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Comprehensive Exam, Topic III

Trans* Historiographies

Introduction: Historicizing Gender Nonconformity

This essay outlines approaches to the historiography of transgender and gender nonconforming people. From accounts of gender variance in antiquity to feminist/anthropological social constructionist theories of gendered formations, from surveys of transness since the medical institutionalization of hormone treatment in the 20th century to critical stagings of contemporary trans identities against dominant bioessentialist legal-historical paradigms, historicizations of gender transgression are as varied in their methodologies as they are in the social/political/geographic contexts they concern themselves with. Trans/ness, or the modern category of the transgender body/individual, is itself a relatively recent and extremely particularized designation of gendered identity/experience, and is often (in some schools of thought) considered to be emergent first from the mid-nineteenth century (with the technical medical-psychological phraseology of "the transvestite" or "transsexual") before becoming subsequently popularized in 1950s through sensationalist media narratives of "sex-change" operations, especially in the United States (Hickman 2021). In recent years, however, a considerable amount of scholarship has looked to complicate straightforward or teleological notions of transness as it has come to be overdetermined by the (often naturalized) historical specificity of the category's Western origins. In addition to work that examines the imbrication of transness with race, coloniality, class, sexuality, disability, animality, and other forms/categories of marginalized differentiation, this has included a reconceptualization of trans history from merely encompassing a recuperative search for historical antecedents or figures that embody seemingly "trans" identities (as much early queer theory and trans studies looked to accomplish) toward a renewed focus on the practices and processes by which gender and its transgression come to be understood, represented, and produced within their respective social schemata. This move towards "trans-ing analysis" (Sears 2014) has opened up a horizon of methodological possibilities for practitioners of trans/gender history.

The web of historiographical endeavors this essay constructs attempts to chart an assemblage of trans* histories as they have been articulated across queer and trans studies. Emergent from the nexus of affect theory and trans studies, trans* gestures toward the inclusive invocation of an assemblage of all words containing the prefix *trans*—a conceptual move against inertness, closure, and taxonomy (Amin 2020). While this essay's aims are admittedly much more modest than the expansive planes of potentiality that the asterisk professes to signal—in some accounts, the very "moving mattering" that constitutes being: affect, vitality, and/or transitivity itself (Hayward and Weinstein 2015)—I use the figuration of *trans** here in the same spirit as Clare Sears' aforementioned trans-ing of analysis, in the sense that it represents a refusal to offer predeterminations of trans/ness to any one historical situation of gender identity. Thus, for my purposes here, a historiography of trans* historiographies imagines transness beyond simple reductions to identity in an effort to highlight the fluid and ever-changing landscape of gender

transgression across time and place. This meta-historiography will examine this undulating terrain, giving primary attention to (1) early work in feminist, queer, and trans studies concerned with finding or resuscitating historical examples of trans/gender nonconforming individuals/identities, largely in response to dominant cis-/hetero-/homonormative narratives that either effaced transness in the service of claiming gay/lesbian identities and/or (implicitly or otherwise) positioned transness as having little or no historical precedent; (2) efforts to reexamine transness as process rather than identity in historiographies of gender expression, where the naturalized category "trans" is subjected to renewed scrutiny for its temporal/geographical contingency, against its ahistorical application to all forms of gender transgression; (3) decolonial and trans-of-color critiques that offer alterative histories of gender variance against contemporary Western (and often white) conceptualizations of "transgender"; and (4) modes of inquiry that grapple with the possibility of queer/trans futurities, particularly in the face of the perceived "nowness" of trans that permeates our contemporary political moment.

Figures, Antecedents

Despite the occasional positioning of trans studies as queer theory's "evil twin," in the sense that trans studies often willfully disrupts narratives that favor sexual identity labels (gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.) over categorizations of gender (Stryker 2004), much of the foundational terrain upon which historiographies of gender transgression rest emerges from early revisionist efforts to locate queer historical figures in a past which, until the latter half of the 20th century, had predominately been told through heteronormative recountings of sexuality and gender identity. Prior to the explosion of queer theory onto the American academic scene in the 1990s, scholars in lesbian and gay studies often dealt with transgender subjects in their historical accounts of gender nonconformity, albeit in considerably different terms than those now favored by contemporary trans scholarship. Works like Jonathan Katz's *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA* (1976), John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1983), and Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (1991), included descriptions of gender categories like the "passing woman," for example, referring to women for whom cross-dressing "promised economic independence as well as allowing lesbian couples to live under the guise of husband and wife" (D'Emilio 1983, 97), and who could, "despite their masculine masquerade, […] be understood not as imitation men, but as real women" (Katz 1976, 209). Accompanying such accounts were broader disciplinary shifts in feminist scholarship towards "gender history"—ushered in by landmark texts like Joan Scott's article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986) and, perhaps most famously, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990)—which stressed the importance of gender and its transgression/subversion as a lens to explore relations of sociality and power. These shifts were not without tension, as for some the rethinking of traditional models of understanding gender (in the historical record or otherwise) appeared to risk either invalidating women's history via the nebulous category of "gender" (as more conservative, and later 'trans-exclusionary,' strains of feminism would have it) or potentially rendering lesbian and butch women ("passing women") invisible under the generalized umbrella of "transgender," a concern within LGBTQ (and later, queer) studies constitutive of what Jack Halberstam (1998, 287) has referred to as the "border wars" (Boyd 2006; Skidmore 2021, 213).

