

# Thinking with Trans Now

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## Introduction

Aren Z. Aizura

This roundtable considers trans theory's status as a site of thinking racialization, empire, political economy, and materiality in the current historical, institutional, and political moment. Like the 2005 special issue of *Social Text* "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," this special issue, titled "Left of Queer," appears during a new crest of the waves of permanent global political and ecological crisis. Climate crisis is unfolding as sea levels rise and forests in the Amazon, Australia, India, Siberia, and central Africa burn. US imperial war against Iran is a real possibility. In multiple nation-states, populist and ethnonationalist tendencies are ascendant.

What does it mean to think trans in a time of crisis? And what is the place of critique in a crisis? Because the questions we discuss in this roundtable are often about intellectual moves, this conversation may appear insulated from the generalized sense of crisis in Left politics right now, yet these global currents are not insulated from trans, and trans is not insulated from the world. After the brief, precarious US-based "transgender tipping point" during the Obama presidency, the White House appears bent on rolling back those limited forms of recognition, including throwing out federal protections for trans people in federal prisons and welfare organizations, including homeless shelters. In India, a transgender rights law passed by the Modi government in 2019 enshrined recognition based on medical intervention and screening committees to vet applications for gender marker change, aimed at separating "real" trans people from "fake."<sup>1</sup> The lines between "real" and "fake" here index caste, class, access to resources, and of course different desires for surgical or hormonal intervention. Meanwhile, the Indian Citizenship Amendment Bill

was passed in the same parliamentary session, designed to work in tandem with a tightening of citizenship registrations via the National Register of Citizens, excluding Muslim undocumented immigrants from Indian citizenship and strengthening Hindutva nationalism. These bills share a preoccupation with authenticity (of gender and bloodline) even while thousands of Indian trans people have lost citizenship through the enforcement of the National Register of Citizens.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, trans-exclusive radical feminisms have been rebranded as gender critical feminism and comprise a coalition between women and queers invested in biological essentialism and evangelical Christians. This movement, which is increasingly global, targets trans women and femmes in particular and whips up panic in multiple fronts: attacks on trans women inhabiting women's spaces; condemning trans childhoods, particularly as a signal of technological alienation (the fabricated pseudodiagnosis of rapid-onset gender dysphoria, caused by teens learning about the existence of other trans people on social media); and attacks on trans athletes and on the growing movements to make gender self-determination mainstream.<sup>3</sup> Gender critical feminism attacks the same ideology of gender denounced by hard-right Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro on taking office and cited by Jordan Peterson and other right-leaning commentators who mock the increasing recognition of trans people's names and pronouns. Taken together, these signal transness and gender autonomy's status as a lightning rod for moral panics working through the contradictions of racial capitalism. They also point to the global ascendancy of a nativism invested in hetero- and gender normativity as the glue that holds together white supremacy and ethnonationalism. Simultaneously whipping up fascist violence against trans people and immigrants, people of color, and the poor in order to restore social norms and managing the limited recognition of those who can pass as elites, these necropolitical tendencies magnify divisions between the global elite and the racialized poor; the lines of caste, class, racialization, and property enforce which trans subjects are "real," recognizable as subjects, and which are "fake," threatening, or hostile.

Multiple materialist formations shape the answers we might offer to how to think trans through these events. This includes a new materialism premised on thinking about trans embodiment outside of trans as subject position. A second form of materialism traces the histories of objects and commodities that entwine with trans life, such as synthetic hormones and surgical techniques. Other thinkers here draw on a historical materialism shaped by queer of color critique, arguing that historical recovery work on the twentieth century contextualizes and makes visible the production of this crisis and its long historical tail. Across the twentieth century, trans emerged as a category; synthetic hormones and body modifying surgeries became available to particular, mainly white middle-

class populations. But twentieth-century trans medicine itself produced a transgender whiteness we contend with now as a racialized biopolitical sorting of populations into recognizable and invisible, life to be fostered and life that is disposable. Against the grain of that history, we can look back to historical figures who were not recognized as trans because they did not inhabit whiteness. This looking back is a form of care and recovery rooted in Black trans and trans of color dialogues and archival practices: Jules Gill-Peterson thinking about Pauli Murray, the Black civil rights activist who understood herself as masculine and desired hormones but was denied them; Treva Ellison's consideration of Lucy Hicks Anderson, a Black trans woman who in 1940s California was criminalized for accepting her husband's military pension; or Toby Beauchamp's consideration of Frank Woodhull, a person processed at Ellis Island in 1908 as "born Mary Johnson." As we see when Ellison invokes Stuart Hall to think about another historical moment when authoritarianism reigned, crises are produced. Seeing outside the presentism of the current emergency can help us see escape routes that others have used in the past and that are still available to us.

Conversations between thinkers are weird beasts. This one emerged from a discussion between Jasbir Puar, David Eng, and Aren Z. Aizura about the possibility of including a roundtable on trans here and now in this issue of *Social Text*. This led to a collectively edited Google document over late 2018 to mid-2019. The participating thinkers, while all gender and sexuality scholars working on trans, are all housed in and between different disciplines. Eliza Steinbock is a cinema studies and cultural studies scholar located in the Netherlands; Marquis Bey is an English and African American Studies scholar; Treva Ellison's work is situated within Black geographies and gender, women and sexuality studies; Jules Gill-Peterson, Aizura, Ellison, and Toby Beauchamp all work in gender, women, and sexuality studies programs but work across multiple disciplines. We did not meet formally or hold a panel in real time, although we talked about doing so. The words that made it to the page share space with ghost words from thinkers who weren't able to contribute. This is the case with every journal issue, of course—there are always people who should have been asked but weren't, and people who were asked but couldn't participate. In making this point explicit here I want to underscore the frankly brutal conditions of trans intellectual production. The contributors here are all employed in universities. However, some of the most important trans and nonbinary thinkers right now are contingently employed or unemployed. Many trans scholars are queer/trans people of color or otherwise marginalized folks already doing far too much formal and informal institutional labor in whichever context they find themselves, within or outside the university. For all those reasons, it is sometimes hard to say yes to extra-

curricular writing like this roundtable. (Will it count as a peer-reviewed article for tenure? Does it pay a fee?) Others we asked are on a small list of high-rotation scholars begged to write for multiple publications and so are perennially overextended. Many of us are in workplaces that are hostile to trans studies or queer and trans of color life despite claiming to champion diversity. Many of us experience the mental and physical health difficulties university workers are supposed to pretend don't affect us, and that trans and gender-nonconforming university workers experience at statistically high rates. All of these conditions of laboring in a marginalized field inform who is represented here, and the absences where we might imagine X voice or X underrepresented category should be. Those presences and absences articulate a lesson as real as questions of who or what the trans subject is: trans studies might now have achieved recognition as a field, but the university itself is broken. Capitalism is broken. (And let's not fix them.)

