proposal is simple: Abandon queer theory. Yes, provocative, indeed. In a forum on queer theory no less. Our proposal, however, is not unique. It reflects a long line of trans thinkers, artists, and worldmakers who, in the frustratingly undercited words of Viviane Namaste, declare: “Queer theory, as it is currently practiced, needs to be rejected for both theoretical and political reasons.” Namaste’s proposal was published in 2000. And still, queer theories continue to largely fail to account for the vastness of transness.

Why?
Because queer theories can struggle to theoretically account for transness outside of a preoccupation with (nonnormative) sexuality. As a result, transness is understood less so through sexuality and more so through its alleged and performative resistance to normativity (though, in a common and sloppy sleight of hand, nontrans communication scholars “reconcile” this incommensurability by studying “LGBT” populations while explicitly discussing “sexual identity” or “sexual orientation,” effectively eclipsing the “T” in LGBT). In turn, queer theories can politically privilege cisgender queerness (and its wellness and survival) over trans identities, sexualities, embodiments, subjectivities, modalities, aesthetics, thoughts, and expressions; not to mention trans wellness and survival. Ultimately, a narrow focus on (nonnormative) sexuality enables anti-intersectional articulations of “queer” that ironically fail to account for sexuality at the intersections of difference. This, too, is not new. Queer theories have long been critiqued for their refusal to theorize sexuality in and through race, class, geography, ability, and (trans)nationality, for instance. Still, exclusions persist even as discourses slowly shift.
Hence, this forum.

And hence, our proposal, to abandon queer theory, is rather underwhelming. To be clear, this is not a “Trans 101” primer. Rather, our contribution to this forum should be understood as no less than an indictment of trans-exclusionary (queer) communication research. Specifically, here, we implicate some of the ways queer theory is used to include, even as it excludes, transness. To make our point, we gesture to interrelated ways that queer theories risk framing transness in cissexist terms. We intend to illustrate ways that trans necessarily troubles the queer (cissexist) theoretical imagination suggesting an incommensurability of sorts between that of the queer theoretical imagination and that of trans subjectivity—the incommensurability of which communication scholars who use queer theory must confront if they/we are to ever earnestly engage the vastness of transness. We offer these reflexive renderings as critical points of departure for deeper engagement with trans-person-centered approaches to communication research, be they queer or otherwise. In the following pages, we briefly unpack some of the ways trans troubles the queer (cissexist) theoretical imagination and end with concluding thoughts that gesture toward a gender futurity free of the queer gaze.

Trans (gender) trouble

Communication scholars who use queer theory may turn to transness in order to imagine or illustrate gender possibility. Or, worse, to prove the performativity of gender, and in turn, identity more generally. In this framing, the trans subject embodies (gender) transgression and, in turn, the potential for cultural transformation. That is, the trans subject is exceptionally queer in their refusal to abide by the binary world. This framing constructs a queer hierarchy of trans intelligibility that pits trans subjects against trans subjects in cissexist terms. On one end of the hierarchy are those presumed to be dupes of gender normativity and heterosexist fantasies. That is, trans subjects who live binary lives and identify with the gender binary as men and women. It has also included transsexual subjects whose relative transitions can be understood, in the queer (cissexist) theoretical imagination, as “regressive,” or most certainly, as not quite queer enough.

On the other end of the hierarchy are gender transgressors who refuse to assimilate into the gender binary (this can include nonbinary folks who are read as “androgynous” from a nontrans vantage as well as transsexual folks who fail to meet cissexist standards for gender presentation, embodiment, and identity, regardless of identity [indeed, some nontrans queer theorists go so far as to describe trans genders as “queer” against a trans person’s identity as a typical heterosexual man or woman who happen to be trans]). Presumed in these cissexist framings are a universalizing image of the typical “male” and “female” form against which the transgressive subject is assessed (the same form that interpellates the trans subject above as regressive). That is to say, transgression is marked in degrees of deviation from an unstated and presumed normative gender foundation. The trans subject in this regard “queers” (normative) gender, effectively teaching us all about gender possibility (the “all,” of course, presumes a universal nontrans audience). In this scene, the unmarked nontrans subject serves as the repressive ground out of which gender possibility has yet to emerge. The alleged pedagogical hope is that the
nontrans subject reflects on their own gender identity and expression. And we all know what comes next:

THE END OF THE GENDER BINARY!

