After Trans Studies

ANDREA LONG CHU and EMMETT HARSIN DRAGER

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

Abstract This dialogue contends with the state of trans studies today. While the authors differ in their levels of optimism for its future, they both agree that if trans studies is to survive, it must be able articulate a fresh set of reading practices distinct from, or even at odds with, those of queer studies. Revisiting Sandy Stone's field-defining 1991 essay "The *Empire* Strikes Back," they note that trans studies paradoxically begins with a call to abandon the figure of the transsexual, imagined solely as a normative medical category. In contrast, the authors argue that the critical value of the transsexual lies precisely in her being an *obstacle* to romantic narratives of antinormative queerness.
Keywords transsexual, transgender studies, narrative emplotment, gender clinics, antinormativity

Andrea Long Chu: Let's face it: Trans studies is over. If it isn't, it should be. Thus far, trans studies has largely failed to establish a robust, compelling set of theories, methods, and concepts that would distinguish itself from gender studies or queer studies. Susan Stryker (2004) once wrote that trans studies was "queer theory's evil twin." She was wrong: Trans studies is the twin that queer studies ate in the womb. (The womb, as usual, was feminism.) What everyone knows is that queer theory has never had any qualms about arrogating gender as one of its primary sites of inquiry, and reasonably so, since trying to study sexuality without studying gender would be manifestly absurd. *Queer* has, from the get-go, described both gender and sexual deviance, and what's more, gender *as* sexual deviance and sexuality *as* gender deviance. From this perspective, trans studies is just an embarrassing redundancy—junk DNA.

In trans studies, there is nothing like the rich conversations about queer temporalities that took place in queer theory in the mid-aughts, or like the recent debates over Afro-pessimism in black studies, both of which owe a lot to polemics (Edelman 2004; Wilderson 2010) and their subsequent fallouts. Instead, we have warmed-over pieties. This is what happens when a massive offload of queer methods and concepts with the label TRANS hastily slapped over their expiration dates meets an influx of political capital courtesy of the current transgender identity

DOI 10.1215/23289252-7253524 © 2019 Duke University Press

politics. The result is something like church. But what matters, from the perspective of theory building, is strife. I'm very conservative when it comes to discipline formation. We need a small number of very good monographs that we can really yell at each other over. Can you think of a single significant debate in trans studies today? Bickering is everywhere, but true disagreement, the kind that births theories, is rare. Why are we so nice to each other? I think a lot of us are itching for a fight. "On Liking Women" (Chu 2018) was a desperate attempt to be disagreed with. In that regard, it's largely failed.

Emmett Harsin Drager: I cannot offer you the disagreement you are looking for, except perhaps to say that I do *not* think trans studies is over, in fact, I think it's potentially at a very exciting crossroads. I think that some of the most cited texts about trans people and in trans studies have been the work of non-trans (i.e., cis) scholars recycling the same citations, concepts, and metaphors.[1] What cis scholar is going to intervene and say, "Hey, I think we have this concept of dysphoria all wrong"? That's just not going to happen. Instead we get the same arguments for bodily autonomy, the radical potential of body modification or even worse, arguments from cis folks as to why social transition is as meaningful and transformative as medical transition. And even among trans scholars that are here in the field, no one wants to talk about how anti-climactic surgery really is or how dysphoria maybe never goes away. That would be seen as undermining our gradual march toward "progress." You cite Edelman as an example of the type of polemic we need. We are in the era of the trans child. It would be absolutely unfounded to imagine a trans studies scholar saying that perhaps, actually, trans children should not be given hormones. As a field we do not allow for those kinds of disagreements. Everything must be "gender affirming" (whatever that means).[2]

Trans studies is not over, but it does need to learn to stand on its own, not as an addendum or a hyphen or an asterisk to something else. I think that is exactly what we are here to discuss, how to make something out of this junk DNA.