What emerged on the page may not engage as much with the conditions of intellectual production as I do here, but our observations reflect precisely that lesson. In writing questions for a queer materialist issue of *Social Text*, we asked how trans theory takes on the tradition of subjectless critique and (historical) materialism. Queer historical materialism in the tradition of queer of color critique provides one touchpoint, a conversation is largely shaped by and with C. Riley Snorton's observation in *Black on Both Sides* that gender and sex are racial arrangements, as Treva Ellison reminds us. We urgently need to think gender, sex, and trans in relation to the histories and futures of racial capitalism. More surprising, perhaps, is how peripheral queer theory has become to that project. We engaged less with how trans studies articulates itself in relation to queer theory and were more interested in how and where the *trans* of trans studies means. The citational genealogies emerging in this space draw nourishment from queer of color critique, but also from Black studies and Black feminisms, psychoanalysis, critical disability studies, and feminist science studies, among others. As Marquis Bey writes, we are less interested in tarrying with the debates around antinormativity that have taken place in queer theory and more with elaborating nonnormativity: a "decline to state," a sliding away from determinacy that many of us are familiar with in daily life.

Another question was about sex: What happens to the *sex* of transsexual when it becomes transgender? Is sex a site of world building for trans politics or thinking now? The answers make clear that sex is still underthought and that trans studies itself is conditioned by the fact that access to hormones and surgery literally has demanded rejecting sexual pleasure. Eliza Steinbock asks us to think pornography, sexuality, and sexual violence with a trans studies lens, precisely because sex is a technology

for “suspending, splitting, shattering, healing.” Given that queer studies has also been charged with sanitizing itself beyond sex, maybe we could all learn a thing or two from trans porn here. Steinbock theorizes the alternative, trans of color–produced porn film *Trans Entities: The Nasty Adventures of Papi and Wil* (dir. Morty Diamond, 2007) as generative not just of sexual desire but of connection and love, mediating between “shifting of intensities between nastiness and lovingness.”<sup>4</sup> This resonates with a dynamic some call t4t, or trans for trans. In Hil Malatino’s framing, t4t is a form of strategic separatism through which trans people might practice love, solidarity, and mutual aid between ourselves while actively decentering cis subjectivities, perceptions, and erotic economies, refusing assimilationist attempts at fixing the trans subject.<sup>5</sup> At times this looks like creating networks of care or kinship, and sometimes this might look like erotics or sex. While the term *separatism* might denote a separation from other political categories, *t4t* as a rallying cry or watchword seems to erupt in spaces that are anything but separate from other political movements, a reminder that trans as mutual aid is not external from (for example) blackness, feminism, disability justice, or historical materialism but often proceeds from, precedes, and emerges alongside those tendencies. In all forms, t4t offers a place in which intimacy may be a route to political praxis or love across the frictions of difference.<sup>6</sup>

Disinterested in the subject or the proper name, and equally disinterested in oppositional stances against proper names or programmatic political positions, the thinkers here are creating their own vocabularies. With one or two exceptions, none of their contributions here seems too invested in something called *trans studies*. If the name of trans studies makes the work institutionally possible, fine, but if it doesn’t, that’s okay too. The “work” is in a long chain that distributes itself across the jammed and minor spaces that exist institutionally; this work goes by multiple names. Sometimes it might front as a trans of color intellectual tradition, which has both invented itself relatively recently as visible within the university and has always been here, sometimes under Black feminisms, critical disability studies, critical university studies, porn studies. What matters, finally, is affinities with other struggles and inventing shared tools and techniques for diagnosing the working of power and how to swerve outside or alongside of it just in time.

**Aren Z. Aizura:** *Who is the subject of trans studies? Many of us are working in and around the edges of a trans studies that refuses a subject, or at any rate the white trans subject, as grounds for theorizing. We have also learned the lessons of queer theory’s valorization of an antinormative or resistant subject, even if we all might frame those lessons differently. But if we theorize without a subject, not*

*even a “resistant” or “antinormative” one, how can trans studies reckon with the materialities and material violences that haunt it and make its institutionalization possible? What would a subjectless critique (rather than a critique of the subject) look like? What would this critique look like articulated through non-US-centric forms of materiality, matter, and Marxist thought?*

**Jules Gill-Peterson:** The question of the subject of trans studies might be the question of the subject produced *by* trans studies. Trans people have lived so many forms of reductionism, where “expert” discourses have robbed our communities for knowledge, only to turn around and disavow that theft in dictating the normative terms of trans legibility. The singularization of transness into a narrative of binary transition, for instance, is the signature effect of the medical model. Part of the lesson of this experience, to me, is that singularizing and universalizing are very risky moves for any trans-affirmative project, as they risk extending the reach of discourses like medicine, law, and the state. For that reason, it makes sense that trans studies has been especially wary of producing a single subject, turning to subjectless modes precisely in order to better defend trans people—and transness—from some of the violence of being turned into a subject.

