



THE  
**GRADUATE**  
HISTORY REVIEW

Vol 12

The Graduate History Review

Fall 2023

Copyright © 2023

**Trans Histories by Trans Historians**

Volume 12, Fall 2023

THE  
**GRADUATE**  

---

**HISTORY REVIEW**

**Trans Histories by Trans Historians**  
Volume 12, Fall 2023

Copyright © 2023

Authors contributing to *The Graduate History Review* agree to release their articles under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC 3.0) licence.

This licence allows these articles to be shared by copying or redistributing them in any medium or format, and to be adapted by remixing, transforming, or building upon them, provided appropriate attribution is given, and the material is not used for commercial purposes. For more information, consult the Creative Commons website at:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0>

Authors retain copyright of their work and grant the journal right of first publication. The articles in this edition are also published online as *The Graduate History Review* volume 12 (2023). Authors are able to enter into separate, additional contractual arrangements for the non-exclusive distribution of the journal's published version of the work (e.g., post it to an institutional repository or publish it in a book), with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this journal.

The opinions expressed in this journal are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Editors or the University of Victoria's History Department. While every effort is made by the Editorial Board to ensure that the journal contains no inaccurate or misleading citations, opinions, or statements, the content of journal articles is the sole responsibility of the authors. Accordingly, the Publisher, the Editorial Board, the Editors, and their respective employees and volunteers accept no responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions.

## **Territorial Acknowledgement**

*The Graduate History Review* acknowledges and respects the ɫə́kʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory our university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ nations whose historical relationships with these lands and waters continue to this day. As a special volume concerning the histories of people who lived across or beyond the gender binary — often historicized as a *colonial construct* — we want to also acknowledge the trans and Two-Spirit ɫə́kʷəŋən peoples from this territory, as well as the many efforts towards radical Indigenous Two-Spirit resurgence taking place every day, here and elsewhere.

### **Editors**

Jamey Jespersen  
Chris Aino Pihlak

### **Reviewers**

Ana Paula Santana Bertho, Jonah Garde, Abigail Goldstein, Will Hansen, Penelope Higgins, Kai Jacobsen, Abigail Romano, Sam Dolores Sanchinel

### **Cover Artist & Statement**

Milo Ira, “Trans-ness is celestial and inevitable. Our cotton-candy heraldry evokes Spring, dawn, and the return of the sun. The night is over and we gather under a blue sky.”

*We wish to thank the University of Victoria History Department Chair, faculty, and staff for their support of this special issue and the advancement of trans historical scholarship.*

## **Contact**

email: [ghr@uvic.ca](mailto:ghr@uvic.ca)

twitter: [@gradhistreview](https://twitter.com/gradhistreview)

web: [uvic.ca/ghr](http://uvic.ca/ghr)

## **Submissions**

The Graduate History Review is a peer-reviewed, open access journal published by graduate students at the University of Victoria. We welcome articles and research notes from emerging scholars in all historical disciplines. Submission guidelines are available at:

<http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ghr/about/submissions>.

## **A Note on the Type**

This journal is laid out in the Crimson Text typeface, designed by Sebastian Kosch. <http://fonts.google.com/specimen/Crimson+Text>.

## Contributors

**Moira Armstrong** (they/them) is a PhD student in American Studies at Rutgers University. They completed a BA in history and English at Kent State University and a MA in Gender, Sexuality, and Culture from Birkbeck, University of London. Their research interests include queer and disability studies, oral history, public history, the COVID-19 pandemic, and asexuality and aromanticism.

**Emily Cousens** (they/she) is a Lecturer in the History of Gender and Sexuality at Birkbeck, University of London. Emily is particularly interested in the philosophical and political contributions of 1970s radical, queer and trans feminisms, with a focus on the conversations taking place in print. Emily's new book, *Trans feminist epistemologies in the US Second Wave*, was published by Palgrave in August 2023.

**Will Hansen** (he/him) is a Pākehā trans man studying at Te Herenga Waka - Victoria University of Wellington. His Masters thesis analysed transgender resistance in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 1970s and 80s, and he is currently working on his PhD about queer activism in Aotearoa from 1962-2013. Will is also a trustee of Te Pūranga Takatāpui o Aotearoa, the Lesbian and Gay Archives of New Zealand.

**Penelope Higgins** (she/her) is working towards the completion of a B.A. in History at Concordia University and preparing to pursue complementary graduate studies. She is drawn to history for its capacity to break through the mystification or simplification of the past used in the imposition and maintenance of oppressive organizations of life. She is spurred on by the constant process of

revealing that the past was ever-changing, complicated, full of unexpected surprises and contradictions. She is passionate about public-facing historical work for its possibility to spread knowledge and interpretation of the past and, in doing so, furnish people with tools to understand the changing present and shape the future. In her spare time, she works with textiles, enjoying the methodical symbiosis of the practical and the ornamental. She shares the building and exploration of life with her much-loved partner, family, and friends and would like to thank them for their encouragement and tolerance of her sometimes-obsessive pursuit of understanding and her constant desire to share what she is learning.

**Milo Ira** (he/they) is a Two-Spirit Métis illustrator and graduate student who researches the mental health care experiences of neurodiverse Two-Spirit people on Turtle Island. They live with their two kids, two cats, and some stick bugs. You can find them on social media as @bonmotmilo.

**Jamey Jespersion** (she/her) is a Vanier Scholar and PhD Candidate in History and Cultural, Social, and Political Thought at the University of Victoria. She specializes in trans and Two-Spirit histories of North America, with a focus on early Indigenous-colonial contact along the Pacific coast. Her writing can be found, or is forthcoming, in *Gender & History*, *History Workshop*, *TSQ*, *The Oxford Handbook of LGBTQ+ History*, and more.

**Dean Leetal** (they/ze) was the first out, non binary person in their country of origin, and organized the first rights and education activist campaigns. They recently graduated Magna Cum Laude from their MA studies at Tel Aviv University, their dissertation research winning the Ze'evi, the Zafirir, and a departmental award

for excellence. They are the Multimedia Editor of *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, and part of the editorial team of *En-Gender* journal. They publish about alternative disability activism, as well as different trans and non binary readings. Recently they published the papers, “Revisiting gender theory in fan fiction: Bringing nonbinary genders into the world” and “Let Me Turn Monster: Shakespeare’s Arden Forest and Trans Geography.”

**Juniper Oxford** (she/her) graduated with an M.A. in History from the University of Vermont in 2023, where she studied nineteenth and twentieth-century American history. In 2021, she graduated from Southern Illinois University Carbondale with a B.A. in History and a minor in Political Science. In addition to her broader interest in women’s history and trans history, her research interests include femininity, sexuality, social movements, third parties, and political discontent.

**Chris Aino Pihlak** (she/her) is a PhD student at the University of Toronto after the defense of her master’s thesis at the University of Victoria. She is a trans woman and social historian who studies past articulations of trans feminine existence. In addition to her interest in trans feminine porn studies, she is a scholar of twentieth-century, Anglophone, and overwhelmingly white, trans feminine subcultural periodical networks.

**Sam Dolores Sanchinel** (they/ella) is a PhD candidate in the Women and Gender Studies program at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on trans identities, and their interactions with the ethics of Christian religious traditions, as well as Latinx Studies. They have also published work in the journals *Feminist Review*, *Religion and Gender*, and *Theology & Sexuality*.



**Chanathip Suwannanon** (she/her) is presently a third-year PhD student in Interdisciplinary Studies (INTD) at the University of Victoria. She is developing her PhD project on oral history with Thai older Kathoey. Her project focuses on Elder Kathoey's lives, experiences, and the Thai historical and social contexts from 1957 to 1993. Her project also builds a theoretical conversation with Transgender studies. Moreover, Esther's interest in Kathoey and Transgender issues crosses a variety of fields: History of Medicine, Southeast Asian Studies, and Postcolonial Studies.

**Niamh Timmons** (she/they) is a Visiting Lecturer in Gender Studies at Mount Holyoke College. She is working on her first academic monograph on trans feminine creative work and activism as forms of dreaming that imagines alternatives to systemic violence. Her other work focuses on applications of disability justice, the Pacific Northwest, storytelling, and queer/trans Irish histories.

## Table of Contents

<b>Jamey Jespersion &amp; Chris Aino Pihlak</b>	i
Special Issue Editors' Introduction	

### *Articles*

<b>Chanathip Suwannanon</b>	1
<i>Thang Sai Thee Sam</i> (The Third Pathway) Novel As Archive: Inspiring a Kathoey 'Herstorian'	

<b>Will Hansen</b>	26
"Alone it's tough, TOGETHER IT'S EASY": Hedesthia, Aotearoa New Zealand's First Transgender Organisation, 1972-1990	

<b>Juniper Oxford</b>	73
Draft Dodger, Soldier's Wife: Trans Feminine Lives, Civic Duty, and World War II	

<b>Penelope Higgins</b>	118
Fascism and the Trans Villain: Historically Recurring Transphobia in Far-Right Politics	

### *Critical Commentaries*

<b>Sam Dolores Sanchinel</b>	153
<i>Hijas de la Putisima</i> : A Trans Femme Perspective on Juana María Rodríguez' <i>Putá Life</i>	

<b>Emily Cousens</b>	164
Androgyny in the Archives: 1970s Trans and Feminist Encounters with the Promise and Politics of Non-Binary	

<b>Niamh Timmons</b>	188
Constellating Trans Activist Histories	
<b>Dean Leetal</b>	201
A Trans, Autistic, and Neurogender Jewish Monster: The Story of the Golem	
<b>Moira Armstrong</b>	227
The Museum of Transology and Radical (Trans) Trust	

# Trans Histories by Trans Historians

## *Special Issue Editors' Introduction*

**Jamey Jespersion** (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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> As trans graduate

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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

---

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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

---

<sup>6</sup> 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 *Putas 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.<sup>7</sup> 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

---

<sup>7</sup> 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.