For me, the problem of trans studies has been a problem of narrative. I have been highly influenced by scholars who think about the role of narrative in historical inquiry. As Hayden White (2000) has argued, all historical inquiry is shaped by narrative emplotment. An historical project must take the form of a plot; it is at its very core a story: a romance, a tragedy, a comedy, a satire (7). In David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004), he argues that the postcolonial is trying to use the same toolkit, or as he calls it "problem-space," as the anti-colonial. He suggests that while romance, a genre about triumph, was necessary for anti-colonial resistance, tragedy is a more apt genre for describing postcolonial modernity. In trans studies, it seems to me that we are telling a story of our victimhood (tragedy) or a story of our resistance (romance). I am much more interested in a satire, a genre about how truly disappointing and sometimes even boring it is to be a trans person

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

in this world. As White (2000: 8) argues, histories told as satires "gain their effects precisely by frustrating normal expectations about the kinds of resolutions provided by stories cast in other modes." This is our task, to write a trans satire.

ALC: I think you're exactly right to say that trans studies has a narrative problem. Or, I would suggest, trans studies has inherited queer studies' narrative problem. As *queer*, as an analytic, has reached a point of analytic exhaustion, queer-studies scholars have had to entertain other vehicles for the romantic fantasy of criticism as a radical political act, which *queer* has sheltered for the past twenty years. The big secret about trans studies is that its working definition of *trans* is just "queer, again." So this is what trans studies *could* offer: a safehouse for queer studies' endangered "political optimism," as Robyn Wiegman (2012) puts it. This is why most trans-studies scholars are, in fact, just queer-studies scholars especially susceptible to fads.

Consider, for instance, the paper that most scholars cite as their "method," in that introductory phase of a book, chapter, or article where scholars are most anxious to look as if they're taking a strong theoretical position: it's the introduction to a ten-year-old special issue of *WSQ*, whose editors reject "the implicit nominalism of 'trans'" in favor of "the explicit relationality of 'trans-,' which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix" (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 11). The basic idea is that transgender people, as a narrow identity group, can be a methodological stepping-stone for thinking more expansively about boundary crossings of all sorts: not just transgender, but also transnational, transracial, transspecies—you get the picture. And so the editors gift us with *transing*, queering's unasked-for sequel. Like most sequels, it's just *the same damn movie* with a few plot elements lightly rearranged. Anyone who says differently is lying. Do we seriously imagine that any graduate student from 1998—plucked, by the power of imaginative thinking, from the windowless basement cubicle where she takes refuge from the male professors who stand too close to her at holiday parties—do we seriously imagine that such a graduate student, having been asked to describe what it means to "queer" something, would reply, "Oh, it's about *firm boundaries*, and *stability*, and also *fixedness*."

But *trans satire*, I think, has the potential to become a real, substantive methodology—not rejecting narration as such (which is impossible), but trying to learn how to write without optimism, or maybe how to be optimistic without being hopeful. Then again, I do suspect that writing without optimism is also impossible, insofar as I am persuaded by Lauren Berlant (2011: 1–2) that "all attachment is optimistic, if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene." Perhaps what I mean, then, is writing without *political* optimism, that is, writing without the subsumption of all

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

optimistic attachment under the sign of the political. Call this a bitter optimism, maybe. Bitterness feels right to me as one of the primary critical affects of trans satire as we're imagining it here—not cynicism, which is a way of titrating bitterness until you can't taste it anymore, but real bitterness, the bitter disappointment of finding out the world is too small for all our desires, and especially the political ones. I know I'm bitter. I get the sense you are, too.

EHD: Trans studies' political optimism has been grounded in the figure of the posttranssexual. Trans studies has been largely shaped by "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1991), in which Sandy Stone tells a story about the university-based gender clinics and the development of a differential diagnosis ("gender identity disorder"). In Stone's version of the story, patients desperate to sneak past the medical gatekeepers, would rehearse and perform a false or inauthentic record of their lives in order to qualify for sex-reassignment surgery. They would circulate among themselves copies of Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in order to know what to tell the doctors in their intake interviews. Stone tells this story in order to highlight the rehearsed nature of trans self-narrativizing and autobiography and in doing so she gestures to questions of authenticity. She is concerned specifically with the collapsing of "emergent polyvocalities" (293) into one, medicalized narrative/discourse. Stone describes the trans body as "a genre—a set of embodied texts" (296). For Stone, medical hegemony reduces a multiplicity of lived experiences, embodiments, and identities into one story of transness (the "wrong body" narrative), one trajectory of embodiment (medical transition), and one identity category (the passing transsexual). Stone's manifesto calls for the transsexual to "forgo passing, to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud," and in doing so, embrace transsexuality as an intertextuality, a multiplicity of genres (299).