I tend to think that reading for the particular is a much more accountable project than reading for the universal. Thinking historically, I see great value in a subjectless critique or a reading practice that is attuned to the opacity of transness in the past, its forms that cannot produce continuity with the present but offer ways to outthink the emergencies and inertias that characterize the present world. For instance, scholarship on the Black trans and trans of color past continues to deepen our appreciation of just how much trans life took place outside of the spectacularly whitened arenas of the medical model, or the narrow trans figures that were culturally visible to the wider public. Yet it would be naive to read the historicity of trans of color existence as taking up an intrinsically antinormative position vis-à-vis that trans medical or cultural archive. The social multiplicities of transness outside of white contexts are better framed as opaque to us in their meaningfulness.

I can’t stop thinking about Pauli Murray, whose commemoration has only recently included a lifelong experience of nonconforming gender that doesn’t offer itself neatly to trans projects of recuperation or subject formation. It’s hardly a coincidence that Murray was born in Baltimore, near the Johns Hopkins Hospital that played such a decisive role in the production of the American medical model. Yet in 1931, during the same time that Hopkins was experimenting on human sex to produce techniques for its alteration, Murray hitchhiked across the United States as a man. There is no obvious way to read the relation between Murray’s potentially Black trans masculine experience in that decade and the production of a medical

model premised on the whiteness of gender, except opaquely. Murray offers up no new truth of race and gender to counter the anti-Black erasures of US trans history and medicine. However, the particularity of the record of Murray's gender might generate an alternate relation not premised on identification with a trans subject but precisely the responsibility of countering the erasure effected by such universalizations.

**Marquis Bey:** The question, to me, is grounds for interrogating its very formulation. That is, in asking, who is the subject of trans studies?, I move toward trans studies as a fundamental critique—or, more acutely, excavation—of whoness. What interests me is how trans studies radically reorients, radically disorients, how we come to an understanding of “who,” burrowing into, perhaps, the very question as the (non)answer: trans studies as rummaging around the interstices of an assertion of the who-as-subject. Worked through the knowledges produced via trans studies subjectivity becomes an open question that is unsettled, flickered, and self-determined via asking itself the question of itself.

So I refuse *a* or *the* subject of trans studies because I want to urge, perhaps timidly, an ongoing interrogation as structuring the texture and shape of one's subjectivity. This poses a bit of a problem for materiality inasmuch as materiality is often thought of as simply the skin and bones of the subject in question. Materiality is often understood as lived experience, which is not to be overlooked in favor of some kind of abstracted notion of trans ideality delinked from lived gender nonnormative life; rather, I have an eye toward a processual materialization that displaces lived experience for livability. If materialization denotes an opening of a sedimented notion of matter, which for me necessarily denotes a loosening of epistemological and visceral certainty—a generative epistemic scrutiny that must be nimbly handled especially when addressing the marginalized's embodied knowledges—then what results from this loosening of normative, hegemonic, ontological holds over who we are is a different kind of sociality that enables the life of those who have been sequestered to terrains in which no life is said to be lived.

I think here of Fred Moten, as I often do, because of his insistence on the mobilization of precisely the paraontological question of subjectless subjectivation amid sociality. He writes in *Black and Blur*, “Indeed, our resistant, relentlessly impossible object is subjectless predication, subjectless escape, escape from subjection, in and through the paralegal flaw that animates and exhausts the language of ontology. Constant escape is an ode to impurity, an obliteration of the last word. We remain to insist upon this errant, interstitial insistence.”<sup>7</sup> A Heideggerian echo in its subordination of what is Being? (which gives priority to the ontic) to how does Being unfold? (which emphasizes the possibility of abandoning the subject), what interests me as it relates to trans studies—as Black studies, necessarily for me,

indexes in its unsuturing of gender's integrity—is the reverberatory concatenation between subjectless critique or interrogating/refusing a subject and escape from subjection. If it is the aim to undermine and swerve, as it were, subjection and subjugation, it necessitates a swerving away from subjectivity, as subjectivity is fundamentally, to my mind, to adhere to a legibilizing ontology, which is itself a subjugation. So, in short, I am interested in how trans studies, through gender and other vectors, asserts the imperative to consider the impossible possibility of inhabiting sociality, of relating to others, on nonsubjective grounds, on grounds that allow for subjectivity without being subjected—in other words, transsubjectivity, parasubjectivity, being and becoming that arise precisely in the extent to which we elude tenets of subjective legibility.

To return, then, to the opening pithy question: in short, the subject of trans studies is the subjectivity that arises in the space between asking and answering the question that is subjectivity.

**Treva Ellison:** The subject of a trans studies that reckons with the material violence that haunts it is not a *who* but rather a *how*. I see trans studies as a field that thinks rigorously about how race, sex, gender, and sexuality are relationally and iteratively crafted as social and spatial arrangements. I really appreciate and think with Snorton's assertion in *Black on Both Sides* that gender and sex are racial arrangements.<sup>8</sup> If we consider the kinds of places where antitrans criminalization and queer and trans sociality take place in the twentieth century, we can see how trans and gender materialized as moral panics around the contradictions of racial capitalist spatial development. My research focuses primarily on archives of Black sociality in World War II-era Los Angeles that precede or coincide with the articulation and widespread use of the terms *transsexual*, *gender*, and *transgender*. I consider what moments of high-tide visibility of Black gender deviance and gender nonconformity in US print culture tell us about shifts in the relations of racial capital and state capacity.