# ***Thang Sai Thee Sam* (The Third Pathway) Novel As Archive: Inspiring a Kathoey ‘Herstorian’**

**Chanathip Suwannanon** (she/her)

University of Victoria

*Abstract: This essay studies the Thai novel Thang Sai Thee Sam, or ทางสายที่สาม (The Third Pathway), as an archive. This novel was written by Kiratee Chanar, the first Thai transsexual woman novelist, who drew from her own emotions and sex-change experiences in the USA in 1975. The first edition of Thang Sai Thee Sam was published in 1982. In summary, this essay elucidates how a novel can be a historical source by contextualizing its formation. Thang Sai Thee Sam reflected the broader political contexts in Thailand during the Cold War, the development of a world sex-change capital in/outside of Thailand, and the visibility of white transsexual autobiographies. By situating it within this context, I demonstrate that it is possible to examine Thang Sai Thee Sam as a “transgender archive” — or more specially a kathoey archive — and a historical source of development of trans medicine in national and global contexts.*

**Introduction: *Thang Sai Thee Sam* and How I Read It**

*“We are born to walk in the Third pathway. The first pathway belongs to men who were born with strength and responsibility for family leadership. Another pathway belongs to women who were born with tenderness and giving birth for humanity. The pathway we are walking is in-between.”<sup>1</sup>*

– Kiratee Chanar (2002)

In 2018, when I first came to Canada to attend the Moving Trans History Forward conference at the University of Victoria (UVic), I took a copy of *Thang Sai Thee Sam* in my suitcase together with my personal stuff, paper for the conference, and the confidence to do a presentation in an international conference for the first time. Before leaving, I donated the novel to the UVic Transgender Archives, as the book is valuable not just as an outstanding work of Thai literature, but as a kathoey or transgender archive.<sup>2</sup> *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is both a fictional romance as well as a semi-autobiographical novel. It was published in *Sakul Thai Magazine* from Volume 1348 on 19 August 1980 to Volume 1436 on 27 April 1982 (88 volumes).<sup>3</sup> Later, it was published as a first edition novel in the same year 1982 by Wannakam Pue Cheewit (or Literature for Life) Publisher. The author Kiratee Chanar is the first Thai transsexual woman novelist who received a sex-change operation in 1975 performed by Dr. Stanley Biber at Mount San

---

<sup>1</sup> Kiratee Chanar, *Thang-Sai-Thee-Sam*, 3rd ed. (Bangkok: Arun, 2002), 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Thang Sai Thee Sam* which I donated to the Transgender Archives at UVic is the 3rd edition published in 2002 and it consists of 870 pages.

<sup>3</sup> Kiratee Chanar, *Thang Sai Thee Sam*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Bangkok: Wannakam Pue Cheewit, 1982).



Rafael Hospital in the USA.<sup>4</sup>

I found *Thang Sai Thee Sam* when I began work on my Master's thesis in the field of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Thammasat University. I still remember the first time I began reading the novel; I approached it without a critical lens or positioning myself as a researcher or graduate student, but as a younger generation kathoey or Thai trans woman myself. Turning page by page, I was nostalgic about my first love, stuck in my sentimentality, and compassionate towards all the kathoey characters in the novel. Even though I chose to walk in the same pathway, I cannot completely understand how difficult the lives of older kathoey were, nor how society in their generation treated them. At the very least, I can sense how they felt, as it reflects how they had struggled and how Thai society has changed over my generation.

In addition to providing a history of sexual reassignment surgery based on the writer's experience, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is inspired by the author's own feelings. One of the biggest challenges I found from reading *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is encountering the oppressive feelings of the kathoey protagonist, such as self-hating, being trapped in the wrong body, feeling pessimistic about love, or feminine incompleteness. Chanar admitted that she wrote this novel

---

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Stanley Biber was an American physician and a pioneer in sexual reassignment surgery. Biber graduated in 1948 from the University of Iowa's medical school and became the chief surgeon of a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) unit in South Korea. After his military service ended, Biber applied at Trinidad's Mount San Rafael Hospital. He performed sex-change surgery from 1969 until 1996. Over a three-decade career, it is estimated that he performed the operation for 5,800 patients. Claire Martin, "Pioneer Sex-Change Surgeon Dies at 82," *Denver Post*, January 18, 2006.

from her friend's experience and from her own feelings.<sup>5</sup> She narrates the stories of kathoey to spread a new understanding towards kathoey people. As she clarified in the afterword of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition novel, which was added in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition:

My real intention to write *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is to be a part of revealing the emotions of the one who is degraded by nature and surroundings, and who is judged by society as being worthless. In fact, their abnormalities should not be considered as a social problem, if they received the correct understanding.<sup>6</sup>

The novel reflects the genre conventions of Thai romance except that the main character is kathoey. The protagonist's name is Kaew (or แก้ว), meaning glass, which can imply fragility, purity, and femininity. She is feminine, beautiful, and passes as a woman; however, she came from a lower class of society, growing up as an orphan and dek-wat (a temple kid).<sup>7</sup> After Kaew finished secondary school, she moved to Bangkok to work as a bus ticket taker. That was until she met Jun, another kathoey character who is non-passing, funny, and completely different from Kaew, but one same thing is that Jun is a lower class kathoey who lives in Ging Petch (a slum area of Bangkok) and works as a lottery seller. Jun suggests Kaew work in a beauty salon while helping Kaew transition into a woman: teaching her how to do makeup and wear

---

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, "Gay vs Laws Seminar," *Nitisat Journal* 12, no. 2 (1984): 112.

<sup>6</sup> Kiratee Chanar, *Thang-Sai-Thee-Sam*, 3rd ed. (Bangkok: Arun, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Dek wat or a temple kid generally refers to a boy who lives in a temple, assists or works for monks. They also are taught Buddhist morals, reading and writing. Some become a dek-wat due to lack of educational opportunity or being an orphan.

female clothes. Aside from Kaew and Jun, another remarkable kathoey character is Chat. She is a kathoey sex worker who received an unethical sex-change surgery in Thailand, and has a tragic ending. Besides romantic stories, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* also portrayed the non-monolithic identity, morality, and self-formation amongst kathoey.

After she befriended Jun, Kaew meets three men. First is Thiraphron, an art student, friend, and Kaew's forever first love. Then there is Navin, a married man who helps Kaew by giving her a job as a receptionist in his restaurant and supporting her financially in pursuing her dream of obtaining sex-change surgery. Last is Pongphol who comes from an elite family and falls in love with Kaew. Near the ending, Kaew, in her postoperative body, loses her virginity to Navin, the married man who is always kind to Kaew. At this scene, the secret affair reiterates the mythical and religious belief in Theravada Buddhism: that being born as kathoey is a karmic consequence of adultery in a past life.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Kaew had not only committed the sin of adultery but had also encountered forbidden love. At the end, however, Kaew leaves every man behind, finding that her true love is for all of humanity, and choosing to walk down the idealist path. Kaew becomes a volunteer teacher in a rural province of Thailand. At this final scene, the protagonist stands in a complex position between being a good woman or a sinner, and there is the blurring of moral boundaries

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter A Jackson, "Male homosexuality and transgenderism in the Thai Buddhist tradition," in *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1998), 55-89. The two stories include the story about Phra Ananda concerning kathoeyes and the second story is about Vakkali, who is indirectly identified as a male homosexual. In Buddhist accounts, kathoey are seen as an immoral and ambivalent subject.

between religion and humanism.

With an outstanding plot, unique characters, and complex narratives, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* has been favorably selected by Thai literary critics and foregrounded in Thai literary criticism since the 1980s. The pioneer critic on *Thang Sai Thee Sam* in the area of comparative literature was Arin Pinijvararak. Her research found that between 1973-1982 there were fifteen Thai novels with sexual/gender non-conforming characters and narratives. At that time, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* was categorized as Niyai Ruk Ruam Phet (a homosexual novel).<sup>9</sup> In other words, it was included in the same genre with lesbian, gay, or bisexual novels. In the 1970s, many English gender/sexual identity terms – for instance, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and homosexual – had been disseminated in Thai society. These novels had a crucial role in giving an explanation of these categories, but only *Thang Sai Thee Sam* specifically describes transsexuality. The fifteen novels in Pinijvararak's work were also grounded in the Thai social and political contexts during the Cold War. As she pointed out:

The October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1973 event<sup>10</sup> brought not only huge

---

<sup>9</sup> Pinijvararak defined Rak Ruam Phet (Homosexuality) as “having sexual pleasure with a person of the same sex.” Arin Pinijvararak, “The Theme of Homosexuality in Thai Novel, 1973-1982,” MA thesis (Chulalongkorn University, 1984), 8.

<sup>10</sup> The October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1973 event in Thailand is known as the “Day of Great Sorrow.” It took place in Bangkok where half a million people gathered at the Democracy Monument to demand democracy and an end to the autocratic regime of the so-called “Three Tyrants”: Thanom Kittikhachorn, Narong Kittikhachorn, and Praphat Jarusathien. As the protest was led by students and intellectuals, they also protested against the arrest of political campaigners and continuing military dictatorship. It became severely violent when soldiers fired into the crowd; seventy-seven were killed and 857 were injured. Christopher John Baker and

changes to Thai politics but also a huge impact to Thai literature; Thai publishers changed and put more attention toward the ideologies of socialism and communism. At the time, there were an increased number of books related to political issues.<sup>11</sup>

I considerably agree with her point that the Thai political context of the 1970s impacted Thai literature in terms of content and ideology. It shaped the author to intervene in social issues through their writings and criticisms of Thai politics and society, while Thai students in the 1970s gave their attention to leftist writings, discovered and translated from Europe and America.<sup>12</sup> More than shifting the fictional narrative, it thus also transformed the character and narrator, as Chanar bravely stepped out to write her first novel *Thang Sai Thee Sam* and represent kathoey or gender non-conforming characters to Thai audiences in the early 1980s.

After four decades, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* continues to be examined for its literary merit and production by Thai literary scholars, including Wanna Numun, Natthanai Prasannam, and Bongkotchakon Thongsuk.<sup>13</sup> Only Prasannam emphasizes the

---

Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 186.

<sup>11</sup> Pinijvararak, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, 184.

<sup>13</sup> Wanna Noomuan, "Novels on Homosexuality: Problems and Human Value," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no.2 (2008): 35-75; Prasannam, 240-256; Bongkotchakon Thongsuk, "Character Reflection of (LGBT-Themed Novels) in Thailand B.E.2516-2557," *INTHANINTHAKSIN JOURNAL* 12, no.2 (2017): 35-57. Besides academia, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* has also been read by Kham Phaka (a well-known feminist writer, critic and journalist). She criticized it in her book

construction of transgender identity in *Thang Sai Thee Sam* novel through the lens of representation and cultural studies. Prasannam considers this novel as a discursive practice, as it is composed of various discourses, including medicine, religion, or myth in Thai society towards kathoey people.<sup>14</sup> Prasannam also noted that the intention of Chanar in creating this novel with a kathoey protagonist who conforms to the idea of femininity under heteropatriarchy may not be subversive, but she is still giving the voice of sexual minority people, claiming a space, and making them visible in literature.<sup>15</sup> However, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* has not yet been understood as historical evidence of kathoey people or the development of “sex-change” surgery in national and global contexts. Therefore, in this essay, I demonstrate how *Thang Sai Thee Sam* can be considered an archive, as it records Chanar’s experiences and feelings, alongside the development of sexual reassignment surgery in Thailand and the globe. To do so, next I will weave Chanar’s life, work, and her influential sex-change experience in the USA, and then I will leave some ideas to re-write the history of trans treatment in Thailand.