The inverse of this concern was shared amongst trans writers as they began to author their own histories during the first wave of trans scholarship at the outset of the 1990s, as some trans historians worried over the potential occlusion of trans historical figures (especially trans men) by way of existing claims and reductions to lesbian or gay identities following nearly three decades of gay, lesbian, and queer scholarship (Whittle 2000, 15). In part as a response to this potential erasure, trans scholars (many of whom were activists without formal training in the academy) moved to construct historical genealogies of transness by locating people like them in the past. Activist-historiographical projects like Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (1996), Pat Califia's *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (1997), and Lou Sullivan's *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland* (1990) tasked themselves with "finding" transgender individuals in history, motivated by the oft-felt sentiment within trans communities that "no one like me seemed to have ever existed" (Feinberg 1996, 11). At the same time, the disciplinary coalescence and formal recognition of trans studies in the academy following the turn of the century (mirrored by a gradual "legitimization" of transgender rights movements in broader political/activist discourses) attempted to move beyond the terminological anxieties of the "border wars" in order to imagine trans pasts prior to the mid-twentieth century. Such efforts materialized across a range of transdisciplinary approaches to the historicization of cross-gender identification, from archaeologies (following Feinberg) that took seriously claims that "transsexualism has been a human problem since the most ancient times" (Erickson 1969, xi) "in every era, on every continent" (Valerio 2006, 2; cf. Weismantel 2013), to anthropological (re)conceptualizations of gender fixity (Bolin 1988; Cromwell 1999; cf. Valentine 2007), to inquiries into the medical-epistemological foundations of the sexed body, drawing on prior theorizations of historical scientific discourse (e.g. Mol [1985] 2015; Meyerowitz 1988; Laqueur 1990; Stone [1991] 2006; Butler 1995; cf. Foucault 1978).

Practices, Processes

Upon establishing the beginnings of a trans-historical archive by the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars working in trans studies during the first and second decades of the 20th century could afford to redistribute energies away from simply "finding" examples of trans people throughout history or rebutting antiquated medical pathologizations of transness, and toward both more nuanced accounts of historical gender-transgressive practices, as well as methodological critiques that problematized transness (or "the transgender") as an historical categorization that could be universally applied. Paving the way forward for such critiques were texts like Sandy Stone's "Posttranssexual Manifesto," which sought to reconsider the category of the "transsexual" and its attendant "textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body" in light of the restrictive and silencing work it often asked trans people to perform in order to access medical and legal procedures germane to their care (Stone [1991] 2006, 295). Attempting to mobilize the juxtaposition between medicalized trans embodiments and culturally legible configurations of the gendered body, Stone intended to "take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries," and thus move beyond transsexuality's medico-juridical/psychotherapeutic origins in order to forge methods of inquiry "whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored" (Stone 1991: 296). Similarly, Joanne

Meyerowitz's widely influential *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (2002) foregrounded the significance of transsexuality within broader discourses of social and scientific thought, placing the life and reception of Christine Jorgenson (generally understood as one of the first Americans to pursue gender "reassignment" surgery in Denmark) at the center of a narrative detailing the emergence of transsexuality from its origins as a medical category in early-twentieth century Europe to its more modern instantiations in American social activism. Both Stone's and Meyerowitz's projects thus opened up a range of methodological possibilities for (re)thinking gender transgressive historical practices, beckoning in a deluge of work that would examine the (co-)construction of transness alongside formations of race, class, sexuality, citizenship, and nationality, as well as temporality more broadly (e.g. Boag 2005, 2011; Sears 2014; Spade 2011; Stryker 2008, Currah, Juang, and Minter 2006; Valentine 2007; Mesch 2020).

