

## **PRIMER: What is Transgender Studies for the Twenty-First Century?**

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#### Part 1 – Introduction

Transgender studies began to coalesce as a field in the early 1990s, although its nascent beginnings stretch back at least thirty years. As a transdisciplinary project it engages critical theory, poststructuralist and postmodern epistemologies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies of science, biopolitical studies, and identity-based critiques of dominant cultural practices that derive from feminist studies, communities of color and queer of color critique, diaspora studies and displaced communities, disability studies and activisms, AIDS activism and queer cultures, among other fields (Stryker, 2012). The commonality among these loci of social critique is that they all expose the mechanisms of power that produce exclusionary and hierarchical social norms. Transgender studies challenges norms related to sexed embodiment and gender expressions that diverge from the dominant social expectations of a given culture.

In the past decade transgender studies has experienced a shift from the objectifying study of transgender people and their bodies to a view of transgender individuals as knowledge-producing subjects. This shift marks a critical turn in contemporary theory and activism. In its present iteration, then, transgender studies moves beyond the positing of trans-identified and gender nonconforming individuals, and related transgender phenomena, as objects of scientific, psychiatric, and medico-juridical inquiry and explanation. The field generates a methodology that centers transgender scholarship, trans-identified scholars, trans people's lives and related social phenomena as the subjects of inquiry. More recently transgender studies has widened its scope to look at how all phenomena, objects, social relations, and social worlds might be analyzable through a transgender optic.

Transgender studies' emergence parallels the historical evolution of what "transgender" itself means: from a particular mode of personhood—cross-gender living without body modification—toward an "umbrella" category that encompasses all trans-identified and gender nonconforming terms, identities, and expressions. While the collective imaginary that places all sexual and gender nonconforming people under the same umbrella is a social construction, the political impulse behind this idea has led to social change by way of advocacy campaigns throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Author-activist Leslie Feinberg's 1992 pamphlet, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*, offered an acute articulation of this collective transgender imaginary (Feinberg, 1992).

Feinberg forwards a politicized vision of "transgender" that encompasses transsexual, transvestite, drag, cross-dressers and other gender nonconforming people—including *all* identities, expressions, and embodiments that violate socially, culturally, and state-enforced boundaries of sex and gender. *Transgender Liberation* thus provided the architecture for an understanding of transgender that moved it beyond individual radical acts toward an explicitly politicized movement. While this collective sense of the category "transgender" initially catalyzed political organizing in North American and European contexts, it has begun to circulate widely around the globe.

This brief social history of transgender might overshadow how the prefix "trans-" embodies a dual impulse. "Trans-" means not only to move through, but also to move across. Likewise, "transgender" does not only denote a specific type of identity and a political collective; it also emphasizes transversal movement across the boundaries of sex and gender relative to specific

social structures and cultures. This means that contemporary studies of sex and gender norms not only pertain to individual identities, bodies, and collectivities, but they further engage with phenomena that transgress or disrupt properly gendered—and normatively enforced—categorical and aesthetic formations. In considering transgender phenomena more broadly, current work in the field stretches past the study of identities and bodies in isolation from larger social processes, and beyond forms and movements restricted to human embodiment and gender expression. Transgender studies is not only transdisciplinary in scope, then, but it also illuminates transversal movements across social boundaries, categorical contours, and cultural formations pertaining to sex, sexuality, and gender. From this perspective, transgender phenomena can be thought of as anything that exposes the assumed-to-be-natural linkages between biological sex and gender expression; sex-roles and embodiment; gender assignment and self-identification; and reproductive capacities and their cultural meanings, among other things.

Drawing upon feminist theorizing of the past thirty years, transgender studies provides another lens to view the way cultures use systems of sorting and classifying sex, gender, sexuality, and embodiment in relation to social power and categorical norms. Through transgender, the precise mechanisms of disarticulation, recombination, and re-categorization of sexed and gendered dimensions of personhood come into sharper focus. While sorting practices vary cross-culturally—accounting for differences of race, nation, religion, state formation, and other factors—all cultures do employ classificatory schemas that ascribe gender attribution, enforce gender socialization, and assign sex at birth that is usually dimorphic: male/female. These engendering practices render bodies socially useful, culturally legible, and productive under different regimes of power. One good example of this classificatory impulse is the administration of state-sanctioned identification: national identity documents, birth certificates, passports, work visas, and other official documents. All these forms of identification hinge upon governmentally recognized sex and gender classifications. Administrative practices that manage identity documents demonstrate that the sorting of sex, gender, sexuality, and embodiment vis-à-vis cultural norms operate at the center of social life in all regions of the globe.