This history of the gender clinics, as Stone tells it, provides the foundation for a set of binaries that have become the core "problem-space" of trans studies for the last thirty years: authenticity versus inauthenticity, medical identities versus vernacular identities, and the transsexual versus the posttranssexual (i.e., the transgender). I don't think Stone intended to create these binaries, but regardless, this is how her article has shaped years of scholarship about trans genders, lives, and identities.[3]

Stone is specifically calling for a new kind of transsexual: a posttranssexual—or as I would argue, a nontranssexual. In her manifesto, a foundational text for the field, she urges us to tell our stories differently from the medicalized transsexual, establishing at the very foundation of trans studies the disavowal of the transsexual. And trans studies scholars have been myopically preoccupied with proving that we are no longer *that* ever since. There's an abundance of trans writing out there that I would describe as diagnostic, in the sense that the authors

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

will choose whatever trans autobiography or memoir or television show is popular at the time and demonstrate how it is different from trans narratives in the past (see, e.g., Beemyn 2006; Rondot 2016). Perhaps unwittingly, these authors are following the call of Stone by attempting to diagnose a narratological shift in which we go from being the medicalized story that Stone outlines, to a new kind of polyvocal, intertextual, recalcitrant posttranssexual. This is very much in the vein of the romantic genre. And in our diagnosis, we always want to prove that we are on the "right" side, or I would say, the "woke" side of the narratological shift.

For me, this project of incessantly trying to prove that we are no longer the medicalized transsexual is the very place where trans studies has lived and will die. It is an obsession with resistance and radicality that has severely limited our ability to fully understand trans pasts and presents. And this is why I am interested in returning to the fraught figure of the 1960s and 1970s transsexual, specifically the US gender-clinic patients or aspiring patients, to try to create a more robust history of trans that is not rooted in these binaries of vernacular versus medical and authentic versus inauthentic, but rather is full of messiness, contradictions, disappointments, and unexpected outcomes.

ALC: And it's no accident, I'd add, that the transsexual is the only thing that *trans* can describe that *queer* can't. The transsexual is not queer; this is the best thing about her. Take Agnes, the pseudonymous transsexual woman who famously posed as intersex at UCLA's Gender Identity Clinic in the late fifties in order to obtain access to vaginoplasty. Agnes's case was chronicled by Harold Garfinkel ([1967] 2006) in an article that's now taught in trans studies courses. (It's the sixth entry in *The Transgender Studies Reader*.) Agnes is regularly celebrated as some kind of gender ninja: savvy, tactical, carefully conning the medical-industrial complex into giving her what she wants (see, e.g., Preciado [2008] 2013: 380–89). What no one wants to talk about is *what she actually wanted*: a cunt, a man, a house, and *normal fucking life*. Whatever intuition she may not have had about gender as a "managed achievement" was put toward a down payment on a new dishwasher (Garfinkel 1967). If there's anything Agnes "reveals" about gender, it's that actually existing normativity is, strictly speaking, impossible. Norms, as such, *do not exist*. (If *Gender Trouble* knew this, it did a poor job explaining it.[4]) That doesn't mean that norms don't structure people's desires; what it means is that the desire for the norm consists, in terms of its lived content, in *nonnormative* attempts at normativity. Agnes was a nonnormative subject, but that wasn't because she was "against" the norm; on the contrary, her nonnormativity was what wanting to be normal actually looked like. Like most of us, Agnes was making do in the gap between what she wanted and what wanting it got her.

We can argue, and people have, about whether queer theory is possible without antinormativity (Wiegman and Wilson 2015). But whatever comes after

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

trans studies—can I suggest transsexual theory?—will be impossible *with* anti-normativity. The most powerful intervention scholars working in trans studies can make, at this juncture within the academy, is to defend the claim that transness requires that we understand, *as we never have before*, what it means to be attached to a norm—by desire, by habit, by survival.

