

Introduction

Trans Studies Now*

SUSAN STRYKER

This issue of *TSQ*, “Trans* Studies Now,” already somewhat dated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, is a child born of necessity. A planned issue experienced unavoidable delay, and given that we needed to pull together another one in short order, I gathered an assortment of work I found readily at hand. It offers less than a full-fledged “state of the field” and more of a casual snapshot that documents something about the moment, when questions abound about what trans* studies has become and what it’s doing, both in the academy and in the wider world, what it sees as it looks back and where its futures might lie.

Self-styled “writer, critic, and sad trans girl” Andrea Long Chu had a break-out year in 2019, including the publication here (with coauthor Emmett Harsin Drager) of “After Trans Studies,” which turned out to be the most-read article of the year for *TSQ* and among the top ten most-read journal articles of 2019 for Duke University Press overall (Duke University Press 2019). In recognition of that accomplishment, we’ve organized a special section of this issue, “After Andrea Long Chu,” to allow several authors to respond to various dimensions of Chu’s work. Cassius Adair, Cameron Awkward-Rich, and Amy Marvin’s “Before Trans Studies” offers a measured rebuttal of Chu and Harsin Drager’s *TSQ* article, while Jack Halberstam, in “Nice Trannies,” accords Chu’s self-consciously pugnacious and deliberately provocative style the sincerest form of flattery by delivering a bare-knuckled counter-punch of his own. Jules Joanne Gleeson’s review essay of Chu’s debut book, *Females*, situates that work in Chu’s rapidly expanding oeuvre as a public intellectual, while longtime trans activist Riki Wilchins uses Chu’s *New York Times* opinion piece about her impending genital surgery to reflect on what transgender studies doesn’t—but might—tend to say about the phenomenological experience of being a post-op trans woman in the contemporary United States.

The section “Institutionalizing Trans* Studies” takes the pulse of recent field-building efforts on behalf of an interdisciplinary transgender studies and possibilities for imagining trans studies otherwise in relation to other interdisciplinary formations. Cael M. Keegan draws from a spate of his own recent work on field formation to further reflect on how trans studies is “against queer theory,” not in the sense of being opposed to it but in the sense of being positioned fricatively adjacent to it. My own contribution to the issue recounts the fraught history of attempting to institutionalize trans studies at the University of Arizona. Madi Day offers an important reminder in “Indigenist Origins” that trans studies has many genealogies, not all of them rooted in settler colonialism, as they discuss the establishment of the first queer and trans Indigenous studies program in Australia. Members of the editorial collective of the *Somatechnics* journal discuss the intersections and shared history of trans studies and their own interdisciplinary investigations into the technicity of all embodiment.

“(Un)Disciplining Trans* Knowledges,” on how established fields do and don’t accommodate trans studies scholarship, is kicked off by Grace Lavery’s “Egg Theory’s Early Style,” which weaves together many of the themes touched on by other essays in this section while advancing sophisticated arguments about, among other things, a cis-centric queer theory’s inability to imagine transition. Robin Dembroff analyzes the worrisome rise of antitransgender perspectives in analytical philosophy in “Cisgender Commonsense and Philosophy’s Transgender Trouble,” while Travers offers an account of the “masculinity contest culture” that contributes to a transmisogynistic bias against trans femininity and trans womanhood, both beyond and within trans studies. Ian Khara Ellasante asks the important and related question of whether trans studies is equipped to offer an affirmative intellectual, political, and spiritual home for many kinds of trans* difference in “Dear Trans Studies, Can You Do Love?” Joshua Aiken, Jessica Marion Modi, and Olivia R. Polk explore the growing nexus of black studies and trans studies in three interrelated “gestures” toward a common set of texts in “Issued by Way of the ‘Issue of Blackness,’” which takes the 2017 black trans studies issue of *TSQ* as its point of departure.

A section of conference reports profiles three recent trans studies symposia. In “Empire and Eugenics: Trans Studies in the United Kingdom,” Ezra Horbury and Christine “Xine” Yao contextualize their efforts to convene a trans studies symposium at University College London within (and in response to) the antitrans moral panic currently running rampant in the United Kingdom. Nicole Seymour reports on the 2019 “Trans ± Sex: Rethinking Sex/Gender in Trans Studies” symposium at the University of Arizona in her contribution, “Bad Dads and Precarious Grads.” Pamela L. Caughie and Emily Datskou document the transfeminist digital humanities praxis that informed their construction of the

Lili Elbe Digital Archive, which culminated in a remarkable symposium at Loyola University Chicago that simultaneously showcased the archive and enacted their values in a project that revolved around the legacy of a transfeminine person. In a related section titled “How to Do Things with Trans*,” McKenzie Wark curates and introduces work by Marquis Bey, Kay Gabriel, and K. K. Trieu from the “Trans | Acker Symposium” she organized at the New School, all of which exemplifies how critique and commentary from trans* perspectives—rather than about transgender topics—can offer fresh readings of literary works and the worlds in which they have been produced, specifically in this case the work of postmodern novelist Kathy Acker. The issue concludes with a commentary from medical anthropologist Sahar Sadjadi, MD, on puberty-blocking pharmaceuticals and book reviews by James McMaster, D-L Stewart, and Nicole Erin Morse.