The incongruities between bodies, identities, assigned gender, and gender expression expose the norm-producing work of governmental procedures and social institutions. This classificatory work becomes most visible when sexed bodies and gender expressions exceed socially mandated categorical boundaries. Bodies and genders that exist in excess of consolidated sex and gender categories, such as unmarked male or female, render such bodies and genders unclassifiable according to the routine administration of social life. Transgender studies accounts for how these mechanisms of governmental and social power collude to produce some bodies as culturally intelligible, and easily incorporable within existing social structures, while other bodies are rendered unassimilable via these same processes. In this way, transgender studies parallels other fields such as feminist studies, race and ethnicity studies, and disability studies that seek to dismantle social hierarchies rooted in bodily difference from social norms. By focusing on the cultural production of embodied “deviance,” all of these fields share a deep and committed engagement with activist practices of social change.

Contemporary work in transgender studies addresses the material consequences of violating sex and gender norms and as a result exposes the productive operations of gendered intelligibility. Although this may seem to be a purely theoretical observation, living in a culturally unintelligible body or expressing a gender that resists social assimilation has very tangible consequences. The resultant after-effects range from an inability to sustain a “livable life”

(Butler, 2004) to the life-threatening conditions of non-existence as a byproduct of sexual and/or gender nonconformance existing in resistance to the routine administration of social life. Legal theorist Dean Spade has traced how the uneven distribution of vulnerability and violence experienced by transgender and gender nonconforming people corresponds to differences of race, class, gender expression, ability, culture, and nation. For Spade, the harms inflicted by state administrative practices are not experienced equally by everyone and thus cannot be described by a singular form of oppression, namely “transphobia” (Spade, 2011). Instead, he calls for an intersectional analysis of the classed and racialized criminalization of gender nonconforming lives.

A vivid example of the consequences of violating sex and gender norms is the confinement of trans-identified and gender nonconforming individuals held captive in gender-segregated spaces. These locations include prisons, homeless shelters, treatment programs, and other state-regulated detention facilities. The majority of individuals confined in these systems are economic and racial minorities, demonstrating that race, class, and gender are inextricably bound. The enforcers of such gender-segregated spaces produce perilous outcomes and are unable, or actively refuse, to support a world that is accessible and habitable by all gender and sexual nonconforming individuals.

As such, another important goal of transgender studies is to promote world-making activities enabling bodies and genders that resist easy classification to exist on their own terms, instead of seeking ways to confine and fit such individuals into existing social structures. This approach means balancing working for trans people’s immediate needs alongside the development of a long-term liberationist politics designed to dismantle norm-enforcing social structures. Proponents of this politics recognize that different tactics are necessary, given that not all social and cultural contexts, and their concomitant regulation of sex and gender, are similarly conditioned. The result is that not all interventions are culturally transferable and the local consequences of political actions must be of primary concern.

## Part II – Eurocentric Science and Categorical Sorting

It is not possible to think through contemporary transgender studies without encountering the history of medicalization of sex, gender, sexuality, identity, and embodiment. Since the nineteenth century, science has sustained a fascination with bodies and genders that deviate from Eurocentric sexual and gender norms. Among the sciences of the nineteenth century, sexology, the scientific study of human sexuality, studied the classification of human bodies and behaviors. Sexologists operated as arbiters of the regulation and production of sexual and gender norms. They did so by using classificatory practices designed to distinguish and catalogue a vast range of human sexual and gendered behavior.

Through typifying individuals using newly coined terms such as “urnings,” “eonists,” and “sexual intermediaries,” some sexologists developed schemas to classify bodies and behaviors that rendered forms of human being either normal or pathological. More radical sexologists like Magnus Hirschfeld, who founded the *Institute for Sexology* in Berlin in 1919, based their study on less stigmatizing criteria for identifying “types” of human behavior—including his “sexual intermediaries” who, as gender nonconforming people, might today identify themselves as transsexual or transgender. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz explains that “for Hirschfeld, hermaphrodites, androgynes, and transvestites constituted distinct types of ‘sexual intermediaries,’ natural variations that all probably had an organic basis” (Meyerowitz, 2002:19).

Whether biology plays an essentialist role in human variation or not, these acts of classification reveal the social dimension and production of sex and gender difference that would persist as an object of medico-legal regulation throughout the twentieth century. Meyerowitz specifically connects differential diagnostic practice to a “taxonomic revolution” that began in the 1960s. Differential diagnosis is the systematic method of diagnosing a medical or psychiatric condition by differentiating it from other so-called disorders. According to Meyerowitz, this sorting practice was used by doctors to gain a “clearer sense of who qualified as a bona fide transsexual and who did not,” for purposes of treatment using hormones and surgery (2002: 169). She claims that beginning in the 1960s doctors “created and refined a new schema of sexological classification that elaborated distinctions between transsexuals and more familiar ‘deviants’” (2002: 169).