EHD: I think you're precisely right about this idea that transsexuality is perhaps a key to understanding norms and how they function, which is exactly what I was trying to say about the pitfalls of only looking for stories that are of resistance or "radical politics." What interests me about the historical impulse is how much it is motivated by a deep desire to find people in the past who may have looked and lived like us. This is a project of finding community across time.[5] But, I ask, what do we do with the historical figures that we find that don't live up to our expectations? We want to find the Sylvia Riveras and Marsha P. Johnsons, but more often than not, we are going to find people that deeply disappoint us. What is our responsibility to them?[6]

For this reason, I was recently quite inspired by Finn Enke's *TSQ* piece "Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s" (2018) in which they ask why, despite all the various complexities of 1970s feminism, it is collectively remembered as simply noninclusive, antitrans, white feminism? Enke urges us to pay attention to collective memory and how often it is more a reflection of the present than of the past. They wonder, why we are so "perversely attached" to a legacy of second-wave feminism that frames this time as only a place of injury and victimization for trans people (17). I echo this by asking, why, as a field, are we so perversely detached from the transsexual? Despite the many heterogeneous, multiracial, multiclass, and transnational individuals who sought sex-reassignment surgery at the university-based gender clinics, somehow, these transsexuals (or aspiring transsexuals) are remembered quite monolithically, as white, middle-class, heterosexual (aspiring) trans women.

What I find so compelling about Enke's argument is that these moments, this history, *our* history "deserve[s] an analysis informed by a larger archive" (Enke 2018: 17). The fortunate thing about the university-based gender clinics of the sixties and seventies is that, due to their university affiliation, they have left behind staggeringly large archives. In regards to transsexual history, we can hardly complain of erasure and archival lack.[7] My own research into the clinics has found university collections to be rich sites for inquiry that challenge some of the core beliefs of trans studies (e.g., the very notion of "medical" identity).[8] "As historians and filmmakers have shown, trans women's and men's own words are readily available; it's possible to find and amplify the perspectives and lives even of people no longer with us, and to know them for their work and play, not just as lightning rods for transphobia" (Enke 2018: 12).

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

Just as you are interested in the question of what we do with people in our communities who have "bad politics," I am interested in what we do with figures of the past that are disappointing to us because they fail to live up to some kind of "radical" litmus test. This is really where our projects meet and overlap, in questions of negative affect and bad objects.

ALC: And there is no object worse than a woman. That's an operating assumption in all of my work. The problem with the transsexual is that she—and paradigmatically she *is* a she, especially if we're talking about twentieth-/twenty-first-century US culture more broadly—carries all the baggage of gender with her. Like many women, she overpacks. The problem with the transsexual is that she's always been too much of a woman. It's hard to make something as politically dowdy as a woman into a cover girl for that trendy new metaphysics you're hawking (see Hayward and Weinstein 2015; Colebrook 2015; Puar 2015; Bey 2017). It's become quite fashionable in the past twenty years to talk about *queerness* or *blackness*, and more recently *transness*, in an ontological way, often in Heideggerian tones. At the same time, it remains the case that being dumb enough to write a book about *womanness* would get you bounced from all the cool academic clubs faster than you can say "intersectionality." I am not arguing that anyone *should* be writing about womanness; I am simply pointing out that no one *could*, even if they wanted to, at least not if they wanted to get a job or a book contract in the current academic climate. Meanwhile, trans studies remains a field in which two men can sit around and debate the merits of *woman* as a political category (Green and Bey 2017). (Spoiler alert: They have their doubts.)

I was flipping back through Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" ([1985] 1991) recently, and I was reminded of how much antipathy she has for woman as a political category in that essay. (It's a sign of the times, for sure: she's writing in the early eighties, reacting against the thing we've been taught to call "cultural feminism," though I'm skeptical of that taxonomy.) The cyborg, as a new "myth," is intended as a way *out* of women, out of the universalism of the seventies, and potentially out of gender, period: "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (150).