In keeping with the theme of “trans studies now,” this issue of *TSQ* offers the perfect opportunity to announce changes to the journal’s editorial structure. This will be the last issue for which I will have primary editorial responsibility, as I step back from hands-on involvement at that level and step up to a new position as executive editor. Francisco Galarte will continue as coeditor and will move the journal’s editorial office with him to the University of New Mexico, where he is now assistant professor in the departments of American studies and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies. Joining him on the coeditorial team will be Abraham Weil, assistant professor in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at California State University, Long Beach, who has served as managing editor of *TSQ* since its founding, as well as two new coeditors: Jules Gill-Peterson, associate professor of English and gender, sexuality, and women’s studies at the University of Pittsburgh, and Grace Lavery, associate professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. The four of them will each have primary responsibilities for supervising the production of one issue per year, along with developing a consensus among themselves as to the overall direction of the journal. I will no longer have a public-facing role and will instead serve as primary point of contact with the press, tiebreaker in case of editorial deadlock, general in-house sounding board, and resident “granny tranny.” As I rotate entirely off the editorial team at the end of 2023 when I will have completed ten years of editorial service, Francisco Galarte will step into the executive editor role and will in turn be followed in that position by each of the other coeditors in succession, as new coeditors cycle onto the editorial team and the most senior member cycles off. In this way, we feel we can both foster continuity and preserve institutional memory, while opening the journal’s editorial vision to fresher and broader perspectives and connecting it more effectively to emerging scholarship and issues.

In this moment of editorial transition, as I look back at what this journal has accomplished and reflect on trans* studies now, I am struck most deeply and

obviously by the change in the political climate in which we do our work. The year we launched *TSQ*—2014—was the year of the so-called tipping point, when Laverne Cox appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, *Transparent* started streaming on Amazon, the Obama administration was actively defending transgender civil rights and health-care access, and liberal society seemed poised to offer at least the whitest and most normative trans people a seat at the table of social inclusion. It was the year the trans studies initiative at the University of Arizona hired its first three tenure-track lines. We in the field knew even then that the gains represented by those fragile beginnings were unevenly distributed and tied to a neoliberal politics of identity management, one that celebrated a patriotic “transnormative” citizenship while reproducing sharp violence against the most marginalized trans people and enacting “slow death” for most of the rest. From the outset, *TSQ* has offered its assessment of the political economy and the bio/necropolitical conditions in which trans lives transpire, even as we grasp to make sense of and respond to the heightened precarity of our lives as the neoliberal paradigm unravels and something worse tries to elbow its way into power.

That same year, 2014, witnessed mass resistance to homicidal antiblack police violence in Ferguson, Missouri, and the rapid expansion of the nascent Black Lives Matters movement in defiance to a rash of police killings of unarmed black men all across the United States. In this context there was a heightened sense of urgency—all the more pressing now—regarding the need for a deeper analysis of the relation of transness to whiteness, blackness, racism, and misogyny, especially in light of the bifurcated realities of Caitlin Jenner’s peaking celebrity, the accelerating wave of violence against black, brown, and indigenous trans women and transfeminine people, and the logical conundrums posed to dominant racial imaginaries by Rachel Dolezal’s claims of transracial identity. Over the years, *TSQ* has become an important venue for promulgating work in black trans studies and trans-of-color scholarship that has profoundly reshaped the field as it existed in the 1990s and 2000s. Alongside long-running efforts to carve out trans speaking positions in the games of power-knowledge, resist pathologizing medical frameworks that reduce the meaning of our lives to a symptom, and attend to feminist struggles over the consequences of sexual difference, the field increasingly foregrounds the recognition of gender as always-already racialized, experiences of fugitivity and fungibility as varieties of transness that transpire along axes not reducible to gender, and the unmarked whiteness of notions of bodily plasticity and capacity for transformation that have long been central to trans aesthetics and analytics.

While the journal’s critical attention to intersections of transness and ethnicity/race have drawn particular force from the political intensities that have characterized life in the United States in the Obama and Trump years, it speaks as

well to our determination to decenter the Northern, white, anglophone bias of trans scholarship. To that end, *TSQ* has featured a recurring content section featuring translations ever since its launch in 2014, solicited work in languages other than English and made ad hoc arrangements to support translation, aimed without always succeeding to have work by scholars outside the United States or on non-US topics constitute half of each issue, and offered special issues on decoloniality, translation, Asian trans studies, and “trans studies in las Américas.” Given that racialized gender is a crucial component of the heteropatriarchal capitalist world system for ordering bodies and lives, that it is part of settler colonialism, and that trans-ing gender transpires along contested vectors of flight from and capture by these apparatuses, it behooves us to understand with as much sophistication and clarity as we can muster how these operations of ordering and transiting function in different locations at different scales, how *trans-* itself functions as a logical operator within schemes of power, creating switch points for strategies of evasion and control.

