



What is ‘trans history’, anyway?: Historiographical theory and practice in a flourishing field

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What is 'trans history', anyway?: Historiographical theory and practice in a flourishing field

Rebecca Hickman

Abstract

This article provides an overview of theory and practice in current trans historical scholarship. It delineates key historiographical discussions and examines their implications for one of the most controversial and long-standing questions in the field: when does trans history begin? It is argued that there are three prominent schools of thought in contemporary trans history — the Feinberg school, which views trans history as extending into antiquity; the medical school, which views it as beginning in the mid-nineteenth or early-twentieth century with the coining of 'trans' medical terminology; and the intersectional school, which shifts emphasis away from the question of when trans 'began' and towards a discussion of its social, cultural, and political entanglements alongside other forms of identity and oppression.

Keywords: Trans history, trans historiography; transgender, transsexual, LGBT+.

A note on names and pronouns: This article uses each author's preferred name at the time of writing. Some books and articles examined here were originally published under a different first name. The gender-neutral pronouns they/them and ze/hir are used where applicable.

Biography: Rebecca Hickman is a PhD History student at the University of Nottingham, funded by Midlands4Cities. Her research examines the role of 'recognition' in the British trans rights movement

Introduction

Since the first institutional shoots of what is now called ‘transgender studies’ emerged in the late-twentieth century, commentators have perennially called it an ‘emerging’ field. However, as Regina Kunzel argued in the first volume of the journal *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ)* in 2014, trans scholarship, with its own journal, several archival institutions, and a number of edited collections, is now better described as ‘vibrant, diverse, and flourishing’.¹ In addition to the general overviews provided by the two *Transgender Studies Reader* volumes,² more targeted edited volumes like *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory* (2010), *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies* (2012), and *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities* (2016), have seen trans scholarship — secure in its foundations — subdivide itself into specialist lines of inquiry. The maturation in the previous decade of trans of colour critique, one of the most intellectually progenitive elements in contemporary trans studies, has been punctuated by a 2011 volume of *Feminist Studies* titled ‘Race and Transgender Studies’ and a 2017 volume of *TSQ* titled the ‘Issue of Blackness’. There are still significant limitations, however — not least of which is the field’s geographic truncation. Of the various national and regional subsections, North American trans studies is, by some margin, the most institutionally developed, with a dominant share of the field’s major monographs, edited volumes, journals, archival institutions, and research/teaching positions.³

Trans history has undergone much the same developmental trajectory as the broader field. Some of the leading theorists in trans studies have been historians, while many of the seminal texts of trans scholarship are histories by discipline or at

¹ R. Kunzel, ‘The flourishing of transgender studies’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1 (2014), pp. 285-6.

² S. Stryker and S. Whittle (eds.), *The transgender studies reader* (London, 2006); S. Stryker and A. Z. Aizura (eds.), *The transgender studies reader 2* (London, 2013).

³ Most existing trans historiographies are consequently America-centric. See, for instance, G. Beemyn, ‘A presence in the past: a transgender historiography’, *Journal of Women's History*, 25 (2013), pp. 113-21.

least carry historically-oriented arguments.⁴ The centrality of history to this new academic ecosystem is attributable in part to the pressing question of where trans phenomena ‘came from’. Put simply, dispelling myths that trans is a ‘fad’ remains key to its historicisation. In addition to its political and cultural timeliness, trans history’s rise has also been aided by concurrent developments in trans archiving: most significantly, the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, Canada, the largest trans archive in the world, was founded in 2007, while the Digital Transgender Archive, a valuable and accessible resource with global reach, was launched in 2016. In the United Kingdom there are numerous institutions with archives partly or entirely relating to trans history, including the Museum of Transology, the Queer Beyond London Project, the Hall-Carpenter Archives, and the Bishopsgate Institute, as well as records kept by former or current activists. Trans-related files are also gradually becoming available at the National Archives, Kew, and oral history collections are growing in size and number.⁵ Given this growth in catalogued source material, efforts to codify a trans archival praxis have emerged to consider pressing methodological and ethical issues like the inclusion of pre-trans forms of gender-nonconformity under the label ‘trans’,⁶ and the handling of material that relates to living and marginalised people/communities.⁷ Trans historians beginning their research career today have the luxury of entering a field with an evolved praxis and an exponentially growing list of canonical texts.

The field has matured to such an extent that there are now recognisably distinct schools of thought within it. I will examine three of the most prominent schools here — which I will call the Feinberg school (after the pioneering American trans activist and historian, Leslie Feinberg), the medical school, and the

⁴ D. Valentine’s *Imagining transgender: an ethnography of a category* (Durham, NC, 2007), is a good example of this latter category. Another example is literary critic E. Heaney’s *The new woman: literary modernism, queer theory, and the trans feminine allegory* (Evanston, 2017).

⁵ E. H. Brown, ‘Trans/feminist oral history: current projects’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2 (2015), pp. 666-72.

⁶ R. Edwards, ‘“This is not a girl”: a trans* archival reading’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2 (2015), pp. 650-65.

⁷ M. Crandall and S. W. Schwartz, ‘Moving transgender histories: Sean Dorsey’s trans archival practice’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2 (2015), pp. 565-77.

intersectional school — and will argue that each group’s view of trans history ultimately stems from a fundamental disagreement about when the trans past actually *begins* (or, alternatively, whether there is any theoretical value in trying to pin down a precise trans ‘beginning’). Scholars from the Feinberg school envision a long chronology, believing trans identity and practice to be as old as humanity itself. Conversely, those in the medical school typically place trans history’s beginnings quite recently: either in the 1950s, when ‘sex-change’ stories became media sensations; or otherwise in the mid-nineteenth century, when the actual phraseology of transvestism and transsexuality was coined. Intersectional trans histories, though often focusing on the 1800s and 1900s, tend to shift emphasis away from the question of *when* trans history begins towards the question of *why* trans took over as the dominant mode of understanding gender-nonconformity.

