

Trans Histories by Trans Historians

Special Issue Editors' Introduction

Jamey Jesperson (she/her) & **Chris Aino Pihlak** (she/her)

University of Victoria

Narrative conventions might call for this special issue introduction to present trans history to the unfamiliar reader as a *burgeoning* field of academic inquiry. For years now, the story goes, trans history has been *becoming*, in the works, and on the horizon. As this exciting new collection of essays displays, trans history is, in fact, already here. Moreover, it is being twisted and transformed by a growing wave of graduate students and early career scholars who are, finally and significantly, trans ourselves. It is with great joy that we now share with the world this very *special* special issue of trans histories — one that is solely trans-edited, trans-designed, and trans-authored.

Graduate student imagination has shaped the contours of trans historical inquiry since its early days. Works including Emily Skidmore's "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual,'" Saylesh Wesley's "Twin-Spirited Woman," and Jules Gill-Peterson's "The Technical Capacities of the Body," among others, show that graduate-student-authored scholarship makes up some of the field's

most influential and oft-cited foundations.¹ Let us not forget that Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker, themselves, were either in the midst of graduate study or freshly post-defense when they published “The Empire Strikes Back” and “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamonix” – *the* foundational texts of trans studies.² What is unique about the upcoming generation represented in these pages, however, is that we are no longer the exception to the rule. Like never before, we are *entering* graduate school out as trans, finding trans and trans-affirming mentors, and establishing solidarity and community networks that are affording us newfound mobility in institutions where we have been historically excluded.

As instilled in us through our historical training, though, we are wary of the illusion of linear progress. Experiencing graduate-school-whilst-trans has come with a new set of challenges, especially amidst growing trans antagonism and neoliberal austerity in what Cassius Adair, Cameron Awkward-Rich, and Amy Marvin aptly call the “poison soil” of the university.³ As trans graduate

¹ Emily Skidmore, “Constructing the ‘Good Transsexual’: Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press,” *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 270-300; Saylesh Wesley, “Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts’iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 338–51; Jules Gill-Peterson, “The Technical Capacities of the Body: Assembling Race, Technology, and Transgender,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 402–18.

² Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” *Camera Obscura* 10 (1992): 150–76; Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamonix: Performing Transgender Rage.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 237–54.

³ Cassius Adair, Cameron Awkward-Rich, and Amy Marvin, “Before Trans

students, we risk regular bigotry from faculty, administrators, funding committees, co-workers, and students, but without substantial institutional power to defend ourselves. The already meagre graduate student wage is extra insufficient for those of us in active transition. Needing to dish out hundreds to thousands of dollars per year for basic trans care, not to mention take off weeks for surgical recovery, places many of us at greater risk of financial and professional disadvantage. This is especially challenging for those who do this while visibly trans, racialized, disabled, first-generation, or otherwise multiply marginalized in institutions and disciplines historically founded without us in mind. We are not completing doctorates, landing jobs, publishing our first monographs, and securing tenure before transitioning; we are doing it all at once, with everything on the line.

Despite these struggles, we are driven by the historical significance of our presence in the academy. After decades of largely non-trans-authored historical, ethnographic, and anthropological study of trans lives, the fact that we are *trans* historians doing *trans* histories is essential. Before the 2000s, historical research of what is being increasingly reframed as trans people and trans phenomena was largely interpreted through the singular lens of sexuality. For decades, non-trans historians regularly occluded or outright missed articulations of trans femininity and masculinity under facile labels like 'effeminate men,' 'masculine women,' or 'third gender.' Jonathan Ned Katz and George Chauncey's respective canonical works *Gay*

American History and *Gay New York*, for example, are replete with gender transgressive historical figures – Alan Hart, Mary Jones, female husbands, fairies, and so on – whose lives deserve, and are now being granted, a trans historical analysis.⁴