Harry Benjamin, the noted endocrinologist who treated trans-identified individuals (with hormones and referrals for surgery) long before his U.S.-based peers, developed a six-point classificatory scale “modeled on [sexologist] Alfred Kinsey’s hetero- and homosexual continuum” (Meyerowitz, 2002: 175). On one end of his scale Benjamin placed “‘pseudo’ transvestites who had only ‘sporadic interest’ in crossdressing” along with “‘fetishistic’ and ‘true’ transvestites who derived sexual pleasure from crossdressing” (2002: 176). On the other end of his scale he placed “three categories of transsexuals, culminating in the ‘high intensity’ transsexuals with ‘total psychosexual inversion’” (Meyerowitz, 2002: 176). Benjamin thus devised a continuum that, according to Meyerowitz, “allowed doctors to distinguish conditions without creating mutually exclusive categories or snapshot pictures of unchanging patients” (2002: 176). During this same time period,

[w]hile the doctors wrestled with definitions and diagnoses, self-identified homosexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals engaged in a *parallel practice* in which they tried to distinguish themselves from one another. They hoped to make themselves intelligible to others and also to convince doctors, courts, and the public to accord them dignity, rights, and respect. Some chose to align themselves with other sexual and gender variants or wondered out loud which of the existing categories best embraced their sense of themselves. But mostly, it seems, they hoped to explain their differences. In a sense, they constructed and affirmed their own identities by telling themselves and others how they differed. For some, the social practice of taxonomy involved a politics of respectability (Meyerowitz, 2002: 177, italics added).

This “parallel practice” of categorical sorting relies upon a declaration of one’s identity as predicated on a fundamental exclusion: “Who I am is as much about who I am not.” The political significance of this sorting process is that it enables identity differentiation and group formation. With an emphasis on difference, on defining oneself through naming and then disavowing an identification with others, socially entrenched hierarchies of realness and respectability are often formed.

What this abbreviated history of the medicalization of sexual and gender difference demonstrates is how transgender people and socially dissonant expressions of gender are positioned as objects of investigation. In the past two decades, the development of a transgender studies framework has repositioned the object of study as a subject of study. Transgender theorist Susan Stryker likens this difference between a medico-legal focus on trans bodies and identities, and the

associated search for the “true” transsexual or trans- person, to similar changes in other fields of study. She observes that “transgender studies, among other things, is to the medico-juridical and psychotherapeutic management of transgender people and phenomena what performance studies is to performance, or science studies is to science” (Stryker, 2012: 2).

### Part III – Critical Engagements: Feminism and Queer Theory

The work of exploring, exposing, and unsettling the normative operations of sex, gender, and sexuality across historically and culturally specific contexts is central to transgender studies. Transgender theory provides a way to view critically these normative social processes that engender bodies. Through exposing these normative operations, transgender studies generates a mode of critique that challenges the social hierarchies that produce “normal” bodies and genders against “atypical” or “deviant” ones. There is no body that is inherently invested with “deviance” or “ambiguity”; instead, seemingly liminal embodiments and identity categories are produced through binary-bound categorical systems.

Both feminism and queer theory hold common cause with this anti-normalizing mode of critique. That is, feminists and queer theorists share with transgender theorists and activists— these are not mutually exclusive categories—a critique of gender binaries and of sexually dimorphic descriptions of physical bodies. However, with this conceptual overlap there also exists a history of tensions between feminism, queer theory, and transgender studies. What follows will describe only a few key examples, among many others, of tensions between these fields.

#### *Feminism*

Feminist theorists of “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988) produced ethical theories of subjecthood in the late twentieth century. In a similar move, Stryker and Aizura observe that the field of transgender studies has involved trans and gender nonconforming people making themselves the subjects of knowledge “rather than remaining mere objects of knowledge in the discourses of others about them” (Stryker & Aizura, 2013: 2). This has not always been the case. Thirty years ago the erasure of transgender people and phenomena as subjects of knowledge was the concern of a germinal piece of transgender scholarship by Sandy Stone. Stone’s essay *The Empire Strikes Back* was a response to a transphobic book-length diatribe by radical feminist Janice Raymond. Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* represented a particular streak of second-wave feminism that denied transgender subjectivity by arguing that all trans-identified people were “dupes” of a patriarchal gender order. Radical feminists like Raymond claimed transgender bodies were manufactured and inauthentic products of a medical establishment that had as a primary goal the enforcement, through technological intervention, of sexed and gendered social norms and bodily forms.