Each answer is tied up with other fundamental questions, like the supposed ‘causes’ of trans, and each carries heavy political implications. For instance, if trans is ‘caused’ by inexpungible biological factors (a notion, it must be noted, that is rejected or problematised in many trans discourses⁸) or otherwise infused into the human condition, it follows that it is likely older than recorded history. Thinkers of the Feinberg school use the ‘fact’ of trans antiquity as the foundation stone for their campaign for respect and rights. Those who see trans as regressive or inimical to women’s ‘sex-based rights’,⁹ on the other hand, have argued that it is a new invention and that, having arisen from nothing, it can return to nothing with enough social and political pressure. Many of the theories discussed below are thus responses to immediate political contingencies. Indeed, from the beginning, the very existence of trans history has itself been a point of contention. Bombarded by condescension and erasure, early pioneers in the field were continually required to justify their own professional existence.

⁸ S. Stone, ‘The “empire” strikes back: a posttranssexual manifesto’, in K. Straub and J. Epstein (eds.) *Body guards: the cultural politics of gender ambiguity* (New York, 1991); J. Serano, *Whipping girl: a transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity* (Berkeley, 2007), pp. 95-160.

⁹ Women's Human Rights Campaign, ‘Declaration on women's sex-based rights’, <<https://www.womensdeclaration.com/en/declaration-womens-sex-based-rights-full-text/>>, accessed 10.04.2021.

I. Justification

Trans history had to overcome numerous theoretical and practical barriers in its early years. Emerging after at least three decades of gay and queer historical inquiry, for example, trans history had to contend with the fact that many potentially 'trans' historical figures had already been co-opted as lesbian or gay. This led some trans people to feel that 'their history was being taken away', particularly where trans men were concerned.¹⁰ Nan Alamilla Boyd observed that lesbian and trans communities 'share a common but sometimes hostile relationship to overlapping historical geographies', resulting in tempestuous discussions over whether certain individuals were butch lesbians or trans men.¹¹ Both claims could be seen as ahistorical in the sense that they impose contemporary concepts on figures who existed in different intellectual and discursive ecosystems from our own, assuming the existence of a transhistorical, underlying truth behind sex and gender that, as French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault argued in the context of hermaphroditism, has not always been regarded as ontologically necessary.¹² In that regard, neither can be characterised as 'correct', but nor should either be disregarded entirely. Lesbian and trans scholars draw different significances from historical gender-nonconformity because they are attempting to shed light on distinct aspects of the 'relationships of power'¹³ perpetuated via sexuality, sex, and gender. Trans scholars simply had the practical misfortune of coming second to the historical co-option game.

Even more fundamentally, various influential authors around the turn of the twenty-first century cast doubt on the historicity of trans and emphasised instead its futurity. For better or worse, trans temporality was widely seen as quintessentially

¹⁰ S. Whittle, *The transgender debate: the crisis surrounding gender identity* (Reading, 2000), p. 15.

¹¹ N. A. Boyd, 'Bodies in motion: lesbian and transsexual histories', in *Transgender studies reader*, pp.422-3.

¹² M. Foucault, 'Introduction' to *Herculine Barbin* (New York, 1980), p. vii.

¹³ J. Scott, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), p. 1067.

futuristic, having revolutionised our relationship with nature, medical technology, and time in a 'postmodern' world.¹⁴ Every trans life seemed to remove another brick from cultural and biological shibboleths once held inviolable.¹⁵ This perception came to a head in the 1980s and 1990s, when the concurrent rise of home computers and the Internet made the growing visibility of trans people seem like part of a broader post-structural ontological crisis in the digital age¹⁶ — a 'punk hyper-modernity', as Paul B. Preciado dubbed it.¹⁷

As befitting the era of existentialist science fiction films like *Bladerunner* (1982) and *The Matrix* (1999), some commentators borrowed sci-fi terminology to describe this disturbance in the order of things. Donna Haraway, a defining late-twentieth century feminist, argued that trans medical procedures were part of a new 'cyborg' humanity, heralding a 'post-gender world' where the organic and the artificial comingled.¹⁸ This was the final frontier of post-structuralism; a Rubicon; a brave new world where 'no amount of trying' could ever revive the perceived simplicity of the past.¹⁹ For some, like prolific trans historian Susan Stryker, 'posthuman' epistemology brought exciting new possibilities.²⁰ For others, including 'trans-exclusionary' feminists like Janice Raymond and Germaine Greer, trans identity represented an existential new threat to women's rights — an attempt by the patriarchy to undermine the political coherence of womanhood so as to undo the progress of feminism.²¹ Either way, as literary critic Rita Felski recognised, there was a tendency for trans and non-trans commentators alike to see the birth of trans

¹⁴ J. Sares, 'Postmodernism', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1 (2014), pp. 158–61.

¹⁵ S. S. Montefiore in *The Daily Telegraph*, 'Sex change teacher is living proof of technological advance', 12 January 2001.

¹⁶ S. Stryker, *Transgender history: the roots of today's revolution (revised edition)* (New York, 2017), p. 44.

¹⁷ P. B. Preciado, 'The pharmaco-pornographic regime: sex, gender, and subjectivity in the age of punk capitalism', in *Transgender studies reader 2*, p. 269.

¹⁸ D. Haraway, *Simians, cyborgs, and women: the reinvention of nature* (London, 1991).

¹⁹ S. Whittle, 'Guest editorial', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 7 (1998), pp. 269–72.