### **Kiratee Chanar and her Journey to the World Sex-Change Capital**

Kaew took a flight from Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok and landed in Hawai’i where she went through the immigration process. Then, she took a connecting flight from Hawai’i to Los Angeles. Upon her arrival, Phongphol’s friend picked her up at the

---

*Kra Too Dok Thong* (2003).

<sup>14</sup> Prasannam, 248.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 254

airport. Kaew spent a night with them. The next morning, she took a domestic flight from Los Angeles to Denver, Colorado. She stayed there with Sirinya's friend for a while to get a recommendation letter from two psychologists.<sup>16</sup> After receiving the letters, Kaew took a Greyhound bus from Denver to the nearby small-town of Trinidad that was once colloquially known as the global capital for sex-change surgery.<sup>17</sup> Chanar's sex-change experience in America inspired Kaew's journey in *Thang Sai Thee Sam*. For that reason, this novel does not only tell the romantic story of a kathoey crossing gender or moral boundaries, but also the journey of a kathoey crossing borders.

It is noticeable that *Thang Sai Thee Sam* paralleled increasing representations of white transsexual women in the 1970s and 1980s. After Christine Jorgensen's famous 1952 debut as "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty," as well as the 1967 release of her autobiography, many white transsexual celebrities walked in Jorgensen's shoes. Aren Z. Aizura found that many of the earliest European and American transsexual autobiographies feature a trip to Morocco to undergo surgery; for example, April Ashley's memoir *April Ashley's Odyssey*, Coccinelle's *Coccinelle*, Renée Richards's *Second Serve*, Caroline Cossey's *My Story*, and Jan Morris's *Conundrum*.<sup>18</sup> According to Aizura, the sex-change destinations featured in white transsexual autobiographies were exoticized and framed through Orientalist lenses.<sup>19</sup> The uniqueness of *Thang Sai Thee Sam* as a

---

<sup>16</sup> Sirinya is Navin's sister.

<sup>17</sup> Claire Martin, "Pioneer Sex-Change Surgeon Dies at 82," *Denver Post*, January 18, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Aren Z. Aizura, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 60.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

semi-autobiographical novel which included Chanar's sex-change experiences in the USA reflects the Oriental author's perceptions of supposed Western modernity, including representations of Global North medicine, gender identity categories, laws, and citizenship.

In this section, I will explore the background life of Chanar and her sex-change experience. But first, I would like to acknowledge that Chanar's life background here is incomplete. With respect to the pathway of her life, Chanar lived her life quietly into old age, even after she courageously wrote *Thang Sai Thee Sam* when there were too many closed doors in society for gender non-conforming people. In the age full of white transsexual celebrities and stories, Chanar was bravely and publicly out in the media. To piece together a narrative of her life, I draw from fragmentary historical materials, including her published works and her interviews in Thai newspapers, as well as a report of a debate event in 1983. Kiratee Chanar attended the public debate on the issue "Gay vs Laws" as a speaker. The event was organized on February 18<sup>th</sup> at Thammasat University. Chanar was one of the speakers in the event who shared her medical and legal experience in the USA.

What I found from tracing Chanar's works is that her novel writings – e.g., *Duang Jai Nai Sai Rom* or *Love in the wind* (1999), *Kanom Jeen Pa Thongdi* (2000), *Buang Ban ja Thornor* or *Love beyond time* (2001), and *Hanale* (2001) – can be categorized as romantic and moral fictions. She is not only known as Kiratee Chanar but also as Ratacha (or รัตชา), another pen name which she used in novel writing guidebooks, such as *To Write a Novel: Art and Craft of Storytelling* (2004). She was also a columnist on women's and kid's



issues in *Prachamati* which is a Thai newspaper in the USA.<sup>20</sup> More outstandingly, she is a professional floral designer. She wrote many books on floral arranging and taught an online course.<sup>21</sup> She also wrote a book about Porntip Nakhirunkanok (Bui Simon), a Thai-American who was crowned Miss Universe in 1988.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, she was a founder of an American-Thai foundation to help children living in poverty. However, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* was Chanar's most recognizable publication, and its publication was a turning point in her writer career from a "no-name writer" to a S.E.A. Write award nominee in 1983.<sup>23</sup> *Thang Sai Thee Sam* got huge attention from Thai film and TV drama producers who wanted to visualize it onto the screen, but it was rejected by Kor-Bor-Wor (กบว.), the Radio and Television Broadcasting Commission.<sup>24</sup>

Aside from her writing works, Chanar was known for social work; a Thai newspaper described her as "a humanitarian" and "a social worker." She sometimes was called "Mae Nheng" or "Mother

---

<sup>20</sup> Magrum, "Tracing back 'Thang Sai Thee Sam' Opening the literature world of Kiratee Chanar," *Siamrat*, October 23, 1988; Sunthron Chavalsil, "Deepen in the society and the Pathway where 'Kiratee Chanar' passed through," *Matubhumi*, July 11, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> Her books on floral arranging are *Professional Floral Design Theory* (1993) *Basic Floral Arranging* (1995) *Professional Floral Design* (1997), *The Art of Bouquet Arrangement* (2000) *Arranging Rose: Queen of Flowers* (2002), and *Floral Arranging Workshop 1-3*. I discovered Kiratee.com when I searched from the internet archive. This site opens for writing workshop. Moreover, there is also a Floral Arranging teaching by Kiratee Chanar on YouTube.

<sup>22</sup> The book is "Porntip" *The Garment of Life* or in Thai "ภรณ์ทิพย์" *อาภรณ์แห่งชีวิต* published in 1988.

<sup>23</sup> The S.E.A. Write Award, or Southeast Asian Writers Award, is a prestigious award that has been presented annually since 1979 to a Southeast Asian writer.

<sup>24</sup> Kor Bor Wor is a state agency which was responsible for broadcasting regulation and censorship from 1975 to 1992.

Nheng” (Nheng is her nickname) for helping children in poverty. Her foundation supports an orphanage in Kanchanaburi province, and she visited there in 1982.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, she was also known as “Kru Nheng” or “Teacher Nheng” since she did several teachings in novel writing and floral arranging.

What I found from the interview that she shared in Thai newspapers and in the debate event in 1983 is that Chanar grew up with divorced parents. She also seems closer to her mother than father. At a young age, Chanar studied at Wat-Benchamabophit School (one of the oldest all-male schools in Thailand) and then got a higher education at the College of Fine Arts in Bangkok. She moved to the US in 1968 and received a sex-change surgery in 1975 when she was twenty-five-years-old (close to her twenty-sixth birthday).<sup>26</sup> She stayed in the USA with her mother and siblings while her father lived in Thailand with other siblings.<sup>27</sup> Before her surgery, she had spent about four and a half years receiving hormone treatments (both injection and capsule) and worked for five years to save money. While living in the USA, Chanar worked as a writer and journalist.<sup>28</sup> Later, she owned a flower and greeting card shop in Los Angeles.<sup>29</sup> By opening this business, I assume that

---

<sup>25</sup> Kiratee Chanar. *Ban Rai Thee Paimek* (Bangkok: Children Foundation, 2004), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Chavalsil, Sunthron, “Deepen in the society and the Pathway where “Kiratee Chanar” passed through,” *Matubhumi*, July. 11, 1983; Anonymous, 110. This means that maybe she was born around in 1950 or 1951 and I assume that she is now probably in her 70s. Chanar is still alive. I met her in Thailand in April 2018 after I returned to Thailand from the Moving Trans History Forward conference trip in Canada. She organized a writing camp at her house in suburban Bangkok.

<sup>27</sup> Chavalsil, Sunthron, “Deepen in the society and the Pathway where “Kiratee Chanar” passed through,” *Matubhumi*, July. 11, 1983.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Magrum, “Tracing back ‘Thang Sai Thee Sam’ Opening the literature world of

Chanar's life in the USA was mainly based in Los Angeles, California.

At the time, the cost of sexual reassignment surgery was around 5,000 USD for the operation and 3,000 USD for accommodations. This excluded the expenses for four-and-a-half years of hormonal therapy.<sup>30</sup> It is likely that Chanar made history as the first Thai person to receive a sex-change surgery abroad; however, she claims this was not the case:

I myself received a sex-change operation in 1975 but I was not the first. There was another person who got the surgery but she disappeared and I don't know where she is ... she was a famous costume designer who had worked in a tailor's shop near Siam Square ... her name is Nhong Anirut . . . Nhong was the first Thai who got the sex-change surgery but she did it in Casablanca in North America.<sup>31</sup>

Her assertion that Casablanca was "in North America" is misleading. In fact, Casablanca is a town in Morocco, which is in North Africa. Following this clue, I have found that there was indeed a surgeon who performed sex-change operations in Casablanca, Morocco, Dr. George Burou (1910–1987). He is the surgeon who invented the penile skin inversion technique and performed the operation in his Clinique du Parc at 13 Rue Lapébie (currently Rue Mélouia).<sup>32</sup> It

---

Kiratee Chanar." *Siamrat*, October. 23, 1988.

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, 112.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>32</sup> J. Joris Hage, Refaat B. Karim, and Donald R. Laub, "On the Origin of Pedicled Skin Inversion Vaginoplasty: Life and Work of Dr Georges Burou of Casablanca," *Annals of Plastic Surgery* 59, no. 6 (2007): 726.

seems that not only Trinidad but also Casablanca was a sex-change capital between the 1960s and 1970s. Even though the story of the first Thai person to receive a sex-change surgery outside Thailand remains a mystery, Chanar claimed that she was the first Thai patient to receive a sex change surgery with Dr. Biber in the USA, and the first non-US citizen transsexual woman to get legally married with her American husband, receive a green card, and change the gender marker on her identity document.<sup>33</sup>

At present, it is not necessary for a Thai trans woman like Kaew, Chanar, or a younger generation kathoey like myself to travel to another country to get a sex-change surgery because Thailand has become the new global sex-change capital. Ironically, trans people from around the world can buy a medical package and come to Thailand for the surgery, as Thailand has been a destination of non-Thai trans patients who were seeking for gender-reassignment surgery (GRS) since the mid-1990s.<sup>34</sup> Thai GRS boomed in the early twenty-first century by the expansion of the Thai tourism industry. Jillana B. Enteen recognizes the change in reputation of Thai tourism industry from sex tourism to the forefront of sex-transition tourism in the same way that Aizura points out that “Thai GRS must be theorized not as a phenomenon but as a market.”<sup>35</sup> Thailand was renowned as a transgender treatment hub for worldwide trans patients due to several factors. One prominent factor was the marketing strategy of a local clinic and domestic government authority that intentionally appealed to international medical tourists, especially Western or, in Aizura’s words, “a

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Aizura, 184.