For example, decades before Ronald Reagan ever uttered a word about welfare queens in the 1980s, Lucy Hicks Anderson was arrested and incarcerated in 1945 in Ventura County, California, for accepting her husband's military pension. She was tried and convicted of fraud as a "female impersonator" for not meeting the biological definition of womanhood at the time. I read this arrest and its media coverage as doing the work of inculcating the racialized and sexed contours of welfare state eligibility and military Keynesianism in the historical moment that the welfare state was being locally articulated in the wake of the New Deal. Anderson's arrest was meant to underscore the ineligibility of gender-nonconforming people for welfare benefits. But it was also meant to underscore Black women's and Black people's secondary eligibility for welfare state benefits. I read stories



like Anderson's alongside and against Southern California urban planning archives to understand what trans representation and the question of Black gender are telling us or asking us to ask about the racialization of space. The forms of policing that resulted in Anderson's arrest, and others like it, should underpin our understanding of welfare raids in 1960s Southern California and highlight how the spatialization of the welfare state functioned as a technique of surveillance. Urban planners in 1940s California were concerned with how to preserve the prevailing racist sociospatial order, given that wartime labor needs had drawn so many Black workers to Southern California. Planning documents focused on how to parse cities and municipalities and neighborhoods into study areas in order to administer and measure the effectiveness of welfare state programs. The creation of study areas often froze and naturalized patterns of racial segregation, encoding the places where working-class Black people lived as problem areas. Salacious news reports about masquerading arrests, drag balls, writing false checks, and deception during the 1940s and 1950s are often recovered today as evidence of trans life. But these news reports helped inculcate the racist spatial imaginary of urban planning and its attendant structure of land valuation, instructing a reading public in the where and how of gender deviance in proximity to blackness. Such representations also often narratively tacitly rationalized the growth of police forces concomitant with city growth to securitize residential life from problem areas and problem people.

World War II-era print culture representations of Black gender non-conformity and deviance in Southern California are examples of how the logics of military Keynesianism express themselves culturally. The impetus to parse, name, and value various enactments of racialized gender and sexuality in World War II-era print culture expresses the dissemination and circulation of the calculative logic of military Keynesianism, what Michelle Murphy calls the *The Economization of Life*. From the late 1930s to roughly 1968, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore, state capacity—the ability of the state to act as the state—became oriented around military Keynesianism, an approach to social and spatial organization that promoted planning and state investment in militarism to securitize the health and wealth of the nation-state against the volatility of an increasingly speculative political economy. Murphy argues that military Keynesianism as a mode of state capacity supported the creep of the logics and techniques of calculation and planning into everyday life, as the health, wellness, and potential of racialized populations were articulated as a measure of national economic productivity. Military Keynesianism helped set the terms for the materialization of the question of transsexual and transgender in medicine through the expansion of medicalization as a multiscalar collaborative effort that included the expansion of the carceral state. The material and archival connections between policing, surveillance, and incarceration and the medical

articulation of transgender, gender, and intersex in Southern California are often inscribed onto the physical and metaphorical bodies of nonwhite people and places. This is a development that continues to haunt many state-sanctioned attempts to address the material violence that continue to shape the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming people, particularly trans and gender-nonconforming people of color.

I try to enact trans studies as a process of questioning how political, social, and economic subjects get formed. I use military Keynesianism as a temporal framework through which to understand the sociospatial elaboration of *transsexual*, *transgender*, and *intersex gender* as terms of order in intertextual dialogue with the racialization of urban space. Doing so has required methodological creativity that is most inspired by the work of cultural Marxists like Stuart Hall. For example, I make queer use of Hall's approach to understanding the phenomenon of mugging in 1970s Britain in *Policing the Crisis* to understand how trans visibility and criminalization operate as racial arrangements. I work with the students who take my courses to manually comb digital and text-based print archives to trace the optics of racial capital applied to people and places we may want to reclaim today as trans. When Hall was writing *Policing the Crisis*, everyone, even liberal criminologists, was focused on the subject of deviant Black youth: what makes these subjects tick, what happened to make them this way, and who is responsible for remediating them? Hall's methodology turned this question upside down and backward by asking, first, how were mugging and deviance procedurally articulated in print culture and television, and second, what does this discursive articulation tell us about crises in racial capital, state capacity, and nationalism? Hall shows how the articulation of the mugger was a driver of authoritarian populism that cathected anxieties about political, economic, and social instabilities occurring at multiple spatial scales onto working-class Black migrants. We are in a similar moment where there is a lot of conversation around transgender identity and studies and the transgender experience: what is essential about it, what is not, who is it for? This conversation is occurring in a context of authoritarian populism, similar to but different from the context in which Hall and others all were theorizing. I hope trans studies continues to upturn some of the questions about trans subjects and identity: what do the articulation of these questions and the impulse or coercion to ask them tell us about the changing nature of matter and material, crises in racial capitalism, and the ongoing crisis of the subject?

**Eliza Steinbock:** For this question, I find helpful Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Marxist subaltern approach to interrogating the falsely universal Subject of continental philosophy that seeks to speak for faceless and nameless resisting subjects.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is worthwhile to name who is doing

the speaking and who is spoken about, even when the “who” referred to by diverging discourses cannot be cross-referenced. Allow us our differences!

How to do so? The trans\* subject typically is asserted as those sharing similar symptoms or belonging to a diagnostic category. In contrast, revolutionary trans\* subjects could become a class of people that seek affinities with other classed people, species, and materialities to join in solidarity across and along differences. Their points of affinity might be how grievances and demands articulate in chorus. This would swap out the logic of trans issues from being a “power in numbers” game of counting how many there are of us, as Susan Stryker has asserted (following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), to a field defined by its “power in articulation”—or better, its power of resonating coarticulations—that demonstrate shared horizons of struggle,<sup>10</sup> for example, sharing the struggle with authorities to obtain correct documentation and cross borders (with migrants, particularly refugees and undocumented), or the movement to stop enforced sterilization and ensure reproductive autonomy (with cis women, particularly those who are impoverished and colonized). Accounting for how the power of trans articulates does not require a preformed concept of a subject. As the work of, for example, Dean Spade, Eli Clare, and Che Gossett shows us, studying these shared material violences will enable scholars and activists to connect nodes of oppressive mechanisms and be able to recognize how (what looks like) gender operates in the vein of other social and subjectifying processes.