²⁰ S. Stryker, 'My words to Victor Frankenstein above the village of Chamounix: performing transgender rage', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1 (1994), pp. 237–54.

²¹ J. G. Raymond, *The transsexual empire: the making of the she-male* (London, 1979); G. Greer, *The whole woman* (London, 1999).

temporality as a rupture in history. Felski notes that, as the third millennium approached,

gender emerge[d] as a privileged symbolic field for the articulation of diverse fashionings of history and time within postmodern thought. Thus the destabilization of the male/female divide is seen to bring with it a waning of temporality, teleology, and grand narrative; the end of sex echoes and affirms the end of history.

Accordingly, Felski writes, the transgender subject is portrayed as ‘either apocalyptic or redemptive metaphor’.²²

Swept away by the intoxicating futurity of the new millennium, few cisgender²³ scholars stopped to wonder if there was a longer trans story to tell. In this discursive context, the contention that trans *has a history* at all was revolutionary. Indeed, proving the existence of a trans past became a key method for justifying trans people’s right to live as they see fit in the present. This is why early historical works by trans authors read more like political manifestos than Rankean scholarly texts. Faced by the erasure of trans existence from mainstream consciousness, social disenfranchisement, and often physical violence, several trans authors responded with a simple, powerful message: trans people have *always* existed, and we *therefore* deserve rights. This argument has been extant for over half a century. As early as 1969, trans man Reed Erickson wrote that ‘transsexualism has been a human problem since the most ancient times’²⁴ — but it acquired new momentum with the publication of Missouri-born Jewish trans activist Leslie Feinberg’s book, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, in 1996. Having grown up wondering if gender-nonconforming people have historical precedent, Feinberg began hir journey of discovery in the 1970s after seeing statuettes of Two-Spirit people at the Museum of the American

²² R. Felski, ‘*Fin de siècle, Fin du sexe: transsexuality, postmodernism, and the death of history*’, in *Transgender studies reader*, p. 566.

²³ Defined by Oxford Languages as ‘denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.’

²⁴ R. Erickson, ‘Foreword’, in R. Green and J. Money (eds.), *Transsexualism and sex reassignment* (Baltimore, 1969), p. xi.

Indian in New York. Ze discovered that, in ‘far-flung cultures all over the world’,²⁵ from ancient Greece and Egypt to pre-colonial India, Africa, and America to medieval France and industrial Wales, there have been individuals who existed outside of the modern man/woman binary. *Transgender Warriors* co-opts many of these historical subjects as essentially proto-trans — embodying the fundamental characteristics of trans as we know it, but, in Feinberg's Marxist view, lacking the impetus to politically organise as a distinct community before 'patriarchal class divisions' had fully taken hold.²⁶ The belief that trans is a recent techno-capitalist invention is therefore turned on its head. By arguing that ‘transgender predates oppression’ by thousands of years, and that ‘ancient communal societies held transgendered people in high esteem’,²⁷ Feinberg lays claim to the legitimisation of antiquity for an otherwise embattled and marginalised community.

Feinberg's work was understandably popular. ‘Trans people have always existed’ is a simple, rhetorically impactful, and easily replicated contention. Even as criticism of this mode of trans historicisation mounted in the late-2000s and 2010s, drawing attention to the historical contingency of trans temporality and the problems inherent in applying modern labels to fundamentally different times and cultures, popular and academic authors alike continued to cling to Feinberg's methodology. German-American poet and filmmaker Max Wolf Valerio, in his 2006 memoir, argued that people like him ‘have always existed, in every era, on every continent’.²⁸ And in 2013, anthropologist-archaeologist Mary Weismantel published an impassioned plea for a ‘transgender archaeology’ that would perform ‘a queer rampage through prehistory’. This was presented as an exercise in reclamation, since, Weismantel argues, prior archaeologists lacked the analytical tools to understand gender-liminality or extra-binary existences and therefore failed to do justice to gendered temporalities alien to the modern Western binary. ‘It is as if the

²⁵ L. Feinberg, *Transgender warriors: making history from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston, 1996), p. 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-53.

²⁷ L. Feinberg, *Transgender liberation: a movement whose time has come* (New York, 1992), pp. 5-6.

²⁸ M. W. Valerio, *The testosterone files: my hormonal and social transformation from female to male* (New York, 2006), p. 2.

premodern past had to wait for transgender scholarship to arrive', she wrote.²⁹ That trans has always existed in one form or another is therefore axiomatic.

As discussed at greater lengths below, the dictum of trans antiquity remains a powerful force in trans scholarship to this day. It does not, however, hold a monopoly over trans historical imaginations. It has long competed with the medicine-centric narrative that places the beginnings of trans history somewhere between 1850-1950 — the period when medical professionals, particularly sexologists, coined the terminology of trans and popularised the notion that trans was a pathological or intersex condition that could be treated with a specific set of therapeutic, endocrinological, and surgical procedures. This narrative largely takes from Foucault's conceptualisation of the early days of Western medicine, when an 'immense will to knowledge', as he put it, brought new epistemological categories into being so as to give order and coherence to the world.³⁰ Medicine-centric narratives argue that the origins of trans history proper can be traced directly to this milieu.

II. Designation

Many of the foundational texts of trans studies — texts that pre-date the field and provided the theoretical building blocks from which it was built — concern themselves with the role of medical knowledge in the conditions of modernity. Most obviously, Foucault's work on 'biopower', which refers to the means by which the state gains 'access even to the body' to regulate the behaviour of its citizens,³¹ and 'epistemes',³² the epistemological systems that define how we catalogue the world around us and conceptualise (im)possibilities, is often regarded as elementary to subsequent trans analysis.³³ Foucault pays particular attention to the justification and perpetuation of invasive state regulation via medical authority in contemporary

²⁹ M. Weismantel, 'Towards a transgender archaeology: a queer rampage through prehistory', in *Transgender studies reader 2*, p. 321.