GENDER REVOLUTION!

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION!

Or something like that. Frankly, that is an awful lot of pressure to place on trans folks. All being said, communication scholars who use queer theory may hold the mythic image of the Gender Transgressor, as we will call it, as the proper (queer) trans subject and the mythic image of the Gender Regressor as the “bad,” or not queer enough, trans subject. All the while, it is nontrans students and scholars of queer theory who assess and determine where to place the trans subject on the hierarchy of trans intelligibility rendering the trans subject unintelligible on their own terms of engagement (here, we do not even mention the painful discomfort that comes with being the lone trans student in a class full of nontrans folks [typically led, disappointingly, by the professor] who use transness as a pedagogical thought experiment; it is offensive to say the least!). The resulting hierarchy, derived of trans bodies, privileges the destruction of the gender binary over basic trans wellness and survival.

Trans scholars, including V Varun Chaudhry, Jay Prosser, and Susan Stryker, for instance, have long critiqued the tendency of queer theorists to augment trans meaning through a narrow lens of (nontrans) queer meaning-making. This process results in the appropriation of trans experience in the construction of critical heuristics. For instance, nontrans queer theorists have begun to “trans” cultural texts. To accomplish this, they may take the experience of the Gender Transgressor to construct universalizing machinations that help to illuminate gender more generally. This is what some term “transing.” And it is key to recognize that those who are forced to fight administrative structures in order to access basic wellness and survival, including the capacity to access affirming identification documents, are not the ones who are necessarily “transing” culture and cultural texts. Indeed, to “trans” a text is to relegate all manner of gender trouble to disembodied thought experiments rather than embodied battles for basic wellness and survival. This, too, is not new.

We can chalk the disembodiment of trans experience up to cissexist misapprehensions of Butlerian performativity that frame “trans” as less stable than “nontrans.” Or, in the words of Cáel Keegan, queer theories may “demonstrate gender as performative, but may struggle to hear its specifically gendered or materially embodied claims as real.” For instance, in the queer (cissexist) theoretical imagination, the desire for sex and gender transition, including hormones and/or surgery, can be misunderstood as succumbing to a performative (read: fake) gender structure. In this framing, the trans(sexual) subject is understood as being duped into perpetuating their own hegemonic oppression (they become the Gender Regressor) and are thus critiqued for failing to meet the queer standard of pure transgression—as if transition is not a laborious, transgressive human act and experience! Look no further than cissexist and antitrans thinkers who use “feminism” to justify their claims, for instance; we will not rehearse those cissexist “arguments” here nor will we cite such vitriol.
Key to all of these trans troubles is an unwillingness for nontrans scholars to simply name themselves as such; as experiencing life in ways that are vastly different than trans folks. And, as women of color feminists have long taught us, difference matters. My (Benny) lived experience as a queer nonbinary trans femme informs my approach to transness. My lived experience has taught me that queer relationalities undergird gender affirmation. My lived experience has also taught me that fatness mediates my dance with gender in ways I hope to never remedy. My (Megan) lived experience as a queer nontrans woman informs my approach to transness. My lived experience has taught me that heterosexism has resorted to unintelligibility because I embody masculinities as a woman. My lived experience has also taught me that choosing to present authentically in bright-colored button-ups and Chucks creates a whole new sense of gender embodiment. Our lived experiences as white(-passing) queers informs our approach to transness, too. To offer a practiced example of this reflexive work, we turn to David Valentine who proposes a theory of “non-transexuality.” Valentine writes,

[I]t is essential to our politics and theories to recognize ourselves as non-transexuals so that the horror at the thought of [gender transition including surgery, specifically] makes us look at the place where that horror originates: in the desire for the natural meanings of the nontransexual body and the agentive, modern subject. In short, for us to take our task as queer theorists and feminists seriously, we non-transexuals need to start thinking about ourselves as such, to take seriously the possibility that in treating [gender transition including surgery, specifically] as exceptional, we are reproducing the seamless story of the uncut, natural body.