Stone’s intervention was a direct response to Raymond’s work and was singularly influential in developing a theoretical critique that moved beyond positioning “transsexual” individuals as inauthentic and duplicitous objects of a patriarchal gender system and a medical “empire.” While utilizing terminology that has since become outdated, Stone’s critical argument has stood the test of time. She defiantly asserted that while “transsexuals” might use normative medical and patriarchal gender narratives, this is because official narrative structures do not allow for the expression of varied sexed embodiments and gender expressions. This same situation is largely true today. Her solution was not to posit a singular and authentic transsexual voice; rather Stone encouraged individuals to forgo passing—as normatively gendered or as non-trans—and instead exhorted them to speak their “polyvocal” excess as an act of political resistance. Stone’s work

represents a mode of positioning *trans* subjectivities and embodiments as sources of legitimate knowledge on their own terms. In this way she articulated transgender subjectivity as central to theoretical critique in line with poststructuralist feminists' attempts to situate knowledge.

### *Queer Theory*

The tensions between transgender studies and queer theory date from the early 1990s and took on a slightly different tone. Beginning in the 1990s, queer theory proposed that the queering of gender norms demonstrate that gender is a social construct. This insight followed Judith Butler's influential theory of gender performativity that was predicated upon the reiteration of gendered social norms and their eventual failure. Butler's book *Gender Trouble* situated transgender subjectivity vis-à-vis queer theory as emblematic of her theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990)—transgender being the example that exposed the failure of normative gender to repeat itself in an invisible and seamless fashion. Such theory revolves around the figure of transgender as a paradigmatic example of what Judith/Jack Halberstam calls "transgressive exceptionalism," a particular trend generated by queer theory of the late twentieth century (Halberstam, 2005: 20).

By the late 1990s, trans-identified theorists challenged reductive uses of transgender as the site where gender norms are exposed and transgressed. They argued that such appropriations erased trans-subjectivity and the associated daily microaggressions experienced by people who violate sex and gender norms (Namaste, 2000). This early moment in the formation of the field of queer theory thus placed an undue burden upon transgender subjects who were assessed according to whether they expressed proper (transgressive or normative) genders and embodiments. Feminist theorist Patricia Elliot asks a pertinent question regarding this debate: "[Is it] possible to value the transgressive potential of transgender lives without disparaging the alternate desires and goals of those transsexuals who wish to live as [normatively gendered] men and women?" (Elliot, 2010: 13). This question encapsulates a tension that remains unresolved to this day.

### Part IV – New Directions in Transgender Studies

Over the past thirty years, transgender studies has concerned itself with critical analyses of, among other things, transsexual autobiography, bioethics and technological body modification, the politics of Gender Identity Disorder (the psychiatric category currently used to "diagnose" trans-related differences), cross-cultural meanings of sex and gender variation, the politics of state administration through sex and gender categories, and the divisions within transgender communities, as well as the relationships between the category transgender and other fields of study. More recently the field has opened to new questions, including those regarding space, time, social policy, art, biopolitics, human-animal relations, and movement(s) in both the political and the kinesthetic sense.

One example of the productive intersection between transgender studies and other fields of inquiry concerns the human–animal relationship. Feminist animal studies provides a materialist account of biodiversity by showing us that even in the supposedly non-social realm of "nature," physical variations of sex exists. According to feminist science studies critic Myra Hirsh,

New materialist developments within the natural sciences have made a significant impression on feminist scholars who increasingly find themselves grappling with issues involving life and matter (for instance in debates about the body, the sex/gender binary and sexual difference)... The reluctance on the part of feminist theory to engage with material processes has meant that, while feminism has cast

light on social and cultural meanings of concepts such as sex, gender, and sexual difference, there seems to be a hesitation to delve into the actual physical processes through which stasis, differentiation, and change take place (Hird 2006: 37).

Working in tandem, feminist science studies and transgender studies provides evidence of the mutability of sex, as well as its context-dependent nature. For example, transgender biologist Joan Roughgarden chronicles fish that change sex—defined solely by gamete size—from male to female. If not enough female fish are present in a colony, males will become females in order to re-establish ecological balance (Roughgarden, 2004). Additional critiques of material stasis catalogue myriad genders—and sexual transmogrifications—that occur among human and non-human species alike. Still other feminists and transgender theorists point toward the co-constitutive dimensions of sex and gender, arguing that neither is reducible to the false dichotomy of nature versus culture. Hird takes the materialist turn farther by “want[ing] to extend feminist interest in trans as a specifically sexed enterprise (as transitioning from one sex to another), ... [into] a broader sense of movement across, through and perhaps beyond traditional classifications” (Hird, 2006: 37).