³⁰ M. Foucault, *The history of sexuality, volume 1: an introduction* (London, 1978), p 55.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³² M. Foucault, *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences* (London, 1989).

³³ S. Dea, *Beyond the binary: thinking about sex and gender* (Ontario, 2016), p. 14.

society, a subject of immediate concern for trans writers. Another oft-cited work is Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1990), from which trans scholars take the lesson that the modern 'incommensurable' categories of sex came about through medical science's 'discursive creation of difference' in the nineteenth century, and that they 'are not the necessary, natural consequence of corporeal difference'.³⁴ It was against the cultural backdrop of this medico-scientific episteme that sexologists like the German pioneers Magnus Hirschfeld and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs discussed theories to explain deviations from binary sex. Modern trans designation was coined at this time and gained in popularity throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Just as pioneering lesbian and gay historians placed great emphasis on the modern medical origins of labels like 'homosexual',³⁵ many trans historians have understandably taken this period as their starting point. Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (1980), is an influential example of medicine-focused trans history, looking at the pathologised category 'transsexual' and the emergence of gender 'reassignment' procedures in the United States in the twentieth century.³⁶ There have also been historical studies looking at the development of medical ideas in Britain. Clare Tebbutt, in particular, submitted a doctoral thesis to the University of Manchester in 2015 titled 'Medical and Popular Understandings of Sex Changeability in 1930s Britain', which shows how the growth of endocrinology shifted both professional and popular beliefs about the fluidity of sex and created the conceptual space for 'trans' to exist. Adrian Kane-Galbraith, a PhD candidate at the University of Washington, is examining the entanglement of bureaucratic and medical practices in British gender transition between the Second World War and the 1970s.

Howard Chiang could be seen as the current standard-bearer of the medical school. His recent book, *After Eunuchs: Science, Medicine, and the Transformation*

³⁴ T. Laqueur, *Making sex: body and gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p.198 and 243.

³⁵ M. McIntosh, 'The homosexual role', *Social Problems*, 161(1968), pp. 182–92.

³⁶ J. Meyerowitz, *How sex changed: a history of transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 1980).

of *Sex in Modern China* (2018), narrates the replacement, in early-twentieth century China, of an episteme mediated by traditional Chinese medicine with one mediated by modern gender-dimorphic Western medicine. Chiang argues that the way the Chinese word *xing* came to be equated with the Western biomedical notion of sex 'reflects a broader underlying transformation in its epistemological designation of human nature: from the rock-solid essence of things into a mutable ontological referent'.³⁷ He coins the term 'epistemic modernity' to describe this new worldview.³⁸ It was under the auspices of epistemic modernity that eunuchs, integral to the courtly culture of Imperial China, came to be regarded as symptoms of a national backwardness, a disease, in the Republican and Communist eras. By the mid-twentieth century, Chiang argues, Western notions of 'transsexuality' had replaced eunuchs as the dominant mode of understanding gender-liminal people, handing doctors the 'alleged authority [to] unlock the secret of sexual identity'.³⁹

While *After Eunuchs* offers valuable insights into how the 'modern' Western biomedical episteme interacted with non-Western epistemes, it is lacking in key areas which point to the general shortcomings of the medical school of trans history, with its focus on trans temporality's dependence on the conditions of modernity that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. First, despite the book's attentiveness to epistemic specificity, there is a surprising laxity in Chiang's use of terminology. In one paragraph he refers to the same individual as 'transgender', a 'cross-dresser', and a 'transvestite', with no indication as to how these terms should be differentiated. Additionally, some of the book's more innovative points are underdeveloped. For instance, Chiang insists on the agency of eunuchs in their own 'social and cultural reproduction' through the finding and raising of new eunuchs and through passing down their customs,⁴⁰ subverting the view that physical castration automatically discounts reproduction. However, he does not carry this point forward to insist on the agency of trans people in

³⁷ H. Chiang, *After eunuchs: science, medicine, and the transformation of sex in modern China* (New York, 2018), p. 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

mid-century to mediate the contours of their own identities. Instead, Chiang gives primacy to medicine and the state, creating the impression that trans existence was impossible outside the walls of the clinic.

To be clear, scholars of trans medical history do not argue that trans as it now exists is *purely* a medical phenomenon, still less that all gender-nonconformity is only explicable through a medical lens. Chiang, for instance, specifically warns against 'the assumption that the nature of the historical relationship of sex to science was fundamentally fixed so that an undisguised view of *xing* (as sex) was merely waiting to be acquired'.⁴¹ Rather, the medical school argues that trans phraseology and phenomenology itself arose from the specific sexological milieu of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and cannot be separated entirely from this historical contingency. The problem is that, in privileging medical discourses, the agency of trans people themselves is often obscured. Their nonconformity seems to derive entirely from their interactions with medicine, rather than being dialogically formulated, negotiated, and affirmed and only later being identified and diagnosed with reference to medical concepts. It was partly in response to this shortcoming that another strand of trans historiography gathered pace in the 2000s and 2010s. This school largely took its inspiration from postmodern intersectional feminist thought and places trans within a much wider nexus of interlocking identity forms and oppressions, principally race and racism.