Here, Valentine (a nontransexual scholar) implicates nontrans(exual) fetishization, fascination, and preoccupation with gender confirmation surgeries. In doing so, Valentine politicizes the nontransexual subject position suggesting the nontransexual subject is not as stable as it presumes itself to be. Valentine’s theory implicates me (Megan) as a nontransexual person who has not and does not seek gender transition in ways vastly different than it does me (Benny) as a nonbinary trans femme whose transition is as complex as it is delightful. Valentine models but one reflexive path toward trans affirmation. And, those paths should reflect the multiplicity that is gender itself. The nontrans communication scholar who uses queer theory can begin by simply queering their own sense of (nontrans) gender and gender experience. That is, by deconstructing the intersectional powers animating the normative nontrans subject position. It is imperative that I (Megan), and other nontrans scholars, queer our own (nontrans) gender and gender experiences so as to resist acquiescing, unperceived, into an unchanged culture that always already privileges my/our own intersectional (nontrans) genders. By deconstructing the power that creates the nontrans subject, gender can therefore be reimagined as the complex and vast infinity that it is. Decentering nontransness in the queer (cissexist) theoretical imagination enables us to affirm both the vastness of genders generally and of trans formations specifically.

**Averting the (cissexist) queer gaze**

We leave you with an item of profound contemplation. Is the trans subject commensurable with queer theory as it is currently practiced in the communication discipline? As our commentary suggests, no. This is the result of queer theorists (and communication
scholars more generally; we do not want to suggest this is a problem exclusive to queer theorists!) failing to engage the vastness of transness. Doing so would require decentering the queer gaze in favor of a trans-person-centered approach informed by developments in trans studies and theory—literatures that are unacceptably undercited in queer communication research save for a few notable (white) names. Regardless, communication scholars tend to cite the same few pieces effectively revealing an offensive unwillingness to earnestly engage trans bodies, thought, and discourse.

And so, we return to our opening proposal: Abandon queer theory. No doubt this is an underwhelming proposal in light of our points made here. Namely, that queer theory, as it has continued to be practiced, simply refuses to engage the vastness of transness. Though, we do not think this is all bad. Indeed, the contradictions between queer and trans theories render important insight into the cultural workings of intersecting power structures. It is when the pursuit of a “proper” object of study attempts to parade itself as an all-encompassing goal that we run into egregious errors including the erasure of transness, as in the refusal of the so-called Gender Regressor or the compulsory expectation of a “proper” queer trans subject evidenced in the so-called Gender Transgressor. In the end, communication scholars who use queer theories have a lot more work to do than simply claiming their work as trans-inclusive or tacking a “T” in an LGBT acronym in a compulsory manner that eclipses transness in the theorization of (cis) sexuality. Inclusion, after all, is but a façade that reasserts the dominance of the already established normative core. Affirming the vastness of transness requires nothing less than a praxiological shift in ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments that radically center transness at the intersections of difference.

Notes


2. These trans trouble areas were initially proposed by Benny LeMaster in a discussion forum published in *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. Here, the authors collaboratively develop these theoretical areas with greater focus. These theoretical areas reflect the lead author’s process of shifting from queer to trans theory in their own communication research and as a trans scholar. Said differently, the lead author implicates their own published research in these critiques as they, too, have performed each of these cissexist renderings in their own queer theorizing as a trans person who first came to this work through (cis) queer theory. See Jimmie Manning, and others, “Queering Communication Studies: A Journal of Applied Communication Research Forum,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 48, no. 4 (2020): 413–37. doi:10.1080/00909882.2020.1789197.


5. For perspective, the same hesitation may be leveraged against nonqueer scholars who “queer” cultural texts absent any focus on queerness.