I also work with the psychoanalytic theory of suture, the stitching up of the subject’s entrance into the Imaginary with the ratification or but-toning of the Symbolic, for two main reasons. First, *suture* refers to the sense of “me-ness” that arrives when one feels zipped up, or clicked into place, a process that requires both the presence of others and a social context in which it can take place. This fragile, contingent, and ongoing act of suturing insists on the processual character of all of our subjectivities—no one ever fully achieves by either being wholly stitched up, or by becoming entirely unraveled. Trans\*’s means of stitching may have established practices and patterns, but trans is by no means the only kind of subjectivity that is made through being remade. Second, the theory of suture points toward the horizon of subjectivity, that we need ideality and we need images, and our embodiment takes its morphological and psychic forms at their bleed. The theoretical attention to this (im)material threshold in which various components have to align makes it possible to see how change and variation come about in our subjective sense of me-ness. This I have parsed as the shimmering of our image, the flickering of self that burns brighter in certain periods when images from without bring legibility to images from within. For instance, trans cultural production enables the imaginary to process new images, which have material impact and influence on the possible range of embodiments we can imagine ourselves doing,

what has been called the shock of recognition: “oh, I am that! That is me! I want to be that!” Nevertheless, these steps taken in tumbling toward meanness are predicated on misrecognition, painfully acknowledged or ignored. Suturing, then, is not only about the burning brightness of what is brought to the fore but also about the folds that get tucked under in the shadows of bodily consciousness. This is how opacities become deposited on our cultural screens. All this to say, I too am less concerned with who is the (true) subject of transgender studies than with how discourses discipline power/knowledge to make a subject all but inevitable.

**Toby Beauchamp:** I often consider the institutionalization of trans studies through the lens of pedagogy, because I view course development as the product of hard thinking about the version(s) of trans studies we wish to present to students and the version(s) we want to be able to imagine and create with our students. For me, it has been more useful and interesting to study and teach not a trans subject but (as Jules notes) the subject produced by trans studies and that process of production itself. I recently wrote about teaching Erica Rand’s chapter on representations of Frank Woodhull, a person whom Ellis Island immigration authorities described as having been “born Mary Johnson” when they processed him in 1908.<sup>11</sup> When I teach this piece, I try to structure the conversation as one focused not on the truth of Woodhull’s identity but on Rand’s approach to writing about Woodhull. She deliberately sets her own use of *he* against the historical documents’ use of *she* in referring to Woodhull, denying the reader both an easy transgender subject and an easy read: the different pronouns insist that the reader continually grapple with gendered decisions alongside Rand. If it refuses us a legible trans subject, though, the text also does not flatten out gender nonconformity: we understand how class status works with gender to situate Woodhull as a target of medicolegal scrutiny, and how whiteness and citizenship work with gender to shield Woodhull from more invasive and violent forms of bodily inspection.

I schedule this text very early in my trans studies syllabus because it helps us engage trans studies as a mode of analysis rather than a project primarily of locating and defining. The Woodhull case, grounded as it is in the physical and ideological harms of immigration policing, illustrates how such a locating-and-defining project can troublingly collude with various state efforts to identify trans subjects. This is also why, in my research on surveillance mechanisms, it has been more useful for me to treat trans as a mode of critique rather than a specific subject position. Many surveillance programs work to enforce gender conformity without ever explicitly naming or even intentionally targeting transgender people, and surveillance practices that do focus on transgender people can use that focus to bolster policing of marginalized people more broadly. For instance, the criminal-

izing bathroom bills that have proliferated in the United States over the past several years most overtly target transgender people but also contribute to the ongoing criminalization of people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, poor people, sex workers, and others who rely on public facilities, whether transgender or not. Relatedly, some efforts to protect trans people—by educating state agencies or refining surveillance technologies to properly recognize transgender people—rely on unmarked whiteness, US citizenship, and class privilege both in their definitions of transgender and in their failure to account for the multiple ways gender nonconformity can manifest and the multiple ways surveillance programs target us.

I find it helpful to return to Cathy Cohen's intervention in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," which continues to refocus us on shared relationships to systems of power, an approach that demands a more expansive understanding of the subject of trans studies and politics. I also want to note here my enthusiasm for burgeoning conversations across trans and disability studies that imagine trans and disability less as specific objects of analysis (as with the Woodhull case, the medicolegal regulations producing both "trans" and "disability" as legible categories already makes me apprehensive about considering them objects of analysis) and more as analytics, methodologies, or modes of critique. (I'm thinking here, for example, of the forum recently published in *Lateral* in which Jina B. Kim, Julie Avril Minich, and Sami Schalk consider the theory and practice of engaging disability studies in this manner.)<sup>12</sup>

*What possibilities does trans\* present in transnational conversations about sex, trauma, and embodiment at this political moment? As a related question, where is the place of the sexual in/against trans studies? What happened to the sex that the term transsexuality made explicit (even in its interpretation of sex as bodily, not sexual)? Does the domain of the sexual still have a communal or world-building capacity? What does trans/trans\* contribute to that vision?*

**JGP:** A trans man with whom I recently spoke summed up a lifetime of being medicalized and speaking back to doctors this way (I'm paraphrasing): "The doctors had it all wrong when they thought being trans was all about sex. It's not about sex at all!" His point was not that we should accept the separation of sexuality from gender identity as the final word. He was concerned with how the sexological origin of trans medicine had been so viciously heterosexual that it seriously delayed the wider recognition that trans men could be gay, a presumption that not only worked as gatekeeping but had also produced a great deal of secrecy and shame in the communities he had helped form in the 1990s. There are so many vernacular discourses about sex within trans communities that are dismissed as unscientific but ought to get more credit for how they unsettle the concept of the sexual, the

tongue-in-cheek experience of starting hormones and “turning gay,” for instance. It’s valuable not because it’s true but because of the instability it embraces. Affirming what Eliza has to say on this, I’m also surprised trans studies hasn’t generated more insight about what *trans* can do to *sex*. I won’t presume anyone else’s personal or communal theorizing here, but one of the allures of t4t as a mode of desire is the possibility—not a guarantee, mind you—of unlinking sex and intimacy from sex-as-anatomy, gender-as-role, and the obligation to be especially well formed as a subject or body. There’s something there to think about!