III. Intersection

Intersectional and trans of colour trans history had a long incubation. One key aspect of its worldview can be traced directly to the postmodern feminist theorising of Judith Butler in the 1990s. Her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), is used as the basis for viewing gender as 'performative' and therefore malleable, rather than biologically infused. Almost immediately upon publication, as literary critic Jay Prosser observed, *Gender Trouble* (*GT*) ran away from Butler. Despite the fact that *GT* barely mentions trans

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 13.

people and is more concerned with drag, it still ‘transformed transgender into a queer icon, in the process becoming something of an icon of the new queer theory itself’.⁴² In order to fulfil this role, the original ‘underwent a certain overreading, playful exaggeration, [and] mischievous adding of emphasis’.⁴³ Readers latched onto buried sentences about gender being a ‘*stylized repetition of acts*’,⁴⁴ and paid little attention to Butler’s post-*GT* interventions, in which she warned against seeing gender as a free-for-all.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the atomised version of *GT* took deep hold in trans studies, as demonstrated by Susan Stryker’s reading of performativity in her introduction to the first *Transgender Studies Reader* (2006):

To say that gender is a performative act is to say that it does not need a material referent to be meaningful [...] is not subject to falsification or verification, and is accomplished by “doing” something rather than “being” something. A woman, performatively speaking, is one who says she is. [...] The biologically sexed body guarantees nothing; [...] it has no deterministic relationship to performative gender.⁴⁶

Belief in the performativity of gender became a necessary precursor to later critiques of the Feinberg and medical schools of trans history. If trans is neither a distinct set of practices and characteristics that can be traced into antiquity, nor a biologically or neurologically intrinsic trait, but rather something that is performed, socially reproduced, and perpetuated in relation to changing cultural norms, then the issue of its social utility as a category of otherness becomes more important than its ‘causes’. Giving primacy to social analysis, in turn, prompts questions about how trans interacts with other categories of identity and oppression, like race, disability, class, and sexuality — in a word, its intersectionality.

⁴² J. Prosser, ‘Judith Butler: queer feminism, transgender, and the transubstantiation of sex’, in *Transgender studies reader*, p. 259.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁴⁴ J. Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (London, 1990), p. 191.

⁴⁵ In particular, see the emphasis on the ‘citationality’ of sex in J. Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of sex* (London, 1995).

⁴⁶ S. Stryker, ‘(De)subjugated knowledges: an introduction to transgender studies’, in *Transgender studies reader*, p. 10.

Often traced back to the Combahee River Collective Statement in Boston, 1977,⁴⁷ and codified in an article by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989,⁴⁸ intersectional feminism resists totalising narratives that collapse complex human experiences of oppression into a unidimensional narrative, and advocates instead an analysis of the ways that different oppressions interact to create unique experiences. Intersectionality is widely associated with ‘third wave’ feminism, a loosely-defined signifier that came of age in the 1990s in response to the second wave’s much-critiqued analytical limitations in relation to race and class.⁴⁹ British sociologist Shelley Budgeon conceptualises the third wave as promoting individual ‘empowerment’ within an individualist ‘culture of the self that endorses self-invention, autonomy and personal responsibility’.⁵⁰ Intersectionality distils this belief in the heterogeneity of human experience into a focussed analysis of *how* differing experiences are shaped through the interaction of various strands of privilege and oppression. It is also closely associated with Black feminism and feminism of colour.

Even before intersectionality’s formal integration into mainstream feminist theory, recognition of the overlapping nature of oppressions was, by necessity, central to Black British feminist analysis.⁵¹ It is fitting, then, that intersectionality was primarily introduced to trans historiography via trans of colour critique. As Ellison, Green, Richardson, and Snorton put it in their 2017 *TSQ* article ‘We Got Issues: Towards a Black Trans*/Studies’, Black trans theory provides impetus to investigate ‘repressed genealogies that might come into view through a more sustained engagement with blackness’. It questions, among other things, teleologies of

⁴⁷ Reproduced in B. Smith (ed.), *Home girls: a black feminist anthology* (New York, 1983), pp. 264–74.

⁴⁸ K. Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics’, *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), pp. 139-167.

⁴⁹ K. Mahoney, ‘Historicising the “third wave”’: narratives of contemporary feminism’, *Women’s History Review*, 25 (2016), pp. 1006-13.

⁵⁰ S. Budgeon, *Third wave feminism and the politics of gender in late modernity* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 284.

⁵¹ B. Bryan, S. Dadzie, and S. Scafe, *Heart of the race: black women’s lives in Britain* (London, 1985); H. S. Mirza (ed.), *Black British feminism: a reader* (London, 1997).

‘progress’ and ‘solidarity’ that push trans of colour history aside while erasing the cultural contexts in which other forms of gender liminality exist(ed). Stryker and Currah argue in their introduction to the *TSQ* issue ‘Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary’ that ‘transgender — grounded as it is in conceptual underpinnings that assume a sex/gender distinction as well as an analytic segregation of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression [...] [is] simply foreign to most places and times’.⁵² Trans of colour critique refuses to perpetuate the erasure of these histories in favour of Western whiteness.

Transgender Day of Remembrance, founded in 1999 as an annual memorial of lives lost to anti-trans violence, has proved to be an instructive focal point of scholarly attention. Sociologist Jin Haritaworn coined the term ‘trans necropolitics’ to describe the process by which trans murder victims are martyred and turned into utilities for the mainstream trans political movement. Haritaworn and C. Riley Snorton point out that ‘trans women of color act as resources—both literally and metaphorically—for the articulation and visibility of a more privileged transgender subject’. This process is ‘cannibalistic’, since it is only ‘in their death that they suddenly come to matter’.⁵³ Sarah Lambale has commented similarly upon the inappropriateness of white trans people ‘taking the voice of the other as our own’. In doing so, Lambale writes, ‘we colonize the bodies of the dead’.⁵⁴ This colonisation also entails the appropriation of significant events in trans of colour history as deracialised ‘gay’, ‘queer’, or ‘trans’ events — most notably the Stonewall Riots in New York, 1969. First colonised as a white gay riot, over time it was overtaken by another myth, as Jessi Gan explains, ‘that all transgender people were most oppressed and most resistant at Stonewall (and still are today)’. This myth could be ‘circulated and consumed [in] the service of a liberal multicultural logic of recognition’ that privileges white transness. It was only when an historian

⁵² S. Stryker and P. Currah, ‘General editors’ introduction’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1 (2014), pp. 303-4.