And, of course, Sandy Stone was Haraway's student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Haraway's influence is all over "The *Empire* Strikes Back," which Stone (1991: 284) explicitly acknowledges. ("A Cyborg Manifesto" will actually make it into *The Transgender Studies Reader* in 2006, despite trans people playing no role in the essay.) I agree with everything you've already said about Stone's essay: I, too, harbor great ambivalence here. I note the connection between Stone and Haraway just to say that *posttranssexual* is not just an attempt to disavow transsexuality; it's also an attempt, like *cyborg* before it, to be *post-woman*. The claim is right there in her citation of *Gender Trouble*—just as, for Butler, butch/

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

femme cultures both recall and displace heterosexuality, so, for Stone, the transsexual both recalls and displaces womanhood: "In the transsexual as a text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries" (296). This is a *very* nineties move. Nothing could be more nineties than finding a figure that "reveals" the inner workings of gender.

I point this out because this suggests to me that what's happening in that essay is *not*—appearances to the contrary—that Stone is telling some authentic truth about the way it really feels to be transsexual (as she claims); what's happening is that Stone is, like most scholars of gender in the nineties (and the aughts, and our own decade), molding her object to fit her theory, which is not by coincidence the same as the then fashionable theory. In other words, the basic narratological *form* of the medical discourse—what Stone calls a "plausible history"—has in fact remained largely intact. All Stone's done is switch out the original *content* of that history (disease, diagnosis, cure) for a different content, namely, the prevailing elements of gender theory in the nineties (performativity, disruption, transgression). In fact, she's laying the groundwork for the long-standing intellectual move in which the trans person, just through the act of existing, becomes a kind of living incubator for *other people's* theories of gender. (Jay Prosser [1998] warned us about this in the late nineties. No one listened.)

EHD: This connection between the posttranssexual and the cyborg is an important one. The cyborg comes to be a stand-in figure for futurity, flexibility, techgender, hypermodernity, etc. and because the cyborg is essentially the posttranssexual, the transsexual is then relegated to the past. She is archaic and anachronistic.

It's quite interesting how the exact same medical procedures and technologies that have been utilized by the transsexual take on a completely new set of meanings in their posttranssexual rebranding as "gender confirmation surgery." In the same vein of "things people warned us about that we didn't listen to," I think we can turn to Nikki Sullivan's essay "Transmogrification" (2006), in which she warns against hierarchies of body modification. Not only do these hierarchies of moral judgements about good and bad types of body modification exist in dominant culture, they also take their own form in counter- or subcultures. Specifically, what I find to be key about Sullivan's argument is her critique of the idea that some types of body modification are made to reflect free will, critical thinking, and subversive politics while other types of body modification are made to symbolize indoctrination, false consciousness, and the status quo.

Despite the fact that Sullivan's essay did make it into the first *Transgender Studies Reader*, it seems most folks might have skipped that chapter; Sullivan didn't make the short list of texts that get cited ad nauseum in trans studies. Moral

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

judgements about body modification run rampant in queer and trans studies, all in the name of antinormativity politics. It's really sort of incredible to me, the vitriol that queer theorists have for phalloplasty. If your body modification looks too much like the original "transsexual medical genre," your queer cred is toast. So I guess *that* is something I'm bitter about—the way the transsexual body is the battleground for politics. And you know, it isn't just politics, it's also how body modification is taken up in theory. How can the *exact same* procedures sometimes symbolize, for queer theory, the Ghost of Genders Past and other times be the very foundation for new materialist theories of mutability, becoming, and enmeshment?

ALC: I'm very glad you bring up the new materialisms. For the purposes of this dialogue, I'll be agnostic about the new materialisms as a general trend: like all academic trends, some of it is good, more of it is bad, and most of it is boring. But I will say, without reservations, that the new materialisms represent the worst possible direction for trans studies to go in. In trans studies, which is so poor in theory to begin with, new materialist–style work somehow manages to take up a disproportionate amount of space while also, quite frankly, *not making a lick of sense*. That's always a scary claim to make in the humanities; the risk is always that one, having failed to comprehend the argument, is imputing that failure to the argument itself. The fallout is that we are very bad at calling bullshit. But bullshit there is. Do I dare to give you an example?