I wonder if one of the unintended effects of adopting *transgender* over *transsexual* over the past few decades has been to intensify the asexual connotations of transness. Maybe it wasn’t unintentional at all. In my work on trans childhood, for instance, the collision of a gatekeeping around sex in trans medicine with cultural norms around the ostensible asexuality of childhood produces an extreme double-bind for trans kids, whose supposed precocity in self-knowledge of gender is parlayed into an intensification of adult anxieties over children having *any* sexuality, let alone one outside of heterosexuality. This has led, for instance, to a bizarre and hurtful battle over children’s fertility outcomes during childhood transition. The root problem is that children’s sexuality is seen as the property and concern of adults, which can be analogized to their gender, restricting them twice over.

In this situation it seems like trans studies ought to make more room for the sexual to counter that predominant asexualizing narrative. And yet, the value of the sexual seems less obvious to me than ever as an anchor for world building because of the critical insights of work on homonormativity, homonationalism, and the many violent deployments of sexual regulation through the category queerness in settler colonial and other racialized venues. I wonder if there is something to draw on here in recent work that has reframed sex and gender as historically epiphenomenal to race and modes of racialization—I’m thinking in particular of two indispensable recent books, Snorton’s *Black on Both Sides* and Kyla Schuller’s *Biopolitics of Feeling*. Both show us, from different domains, key ways in which the modern grammar and biopolitics of sex and gender are indissociable from larger racial projects that they have greatly extended and elaborated. Perhaps a common inquiry for queer and trans studies that prioritizes race and racialization is to understand the degrees to which the sexual and sexuality are also advents of larger racial logics, clarifying the context for using those categories to build less oppressive worlds.

**MB:** If I may take up the question of sex broadly, it first seems that trans presents a substantive troubling of sex, both as an act of pleasure and reproduction and as a troublesome affixation to the body. Inasmuch as sex-as-act very often collapses erogenous pleasure to genitalia, trans, with its troubling

of genitalia as a primary site of erogenous activity and axiomatic designation of “true” sexed/gendered subjectivity, throws such a practice into at least a little bit of turmoil—namely, do people of trans experience have sex in the same way nontrans folks do? Or relatedly, what possibilities for sex are opened up when transness unfixes genitalia as a privileged, fetishized site from which to derive a legible sexuality and definition of “proper” sexual acts? To put it in Eliza’s language, “What can we learn from trans sex?”

Relatedly, inasmuch as sex as bodily characteristics is deployed in trans antagonistic ways—that is, equating genitalia with “true” sex and the recent “defining trans out of existence” advanced by the current political regime (i.e., the “proposed definition would define sex as either male or female, unchangeable, and determined by the genitals that a person is born with”)—trans refuses the thought that genitalia, or legible bodily components, define one’s gender or that normative logics structured by the state can engender or erase one’s sense of oneself.<sup>13</sup>

The possibility entailed here, then, is one that allows for precisely what trans is overwhelmingly used to denote: in David J. Getsy’s language, “capacity,” an unbounded openness that will not close around a demarcated exclusionary limitation.<sup>14</sup> If trans is a capacity often affixed to gender (but not reducible to gender), there is a way to think alongside trans as a mobilizing gesture, or a modality, that does not succumb to Western parochialism. Trans might allow for diasporic coalition because it does not abide strict boundaries that qualify one for a certain type of personhood or civic affiliation that thus bestows upon them certain rights and privileges. Trans, perhaps, broadens the ambit through which those who are marginalized can find (under)common (demonic) ground—a nod, of course, to Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Katherine McKittrick—via a subversive posture that critiques the stifled confines of violent normativity, dominant notions of sex among them.

**ES:** I might summarize this question as, what can we learn from trans sex? Though elided in the recent #metoo and #timesup transnational conversations on sex, trauma, and embodiment, trans political activism has long pulled the curtain back on gendered and heterosexist assumptions about sexual violence. Trans folks being denied entrance to toilets, access to domestic violence shelters, and participation in play parties all spin on normative narrations of who can experience sexual violence and expect it to be recognizable as such. I would say that any invocation of “predatory behavior” needs to be read with a trans studies perspective to identify how cisgendered norms dictate the narrativizing of what is sexual, what is violence, and how these conceptions are gendered and raced. For trans people, #metoo communal healing has long coalesced around rage at being asked what your genitals look like, what kinds of surgeries you’ve had, how you have sex, and

anger at having your chest groped or clocked, assuming you are up for it with anyone, or being treated like a sexual experiment. Hypersexualization of trans feminine subjects has been de rigeur for medical treatment: see debates about “autogynephilia,” the specious category invented by nontrans medical researchers to invalidate sexually active trans women from accessing body modification. Meanwhile, sexual agency has been denied all kinds of trans persons who are assumed to shunt their libidinal desire into transforming their bodies. Further, practices of transitioning are often framed by gross assumptions of self-inflicted sexual violence, a kind of acting out of self-hate leading to mutilation of the body’s sex.

In light of these twisted and damaging discourses about trans sex that restrict our thinking around and experiences of trans sexualities, I have sought to see and hear other versions of trans sex presented in trans cultural production. My decade-long focus on trans pornographic experiments considered the importance of porn as pedagogical (look, these combinations of bodies and bits are possible) and of porn as political (look, *these* combinations of bodies and bits are possible). Back in 2003 I first brought the question to trans porn of why take the risk of showing what to some might be an incongruent body? Having personally navigated the risks of potential misreading by physically exposing myself and my partners (in porn?), the pornographic genre conventions of maximum visibility seemed like a red-hot zone of ontological uncertainty. The point is, I’ve learned, it is: porn is not the whole domain of sexuality, thank goodness, but it does constitute an arena for writing social scripts and mapping choreographies that hook into lived socialities and sexual/erotic habitus. Studying the histories of pornographies teaches us how varied and richly complex the grammar of these scripts has been, and how generative ontological uncertainty can be. Porn is the place where the “domain of the sexual” is exported into a format that can be shared widely. Like any other kind of text, it serves as a communal reference point for those who have read it and even influencing those who haven’t but who feel the effects of its scripts and choreographies in the habitus of others. For these reasons alone, of course trans pornographies have been a vital source of world building. Further, what I have learned from trans sex exported into this format, into the porno genre, is that sex is a technology for suspending, splitting, shattering, healing, that is, growing an erotically charged sense self. In the face of cultural norms that deny and shame the *sex* in transsex, porn is a place where we can say both fuck yes to our bodies and fuck no to cultural dictates that shun the place of sex in our transitions.