⁵³ C. R. Snorton and J. Haritaworn, ‘Trans necropolitics: a transnational reflection on violence, death, and the trans of color afterlife’, in *Transgender studies reader 2*, pp. 71-4.

⁵⁴ S. Lambale, ‘Retelling racialized violence, remaking white innocence: the politics of interlocking oppressions in Transgender Day of Remembrance’, in *Transgender studies reader 2*, p. 40.

interviewed the Puerto Rican-Venezuelan drag queen and trans activist Sylvia Rivera in the early 1990s that the integral role of gender-nonconforming people of colour at Stonewall became widely known.⁵⁵

Various scholars have also called into question the Feinberg school's perennial use of 'other cultures' as historical proof that transgender people have always existed. As Native American studies scholar Deborah A. Miranda has explained, the Western hegemonic culture from which 'transgender' emerged is the very same culture which committed 'gendercide' against gender-nonconforming people during colonisation.⁵⁶ Those identity forms that survived are now subject to efforts by the trans umbrella to claim their history as its own. Thus, as Nael Bhanji has elaborated, trans identity 'carries its own imperialist baggage', which manifests in Western-centric scholarship on 'other cultures' as 'a veritable buffet of exotic (trans) sexuality' wherein 'a rotating chain of marginality tends to be pitted against an unstated, white, Western norm'.⁵⁷

By drawing attention to the oppressions and marginalisations fused into and perpetuated through trans temporalities, trans of colour critique fundamentally altered trans studies in the 2010s. Intersectional trans history synthesised elements from the Feinberg and medical methods, arguing that while identities, ways of life, and practices outside the Western gender binary *have* always existed, it is the specific political, social, and medical circumstances of the last two hundred years that have enabled them, on an ontological level, to be grouped together as 'trans'. In this new iteration of trans history, the key objective is not to claim all historical gender-nonconformity as trans by default, nor to trace all forms of gender-nonconformity back to a common medical discursive modality, but to ask *how* and *why* trans took over as the dominant mode of understanding

⁵⁵ J. Gan, "'Still at the back of the bus": Sylvia Rivera's struggle', in *Transgender studies reader 2*, pp. 292-3.

⁵⁶ D. A. Miranda, 'Extermination of the *joyas*: gendercide in Spanish California', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 16 (2010), pp. 253-84.

⁵⁷ N. Bhanji 'Trans/scriptions: homing desires (trans)sexual citizenship and racialized bodies', in *Transgender studies reader 2*, p. 513.

non-normative gender, and to identify what impact this had upon the dialogical possibilities of gendered expression.

Jules Gill-Peterson's ground-breaking book, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (2018), is an influential and passionately argued example of the intersectional/trans of colour approach. Gill-Peterson's analysis of trans children's interactions with gender identity clinics in the United States dating back to the Interwar Years demonstrates, firstly, that children often developed their own autonomous sense of who they were long before hearing about trans medical theory, and secondly, that once they were under medical supervision their minds and bodies resisted efforts to make them fit one of the two available gender categories. This suggests that, while gender-nonconforming children do not typically get to choose the diagnostic words that are applied to them, they do play an independent role in defining what those words mean socially, subverting medical definitions with self-made forms of expression.⁵⁸ They themselves are not 'made trans', so to speak, by medical diagnosis or intervention, but their identities are rendered intelligible to broader society as *trans*. Trans terminology, once popularised and placed in the hands of the diagnosed, left the sole control of medical doctors and came to be infused with new meanings and possibilities, as can be seen in the heated debates over the definitions of 'transvestite', 'transgender', and 'transsexual' in the pages of *Transvestia*, an international magazine by and for trans people that circulated from the 1960s to the 1980s.⁵⁹ This process resembles the 'looping effect' theorised by Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking, whose work on 'human kinds' stresses the dialogical back-and-forth through which feedback from the diagnosed ultimately affects the discursive contours of the diagnosis itself.⁶⁰

C. Riley Snorton authored another seminal text in this vein. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) delves further into the construction of

⁵⁸ J. Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the transgender child* (Minneapolis, 2018), p. 94–5.

⁵⁹ R. Hill, 'Before transgender: *Transvestia*'s spectrum of gender variance, 1960-1980', in *Transgender studies reader 2*, pp. 364-79.

⁶⁰ I. Hacking, 'The looping effects of human kinds', in D. Sperber, D. Premack, and A. J. Premack (eds.), *Causal cognition: A multi-disciplinary debate* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 351-83; I. Hacking, *Historical ontology* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 99-114.

‘trans’ as its own distinct category of identity, drawing particular attention to the role that racist caricatures of Black people played in delineating what a ‘normal’ male or female body looked like (i.e., conforming to a particular white vision of anatomical congruity, purity, and good health), which in turn made trans ‘conceivable’ as an exception to the rule. Starting with the use of Black chattel slaves in the experiments of early gynaecology in the mid-nineteenth century and ending with the erasure of anti-Black violence by the mainstream trans rights movement in the present, Snorton narrates how Black flesh served as the ‘malleable matter’ from which modern white notions of normative and non-normative gender are crafted.⁶¹ Trans cannot, therefore, be understood in isolation from broader histories of systemic racism in Western medicine and society.