Sure. Take a 2015 article by Karen Barad published in *GLQ*. In this article, she assures us that she is not taking up trans "in an appropriative embrace of the latest theory trends" (413). Then she writes things like this:

> Matter is a wild exploration of trans* animacy, self-experimentations/self-re-creations, not in an autopoietic mode, but on the contrary, in a radical undoing of "self," of individualism. Ever lively, never identical with itself, it is uncountably multiple, mutable. Matter is not mere being, but its ongoing un/doing. Nature is agential trans*materiality/trans-matter-reality in its ongoing re(con)figuring. (Barad 2015: 411)

Trans is doing zero theoretical work in this essay; it is employed here purely as an au courant garnish on the same argument Barad has been making for years. I can prove this to you easily. Here's Barad in *differences* in 2012, doing her thing:

> Every level of touch, then, is itself touched by all possible others. Hence, self-touching is an encounter with the infinite alterity of the self. Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is. Polymorphous perversity raised to an infinite power: talk about a queer intimacy! (Barad 2012: 212–13; italics removed)

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

Now here she is making the exact same claim—she's straight-up recycling sentences, which she admits to in the notes—in 2015 (I've italicized the new bits):

> Every level of touch, then, is itself touched by all possible others. *Particle self-intra-actions entail particle transitions from one kind to another in a radical undoing of kinds—queer/trans*formations.* Hence self-touching is an encounter with the infinite alterity of the self. Matter is an enfolding, an involution, it cannot help touching itself, and in this self-touching it comes in contact with the infinite alterity that it is. Polymorphous perversity raised to an infinite power: *talk about a queer/trans* intimacy!* (Barad 2015: 399).

Well, which is it, Karen? Is matter queer or is matter trans? Both, of course, because for her, like for most people who claim to be working in trans studies, *queer* and *trans* are obviously synonyms. If I sound angry about this, good. I am.

But let's try to be nice trannies for a second. What work gives you cheer these days?

EHD: I am excited about Kyla Schuller's new book *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (2018) for the ways it pushes back on some of these theories of re(con)figuring and (un)doing that you and I both find so maddening. Through a history of science, she argues that impressions and impressibility (the ability to affect and be affected) are baked into the very structure of biopower and therefore the modern concepts of race, sex, and species. "Contemporary frameworks that seek to contest biological determinisms with flexible materiality do not escape the political legacies of liberal humanism—rather, they unwittingly recapitulate the conceptual apparatus of the biopolitics of feeling" (11). I am interested in the implications of what she is saying as it relates to trans theory, specifically the ways in which "trans" as both a prefix and verb has been used as a theoretical shortcut out of fixed binaries of the human. Schuller's argument is that plasticity was actually at the very core of racial science, biology, and heredity. The ability to be affected, to change and adapt and enmesh with one's environment, was actually seen as a marker of "civilization." In this framework, transing (i.e., boundary crossing) loses its purchase on radical politics.

ALC: As I've said, I can't abide transing. Verbing does not a theory make. But if we had to hang on to it, transing should be a methodology that would start from the premise that everyone's gender is a political disaster and refuse to fix it. I'm inspired here by Marissa Brostoff's (2017) recent essay on Caitlyn Jenner in *differences*—easily one of the best pieces of trans studies scholarship I've read in a long time, maybe ever. The claim is basically that Jenner is unwittingly engaged in a camp performance whose object is queer politics itself: just as the drag queen once revealed the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

fragile conventions of gender for Butler, so Caitlyn Jenner, with her timid, half-assed attempts at "trans activism" in her short-lived reality series *I Am Cait*, now reveals the fragile conventions *of the political as such*. It's a beautiful essay and a shrewd argument. I want more work like this, work that refuses both the pomp of antinormativity and the circumstance of the posthuman for something slower, smaller, more tuned in to the ways in which ordinary life fails to measure up to the political analyses we thrust upon it.

Of course, at some point, that line of thinking takes you out of the academy altogether. ('Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.) We've joked, in planning this dialogue, that if we *really* wanted to upend the pieties 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.

I exaggerate. A little.

Andrea Long Chu is a writer, critic, and doctoral candidate at New York University. Her writing has appeared, or will soon appear, in *n+1*, *Artforum*, *Bookforum*, *Boston Review*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *4Columns*, *differences*, *Women and Performance*, *TSQ*, and *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. Her book *Females: A Concern* is forthcoming.