<sup>35</sup> Jillana B. Enteen, “Transitioning Online: Cosmetic Surgery Tourism in Thailand,” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2014): 240; Aizura, 179.

self-orientalizing strategy.”<sup>36</sup> These strategies included endorsement by the Thai government of the medical tourism industry, the affective labor of Thai clinic staff, the marketing of local clinics in promoting GRS service packages, and even the designing of internet websites to advertise the service to non-Thai patients.<sup>37</sup>

To sum up, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is evidence of world sex-change capital history, as it shows the experience of Chanar herself as a non-white/Western transsexual in accessing trans medicine in the USA before Thailand became a new global sex-change capital at the turn of the twenty-first century.

### **“I” and A Journey to Re-Write a History of Sex Change Surgery in Thailand**

Even though *Thang Sai Thee Sam* novel includes Chanar’s American-based sex-change operation, it leaves me just a few hints about trans medicine in Thailand. Before traveling to the USA, Kaew received hormonal therapy under the guidance of a Thai doctor, and Chat (a kathoey sex-worker character) received a likely unethical and unsafe surgery without a medical letter from a psychologist in a private clinic in Thailand by a Japanese surgeon. What is overshadowed from the novel is the formation of trans medicine in Thailand. Therefore, it prompts me to trace its beginning.

Stepping back to the year 1975, the same year Chanar received sex-change surgery with Dr. Biber in Trinidad, two Thai doctors (Dr. Preecha Tiewtranon and Dr. Prakrob Thongpeaw) performed a MtF sex reassignment surgery in Thailand at

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Chulalongkorn hospital.<sup>38</sup> This was not long after Dr. Harry Benjamin first officially published *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966. Then, sex-reassignment surgery began to be taught in Chulalongkorn University Hospital in 1983.<sup>39</sup> The year 1975 was historically recorded in medical papers as the start of MtF gender reassignment surgery in Thailand by Thai doctors.<sup>40</sup> The 1970s are also seen as a milestone decade when the GRS techniques were developed by a Thai doctor.<sup>41</sup> However, I would note that this record obscures the period that Thai doctors began to medically study kathoey people, and also overlooks the experimental stage of related-genital surgery in Thailand.

My first clue to retrieve the history of trans medicine in Thailand came from the thesis of Terdsak Romjumpa, which studies gay discourses in Thailand between 1965 to 1999 through various sources including a group of medical texts.<sup>42</sup> Romjumpa's work showed that, before 1975, there were two Thai doctors that

---

<sup>38</sup> Prayuth Chokrungrvaranont and Preecha Tiewtranon, "Sex Reassignment Surgery in Thailand," *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 87, no.11 (2004): 1402.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Prayuth Chokrungrvaranont, Gennaro Selvaggi, Sirachai Jindarak, Apichai Angspatt, Pornthep Pungrasmi, Poonpismai Suwajo, and Preecha Tiewtranon, "The Development of Sex Reassignment Surgery in Thailand: A Social Perspective," *The Scientific World* 2014, (2014): 4; Burin Wangjiraniran, Gennaro Selvaggi, Prayuth Chokrungrvaranont, Sirachai Jindarak, Sutin Khobunsongserm, and Preecha Tiewtranon. "Male-to-Female Vaginoplasty: Preecha's Surgical Technique," *Journal of plastic surgery and hand surgery* 49, no. 3 (2015): 159.

<sup>41</sup> Aren Z. Aizura, "Feminine Transformations: Gender Reassignment Surgical Tourism in Thailand," *Medical Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (2010): 429.

<sup>42</sup> Terdsak Romjumpa, "Discourses on Gays in Thai society, 1965-1999" (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2002), 41-54.

medically studied kathoey: Dr. Sood Sangvichien<sup>43</sup> (sometimes his surname was spelled in English as Saengvichien) conducted medical research on 18 kathoey prisoners<sup>44</sup> in Lad Yao prison in Bangkok with the support of Dr. Arun Bharksuvan, the director of Somdet Chaopraya hospital<sup>45</sup> at that time. They both presented their findings in the grand annual meeting of the Medical Association of Thailand on January 28th, 1961. In July, their papers were both published in the *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* in the same volume.

The two doctors proposed the term Lak-Ka-Phet or ลักกะเฟต which was coined from the idea of transvestitism in English. Dr. Sangvichien considers that the word kathoey should describe people with hermaphrodite (or intersex) conditions. This idea came from the original meaning of the word kathoey in the Royal Institute Dictionary which refers to “human or animal without male or female sex characteristics.”<sup>46</sup> With his expertise in Anatomy, he applied a variety of scientific methods — e.g., a physical measurement method of Decourt and Doumic, a sex chromatin test, sperm examination, and a 17-ketosteroids urine test — to examine

---

<sup>43</sup> From my current medical archival research, I found that Dr. Saengvichien seems to be a leader in this field, as he published several works concerning hermaphroditism, transvestitism and transsexualism between 1950 and 1980 and he was also a co-researcher in studying these issues.

<sup>44</sup> Dr. Sangvichien reported that these kathoey prisoners were arrested by being Lak Ka Phet, while Dr. Bharksuvan’s informed that some of them were arrested for sex-work.

<sup>45</sup> Somdet Chaopraya Hospital is the first psychiatric hospital in Thailand, and it was founded at the behest of King Chulalongkorn in 1889.

<sup>46</sup> Sood Sangvichien, “Homosexuality-Anatomical Aspect,” *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 44, no. 7 (1961): 435.

Lak-Ka-Phet prisoners.<sup>47</sup> He concluded that the abnormality of Lak-Ka-Phet, the man who wears female clothes and expresses female behaviors — or people who were generally recognized as kathoey in Thai society — is the result of mental disorder rather than physical.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, Dr. Bharksuvan, whose expertise was in Psychology, reported three cases and analyzed the cause of being Lak-Ka-Phet. He had three assumptions on heredity, glandular disease, and psychological disorder which mentioned Sigmund Freud's psychosexual development theory.<sup>49</sup> However, Dr. Braksuvan did not make a clear conclusion; rather, he proposed the treatment and the protection of Lak-Ka-Phet.<sup>50</sup>

Following this clue, I found that Dr. Sangvichien devoted his attention to kathoey or hermaphrodite research subjects after he published the paper, "An Unusual Hernial Sac Content," in 1951. In it, he received a report on a surgical specimen from a case of right congenital inguinal hernia which presented the resembling infantile uterus inside. The case concerned a Thai patient who appeared as a normal man externally in Chiangrai province but, from hernia surgery in 1946, was found to have a mass. Later, in 1950, this surgical specimen was forwarded to Dr. Sangvichien by Dr. Sem Pringpuangkao.<sup>51</sup> In addition to these mentioned doctors, it is likely that trans-related surgery was a noticeable issue among Thai medical providers. Before Chulalongkorn Hospital provided the first

---

<sup>47</sup> Sangvichien, 437.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 442.

<sup>49</sup> Arun Bharksuvan, "Homosexuality-Psychiatric Aspect," *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 44, no. 7 (1961): 445.

<sup>50</sup> Bharksuvan, 448-450.

<sup>51</sup> Sood Saengvichien, "An Unusual Hernial Sac Content," *Siriraj Hospital Gazette* 3, no. 2 (1951): 57-58.



MtF surgery to a patient in 1975, a FtM sex-change surgery had been performed by Dr. Kampee Mallikamas and his colleagues at Central Hospital (Klang Hospital or โรงพยาบาลกลาง) in 1973.<sup>52</sup> By tracing these clues, I would demonstrate that the emergence of transgender medicine in Thailand can be traced back to at least the 1950s.

Although *Thang Sai Thee Sam* sparked my enthusiasm for tracing the history of trans medicine in Thailand, I leave more in-depth analysis to future scholastic works. To fully re-write the sex-change surgery history in Thailand, we need much more work to examine the connection of GRS in Thailand and global contexts, to understand the circulation of European sexology, and to historicize American influence on Thai medicine during the Cold War. Additionally, it also needs a radical paradigm to analyze the medical archive. Jules Gill-Peterson proposes that we read the clinical archive “to contest the historiography of the trans past monopolized by the parameters of transsexuality.”<sup>53</sup> By doing this, it will create a bridge between intersex and trans medical history and broaden the history of GRS in Thailand.

Besides the Thai popular uprising of the 1970s, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* was also embedded in the rise of the development of trans medicine in Thailand. As such, I argue that the novel *Thang Sai Thee Sam*, inspired by Chanar’s sex change experience, can be interpreted as evidence of the development of modern gender reassignment surgery in Thailand, as well as in a broader global context.

---

<sup>52</sup> Kampee Mallikamas, “Operative Technics,” *The Journal of the Central Hospital* 22, no. 2 (1985): 66.

<sup>53</sup> Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 11.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I demonstrated how *Thang Sai Thee Sam* emerged from the Thai social and political influence of the 1970s, and how these local and international political changes transformed Thai literature. Meanwhile, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* was also grounded in the formation of trans medicine in Thailand, emerging in comparison to white transsexual celebrities and autobiographies of the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, my main argument here is that *Thang Sai Thee Sam* has the potential to be an archive, rather than merely a novel.

*Thang Sai Thee Sam* can be read as an archive in two ways. Firstly, Chanar's novel can be counted as a "transgender archive," since it functions as "a technology of identity."<sup>54</sup> As K.J. Rawson explains, "Far from a neutral or objective record of the past, a transgender archive is thus a rhetorical institution that is intentionally adapted to an audience for a particular persuasive purpose."<sup>55</sup> Clearly, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* serves the author's purpose, as Chanar wrote this novel to demythologize kathoey people and propose a new understanding to Thai society. More than that, it convinces the reader to accept what Kaew chose: the surgical operation and becoming a woman after the surgery. Secondly, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* functions as a record of the development of GRS in Thailand and the broader global context, as Chanar wrote this novel in a semi-autobiographical form by adding her sex-change experiences in the USA. From these two points, I propose to read

---

<sup>54</sup> Valerie Rohy, "In the Queer Archive: *Fun Home*," *GLQ: Journal of Gay & Lesbian Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 345 (cited in Rawson, 25).

<sup>55</sup> K.J. Rawson, "Archive," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 24-26.

*Thang Sai Thee Sam* as a historical text.

*Thang Sai Thee Sam* is a complex and incomplete site of analysis. There are still many issues to interrogate; e.g., the lives of Thai kathoey in 1950s and 1960s, the complex moral and political position in the novel, kathoey feelings that made up of Chanar's emotions, the hegemony of kathoey protagonist's femininity, and the relationship between men and kathoey character in heteronormativity and patriarchy. However, we should be mindful that kathoey or Thai gender non-conforming history is still obscured and overshadowed. Therefore, I suggest we re-narrate and re-write our history rather than just read this novel repeatedly.