These theories have profound implications for trans history as a subject. Because ‘trans’ as we know it is epistemologically dependent on the conditions of modernity, claiming that trans people per se have always existed is fundamentally fallacious. To reiterate: liminal, transgressive, and nonconforming modes of identification and expression have always existed. Trans identity, specifically, has not. Intersectional trans history thus does away with a certain level of chronological and thematic precision and replaces it with a more sophisticated analysis of the cultural and social entanglements of trans. In the syntax of Foucault, the quest for historical origin, which ‘assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession’, and which, as a result of this assumption, ‘neglect[s] as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history’, is dropped in favour of an appraisal of the ‘genealogy of values, morality, asceticism, and knowledge’.⁶² The question of when, precisely, trans history should begin — so keenly debated between the Feinberg and medical schools— is consequently and deliberately left open-ended by the intersectional school.

So, too, is the thematic remit of trans studies. As early as 2006, Susan Stryker, whose work bears the distinct mark of intersectional feminism, urged trans

⁶¹ C. R. Snorton, *Black on both sides: a racial history of trans identity* (Minneapolis, 2017), p. 135.

⁶² M. Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, genealogy, history’, in D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews* (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 142-4.

scholars to be ambitious, and not to limit themselves to researching people and phenomena specifically identified as ‘trans’:

[T]ransgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statutes that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood.⁶³

While undoubtedly vibrant, enterprising, and pioneering, however, intersectional trans history has not replaced, but rather stands alongside, the other schools. In fact, the Feinberg model experienced something of a resurgence around the turn of the 2020s.

IV. Amalgamation?

If the medical and intersectional schools both seek to deconstruct the belief that ‘trans has always existed’, the previous few years showed the notion’s capacity for endurance. This neo-Feinbergian moment encompasses both wholesale restatements of Feinberg’s original thesis and attempts to amalgamate it with current scholarly trends, expressed in both popular and academic contexts. *Transgender Resistance: Socialism and the Fight for Trans Liberation* (2020), by trade unionist and trans activist Laura Miles, falls into the former, less critical category. It is a primarily political text that draws on Feinberg’s Marxist view of trans oppression, particularly her argument that systemic, institutionalised transphobia is an invention of modern capitalism.⁶⁴ Intersectionality and other intellectual traditions

⁶³ Stryker, ‘(De)subjugated knowledges’, p. 3.

⁶⁴ L. Miles, *Transgender resistance: socialism and the fight for trans liberation* (London, 2020), pp. 18-32.

that might disrupt this narrative are dismissed by Miles as insufficiently sensitive to the class origins of oppression. Another prominent non-academic text, *Trans Britain: Our Journey from the Shadows* (2018), edited by veteran British trans campaigner Christine Burns, displays more awareness of the Feinberg line's limitations. Burns warns readers:

Labelling figures from antiquity with modern terms such as “transgender” is a dangerous thing. People living hundreds of years ago couldn't have ‘identified’ with such a term because it didn't exist. We rely on the co-evolution of identities and the word available to describe them in order to provide the script for how to interpret our feelings and possibilities – the things we can be and embrace. What we can look for, however, are behaviours identified by ancient documents and life in ways that apparently departed from a simple binary man-woman model of life. Those exist throughout recorded history and across cultures.⁶⁵

Though prefaced with this qualification, what follows in *Trans Britain* is a fairly orthodox recounting of trans antiquity, employing pre-trans figures like the gender-transgressive French spy, the Chevalier d'Éon (1728-1810), in service to its narrative of trans people's ‘journey from the shadows’.⁶⁶

Historian Jen Manion's *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (2020), which is dedicated to Feinberg, attempts a similar if more theoretically complex modification of her approach. Rather than looking for historical examples of trans identity as we know it, Manion focusses on the *transing* of gender as an activity or process. They particularly build on Clare Sears's dictum that studies of cross-dressing should move ‘away from the recognizable cross-dressing *figure* to multiple forms of cross-dressing *practices*’.⁶⁷ Manion argues that deemphasising the search for specifically trans identity forms avoids some of the pitfalls of the traditional

⁶⁵ C. Burns (ed.), *Trans Britain: our journey from the shadows* (London, 2018), p. 8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

⁶⁷ C. Sears, *Arresting dress: cross-dressing, law, and fascination in nineteenth-century San Francisco* (Durham, NC, 2014), p. 9.

argument for trans antiquity. ‘To say someone “transed” or was “transing” gender’, they write, ‘signifies a process or practice without claiming to understand what it meant to that person or asserting any kind of fixed identity on them’.⁶⁸ This entails a ‘trans reading’ of historical subjects (in this case ‘female husbands’) without ‘foreclosing’ on their mode of self-identification,⁶⁹ thus opening ‘a window into our [the trans community’s] collective past’ while not laying claim to historical actors as ‘trans’ per se.⁷⁰ The implication is that *transing*, rather than trans identity itself, has always existed, and this is indeed a more defensible claim. There have always been those who cross, complicate, subvert, and sit astride the categorical boundaries extant in their communities. Most of them did not understand their selfhood as do modern trans people, but this is beside the point. What matters in this modified Feinbergian approach is that the feelings, practices, concepts, movements, images, and imaginaries of the modern trans community have *precedent*.