Emmett Harsin Drager is a PhD candidate in the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. Emmett's dissertation, tentatively titled "To Be Seen: Transsexuals and the Medical Gaze," focuses on the university-based gender clinics of the 1960s and 1970s.

Notes

1. When I say trans studies I refer to the medical, cultural, aesthetic, and political theory that has come about since the creation of transsexual and transgender as identity categories in the mid-twentieth century. If *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker and Whittle 2006) and *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (Stryker and Aizura 2013) are to serve as examples of how trans studies is being constituted and understood, then we can see that a large bulk of the "canonical" texts in the field come from non-trans scholars. There are sexologists and clinicians like Harold Garfinkel, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Harry Benjamin; feminist theorists like Janice Raymond, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler; and queer scholars such as Gayle Salamon, Heather Love, and Marcia Ochoa. As Andrea says in this dialogue, trans studies is full of "queer studies scholars especially susceptible to fads." I challenge you to give me a list of every tenured trans scholar you can think of—don't worry, it won't take long, especially if you make it a list of trans of color scholars (I know

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

this because C. Riley Snorton once posed this challenge to me and I don't think I got beyond the number four). However, I should also mention that I am a member of a Facebook group of over five hundred trans-identified scholars currently working on their PhDs around the globe. Perhaps this is where some of my optimism about the future of trans studies is coming from.

2. I wrote this just weeks before Jesse Singal's (2018) piece on trans kids came out in the *Atlantic*. In that article Singal is making some of the interventions that I was claiming are impossible to make. While I think the article is mostly a heaping pile of garbage, a few of the questions he raises about trans kids are important. I think we need to be critical about who's treating trans kids, the clinical advice and options they're offering, and the role of (cis) parents in this whole process. However, the moment Singal's piece came out, it was quickly brushed aside, with Singal's cisness providing an easy out. Rather than engaging with any of the content of the article we could quickly dismiss him as a transphobe and move on. Nothing to see here!

3. I think one of the clearest examples of how these binaries have been taken up can be found in Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005: 53): "The production of categories is also different in different spaces: expert-produced categories ('the homosexual,' 'the invert,' 'the transsexual') are ultimately far less interesting or useful than sexual vernaculars or the categories produced and sustained within sexual subcultures." It seems that at the core of Halberstam's work is the intention to expand gender beyond any kind of binaristic thinking through highlighting gender-expansive identities; unfortunately, this is always done at the expense of the medicalized transsexual.

4. To be fair, Butler is well-aware in *Gender Trouble* that "gender norms are . . . impossible to embody." This impossibility is, in fact, the driving force of gender performativity as a "stylized repetition of acts" ([1991] 1999: 179). Yet her implicit assumption throughout *Gender Trouble* and later in *Bodies That Matter*, is that approximations of the norm can be divided into those that reconsolidate the norm and those that displace or resignify it. What is never adequately explained is how these two categories are to be told apart. The criterion for distinguishing them *cannot*, after all, be that the first set is normative whereas the second set is not; on the contrary, if norms are impossible to embody, then *both sets are nonnormative*.

5. In Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval* (1991: 1), she puts forth the concept of "a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between on the one hand, texts, lives, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other hand, those left out of current sexual categories now." Nayan Shah (1998) also writes about this desire to experience affirmation and validation in the face of alienation through history, specifically in a kind of seeking that is also rooted in race, ethnicity, and nationalism/diaspora.

6. These same questions can be asked about the detransitioners that Singal writes about, who we are so quick to dismiss because they do not fit into the narratives of transness that we want to tell.

7. In my own project I explore this question of historical erasure, specifically as it relates to the restricted and redacted case files of transsexual gender clinic patients. I follow the lead of scholars such as Anjali Arondekar (2009) and Abram Lewis (2014), who suggest that this notion of lack and erasure, when it comes it comes to archives of gender and sexuality, produces a methodology of recovery, in which we are always looking for that

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

which is missing in the hope of bringing it to light. This can be compared to Eve Sedgwick's (1990) "epistemology of the closet," a mode of thinking that upholds a binary of hidden versus revealed. This binary prevents us from more complex reading of the archives.