It has now been over forty years since the release of *Thang Sai Thee Sam* and the emergence of representations of kathoey characters in world literature. I am not sure how far Thai society has come to the point that Chanar imagined a better place for kathoey/trans people. As a younger generation kathoey/trans woman myself, there are still many points in this novel that I cannot understand, entirely agree with, or stop questioning. We need many more historical works to bridge kathoey people in each generation and understand social history in/outside of Thailand. However, I cannot deny that *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is one of the sources of inspiration for me to become a kathoey 'herstorian' to discover the genealogy of Western sexology, the history of sex-change in Thailand, and its capitals in previous decades. It also inspires me to build up the oral history of kathoey elders and weave the history of Thai sex-change surgery in its global context, the subject of my current PhD dissertation. I give thanks to Chanar for paving this pathway for me.

## Bibliography

Aizura, Aren Z. "Feminine Transformations: Gender Reassignment Surgical Tourism in Thailand." *Medical Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (2010): 424-43.

Aizura, Aren Z. *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Anonymous. "Gay vs Laws Seminar." *Nitisat Journal* 12, no. 2 (1984): 96-149.

Baker, Christopher John and Pasuk Phongpaichit. *A History of Thailand*. Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Bharksuvan, Arun. "Homosexuality-Psychiatric Aspect." *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 44, no. 7 (1961): 443-50.

Chanar, Kiratee. *Thang-Sai-Thee-Sam*. 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Bangkok: Wannakam Pue Cheewit, 1982.

Chanar, Kiratee. *Thang-Sai-Thee-Sam*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Bangkok: Arun, 2002.

Chanar, Kiratee. *Ban Rai Thee Paimek*. Bangkok: Children Foundation, 2004.

Chokrungrvaranont, Prayuth and Preecha Tiewtranon. "Sex Reassignment Surgery in Thailand." *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 87, no. 11 (2004): 1402-08.

Enteen, Jillana B. "Transitioning Online: Cosmetic Surgery Tourism in Thailand." *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2014): 238-49.

Gill-Peterson, Jules. *Histories of the Transgender Child*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Hage, J. Joris, Refaat B. Karim, and Donald R. Laub. "On the Origin of Pedicled Skin Inversion Vaginoplasty: Life and Work of Dr Georges Burou of Casablanca." *Annals of Plastic Surgery* 59, no. 6 (2007): 723-29.

Jackson, Peter A. "Male homosexuality and Transgenderism in the Thai Buddhist Tradition." In *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*, edited by Winston Leyland, 55-89. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1998.

Magrum. "Tracing back 'Thang Sai Thee Sam' Opening the Literature World of Kiratee Chanar." *Siamrat*. October 23, 1988.

Mallikamas, Kampee. "Operative Technics." *The Journal of the Central Hospital* 22, no. 2 (1985): 64-81.

Martin, Claire. "Pioneer Sex-Change Surgeon Dies at 82." *The Denver Post*. January 17, 2006.

<https://www.denverpost.com/2006/01/17/pioneer-sex-change-surgeon-dies-at-82/> .

Noomuan, Wanna. "Novels on Homosexuality: Problems and Human Value." *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no. 2

(2008): 35-75.

Plysuan. "Floral Arranging with Kiratee Chanar." YouTube video, 13:25. March 14, 2012.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws4sk8j6jUM>.

Piniivararak, Arin. "The Theme of Homosexuality in Thai Novel, 1973-1982." MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1984.

Prasannam, Natthanai. "Blood, Sweat, and Tears: Identity Construction of the Transgender in Keeratee Chanaa's *Thang Sai Thee Sam*." *Kasetsart Journal: Social Sciences* 29, no. 3 (2008): 240-56.

Ratacha. *To Write a Novel: Art and Craft of Storytelling*. Bangkok: Tawikit Book, 2004.

Rawson, K.J. "Archive." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 24-6.

Romjumpa, Terdsak. "Discourses on Gays in Thai society, 1965-1999." MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2002.

Saengvichien, Sood. "An Unusual Hernial Sac Content." *Siriraj Hospital Gazette* 3, no. 2 (1951): 57-64.

Sangvichien, Sood. "Homosexuality-Anatomical Aspect." *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 44, no. 7 (1961): 435-42.

Sunthron, Chavalsil. "Deepen in the Society and the Third Pathway, The path "Kiratee Chanar" passed through." *Matubhumi*. July 11,

1983.

Thongsuk, Bongkotchakon. "Character Reflection of (LGBT-Themed Novels) in Thailand B.E.2516-2557." *INTHANINTHAKSIN JOURNAL* 12, no. 2 (2017): 35-57.

# **“Alone it’s tough, TOGETHER IT’S EASY” Hedesthia, Aotearoa New Zealand’s First Transgender Organisation, 1972-1990**

**Will Hansen** (he/him)

Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington

*Abstract: Founded in 1972, Hedesthia was a social, support, and advocacy group for transvestites and transsexuals - the first organisation of its kind in Aotearoa New Zealand. Hedesthia provided support to its members through monthly meetings, a bi-monthly newsletter, and various other services which included hot-line counselling and a lending library. For many members, Hedesthia and its off-shoot group, TransFormation, were lifelines in a world that could be intensely hostile to trans people. Pathbreaking in their trans activism, Hedesthia and TransFormation’s leaders diligently advocated for trans issues in their local communities. Yet Hedesthia also cultivated a transnormative politics of respectability. Largely middle-class and white, Hedesthia’s leaders worked hard to define their members as ‘normal’ and acceptable, and in the process denigrated Māori and Pasifika trans sex workers.*



## Introduction

On an ordinary Friday night in 1977, Karen found herself for the first time in the living room of Suzan Xtabay, and she was surrounded by “chattering women talking about the latest fashions and the price of cosmetics.”<sup>1</sup> Though Karen felt the scene appeared remarkably conventional, it was nonetheless “an evening out of a story book,” as it was her first time amongst other transvestites and transsexual women. Xtabay was the National Coordinator of Hedesthia, which was the first trans organisation on record in Aotearoa New Zealand. The living room gathering was one of the groups’ monthly meetings. When Karen reflected on the evening a year later, her subsequent personal changes overwhelmed her. In an article in Hedesthia’s newsletter, Karen underscored the damaging impact of isolation on a person’s mental health, and she urged others to connect to their nearest chapter via the organization’s hotline, newsletter, or – even better – through attendance of an in-person meeting. As Karen explained, “I can at last see laughter in my eyes, happiness in my life and a goal to reach out for,” and she was secure in the knowledge that should she ever feel low again that here existed a space in which she was, “welcome, loved, accepted and understood without explanation.”<sup>2</sup> Though the first step was daunting, Karen reassured readers that her life had become infinitely more meaningful: “all because I kicked open the door, tossed away the key and yelled – ‘Look out World, here comes Karen and I want to start LIVING.’”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Karen, “The First Time Ever,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1978, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Founded in 1972, Hedesthia was a social, support, and advocacy group for transvestites and transsexuals. Though the organization never had more than 200 members, for those Hedesthia reached it provided a vital service. Chapters across the country cultivated local trans networks through monthly meetings, informal counselling, and from 1974 a bi-monthly newsletter *S-E-L-F* which was re-named *Trans-Scribe* in 1978. Hedesthia provided a lifeline in a world that often felt overwhelmingly hostile to members like Karen. As most Hedesthia members prioritised secrecy, their connection with the group was their one outlet for gender expression. But other members worked hard to educate the public about their views on trans lives, and in the process these advocates ushered in a new era of trans activism. These organizers obtained mainstream media coverage on Hedesthia, and through related workshops and the cultivation of relationships with various local organisations, they began a new trans activist epoch in New Zealand. Hedesthia's organizers broke from earlier modes of Aotearoan activism that were largely informal and grounded in a politics of claiming public space. Though it broke new ground, Hedesthia's activists promoted a trans politics rooted in notions of respectability. Hedesthia's membership and leaders were largely white and middle-class, and its activists worked hard to define their members – and trans people generally – as *normal*, hard-working, family-oriented, and law-abiding citizens. Those who did not fit this heterosexist mould were rejected by the group, and Hedesthia members further defined them as distinct from themselves: as not truly trans. This was a transnormative political strategy that reified hierarchies in which only those deemed suitably 'ordinary' deserved acceptance. The members of Hedesthia did not resist colonial gender ideologies, but they instead reconstructed them.

## Context and Methodology

Hedesthia established itself amidst a critical moment in Aotearoa’s queer history. The 1960s inaugurated increased challenges to, “older notions of sexual morality and rigid gender roles.” Working-class ‘kamp’ queer communities increasingly carved out public space for themselves while homophile reformers lobbied for the decriminalisation of sex between men.<sup>4</sup> But these challenges were the exceptions to the rule as ongoing colonisation reinforced Christian sexual values and social conformity. These factors left queer discourse, “largely beyond earshot of public consciousness,” and encouraged queer people to keep their identities ‘underground’ lest they face criminal charges, social ostracism, or other forms of violence.<sup>5</sup> Though the colonial state never explicitly criminalized transness, those caught ‘cross-dressing’ in public were often charged under vagrancy legislation. In addition, censors frequently suppressed trans publications under the 1963 Indecent Publications Act. Whether or not these works contained erotica, state agents typically justified censorship through the argument that trans publicans were, “injurious to the public good,” by the promotion of, “aberrant sexual practices.”<sup>6</sup> The courts, medical system, and Christian churches all offered competing pejorative definitions of

---

<sup>4</sup> Chris Brickell, “Sex Education, Homosexuality, and Social Contestation in 1970s New Zealand,” *Sex Education* 7, no. 4 (2007): 388.

<sup>5</sup> Laurie D. Guy, *Worlds in Collision: The Gay Debate in New Zealand, 1960-1986* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002), 25.

<sup>6</sup> *New Zealand Gazette* no. 39 (7 March 1985), New Zealand Legal Information Institute, 1104; Will Hansen, “‘Every Bloody Right To Be Here’: Trans Resistance in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1967-1989,” (Master of Arts, Victoria University of Wellington, 2020), 6.

queerness. Psychologists framed gender diversity as a “behaviour disorder” while journalists increasingly argued, “that a diagnosis of sickness was surely preferable to one of sinfulness,” when one was assessed for homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> By the early 1970s, many increasingly challenged these discourses. Historian Chris Brickell highlights 1972 –the year of Hedesthia’s formation – as a watershed moment for Aeoteran social activism. The National Women’s Liberation Conference and various Gay Liberation Fronts began in 1972.<sup>8</sup> Sexual revolution was in the air, and other social justice movements focused on Indigenous rights, anti-racism, environmentalism, and anti-authoritarianism all gained new momentum in this period.<sup>9</sup>

Hedesthia occupied a unique role in this milieu. Whereas rebellious attitudes, youthful composition, university strong-holds, direct action strategies, and long-term revolutionary aims characterized many of these movements, Hedesthia was composed of middle-class suburbanites with the ultimate goals of education and assimilation. Moreover, while Hedesthia was the first *organisation* created by and for trans people, it was not the beginning of trans activism in Aotearoa. Trans people had long been leaders within kamp communities, and Māori and Pasifika trans sex

---

<sup>7</sup> A.J.W. Taylor and D.G. McLachlan, “Further Observations and Comments on Transvestism,” *New Zealand Medical Journal* 62, no. 375 (1963): 527–29; A.J.W. Taylor and D.G. McLachlan, “Transvestism and Psychosexual Identification,” *New Zealand Medical Journal* 63, no. 382 (1964): 396–372; Brickell, “Sex Education, Homosexuality, and Social Contestation in 1970s New Zealand,” 388.