Following trans feminine medievalist Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski, we consider each of the contributors to this special issue to be taking their rightful “transgender turn” in response to a ‘cistoriography’ that has failed to see the minutiae of trans life, as well as trans death.⁵ Emotive, material stakes drive trans historians to create works by, for, and about our communities. Our creation of trans-centered scholarship is a duty to past, present, and future trans people whose stories would remain untold or overlooked otherwise. For many of us, our work endeavors to directly advance trans liberation, to improve trans life, and to foster trans joy. Though with only a handful of trans history monographs and not a single journal dedicated to historicizing trans pasts, vast temporal, thematic, and geographical gaps in our histories remain. In response, we hope that this special issue takes a necessary step in

⁴ Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Crowell, 1976); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁵ M. W. Bychowski, “The Transgender Turn: Eleanor Rykener Speaks Back,” in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, eds. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 97; Jamey Jespersen, “Trans Misogyny in the Colonial Archive: Re-Membering Trans Feminine Life and Death in New Spain, 1604-1821,” *Gender and History*, advanced online publication, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12733>.

filling in the ever-important and lively trans historiography from a trans point of view.

As outlined in Jules Gill-Peterson's provocative 2022 lecture, "Queer Theory Killed Venus Xtravaganza," the trans woman, specifically the trans woman of color, has been historically foreclosed as a subject or author of knowledge.⁶ This form of exclusion has resulted in a long-time, foundational warping of our histories as non-trans-feminine scribes, historians, and theorists have narrated our stories, often with contempt. It is with much gratification, then, that this special issue has been co-edited by two emerging trans feminine historians of trans femininity, and presents a majority of works by trans feminine scholars. Altogether, the contributors to this special issue represent an important range of subject-positions, locations, disciplines, and interests that challenge historical trans exclusion. Through the use of new sources, methods, and approaches, they demonstrate the benefits and necessity of trans people telling trans stories.

The contributions to this special issue are split between traditional primary-source research articles and shorter think-pieces we have called critical commentaries. The former section kicks off with a field-shattering piece from **Chanathip Suwannanon**, a PhD

⁶ Jules Gill-Peterson, "Queer Theory Killed Venus Xtravaganza," Duke University Annual Queer Theory Lecture, Durham, North Carolina, October 14th, 2021, <https://duke.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Embed.aspx?id=2986a255-ad98-4db4-bd23-ad9d00f73ef0>.

student at the University of Victoria who is on her way to developing Kathoey Studies in Thailand. Through contextualizing Kiratee Chanar's 1982 novel *Thang Sai Thee Sam* (The Third Pathway) within the contexts of the Cold War, the global development of sex-change capitals, and white transsexual autobiography, Suwannanon reveals the possibilities of interpreting a semi-fictional work as a "Kathoey archive." By reading between the lines of Chanar's words, Suwannanon endeavors to *re-write* the long-purported development of trans medicine and sex change surgery as purely Western to reveal a lesser-known Thai history. Next, we move to **Will Hansen's** incisive examination of Hedesthia, Aotearoa New Zealand's first formal transvestite-transsexual organization. While Hedesthia provided an essential network of community, advocacy, and care for its members, a transnormative desire for white, middle-class respectability that denigrated Māori and Pasifika trans sex workers motivated much of its member base. Expanding the historiography of late-twentieth-century trans community organizing, Hansen deftly situates Hedesthia's complex legacy within the larger trans histories of Aotearoa New Zealand. Following suit, **Juniper Oxford** provides another formidable work of re-historicization through her analysis of American trans feminine draft dodgers of the Second World War. Disrupting common dismissals of 'cross-dressers' as solely motivated by petty material advancement, Oxford demonstrates how many 'pre-Jorgensen' trans women were in fact committed to their gendered embodiments, despite the trans

misogynistic consequences that accompanied being outed. Our research articles close with a bang with **Penelope Higgins'** evaluation of fascism, propaganda, American imperialism, and global political economies of capitalism through close readings of 20th Century-Fox's 1970 transploitation films *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Higgins' work concludes with a passionate call for trans historians to conceptualize our scholarship as a weapon in the contemporary fight against fascism, an assertion that certainly holds great weight for all of us today.