8. Perhaps this all could have been avoided if we had just listened to our queer historians:

> But it would be wrong to assume, I think, that doctors created and defined the identities of "inverts" and "homosexuals" at the turn of the century, that people uncritically internalized the new medical models, or even that homosexuality emerged as a fully defined category in the medical discourse itself in the 1870s. Such assumptions attribute inordinate power to ideology as an autonomous social force; they over simplify the complex dialectic between social conditions, ideology, and consciousness which produced gay identities, and they belie the evidence of preexisting subcultures and identities contained in the literature itself. (Chauncey 1982–83: 115)

References

Barad, Karen. 2012. "On Touching: The Inhuman That Therefore I Am." *differences* 25, no. 5: 206–23.

Barad, Karen. 2015. "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings." *GLQ* 21, nos. 2–3: 387–422.

Beemyn, Brett Genny. 2006. "Autobiography, Transsexual." *Glbtq.com* (blog), www.glbtqarchive.com/literature/autobio_transsexual_L.pdf (accessed October 1, 2018).

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bey, Marquis. 2017. "The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness." *TSQ* 4, no. 2: 275–95.

Brostoff, Marissa. 2017. "Notes on Caitlyn, or Genre Trouble: On the Continued Usefulness of Camp as Queer Method." *differences* 28, no. 3: 1–18.

Butler, Judith. (1990) 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.

Chauncey, George. 1982–83. "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance." *Salmagundi*, nos. 58–59: 114–46.

Chu, Andrea Long. 2018. "On Liking Women." *n+1*, no. 30: 47–62.

Colebrook, Claire. 2015. "What Is It Like to Be a Human?" *TSQ* 2, no. 2: 227–43.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. 1999. *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Enke, Finn. 2018. "Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s: Toward a Less Plausible History." *TSQ* 5, no. 1: 9–29.

Garfinkel, Harold. (1967) 2006. "Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an 'Intersexed' Person." In Stryker and Whittle 2006: 58–93.

Green, Kai M., and Marquis Bey. 2017. "Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation." *Souls* 19, no. 4: 438–54.

Halberstam, Jack. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024

Haraway, Donna. (1985) 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149–82. New York: Routledge.

Hayward, Eva, and Jami Weinstein. 2015. "Introduction: Tranimalities in the Age of Trans* Life." *TSQ* 2, no. 2: 195–208.

Preciado, Paul. (2008) 2013. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. Translated by Bruce Benderson. New York: Feminist Press.

Prosser, Jay. 1998. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Puar, Jasbir. 2015. "Bodies with New Organs: Becoming Trans, Becoming Disabled." *Social Text*, no. 124: 45–73.

Rondot, Sarah Ray. 2016. "'Bear Witness' and 'Build Legacies': Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Trans* Autobiography." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 31, no. 3: 527–51.

Sedgwick, Eve. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Schuller, Kyla. 2018. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Scott, David. 2004. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Shah, Nayan. 1998. "Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History." In *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, edited by David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, 141–56. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Singal, Jesse. 2018. "When Children Say They're Trans." *Atlantic*, July/August. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/07/when-a-child-says-shes-trans/561749/.

Stone, Sandy. 1991. "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." In *Body Politics: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, edited by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, 280–304. New York: Routledge.

Stryker, Susan. 2004. "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin." *GLQ* 10, no. 2: 212–15.

Stryker, Susan, and Aren Aizura, eds. 2013. *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*. New York: Routledge.

Stryker, Susan, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore. 2008. "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *WSQ* 36, nos. 3–4: 11–22.

Stryker, Susan, and Stephen Whittle, eds. 2006. *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Sullivan, Nikki. 2006. "Transmogrification: (Un)Becoming Other(s)." In Stryker and Whittle 2006: 552–64.

White, Hayden V. 2000. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Wiegman, Robyn. 2012. *Object Lessons*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wiegman, Robyn, and Elizabeth A. Wilson, eds. 2015. "Queer Theory without Antinormativity." Special issue, *differences* 26, no. 1.

Wilderson, Frank B., III. 2010. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/6/1/103/1570046/103chu.pdf by HUNTER COLLEGE LIB user on 14 May 2024