<sup>8</sup> Brickell, 388.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*; Aroha Harris and Melissa Matutina Williams, “Rights and Revitalisation, 1970-1990,” in *Tangata Whenua: A History*, eds. Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney, and Aroha Harris (Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books, 2015), 358; Stephanie Gibson, Matariki Williams, and Puawai Cairns, *Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2019).

workers were particularly prominent in informal queer activism.<sup>10</sup> In 1967, two whakawāhine (Māori trans women), Carmen Rupe and Chrissy Witoko, had each established coffee lounges in Wellington, and they were among the first trans women to do so in Aotearoa.<sup>11</sup> These businesses created spaces for trans people to exist, and they provided employment opportunities to otherwise economically marginalized peoples.<sup>12</sup> Though these informal strategies fostered community, they were not consciously political. But they were powerful methods to resist oppression and make life more liveable for trans sex workers, and they laid the foundation for subsequent activist groups such as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective’s 1998

---

<sup>10</sup> Dana de Milo, Dana de Milo on Carmen Rupe, interview by Gareth Watkins, 11 December 2012, [https://www.pridenz.com/dana\\_de\\_milo\\_on\\_carmen.html](https://www.pridenz.com/dana_de_milo_on_carmen.html); John Jakeman, John Jakeman, interview by Gareth Watkins, 13 May 2017, PrideNZ.com; Chris Brickell, *Mates and Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand* (Auckland: Random House, 2008), 301.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about whakawāhine and whakawāhine history, see Elizabeth Kerekere, ‘Part of The Whānau: The Emergence of Takatāpui Identity - He Whāriki Takatāpui’ (Ph.D., Victoria University of Wellington, 2017); Ashleigh McFall (Feu’u), ‘A comparative study of the fa’afafine of Samoa and the whakawāhine of Aotearoa/New Zealand’ (Master of Arts, Victoria University of Wellington, 2013); Caren Wilton, *My body, my business: New Zealand sex workers in an era of change* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2018); Hansen, ‘Every Bloody Right To Be Here’. Other significant sources include the various interviews conducted by Gareth Watkins with whakawāhine on PrideNZ.com – not all audio featuring Māori trans women have been tagged with “whakawāhine,” but a collection which have can be accessed here:

<https://www.pridenz.com/tags/4888.html>. Lastly, there are two key biographies by whakawāhine: Paul Martin, *Carmen: My Life as told to Paul Martin* (Auckland: Benton Ross Publishers, 1988); and Cathy Casey, *Change for the Better: the story of Georgina Beyer* (Auckland: Random House, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Hansen, ‘Every Bloody Right To Be Here,’ 35–39.

Ongoing Network Transgender Outreach Project.<sup>13</sup> As scholar Elizabeth Kerekere writes, prior to colonisation Māori of diverse genders had simply been, “part of the whānau (family),” and their activism in the latter half of the twentieth-century acted as a decolonial reclamation of Indigenous gender.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, while Hedesthia’s efforts were not the *start* of trans activism in Aotearoa, they did inaugurate a new form of trans activism. This new mode was formally organised, politically conscious, and focused on notions of respectability and human rights.

The concept of ‘transnormativity’ is key to understand both Hedesthia’s respectability politics, and to complexify a single-axis view of trans oppression in New Zealand. Transnormativity is modelled off queer theorist Lisa Duggan’s concept of “homonormativity,” and the former names the norms that determine which trans people live, for how long, and under what conditions.<sup>15</sup> Transnormativity is informed by racism, classism, heterosexism, and other intersecting power structures that create an uneven distribution of “vulnerability and security.” Those trans people who are, “highly assimilable - gender normative, heterosexual, middle-class, well educated, racialized as white,” and non-Indigenous are distributed greater life chances than others.<sup>16</sup> For Black feminist scholar Marquis Bey normativity is “necessarily

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>14</sup> Kerekere, 128; Fiona Lam Sheung et al., *E Oho! Mana Takatāpui* (Wellington, New Zealand, 2022), PrideNZ.com, [https://www.pridenz.com/e\\_oho\\_manatakatapui.html](https://www.pridenz.com/e_oho_manatakatapui.html); Hansen, 67–68.

<sup>15</sup> Dean Spade, *Normal Life Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 6–7.

<sup>16</sup> Spade, 4–5; Hil Malatino, “Gone, Missing: Queering and Racializing Absence in Trans and Intersex Archives,” in *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 110.

violent.” As they explain, the normative is not neutral or numerically descriptive, for it grants only those who count as, “valid, ideal, normal, and representable,” to a liveable life.<sup>17</sup> Transnormativity feeds respectability politics among trans communities as privileged members conform to dominant norms to gain greater security. Susan Stryker identified this impulse amongst twentieth-century American trans communities as white middle-class trans people organized, “around the one thing that interferes with or complicates their privilege”: being trans. These early groups emphasized their assimilable qualities, and they distinguished themselves from those who would thwart their claims of respectability.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, many Hedesthia members highlighted their adherence to norms of white middle-class womanhood. Oftentimes they did so through an acerbic bifurcation between themselves and trans sex workers, and many of the latter were Māori and Pasifika.

It is important to understand the coloniality of gender to recognize how Hedesthia’s respectability politics functioned as a colonial tool. Feminist theorist Marie Draz expands on the pioneering work of decolonial feminist Maria Lugones as she explains how, “the modern gender system,” that includes the idea of gender as binary, cannot be understood, “apart from its inception in colonial ways of knowing and being,” and Draz emphasizes that part of the colonising project encompasses the dehumanization and ultimate elimination of Indigenous peoples and knowledges.<sup>19</sup> Scholars who are takatāpui – Māori of diverse sexualities, genders,

---

<sup>17</sup> Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 55.

<sup>19</sup> Marie Draz, “Retro-Sex, Anti-Trans Legislation, and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 11, no. 1–2 (2021): 31.

and sex characteristics – have likewise established that heterosexism, cissexism, and interphobia (discrimination against intersex people) are tools of colonisation, and traditional Māori society embraced takatāpui.<sup>20</sup> Leonie Pihama makes it clear that, “Western reductionist approaches to gender identities,” that are rooted in bioessentialism, “reproduce systems of marginalisation and oppression,” and these modes deny the “range of gender identities,” that Māori claim.<sup>21</sup> Pihama explains that to decolonize gender in Aotearoa requires one to centre, “tino rangatiratanga (Māori sovereignty, self-determination).”<sup>22</sup>

Gender self-determination stands in opposition to the self-disciplining nature of transnormativity. Although all trans people suffer under the hegemonic power of transnormativity, the structure of colonialism means that trans colonisers are afforded more power as part of what Dean Spade names the unequal, “distribution of vulnerability.”<sup>23</sup> If one analyses Hedesthia through the lens of transnormativity, it foregrounds the positionality of members who were both trans subjects within a cisgender hegemony, but also their position(s) as white, Pākehā (foreign, not Māori), middle-class subjects in a settler-colonial, capitalist state. This work is important. Pākehā trans people living in Aotearoa

---

<sup>20</sup> Leonie Pihama, “Mana Wahine: Decolonising Gender in Aotearoa,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 35, no. 106 (2020): 357, 359; Kerekere, ‘Part of The Whānau: The Emergence of Takatāpui Identity - He Whāriki Takatāpui’, 21; Clive Aspin and Jessica Hutchings, “Reclaiming the Past to Inform the Future: Contemporary Views of Maori Sexuality,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (2007): 415.

<sup>21</sup> Pihama, 356–59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>23</sup> Spade, 193.



must examine their own histories to build a trans politics that is anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and decolonial.

Throughout this article I use ‘trans’ in a similar manner to Stryker as a means to broadly gesture towards individuals who moved away from their gender assigned at birth.<sup>24</sup> Hedesthia members did not describe themselves as ‘trans.’ Most referred to themselves as cross-dressers, transvestites, or transsexuals, and from at least 1976 members used the word ‘transpeople’ when they collectively referred to themselves. By 1978 many began to use the term ‘transgenderist.’<sup>25</sup> They likely began to do this in order to acknowledge their transmasculine members as many previously referred to themselves collectively as ‘sisters.’<sup>26</sup> Their use of collective terms reveals that Hedesthia members thought of themselves as belonging to a shared community of gender diversity. Though in my use of the term ‘trans,’ I do not wish to gloss over the internal and individual differences amongst group members. My focus is not on how individual Hedesthia members understood themselves, but instead it is on the collective politics that they developed. When I refer to the land Hedesthia members lived on, I follow the scholarship of fa’afafine researcher Patrick Thomsen, who uses ‘New Zealand’ to name the settler-colonial context, and he deploys ‘Aotearoa’ in other contexts to honour Māori.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Stryker, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Gillian Laundon, “Friends,” *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 3; Suzan Xtabay, “Observations on the Phenomenon of Trans-Genderism,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1978, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Christine Young, “Greetings, trans-people!” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Thomsen, “Research ‘Side-Spaces’ and the Criticality of Auckland, New Zealand, as a Site for Developing a Queer Pacific Scholarly Agenda,” *New Zealand Sociology* 37, no. 1 (January 2022): 120.

## Hedesthia

Christine Young was a transvestite who lived in the small city of Lower Hutt. After fifteen years feeling isolated, she established Hedesthia in 1972. It was only when she happened across the novel *A Year Among the Girls* by author Darrell G. Raynor that she realised she was not “alone” nor “too abnormal.”<sup>28</sup> After further research she discovered *Transvestia*, an American magazine for heterosexual cross-dressers reestablished by well-known transvestite Virginia Prince in 1960. Each issue featured information about trans groups around the world.<sup>29</sup> The magazine inspired Young, and she quickly gathered a dozen like-minded friends and acquaintances together.<sup>30</sup> Steadily Hedesthia expanded, and by 1986 they had chapters in Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, “Rotorua/Hamilton,” New Plymouth, Hawkes Bay, Gisborne, and Northland.<sup>31</sup> Most members were transfeminine individuals, and most were heterosexual transvestites and transsexual women. In May 1976 Hedesthia welcomed their first (unnamed) transmasculine member, or as *S-E-L-F* put it, “F/M [female to male] T/S [transsexual] Full Member.”<sup>32</sup> The author’s description of him as their first “Full Member” likely means that other transmasculine people were involved in Hedesthia prior to

---

<sup>28</sup> Young, “Hello, Girls!!” *Hedesthia Newsletter*, June 1974, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 179–80.