Such efforts to articulate the variable and often contested nature of historical gendered construction(s)/transgression(s)/subjecthood have since become widespread (particularly in Anglo-American scholarship), from accounts of queer/trans gender categories in early modern and nineteenth-century America (Cleves 2014a, 2014b, 2018; Larson 2014; Fisher 2016; Skidmore 2017; Manion 2017, 2020) to works grappling with the radical alterities of premodern gender plurality (Mills 2015; Dinshaw 2019, LaFleur et al. 2021, DeVun 2021, Libby 2021, Alicia and Blake 2021, Goodrich 2023, Gordon 2024). The past two decades have also begun to witness the appearance of formal historiographies of trans studies/history as a discipline, a phenomenon Emily Skidmore (2021) has attributed to the field's "arrival" or maturation in her own historiographical account of writings on transness. Among these (and alongside Skidmore's) have been Genny Beemyn's article "A Presence in the Past: A Transgender Historiography" (2013), which appeared in the *Journal of Women's History* just a year prior to the inaugural issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (TSQ), the first academic journal of its kind; Rebecca Hickman's article, from a British vantage point, "What is 'Trans History,' Anyway?: Historiographic Theory and Practice in a Flourishing Field" (2021), which appeared in *Midlands Historical Review*; and, foundationally, historian Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* ([2008] 2017), which, in addition to charting an overview of trans history in the US, provided a survey of key "trans-relevant" terminologies. It is difficult to overstate Stryker's contributions to trans scholarship, as she has, across an astounding oeuvre of work and service both within and outside of the academy, been irreplaceably fundamental to the development, institutionalization, and legitimization of trans studies as a (now exceedingly vibrant) hub of knowledge production (see in particular Stryker 1994, 1998, 2004, 2013, 2020; 2024).

Globality, "Metronormativity," and Trans* of color Critique

In light of the Western (and especially North American) foci of much early work in trans studies and trans historical writing—as well as the historical/geographical specificity of the category "transgender"—a considerable amount of trans scholarship within the past decade has moved to mount critiques of the colonial/racial biases that often accompany discourses of and conceptualizations around gender-nonconformity and gender-variant practices. Such interventions have sought to articulate what decolonial feminist philosopher María Lugones has referred to as resistance to the coloniality of gender, or the "complex interaction of economic, racializing, and

gendering systems in which every person at the colonial encounter can be found" (2012, 77). Drawing on the work of decolonial feminists like Lugones, Emma Pérez, and Chela Sandoval, queer Indigenous scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, and Black feminist and queer scholars like M. Jacqui Alexander, Sharon Holland, Saidiya Hartman, and Lindon Barrett, decolonial and trans* of color critiques of transness and its canonical histories/archives/categories/geographies foreground the ways in which "trans people have always done political and theoretical work that centers the dynamics of imperialism, colonialism, and the multiple histories of racialization" (Retzloff 2007). As a result, such projects have required both the displacement and disruption of straightforward temporalities of trans experience and its histories, particularly where trans people of color are concerned (Aizura et al. 2014, 308; Stryker and Aizura 2013; Amin 2014; Fisher, Phillips, and Katri 2017; Snorton 2017; DeVun and Tortorici 2018; Pyle 2018, Gill-Peterson 2018a), as well as the explosion and problematization of the category "trans/gender" and its Western colonial overrepresentation in the service of demarcating space for a plurality of gender-transgressive practices/experiences, within which it might become possible to "(re)name, (dis)articulate, and (re)assemble the constituent elements of contemporary personhood in a manner that facilitates a deeply historical analysis of the utter contingency and fraught conditions of intelligibility of all embodied subjectivity" (Stryker and Currah 2014, 8). Work on geographies and configurations of gender transgression—and myriad other "geographies of selves," to invoke Gloria Anzaldúa (2015)—beyond Western contexts are now widespread, and spring from a vast array of inter-/transdisciplinary perspectives (e.g. Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997; Blackwood and Wieringa 1999; Towle and Morgan 2002; Reddy 2005; Ochoa 2014; Dutta and Roy 2014; Di Pietro 2015; Najmabadi 2013; Namaste 2011; Driskill 2011, 2016; Boellstorff et al. 2014; Chiang 2018; Edelman 2019, etc.).

