

Whither Trans Studies?

A Field at a Crossroads

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Abstract In the face of incisive and important critiques by Andrea Long Chu, Emmett Harsin Drager, Che Gossett, and Eva Hayward, this article proposes that trans studies is a field at a crossroads. It can slide further into irrelevance by continuing to promote *trans-* as an abstract prefix of crossing, or it can become relevant to trans people by focusing on the material heterogeneity of trans populations, histories, and epistemologies. The article sketches out some of the rich and exciting directions the latter inquiry could take. With reference to particularly generative proposals by graduate students in this issue, it argues that trans and gender-variant life is a more than sufficient basis for the field.

Keywords trans studies, field formation, trans history, Black trans women, global South

It was August of 2021, one week before the start of the semester, and my syllabus composition had hit a wall. I had proposed a graduate seminar titled “Trans Epistemologies.” My goal had been to expose, for students, the bourgeois Western epistemology embedded within the term *transgender*, and then to see, experimentally, what alternative epistemologies we could derive from contemporary trans literature, ballroom culture, trans history, and the anthropology of gender variance. The proposed syllabus, I was discovering, was far too ambitious. The problem was not only that the reading list was stretching on and on; it was also that it included precious little work by actual trans scholars in trans studies.

I shifted gears abruptly, throwing that syllabus in the virtual trash bin and beginning again with a document titled, “Whither Trans Studies?” My new goal was less to teach the field than to teach emerging scholars where the field might be capable of going. I began by introducing students to the process by which first *transsexual*, then *transgender* anchored the institutionalization of *gender* more broadly. I focused each subsequent unit around a “fissure” in the field—a gap, contradiction, or unthought problem where a young scholar might stake an intervention. This wasn’t hard to do: the field was full of them.

This situation wasn't entirely the fault of the precious few trans studies scholars lucky enough to have landed an influential position on the tenure track. Those "lucky" few were frequently overburdened, particularly if they were women and/or of color. Dealing with life as a trans person was hard enough; dealing with life plus academia was more than many could bear. In earlier years, universities viewed trans scholars with little interest and much transphobia. While the student demand existed, the field itself was simply not perceived as having much intellectual capital. Trans scholars, with their confusing pronouns, icky bodies, and incessant (let's not say "hysterical") complaints and demands, might just be more trouble than they were worth. As a result, trans studies, though born as a named field shortly after queer theory, languished behind its celebrity sibling, starved of resources and personnel. Academia's snap judgment about the field became a material reality. If you don't give a field a chance, it can't grow. The persistence of trans studies throughout those years was largely due to Susan Stryker's indefatigable will.

Lately, however, there have been signs of change afoot. In fall of 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and a broken academic job market, no fewer than six tenure-track jobs were announced with trans studies as their primary area of expertise. Graduate student interest in trans studies is higher than ever before, and an energized and opinionated new cohort of scholars stand poised to enter academia. It may no longer be necessary for trans studies scholars to sneak in sideways via another field, as I did, or to transition after they obtain tenure-track jobs.

But for me, the real sign of change was Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager's (2019) "After Trans Studies." "Things are getting interesting," I thought on my first read. A field capable of dissent and debate, rather than what Chu calls "warmed-over pieties," is a field worth joining (103). But it wasn't just the article's polemic and satirical tone that got my attention. It was the fact that, thrillingly, I found myself nodding along with many of its analyses, analyses I had long thought too "impious" to be voiced in print: the field is anti-transsexual; the version of *trans* it celebrates is just *queer* all over again; the so-called method of *transing* is a joke, and trans new materialism, in its flight from trans people to the enchanting vibrancy of matter, exemplifies the problems with the field. *TSQ*'s decision to devote an entire forum, aggressively titled "After Andrea Long Chu" (Stryker 2020) to critiquing this article was intellectually conservative and politically bankrupt. Rather than attacking Chu (and remaining symptomatically silent about Harsin Drager), and rushing to the defense of the field, scholars might have asked why one of the most brilliant graduate students in the field, a trans woman at that, was leaving academia. Perhaps trans studies, as it stands, had little to offer her.

Nonetheless, I would characterize the current moment in trans studies differently than Chu. Rather than “over,” I would say that the field is at a crossroads. Will we be able to make the most of the current window of opportunity—which may well prove fleeting—to confront the problems Chu and Harsin Drager identify and to stake out an intellectually robust future for the field? Or will we drive the field into irrelevance by continuing to evaluate trans worth through the grid of queer values, critiquing or overlooking trans desires for normativity, stability, belonging, beauty, sexiness, and money, and cherry-picking and distorting trans people’s words and deeds to overinflate what is queerest about them?