<sup>30</sup> Young, “HELLO, Girls! Christine Calling Again,” *S-E-L-F*, August 1975, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Note that members from Rotorua and Hamilton formed one chapter together, despite the geographical distance. *Trans-Scribe*, February 1980, 1; *Trans-Scribe*, April/May 1986, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Young, “GREETINGS, Sisters, Everywhere !!” *S-E-L-F*, May 1976, 1.

this, but they had not been active enough to be considered *full* members. Young remained Hedesthia’s President until she fell ill and transferred leadership to Xtabay in 1977 after which the group’s headquarters moved from Lower Hutt to Auckland. In addition to the Presidency, were the positions of Public Relations and Liaison Controller, and each chapter also had Meetings and Social Organisers.<sup>33</sup> Hedesthia also provided various services such as in-person counselling, a library-lending service, confidential photographic service, sale of homemade bra-fillers, and from 1989 a hotline named Trans-Help-Line. These were the first recorded services of their kind made by and for trans people in Aotearoa.

Hedesthia’s newsletter and monthly meetings were the organisation’s cornerstones. Gatherings typically lasted until late on Friday evenings. After members discussed club business, they became purely social gatherings, and meetings often featured dinner, drinks, and the occasional film screening.<sup>34</sup> These gatherings allowed members the opportunity to dress and speak freely, and conversation topics frequently ranged from clothing, coming out, sexuality, legal barriers, and more.<sup>35</sup>

If someone lived too far from the nearest chapter, Hedesthia’s newsletter was likely their only way to keep in touch with other trans people.<sup>36</sup> *Trans-Scribe* was a comprehensive publication that featured editorials, reports from various chapters, group notices, letters to the editor, pieces about members’ personal journeys, reprinted articles from international trans magazines,

---

<sup>33</sup> Young, “GREETINGS, Sisters, wherever you are !!” *S-E-L-F*, August 1976, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Laundon, “Friends,” 3; Xtabay, “The First Time Ever,” *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Xtabay, “The First Time Ever,” 10.

<sup>36</sup> Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1980, 2; CJ and Jan Simpson, interview by Will Hansen, 3 April 2019.

relevant clippings from local newspapers, poems, obituaries, a biting “Aunty Aggie’s Agonies” gossip column, cartoons, and ads for trans-friendly businesses. A former Hedesthia member pseudonymously known as CJ exclaimed that people, “lived for the magazine,” as it provided their sole connection to trans community.<sup>37</sup> Though *Trans-Scribe* was certainly not short of debate nor of shared commiseration, one of the magazine’s most important functions was to reinforce members’ sense of self-worth and pride. Even the campily bitter “Aunty Aggie” made a point to cheer and reassure others as she wrote that: “You have a right to be here and whether or not it is clear to you, this is where you belong. Therefore, be at peace with Aphrodite for she too was femme, and whatever your labours, let them give birth to a beauty.”<sup>38</sup> *Trans-Scribe* consolidated feelings of community as members shared stories, received validation, read the stories of others, and thereby felt less alienated.

Though the terms ‘transphobia’ and ‘transmisogyny’ had not yet been coined, Hedesthia members were well aware of their effects. Gillian Laundon, who used the pseudonym Gillian Cox when she wrote to *Trans-Scribe*, explained that the internalisation of the “common attitude” that transness was “disgusting” not only diminished self-worth, but it also drove trans people to avoid other trans people for fear that it would confirm their own “disgusting” nature.<sup>39</sup> Wendy Maclaine described this “isolation syndrome” and

---

<sup>37</sup> CJ, interview.

<sup>38</sup> Aunty Aggie, “Trans-Desperata or Aunty Aggie’s Lament,” *Trans-Scribe*, Summer 1984, 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> Laundon, “Friends,” 3; In her Hedesthia work, Gillian used her wife’s surname, Cox, while under her legal surname Laundon she was a noted mycologist. She announced her transition to the scientific community in a notice published in

stressed that had she not, “had understanding friends in Hedesthia,” the “mental agony” would have been impossible to cope with. As Maclaine asked herself, “Where would I be today, if I had never joined Hedesthia??” She answered her own question, “probably in a mental hospital, in a cemetery, or at best perhaps an alcoholic.”<sup>40</sup> Former Hedesthia members CJ and Jan Simpson, who I interviewed together in 2019, emphasised the presence of the trans mental health crisis. Suicide was a recurring theme throughout our interview.<sup>41</sup>

In the face of transphobia and transmisogyny, Hedesthia encouraged communal caretaking. From the very first newsletter Young emphasised the positive benefits that came from trans community even if this was, “just to know that one is NOT ALONE.” Young further argued that it was members’ “duty” to help Hedesthia grow through word-of-mouth.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Laundon underscored, “the value of trans-friendships,” as the development of friendships with other trans people by definition involved the recognition of trans humanity and worth.<sup>43</sup> “Simply to meet others and see just how normal and decent they really are, and to see what they have achieved in bringing out their real selves,” Laundon argued could, “help towards self-acceptance.”<sup>44</sup> CJ explained that meeting others who had already transitioned and continued to enjoy life was incredibly encouraging, and this opened members up to a

---

*Taxon*, the leading journal of plant taxonomy, in 1977. See ‘News and Notes: Personalia,’ *Taxon* 26 no. 2/3 (May 1977): 308.

<sup>40</sup> Wendy Maclaine, “Why do we need Hedesthia?” *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 3-4.

<sup>41</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Young, “Hello, Girls!!” 2; Young, “We have made great strides as a club...” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Laundon, “Friends,” 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

world of possibilities.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, members consistently wrote into the newsletter to thank Hedesthia for the joy and confidence that it had brought them. Often, they mentioned the close friendships they had developed that lasted into the present day: the friendship between CJ and Simpson is a prime example of this.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the confidence members gained through community-building, most Hedesthia members were steadfastly committed to secrecy. Though both CJ and Simpson emphasized that while neither cross-dressing nor being trans was illegal, they were so stigmatised that to many they were, “*considered* illegal,” as they explained that, “anything which was out of the ordinary, which was bizarre, interpreted as queer, was absolutely ruled out.”<sup>47</sup> Members feared that if they were outed they would lose their jobs, their families, and their friends. Hedesthia’s leaders respected these valid fears. Hedesthia sent out newsletters in plain envelopes, members’ “Twin Brother” names and contact information were kept “under extremely tight security,” and in 1978 the organization assigned members identification numbers for extra anonymity.<sup>48</sup> For in-person meetings Hedesthia strictly vetted potential members.<sup>49</sup> Prospective attendees required an existing member to vouch for them to ensure that only those from certain circles had access to the group. This is reminiscent of the, “highly secretive affairs,” that were the meetings of Prince’s group the Foundation for Personality

---

<sup>45</sup> CJ, interview.

<sup>46</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Laundon, “Friends,” 3; Xtabay, “Membership Numbers,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Young, “Hello, Girls!!” 2.

Expression (FPE).<sup>50</sup> Like the FPE, Hedesthia was geared towards white, married, and middle-class individuals – many of whom only ‘cross-dressed’ in private or at meetings. These members were often able to use their wealth along with access to private property and transport to, “create a space in which they could express a stigmatized aspect of themselves in a way that didn’t jeopardise their jobs or social standing.”<sup>51</sup> Stryker argues that it is unsurprising that FPE was among the first trans organisations in the United States – it was founded in 1961 – as it was those within trans communities who had both race and class privileges that had the resources to facilitate their ability to organise first. Certainly, one could say the same about Hedesthia.<sup>52</sup> Though CJ and Simpson did not recall any non-white members nor sex workers, there were many “strange people” who were “peripheral” to the group, and the interviewees acknowledged that some members had spent time incarcerated, and others were involved in non-conventional sexual practices that included BDSM and various fetishes. Yet as their moralising language indicates, such members were not readily embraced and remained in the minority.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to Hedesthia’s cultivation of national links, individual members eagerly joined networks of international trans correspondence. Alongside *Transvestia*, Hedesthia’s leadership communicated, exchanged newsletters with, and reprinted articles from the Chameleon Society of Western Australia, Sydney’s Seahorse Club, and England’s Beaumont Society.<sup>54</sup> By the late 1980s,

---

<sup>50</sup> Stryker, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

<sup>54</sup> Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1979, 1.

Hedesthia was also featured in listings of international organisations in publications like *Tapestry* (America), *Fanfare* (South Africa), *Our Sorority* (America) and as trans men became more involved in the group, *Metamorphosis* (Canada).<sup>55</sup> When members travelled overseas, they often visited with or were hosted by members of local organisations. Travel to Sydney was popular with many New Zealanders at the time, and Hedesthia members were no exception; several attended Seahorse Club meetings, and in 1976 Young attended Seahorse's first Trans-Seminar transvestite conference.<sup>56</sup> My recognition of Hedesthia's Australasian and international connections builds upon the work that has been done in analysis of international trans networks. This includes those plotted across Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States in *Others of My Kind: Transatlantic Transgender Histories*.<sup>57</sup>

### Political Advocacy

Though confidentiality was the priority of most Hedesthia members, not all fit this mould. Pathbreaking individuals within Hedesthia became leaders through their willingness to advocate openly for specific trans communities, and this fulfilled Hedesthia's secondary aim: "to work for the breaking-down of prejudice and

---

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Ghosh and Rupert Raj, *Metamorphosis Magazine*, May-June 1987, Periodicals - m326m182n, Digital Transgender Archive; The Phoenix Society, *Fanfare Magazine*, September 1985, Periodical - gm80hv39h, Digital Transgender Archive; Merissa Sherrill Lynn, *Tapestry* no.46, 1985, Periodical - 6682x4006, Digital Transgender Archive; The Outreach Institute, *Our Sorority* no.22, April 1990, Newsletter - tx31qh812, Digital Transgender Archive.

<sup>56</sup> Young, "Seven Days (plus three)," *S-E-L-F*, May 1976, 2-3.