The centrality of whiteness, as present both in misconceptions of gender nonconformity as a predominantly urban (rather than rural) phenomenon—what Jack Halberstam has referred to as "metronormativity" in the context of its reflection in queer scholarship (Halberstam 2005, 36; Howard 2001; Johnson 2013; Cleves 2014; Skidmore 2017; Gray 2009; Herring 2010; Tongson 2011; cf. Chauncy 1994, Stein 2004)—as well as in the construction of contemporary transgender subjecthood (see esp. Vidal-Ortiz 2014; Snorton 2017; Gill-Peterson 2018a, 2018b) has prompted a growing number of trans studies scholars to reimagine conventional histories of how transness and its antecedents have indexed and been/become intimately entwined with processes of racialization. While the full breadth of these projects would prove impossible to cover here (see, for example, Vidal-Ortiz 2008, 2009, Fisher 2016; Patrick 2016; Ellison et al. 2017; Krell 2017; Ware 2017; Durban-Albrecht 2017), chief among these have been works like C. Riley Snorton's indispensable *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), in which he investigates the confluence of anti-Blackness and transphobia since the mid-nineteenth century by elucidating the ways in which trans (as "a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival,") "finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness," just as blackness is "transected by embodied procedures that fall under the sign of gender" (2017, 2). Jules Gill-Peterson has taken up similar racial histories in thinking "trans before trans" (DeVun and Tortorici 2018), asking "how the overexposure of medicine as an available archive of transgender history produced an incalculable deflation of trans of color life's intelligibility" (Gill-Peterson 2018a, 607). Also notable is Gill-Peterson's work on historicizing both the global emergence(s) of trans misogyny—

even as, she notes, “Black, Brown and Indigenous trans-feminized people have often rejected the arrival of *trans* as a missionary force from the global North, or have been forced to work within its limiting parameters to survive” (Gill-Peterson 2024)—as well as notions of the trans child, through which she excavates the racial plasticity/formation of both gender and childhood as categories and advocates against “the etiological framing of trans children, whether by medicine, the helping professions, or the media” (Gill-Peterson 2018b, 33).

Conclusion: Queer[ing] Futurity—Whither Transness?

Indeed, as Gill-Peterson and others have drawn attention to, the particular crises of temporality signaled by contemporary discourses around trans children and childhood (where the transgender child—and transness in general—is construed as a resolutely modern phenomenon and thus possesses no history to speak of) invites interrogations into the contested nature of futurity as it comes to bear on trans* life. Amidst a political landscape that has turned increasingly hostile toward trans existence (especially in the United States), the imagination of trans* futures has arguably never been a more urgent project. This is not because trans* communities are somehow newly at risk of annihilation—trans* life has always persisted and will continue to exist, regardless of the medico-juridical dialects and legal whims of the state—but rather because trans* futurities intervene, as Jian Neo Chen and micha cárdenas remind us, in “what can be captured in the other natural, universal order of time considered dialectically opposed to the rational modernity of the heteropatriarchal settler colonial state, liberal civil society, and territorial national body” (Chen and cárdenas 2019, citing Mbembe 2003, Bruyneel 2007, and Derrida 1992). Transness, like Jose Muñoz has written of queerness, is “not yet here,” yet remains warmly illuminated against horizons imbued with potentiality (Muñoz 2009). Transness, too, often requires agonizing wagers be made in the face of uncertainty, evident in the cruel optimism(s) (Berlant 2011) of transition and its existential waiting games (Malatino 2019) and in the gravity of atmospheres all too heavy with wanton violence and trans death (Stanley 2021). To be trans* carries with it the weight of fraught historicities and the levity of utopian hopes; even the mundane (magical!) act of renaming oneself participates in imagining the radical possibilities of change, ushered in by poetry: giving “name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde 1984, 37). “To reconfigure one’s self in language—name and/or pronoun,” J de Leon suggests, “is to indulge in an idea of another way of being in the world, to imagine a way into or out of something binding, and to hold open space for a different sense of movement for one’s self instead” (2019, 621). It is in part this different sense of movement, of moving, and of moving differently that holds open the thresholds of trans* futurity.

If the trans* subject has so often been construed as a rupture in history, rendered, as Rita Felski has written, as “either apocalyptic or redemptive metaphor” (Felski 2006, 566), then the collective task of imagining trans* futures is imperative to the “now”; the fleeting, the ephemeral, the interstices of the *has-been* and the *as-yet-to-come*. Trans* life and its futurity thus fly in the face of what Elizabeth Freeman has called “chrononormativity,” as the social patterning of time in accordance with normative sociopolitical frameworks that, in turn, represents “a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts” (Freeman 2010, 3). At the same time as trans* (/gender, /sexual, /whatever else) resonates sympathetically with (and thus amplifies and generates) questions of radical transformation—of gender

transcendence or abolition, of post-, trans-, non-, in- and more-than-humanisms, of biomedical and technological revolution—trans* life, ever-fantastically, ever-modestly, *as-ever*, hangs in the balance. In the words of Juana María Rodríguez (2014, 187): "So let us be tender with one another."

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