Let me state it baldly: turning *trans* into either a gerund or a prefix that might add value to any noun was a devil’s bargain. This move responded to a palpable fear: that trans and gender-variant people were not enough. As Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Moore (2008: 11) admit, “We didn’t want to perpetuate a minoritizing or ghettoizing use of ‘transgender’ to delimit and contain the relationship of ‘trans-’ conceptual operations to ‘-gender’ statuses and practices in a way that rendered them the exclusive property of a tiny class of marginalized individuals.” *Trans* as prefix and gerund sought to grant the field a new lease on life, given the dearth of trans studies scholars, by borrowing the intellectual capital of scholars outside the field who were only too happy to play with *trans-* without having to discuss (or know anything about) trans people (Hayward and Weinstein 2015). For transing has little to do with trans life. The fact that trans people traverse genders and sexes does not mean that we are any more apt than non-trans people to cross other sorts of boundaries. Nor is crossing boundaries necessarily politically or intellectually desirable—we need only think of the history of intergenerational, interracial, and cross-class sex for a case in point (Amin 2017).

Toward the end of her conversation with Harsin Drager, Chu writes,

We’ve joked, in planning this dialogue, that if we *really* wanted to upend the pie-ties of the field, we’d ditch the topic we selected and just speak candidly about our lives as transsexuals, the way we might talk over dinner or text message. Of course, we can’t do that, not just out of academic decorousness, but because *the pages of TSQ would catch fire* before letting readers read something truthful about what being trans actually feels like. (Chu and Harsin Drager 2019: 113; my emphasis)

Indeed, thus far, trans scholarship has delivered precious little knowledge about trans life. Outside political idealization, the field has little to say about what it feels like to be trans and what trans people actually desire. Despite our commitment to

intersectionality, we trans studies scholars still know little about how race, class, and gender affect the qualitative experience and the meaning of trans life—other than as vectors of premature death and constricted life chances.¹ Despite the lip service we pay to Black trans women and femme queens, we have attended, as Victor Ultra Omni (2023) incisively points out, embarrassingly little to the richness of their lives, legacies, knowledges, and archives. What we need as a field is neither to run away from trans life nor to retrofit it to an existing schema of queer value, but to think even harder and more inventively about it.

Sooyoung Kim (2023) advocates “staying with the problem of history” rather than investing in the colonial progress narrative of trans politics. Indeed, scholars have hardly begun to ask the really important questions of trans history, such as, When and why did transness become an internal identity, and what was it prior to that? How and why did European and American colonial projects seize on binary sex as a rationale for rule when their own cultures hardly conformed to a sex binary? When did trans mascs and trans femmes begin to understand themselves as jointly trans, and in relation to whom did they position themselves before then? Why is transfemininity overrepresented in the colonial and anthropological archive, and transmasculinity relatively absent (if *trans* ought even be used here at all)? Outside a burgeoning body of excellent scholarship on the relation of transgender, *kothi*, and *hijra* in South Asia (Saria 2019; Dutta and Roy 2014; Jain and DasGupta 2021), the field has hardly begun to confront the increasingly urgent question of the globalization of *transgender* through nongovernmental organizations, medicine, and law, much less to ask how scholars can actively resist the use of *transgender* as a tool for the imperialist expansion of bourgeois Western epistemologies and forms of governance. Shiv Datt Sharma’s (2023) bold proposal that, beyond provincializing transgender, we might consider non-Western transness as a site of theory making indicates one promising future for the field.

Everything remains to be done. One starting place would be to reevaluate the entire anthropology and history of sexuality, which have always had gender variance at their center (Valentine 2007). How and why such forms of transness look very little like contemporary Western trans identity are questions that ought to be at the very center of the field.

In investing in trans* and trans-, scholars have reified mobile abstractions, contributing to the valorization of *trans* as a catchall that dangerously conceals the actual heterogeneity of trans life (Gossett and Hayward 2020). To confront this material heterogeneity directly would create the basis for a robust, interdisciplinary, intellectually vibrant field that actually matters to trans people.

Trans life is more than enough.

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Note

1. There are exceptions (see, e.g., Glover 2021), but there remains much work to be done.

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