Our critical commentaries lead with **Sam Dolores Sanchinel's** half-book review, half-autobiographical interpretation of Juana Maria Rodríguez's *Put a Life: Seeing Latinas, Making Sex*. Affectionately titled, "*Hijas de la Putisima*," Sanchinel gifts their trans femme perspective on the historiography of *putas*, interrogating and presenting the benefits of Rodríguez's models of queer affective kinship and loving personal readings for trans studies and trans history. Next, **Niamh Timmons** presents a much-needed, new trans historical methodological approach in "Constellating Trans Activist Histories." Pushing against common invocations of the 1969 Stonewall Riots as a single origin of queer and trans liberation, Timmons demonstrates the utility of adopting a 'constellating' framework that allows for multiple points of trans activist histories from different communities, geographies, and periods. **Emily Cousens** provides a similar genealogical intervention to Timmons in their piece, "Androgyny in the Archives." Amidst a flurry of scholastic discourse on what Kadji Amin calls the "taxonomical

renaissance” of gender and sexual identities, Cousens considers how “androgyny” was articulated and appealed to within trans and feminist knowledge production during the 1970s.⁷ Through analysis of a curious finding from the Ariadne (Ari) Kane collection at the UVic Transgender Archives, Cousens reveals how an established philosophy of androgyny offered a basis for affective and subjective investments in non-binary gender that may destabilize taxonomical timelines. Following Cousens, **Dean Leetal** revisits the Jewish story of the Golem in “A Trans, Autistic, and Neurogender Jewish Monster.” Akin to Stryker’s canonical interpretation of *Frankenstein*, Leetal extrapolates core lessons from the ancient folktale for the benefit of contemporary readers who are multiply marginalized as Jewish, trans, autistic, and neurogender like zimself. Closing our special issue is an insightful and radical analysis of trans public history by **Moira Armstrong**. Analyzing the London-based Museum of Transology, Armstrong conceives of the activist and community-based foundations of “radical (trans) trust” that can and should be adopted by the wider heritage sector. Expressed through community archiving that centers actual trans voices and lives, radical (trans) trust presents a tangible and much-needed solution to the long-time, overdue misrepresentation of trans life by non-trans and trans antagonistic authority figures.

Pulled together, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate an interdisciplinary range of strategies, motives, and

⁷ Kadji Amin, “Taxonomically Queer?: Sexology and New Queer, Trans, and Asexual Identities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 29, no. 1 (2023): 91.

angles to read the trans past, but with a shared, critical focus on the trans present and future. We wish to thank our artist **Milo Ira** for designing the special issue's stunningly joyful cover to represent this, as well as our reviewers, contributors, and amazing supervisor Rachel Hope Cleves for their time and care helping make this happen. Watching this special issue take shape over the past year has been a beautiful and memorable experience. We hope that the histories shared in these pages hold meaning for others in the way they have for us. We hope that the trans scholars who follow in our footsteps can use this as a resource to mark their own path forward and recognize the worth of their voices and perspectives in advancing the discipline of history. But perhaps greatest of all, we hope that, in many years to come, we may look back from a changed field and no longer feel that a special issue such as this is so special after all.

Bibliography

Adair, Cassius, Cameron Awkward-Rich, and Amy Marvin. "Before Trans Studies." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2020): 306-320.

Amin, Kadji. "Taxonomically Queer?: Sexology and New Queer, Trans, and Asexual Identities." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 29, no. 1 (2023): 91-107.

Bychowski, M. W. "The Transgender Turn: Eleanor Rykener Speaks Back." In *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, edited by Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska, 95-113. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.

Gill-Peterson, Jules. "The Technical Capacities of the Body: Assembling Race, Technology, and Transgender." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 402-18.

_____. "Queer Theory Killed Venus Xtravaganza,"
Duke University Annual Queer Theory Lecture, Durham, North
Carolina, October 14th, 2021,
<https://duke.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Embed.aspx?id=2986a255-ad98-4db4-bd23-ad9d00f73ef0>.

Jespersion, Jamey. "Trans Misogyny in the Colonial Archive: Re-Membering Trans Feminine Life and Death in New Spain, 1604-1821," *Gender and History*. Advanced online publication.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12733>.

Skidmore, Emily. "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press." *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 270–300

Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *Camera Obscura* 10 (1992): 150–76.

Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamonix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 237–54.

Wesley, Saylesh. "Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts'iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 338–51.