*If materiality might be said to have dropped out of queer theory (with its post-structuralist focus on discourse and social constructionism), could we say that trans theorizing has brought scales of matter back into the realm of queer theory?*



*How do we do so without essentializing or reducing trans and trans studies to the body per se or to certain trans bodies? And relatedly, what do technologies, broadly speaking, have to do with trans materiality? How can trans studies contend with its status as a corrective to queer theory?*

**JGP:** One of the important differences between queer and trans studies has been around the insistence of the material. And as the field of the material has widened to include a rich scale of matter in recent years, it is tempting to construe trans studies' preoccupation with materiality—especially bodily materiality—as a corrective to queer theory's abstractions. That would overread the separateness of the two fields, including a misrecognition of their entangled histories. At the same time, though, queer theory's long-standing figuration of transness and trans people as the apotheosis of gender's internal trouble has reenacted that corrective narrative within queer theory itself.

One way to tackle that tendency is to better contextualize its origins, some of which are not about the two academic disciplines. The gay and lesbian project of depathologization, for instance, that heated up in the 1970s around the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* was able to accomplish its goals through affirming a gender normativity that intentionally left the "abnormal" trans or gender-nonconforming body behind. As gay and lesbian subjects were able to somewhat abstract themselves out of the marked embodiment of the medicalized or pathologized, trans people became even more figurally burdened with the materiality of a visible body, one to be studied, incarcerated, and administrated. As queer theory has since expanded the purchase of *queer* well beyond gay and lesbian, the catachresis of the sexual, and even the antinormative, this has all accompanied the increasing incorporation of queer subjects and queerness into state- and capital-facing projects of biopower, citizenship, imperialism, and war making. It's not that trans people and transness have always been innocently excluded, or are entirely separate from those historical processes, but there does seem to be a difference in some of the references for the urgent political demands made by the two fields because of the asymmetries of homonormativities and transnormativities in how they imagine what it means to be figured as especially material, or particularly reduced to the material body.

**MB:** I hesitate to think of trans studies as a corrective per se to queer studies. I certainly understand this phrasing, and think it has apt resonances, but I wonder if the language of *corrective* is best, at least for my purposes. I might venture to experiment with the language of, echoing Susan Stryker's "evil twin" metaphor, trans studies as queer theory's "demonic spawn," demonic in a Luciferian sense, the sense of a radical criticality, and even more in a Black feminist sense of a schematic indeterminacy linked to the

absented presence of the nexus of Black and femme.<sup>15</sup> Trans studies as queer theory's demonic spawn, as trans studies is at least loosely indebted to queer theory (though, like with our parents, we can have some major disagreements), makes room for a different kind of relationship that does not rely on the rhetoric of *correct* or *incorrect* and finds solace in reworking, retooling, revising, and departure. (It also bears making explicit that I am not claiming that there was no trans studies, much less transness, before queer theory appeared on the scene. Rather, my terminology indexes the resonances between the two, the kindredness, the concatenation.)

Where queer theory advanced a sense of antinormativity as the golden child of its theorization, as it were, trans studies might (and I mean *might*) be said to advance a nonnormativity, the distinction of which from antinormativity is one in which the *anti-* indexes a militant rejection or reactive opposition, whereas the *non-* references, for me, a subversion, a decline to state that refuses the very logics that structure the ability to say yes or no. Trans studies offers me that, the tinkering and refusal that cares less about opposing the hegemonic on its own terms and much more about subverting the hegemonic by way of living life on another terrain. So it does not “correct” queer theory with a red pen, drawing Xs over falsities; it writes long comments in the margins and forgets to even grade the test.

More to the language of the question at hand, I do like the language of *scales* of matter, as it resonates with a previous response of mine. The question becomes, how do we hold or caress bodyness without possessively owning a particular conception of it, a conception that very often approximates what Sylvia Wynter calls an oppressive, hegemonic “genre of being human”?<sup>16</sup> That seems to be the challenge, one I cannot answer fully in this short response. My initial answer might be that material scales, as an analytic purview, are not obsessed with a fixed notion of what matter is, a materiality that is transparent and unmediated; scales of matter, to my mind, allow for degrees of opacity and bodily epistemic scrutiny. I do not think we can know “the body” in its entirety, or without a degree of uncertainty as to what the body might be (able to become). And that is a good thing, I want to think.

**TB:** This question strikes me as importantly related to our conversation about the subject in/of trans studies. Despite all the ways that trans studies (and indeed, the very idea of transgender) has been reduced to the body, I'm still reluctant to assume that consideration of matter and materiality necessarily leads to that oversimplified association. I think it is possible that careful study of materiality could be one avenue to expanding trans studies' purview.

When we study sex hormones as material substances, for instance, they can illuminate some of the ways that “trans” is produced and regu-

lated as a legible subject, particularly but not exclusively through law and medicine. But careful attention to these substances entails reckoning not merely with their use for, by, or against trans-identified people. If we consider how synthetic sex hormones are produced and circulate transnationally, across bodies, borders, and marketplaces, then we also begin to trace the kind of affinities that Eliza references above as the “power in articulation.” Engaging these material substances demands that trans studies grapple with such topics as reproductive justice, environmental destruction, migration, and struggles over borders and land, in ways that—as the material and political histories of synthetic hormones themselves show—cannot be reduced to certain trans bodies, or perhaps even to “the body” as it is commonly understood.