Another author, Barry Reay, has proposed a different solution to the Feinberg problem. Given his pointed rejection of the idea that trans people have always existed and his insistence that trans history essentially began in the 1950s,⁷¹ it may seem incongruous to include Reay’s *Trans America: A Counter-History* (2020) in a section about a Feinbergian revival. However, *Trans America* deviates less from theories of trans antiquity than the author himself implies. Rather than label millennia-old gender-nonconforming and gender-liminal phenomena as trans *history*, Reay categorises them as trans *pre-history*, arguing that gender-nonconforming temporalities extant before the rise of trans phraseology should be seen as ‘prefigurements of transgender: trans before trans’.⁷² In effect, this is an effort to square a circle — to claim a long precedent for trans people (and therefore invoke the legitimisation of antiquity) while not participating in the fallacy of trans anachronism. It is not clear, however, what the shift from ‘trans history’ to ‘trans prehistory’ achieves on a theoretical level. The end result — the placement of

⁶⁸ J. Manion, *Female husbands: a trans history* (Cambridge, 2020), p. 11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁷¹ B. Reay, *Trans America: a counter-history* (Cambridge, 2020), p. 2, 57.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 16, 55.

all forms of gender-nonconformity and gender-liminality within a narrative that leads eventually to modern transgender — is the same. Trans pre-history might even be *more* problematic in some respects, since, firstly, it risks portraying ‘trans before trans’ identities and expressions as merely primitive foreshadowings of an inevitable trans endpoint (a ‘monotonous finality’, as Foucault put it⁷³), and secondly, it conjures notions of a foggy past about which nothing substantial is known. Indeed, such a hard separation between ‘history’ from ‘pre-history’ potentially lowers the burden of proof for scholars seeking to link trans with pre-trans temporalities by removing the need to demonstrate an actual continuity of concepts, practices, or traditions.

It seems unlikely, then, that Reay’s model shows the best way forward. Manion’s emphasis on ‘transing’ as an historically omnipresent phenomenon is more promising, and, with its awareness of the historical contingency of trans *identity* (as emphasised by the medical school) and its refusal to co-opt pre-modern and non-Western gender systems as belonging to trans temporality per se (in keeping with the intersectional school), could potentially catalyse a moment of synthesis in trans historiography. Such a synthesis is long overdue, and would undoubtedly open new research trajectories should an ambitious theorist be willing to attempt it.

Conclusion

Whatever their theoretical and ideological stripes, fresh trans historians today can rest assured that, at the very least, they will spend far less time than their predecessors justifying the very necessity of trans historical inquiry. Though there continue to be impassioned disagreements about what it encompasses, there can no longer be any reasonable doubt that trans history *exists*. Whether thousands of years old, hundreds of years old, or merely tens of years old, it has been clearly established that trans is not a contemporary invention, as so many turn-of-the-century writers thought, but an ever-mutating nexus of phenomena,

⁷³ Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, genealogy, history’, p. 76.

some of which are very old. Indeed, contrary to the popular obsession with trans-postmodernist-cyborg futurity, one of the most pressing questions now is not whether trans has a history, but whether it has a future. Leading theorists fully expect that trans, with all its entanglements in oppressive histories and invasive medical authority, will sooner or later be ‘eclipsed by new imaginaries that might not even call themselves transgender at all’.⁷⁴

Is it possible to make educated guesses about what these new imaginaries might look like? Some authors have conducted thought experiments, positing fresh terminology not in the expectation that others will necessarily adopt it, but rather as a call for readers to think outside the box. Paul Preciado, for example, suggested a list of possible names for Internet-age queer movements that speak to the irreverence and impermanence of our ‘punk hyper-modernity’: ‘Postporno, Free Fuckware, Bodypunk, Opengender, Fuckyourfather, PenetratedState, TotalDrugs, PornTerror, Analinflation, [or] TechnoPriapismoUniversal United’.⁷⁵ Radical liberation for gender-nonconforming people has also been integrated into broader intersectional feminist, xenofeminist, posthuman, and antihumanist future imaginaries that seek to strip gender of its ‘extraordinary explanatory power’,⁷⁶ thus embracing ‘unintelligibility’ and removing the need for formalised trans identity to exist as an exception to normative strictures.⁷⁷ To an extent, however, predictions are unnecessary. The process of formulating extra-trans and post-trans identities is already underway. Words like genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, and non-binary have been in mainstream circulation for over a decade, providing modes of self-understanding and self-representation beyond the more established trans

⁷⁴ S. Stryker and A. Z. Aizura, ‘Introduction: transgender studies 2.0’, in *Transgender studies reader 2*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Preciado, ‘Pharmaco-pornographic regime’, p. 275.

⁷⁶ H. Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 49. See also L. Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist manifesto: a politics for alienation* (London, 2018).

⁷⁷ A. Escalante, ‘Gender nihilism: an anti-manifesto’, 2016, <<https://libcom.org/library/gender-nihilism-anti-manifesto>>, accessed 13.04.2021. For examples of the incorporation of trans into intersectional feminist agendas, see: R. Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m no longer talking to white people about race* (London, 2017), p. 181; L. Olufemi, *Feminism, interrupted: disrupting power* (London, 2020), p. 6.

narratives.⁷⁸ For some, these terms are merely a precursor to the total ‘deconstruction of gender’, one feature of which would be an end to the social expectation that one should make oneself sexually intelligible to others by accumulating identifying adjectives.⁷⁹ In that imaginary, all gender-nonconforming identities, and indeed gender itself, will eventually fall into disuse.

Accurate or not, this glimpse into the yet-to-be might, ironically, represent the most important lesson a passing observer can take from trans history. We and our tools of self-expression are historically contingent. The identity forms that make sense to us will not necessarily make sense to others in a few centuries, a few decades, or even a few years. Just as there was a pre-trans, so too must there be a post-trans, and, in this sense, trans history has fully anticipated its own obsolescence. It is a matter of when, not if.

⁷⁸ J. Twist, B. Vincent, M. Barker, and K. Gupta (eds.), ‘Introduction’ to *Non-binary lives: an anthology of intersecting identities* (London, 2020), pp. 19-20.

⁷⁹ LJ, ‘Who needs gender?’, in *Non-binary lives*, pp. 63-9.

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