The publication in 2014 of Sheila Jeffreys’s *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* appears in retrospect to mark an inflection point in the resurgence of a transphobic feminist discourse that had seemed on the wane for nearly a quarter century, and one to which trans studies has been perhaps too slow to respond, effectively dismissing it as an increasingly anachronistic and revanchist form of nostalgia best left to wither and die. *TSQ* did publish a special double issue titled “Trans/Feminisms,” specifically in response to Jeffreys’s book, but chose to showcase transfeminist work that refused to cede feminism to transphobes, rather than addressing so-called gender-critical feminism more directly. However noble that gesture may have been, it appears increasingly naïve in light of transphobic feminism’s increasingly close association with reactionary ethnonationalism. Transphobic feminism’s strangest bedfellow is the conservative global movement against “gender ideology” that positions transgender as an especially potent threat to “traditional values” or even—as in Pope Francis’s characterization of transgenderism as more dangerous than nuclear weapons, given its perverse destruction of biological reproductive capacity—to the continuation of human life. It scarcely matters if the transgender figure imagined by transphobic feminism and antigender ideology is a phantasm, like the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew, when it nevertheless serves the ideological purpose of uniting disparate social groups with disparate interests in service to a dominant mode of power that is detrimental to our very existence. Trans studies has the deepest imaginable stake, now and in the near term, in monkey wrenching this disquieting development as it continues to unfold.

Looking back over the seven volumes of *TSQ* that have been published since 2014, I see resources for living, even when they attend to matters of violence

and death. There is work on cultural production and artistic expression, work that recovers and reinterprets trans histories, work that critiques institutions and social policies and proposes better ones, work that intervenes in environmental practice, work that enacts new aesthetics, ontologies, epistemologies, cosmologies, and metaphysics. To cite my own contribution to this issue, I see the development of trans studies and the platform it is offered in *TSQ* as one small piece of infrastructure that might not only help keep actual trans people alive, but:

for using transness to learn and teach how we might better decenter human privilege in our cohabitation with the nonhuman world, extract all of our bodies from the coloniality of gender, untether ourselves from the racializing biopolitical assemblages that fasten on the flesh of us all in different ways, and heal from the wounded attachments to identity categories through which we live but that can thwart our collective work, in this moment of political, economic, and ecological crisis that demands our undivided attention.

In the words Paisley Currah and I chose as *TSQ*'s marketing tag line and motto when we launched it in 2014: "We're changing gender." The work in this journal changes gender. And changing gender is part of changing the world in ways that help us live in it, or die trying.

As I wrote this introduction in mid-February 2020, COVID-19 seemed a distant concern, Bernie Sanders was leading the race for the Democratic Party's nomination, an online controversy about *TSQ*'s "Trans Pornography" issue was months in the future, and George Floyd was still alive. By the time I made final copyedits in the summer of 2020, "Trans* Studies Now" had already become "Trans* Studies Then," and the choice of Gordon Matta Clark's deconstructed house as a cover image seemed more apt than ever. Who knows what the world, higher education, the field of trans* studies, and this journal will look like by the third quarter of 2020 when this issue sees print, around the time of what promises to be a contested US presidential election, in the midst of the pandemic and all its economic fallout, a hopefully ongoing antiracist uprising demanding abolition of policing and prisons, and the journal's revamped editorial structure? All we can do is work in the present and hope for the best.

While I have no better sense than anyone else of what 2020 will hold in store, I do know that as of this issue, *TSQ* has accomplished one of the goals Paisley and I set for ourselves when we launched the journal, which was to turn over a financially sound and thriving publication to a trans-of-color majority in the lead editorial positions, a majority of whom originated from or worked on topics outside the United States, by the time we ourselves stepped aside. That might not be enough, but it's not nothing. In closing, I'd like to celebrate

Francisco's continued leadership and Abraham's advancement now that he's joined the ranks of the professoriat, while welcoming aboard Jules and Grace, two exciting and accomplished scholars already making powerful contributions to the field. The journal is in exceptionally good hands, and I look forward to seeing what they and our contributors make of it.

Susan Stryker, executive editor of *TSQ*, is professor emerita of gender and women's studies at the University of Arizona and Barbara Lee Distinguished Chair of Women's Leadership at Mills College.

Reference

Duke University Press. 2019. "The Most Read Articles of 2019." December 23. [dukeupress.word
press.com/2019/12/23/the-most-read-articles-of-2019/](https://dukeupress.edu/tsq/article-pdf/7/3/299/1570379/299stryker.pdf).