**ES:** I feel I must reference first my intellectual training, particularly the lineage of psychoanalytical queer theory that considered the immaterial status of the phallus with all its knock-on material consequences within white supremacist, ableist heteropatriarchy. In its jocular consideration of having, being, or fucking with the phallus, queer theory referenced my material life directly. Much like Heather Love insisting on bodily histories couched in the identity of lesbian, I find myself entirely attached to terms like *dyke*, *fag*, and *butch queen* that index gendered, sexual, cultural trajectories. In the classroom what I preach is the gospel of queer commentary, that prophetic analysis wrought by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their cheeky 1995 essay, “What Can Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” where X indexes an algebraic opening for anything. Queer shows that what seems specific (my dyke life) is actually general (confessing the truth of sexual identity is integral to modern subjectification). If we speak of scale, then queer commentary is best at scaling up from human to society and showing the links between structure and superstructure. Here I am giving queer theory’s capacity a Marxist and psychoanalytical bent.

Though not explicitly raised in the question, the conceptual work around how to name *trans* or *trans\** seems to me where much thought has been invested into the proper scale of transgender studies. Whereas *trans* on its own mainly references a bodily identity and its timeline, *trans\**, affixed by a typographical opening, insists on more scales traversed simultaneously. This asterisk is the little star in critical life studies, as Susan Stryker and I have written in our successful bid for the Duke book series Asterisk. Trans studies insists on specific multiplicities of aggregated embodiments, affects, technics and poesis. The asteriskial glyph is a “little star” that takes the form of several intersecting, outward-reaching arms that simultaneously mark a particular point of convergence and point toward an encompassing unmarked space of potential that teems with a theoretically limitless number of possible objects of attachment. It visually signals the continuance of

thought and action vis-à-vis a link to something other, to some different context. We follow Walter Benjamin's notion that ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars; that is, that constellations are not rigid systems but creative perceptions that draw relations among objects. As such, the starry asterisk reminds us to attend to nonrepresentational modes of analysis of the atmosphere around transness. It asks the reader to bear in mind this *and* that, in the manner of the Deleuzoguattarian definition of multiplicity that insists not just on considering the elements and the sets but on considering the connectors that bind those sets and elements as well. I hope this makes clear that for me the scale of trans can reach the cosmos.

A last thought: field formations tend to emerge from the jostling or bumping up against one another of competing ideas. In this regard, the sibling rivalry narrative overlaid onto trans and queer theory has some truth and substance. Although I'd not want to hazard a clear line of demarcation around the question of material or of scale, I might stick my neck out to suggest that trans analytics have (historically, though not universally) a different set of primary affects than queer theory. Both typically take pain as a reference point, but then their affective interest zags. Queer relishes the joy of subversion. Trans trades in quotidian boredom. Queer has a celebratory tone. Trans speaks in sober detail. Perhaps the style of trans studies has been for the most part realist, but this should not be mistaken for base materialism. Even speculative thinking requires enough detail to launch into new realms.

**MB:** To address the question of technologies: among many things, technologies provide the capacity to be, become, and do things that may not have been possible within the confines of what is surely inaccurately called *nature*. From electronic technologies to somatechnics, technologies enable, and it is an enabling that can thrust outward in myriad ways that can be read through variegated valuations. This is thus to say that insofar as gender is cast binaristically, technologies, broadly speaking (we must not succumb to thinking that medical technologies are the only things that, validly, can usher one into trans(gender) subjectivity), can enable other kinds of gender embodiments. Technologies can usher in other-than genders.

**ES:** Although imperfect, I'm fond of apparatus theory launched within the context of film theories of spectatorship for how it reminds us to bear in mind the multiple components of technologies in a state of interaction. The setup of the projector, screen, celluloid, editing, room with seats, dimmed lighting—and then spectators plug in, bringing along their own ideologies that play out in tension or happy coincidence with the cinematic space. Technologies must be spoken of in specificity to understand how they become leveraged into different political ideologies. This is why feminist and dada filmmakers, and all the different movements that challenged pat

commercial setups of the filmic apparatus, attacked and adjusted these different elements and levels of what as a whole might be called the film apparatus. So, too, with hard and soft technologies directed toward morphological transformation and its narration in a public space. Technologies, broadly speaking, compose trans materialities; they orchestrate the means to decompose and derange them too.

I want to second Marquis's nod to Nikki Sullivan's insight into the cis-centric valuation of bodily modifications that tend to be validated if they affirm cultural norms and are disparaged when appearing countercultural.<sup>17</sup> Sullivan insists on making a comparative appraisal of trans materialities engineered from typical surgical procedures with a wider array of bodily modifications, to point to the human condition of expressing life through what she calls transmogrification. Many trans scholars have written about how trans materialities have been constituted by discursive regimes that empty out autonomy, and the possibility for self-determination, from trans-marked procedures. For example, Dean Spade's essay "Mutilating Gender" opens with a joke that an elective procedure like rhinoplasty could be considered a deep-seated pathology that follows the "when did you know you were a small-nosed woman trapped in a large-nosed body" normalizing clinical in-take script.<sup>18</sup> I point to the cinematic apparatus and cosmetic plastic surgery to demonstrate that, while the cuts are made in either case, the organizing technologies of politics, value, and the concept of what a body is (and is for) makes all the difference.

## Notes

1. Bhattacharya, "Transgender Nation and Its Margins."
2. Sharma, "Shared Agenda?"
3. Restar, "Methodological Critique."
4. Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 96.
5. Malatino, "Future Fatigue Trans Intimacies," 652.
6. Malatino, "Future Fatigue Trans Intimacies," 656.
7. Moten, *Black and Blur*, vii.
8. Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 11.
9. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"
10. Stryker, "Thinking about 'Gender in Spatial Terms.'"
11. Rand, *Ellis Island Snow Globe*, 85.
12. Kim, "Toward a Crip-of-Color Critique"; Schalk, "Critical Disability Studies as Methodology"; Minich, "Enabling Whom?"
13. Green, Benner, and Pear. "'Transgender' Could Be Defined out of Existence under Trump Administration."
14. Getsy, "Capacity."
15. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xxiv.
16. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 269.
17. Sullivan, "Transmogrifications."
18. Spade, "Mutilating Gender," 315.

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