Play on the prefix *trans-* to denote moving beyond, across, or past traditional social formations directs us to another emergent trend in transgender studies. Attention to movement engages several new strands of transgender studies, including the arts broadly defined to include performance art, textiles, dance, and film as media that enable analysis of and complicate conventional accounts of trans-specific phenomena. Interactions with drag performance, textile art, dance, and other media involving kinesthetic movement and tactile sensory information allow for enacting new relations to the social and further enable the imagining of different possible futures. In each of these media, *trans-* is understood anew as crafted, multi-layered, and without the terminal end-point of a conventional linear narrative or fixed structure. Through a *trans-* lens, then, we can see artifacts and aesthetic formations as immanent, immaterial, transitory, and as coming-into-being through process versus the result of fixed production.

This unfixing of bodies and related movements helps us to rethink the traditional transition narrative centered on medical intervention. Through a transgender studies framework we can ask: Why is it that narratives of gender transition so often rely upon a metaphor of geographical migration? Such narratives reinforce a linear structure that is predicated upon a progression from the “wrong” body and/or location and a travel toward the “right” embodiment and/or geographic destination. Movements of this sort include those from a rural community to an urban metropolis after gender transition, or a journey to “foreign” locations in order to obtain surgical procedures that “right” the body and thus enable a return “home.”

These border crossings can be literal, in the case of increasingly common surgical tourism, or they can be metaphorical—as in border crossings to “exotic” locales that imaginatively render gender transition via a travel narrative. Such careless metaphors erase the very real stakes of transnational border crossing, especially for dispossessed gender nonconforming racial minorities and undocumented peoples. Transgender studies grapples with these questions and proposes alternatives such as that of “cosmopolitan transnational citizenship,” which rejects “borderland belonging” and “hybrid” subject formation (Romesberg, 2013). This new work allows us to see that much like physical bodies move in transition, gender itself is in constant

motion, in a state of flux, and is not fixed by any particular physical, metaphorical, or geographical destination.

### Conclusion: Transgender Studies for the Twenty-First Century

A transgender studies for the twenty-first century engages anti-colonial theorizations such as that found in Mary Louise Pratt's essay *Arts of the Contact Zone*. Pratt proposes the idea of "contact zones" wherein ideas drawn from different cultures clash and are mutually transformed. Her concept of "transculturation" posits that colonizing acts, objects, and ideas are reclaimed and re-inscribed with meaning by colonized peoples. Her proposed method for navigating contact zone encounters is through the practice of "autoethnography" whereby "people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (Pratt, 1991: 2).

Related to Pratt's method is Stryker's concern that an anti-colonial transgender studies requires an "ethico-critical assessment of whether or how the phenomena towards which the researcher is oriented and invested in either can or cannot ... be apprehended through a transgender optic" (Stryker, 2012: 6). Such decolonizing work involves the self-conscious crossing of cultural imaginaries and geo-political boundaries. This simultaneous process of moving across gender categories and cultural contexts—risking contact zone-like clashes—occurs in an increasingly globalized world where boundaries are often permeable, at the same time that material borders are ruthlessly policed.

Globalization opens us to a process of trans-localization predicated upon the multi-directional transportability of terminology, concepts, and technologies. As a particular movement, trans-localization circulates without centering and suggests that even if terms like *transgender*, *transsexual*, *transvestite*, and *genderqueer* originated in the west, that they are already in the process of transculturation—inscribed with new meanings—in regions where people live through significantly different social organizations of sex, gender, sexuality, embodiment, and identity. Trans-local movements and transculturated terminological re-inscriptions make decolonial theorizing and political work a necessary practice of transgender studies.

This version of transgender studies creates a space for knowledge to flow in all directions, not just from "the west to the rest." Multi-directional movement occurs even as incommensurate lived epistemologies—because economic and intellectual capital flows unevenly across borders of geography, political economy, and social imaginaries—find a productive site of engagement in a decolonial transgender studies. Born of a utopian impulse, transgender studies for the twenty-first century is a project poised to establish the conditions of contact for a co-constitutive, perhaps transformative, exchange between bodies of knowledge. It further seeks to materialize imaginative possibilities that lay in wait. It is our hope that *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* is one such space where this exchange can begin.

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