<sup>57</sup> Alex Bakker et al., *Others of My Kind: Transatlantic Transgender Histories* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2020).



ignorance that exist in the public’s mind.”<sup>58</sup> Young, Xtabay, Laundon, CJ, and others frequently liaised with a large range of organisations that included counselling groups, the police and probation services, religious groups, hospitals and medical services, along with university faculties that specialized in social work, psychology, and nursing. For those who spoke with and to these external groups about trans issues, they recalled these experiences boosted their “confidence and experience,” and members were thankful that they had been met with “well disposed” and “open-minded” audiences.<sup>59</sup> Yearly talks with nurses at Carrington Hospital, which was an institution infamous for its use of aversion therapy techniques, were “enjoyed by all” who took part. Xtabay and fellow Hedesthia activist Deanne Mead built up such a rapport with the workers there that they were even able to successfully lobby for the release of a trans woman incarcerated at the psychiatric institute.<sup>60</sup> In 1978 Xtabay hosted Hedesthia’s first “Open Night” meeting where members of the public were welcomed to an open forum that was so well-attended Xtabay, “feared her lounge floor would collapse.”<sup>61</sup> Media coverage was initially more difficult to come by which Launby believed was due to both a lack of money and, “the general attitude of most editors, who have in the past vetoed almost every attempt to reach the public.”<sup>62</sup> Yet by the late 1970s their publicity campaign had achieved some success, and larger news outlets such as the *NZ Herald*, *Sunday News*, *Metro*

---

<sup>58</sup> “About Hedesthia” (Hedesthia Bulletins, n.d.), Agender New Zealand: Records, MS-Papers-11170-073, Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>59</sup> Young, “We have made great strides as a club,” 9.

<sup>60</sup> Xtabay, “National Report and Round and About,” *Trans-Scribe*, April 1983, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Xtabay, “Open Night,” *Trans-Scribe*, October 1978, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation: Report 1976,” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 3-4.

magazine, *Auckland Star* and the *8 O'Clock News* reported on the group, and this resulted in numerous inquiries.<sup>63</sup> Although Young and others told Hedesthia members that it was their “collective responsibility” to work together to achieve change, few were prepared to be the public face of Hedesthia’s educational efforts.<sup>64</sup> Simpson described Xtabay as the, “guiding genius behind Hedesthia,” who was “determined” to advocate for Hedesthia’s members.<sup>65</sup>

In January 1976, Laundon and her cisgender wife Margaret Cox set up TransFormation as an off-shoot of Hedesthia, “a sympathetic, confidential, and free information service on Transsexualism, transvestism, etc.”<sup>66</sup> TransFormation’s main work was the production of free information leaflets – distributed widely to public libraries, universities, gay groups, and various community organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, Marriage Guidance Council and YouthLine. In addition, the organization provided a “personal service” that fielded questions by letter and, though more rarely, in person.<sup>67</sup> These twelve leaflets covered a wide range of topics, and these included: “the differences between intersexuals [sic], transsexuals, and transvestites”; gender affirmation surgery (known as “sex-change” surgery), hormone replacement therapy, and electrolysis; how to come out and, “gain understanding

---

<sup>63</sup> Xtabay, “Advertising,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 3; Xtabay, “Dear Members,” *Trans-Scribe* July 1978, 1; Patricia Prime, “All Dressed Up and No Place To Go,” *Metro* reprinted in *Trans-Scribe* June 1987, 9-10; “Sex Changes “Don’t Work”” *Auckland Star* 26 July 1984, reprinted *Trans-Scribe* July 1985, 22; “Trans Sexuals’ Twilight World,” reprinted in *Trans-Scribe* April/May 1979, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Young, “How Many of Us Are There?” *S-E-L-F*, March 1976, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Jan Simpson, interview by Will Hansen, 3 April 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation,” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Laundon, “Transformation: Report 1976,” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 3-4.

and acceptance”; legal and religious views on trans issues; “the benefits of friendship with other transpeople”; and how to join Hedesthia.<sup>68</sup> TransFormation received a steady stream of inquiries to their PO Box, and after four years they had received 340 letters. Inquirers largely sought guidance on medical transition and how to meet other trans people, and until 1977 – when they began correspondence with three transmasculine individuals – these inquiries came entirely from transfeminine people.<sup>69</sup>

TransFormation’s communications were less well-received outside of trans communities. Public libraries in Auckland and Christchurch refused to display their leaflets, editors from local newspapers snubbed their advertisements, and even certain local doctors who they believed would be supportive declined to reply to TransFormation’s requests for information. Nonetheless, Laundon and Cox persisted, and the two often met with various community organisations. These groups were primarily those they sent leaflets to, and those who had previously established contact with Hedesthia. The couple also conducted joint appearances with Hedesthia.<sup>70</sup> Although Laundon and Cox continued working on TransFormation after their divorce in 1978, they began to struggle financially and passed their duties onto Hedesthia in 1980. Subsequently, the two groups became essentially indistinct.<sup>71</sup> When Laundon passed away in 1984, her obituary in *Trans-Scribe* noted that Hedesthia had continued to receive many letters from those

---

<sup>68</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation,” 11-12.

<sup>69</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation Report 1977,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Xtabay, “Membership Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1979, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1980, 2.

who she, “offered comfort and advice through her leaflets and correspondence.”<sup>72</sup>

The content of Hedesthia and TransFormation’s talks with organisations, the media, and at their Open Night events generally included the legal issues that faced trans people, such as difficulties when updating passports and other identification files; the “misunderstanding and ridicule” trans people faced socially; experiences with coming out; what medical transition entailed; and above all, how Hedesthia defined the differences between “Transvestites, Transsexuals, and Drag Queens.”<sup>73</sup> Robert Hill’s work on *Transvestia* is helpful in situating Hedesthia as a late-comer in the “taxonomic revolution” that occurred in the mid-twentieth century where, “doctors, sexologists, and psychologists, along with persons who identified as transsexuals, transvestites, and homosexuals began to map and sort out the overlapping subcultures of gender and sexual variance and make ontological distinctions among the categories of ‘sex,’ ‘gender,’ and ‘sexuality.’”<sup>74</sup> Like the writers in *Transvestia*, members of Hedesthia debated and dissected definitions of drag queen, transvestite, transsexual, androgynist, hermaphrodite and homosexual. These definitions were, in the words of one member “painstakingly drawn” and “clung to,” and they were frequently (re)communicated in Hedesthia and TransFormation’s bulletins and leaflets, and to the mainstream media.<sup>75</sup> One undated Hedesthia bulletin stated that a transvestite was, “not the same as a

---

<sup>72</sup> “Obituary, Gillian Cox,” *Trans-Scribe*, Autumn 1984, 8.

<sup>73</sup> “Talkback or Backchat,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1983, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Hill, “Before Transgender: Transvestia’s Spectrum of Gender Variance, 1960-1980,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 366.

<sup>75</sup> “Letter to the Editor,” *Trans-Scribe*, May/June 1983, 16.

trans-sexual,” neither were “usually homosexual,” and that homosexuals “rarely” cross-dressed.<sup>76</sup> In June 1978, Xtabay gave a paper that detailed her thoughts on the differences between each group. She felt drag queens cross-dressed to sexually attract others while transvestites did so to, “express the feelings of the opposite sex,” and transsexuals to express their, “belonging to the opposite sex.”<sup>77</sup>

But opinions within Hedesthia were frequently contradictory, and they were certainly not monolithic. While Xtabay made it clear that transvestites and transsexuals were distinct categories, she also underlined that Hedesthia was inclusive of, “transvestites, trans-sexuals, androgynists and hermaphrodites both male and female,” and she often used the phrase “transpeople or transgenderists” to refer to them collectively.<sup>78</sup> In 1980 an anonymous author used the term “transvestite” to refer to transvestites, transsexuals, and drag queens indiscriminately as she wrote with tongue firmly in cheek that she felt they were, “all sisters under the psychosis! Psychosisters?”<sup>79</sup> This author directly referenced Prince as the, “archguerette of US transvestism,” before the writer noted that she disagreed with several of Prince’s ideas. *Tranvestia* influenced Hedesthia, but members did not absorb its ideologies uncritically. Prince and others in FPE and *Tranvestia* worked hard to, “disassociate heterosexual transvestism from forms of deviant sexuality that doctors and the public associated with

---

<sup>76</sup> Hedesthia, “Correcting Some Misconceptions: Did You Know That,” (Bulletin, New Zealand, n.d.), MS-Papers-11170-073, Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>77</sup> Xtabay, “Observations on the Phenomenon of Trans-Genderism,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1978, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Xtabay, 2.

<sup>79</sup> “Is There Transvestism after Death?” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1980, 5.

cross-dressing,” and they particularly disarticulated this form from homosexuality and transsexuality. By contrast, this anonymous author was clear that gender did not determine sexual orientation, and she wrote that many saw themselves as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian.<sup>80</sup> In FPE gays and transsexuals were excluded from membership.

Hedesthia’s inclusiveness of various sexual and gender orientations distinguished them from similar groups overseas, and this was a point of pride for Xtabay. She argued in a 1980 interview with *Key Contact* magazine that Hedesthia was “more understanding” than other clubs, and she wanted to make it clear that trans people were simply people, “and like people we can be all things, including gay.”<sup>81</sup> The differing timelines between Hedesthia and FPE are important to note. While FPE began operating well before the gay liberation movement emerged, by the time Hedesthia formed in 1972 gay liberation activism was well-established in places such as the United States, England, and Australia, and the first Gay Liberation Fronts in Aotearoa were founded that same year. Indeed, Young acknowledged that alongside the, “dozen ordinary square citizens,” who were Hedesthia’s first members, so too were acquaintances from “Gay Lib.”<sup>82</sup> Many Hedesthia members had been members of gay political and social groups prior to their membership in Hedesthia, and they maintained friendships with individuals from these groups. These enduring connections likely influenced Hedesthia’s open position. New Zealand’s comparatively smaller population probably also accounted for Hedesthia’s inclusive stance as Mead contended that a “harmonious relationship” between

---

<sup>80</sup> “Is There Transvestism after Death?” 6; Hill, 367; Meyerowitz, 181.

<sup>81</sup> “Transgenderism,” *Key Contact*, 1980, 6.

<sup>82</sup> Young, “HELLO, Girls! Christine Calling Again,” 3.

Hedesthia and the gay movement was “sorely needed” if Hedesthia’s voice was “going to be heard.”<sup>83</sup>

In 1977, Young declared it was “policy” that Hedesthia allied with gay liberation, “in the fight for right of self-expression.”<sup>84</sup> Xtabay confirmed this policy as she argued that members had:

a responsibility to all gay people to support them, because any advantages that are finally won, wrested from the establishment WILL benefit all of us...it’s our cause, YOUR cause, and don’t any of you forget it. Hedesthia HAS a place in the Gay movement, and so have ALL of its members.<sup>85</sup>

Hedesthia often attended gay liberation conferences, and it became an associate member of the National Gay Rights Coalition (NGRC) when it was founded in 1977. Hedesthia frequently co-hosted educational workshops with gay activists to advocate for their shared issues. For example, in 1977 Young “gladly” accepted an invitation from gay liberationists to participate in a forum at Porirua Hospital alongside five gay men and three lesbians.<sup>86</sup> At the 1976 Gay Liberation Conference, Young and Joanna F. Gall were invited to conduct a, “workshop on Transvestism and Transsexuality,” and an open forum. The two received the “best ovation” of the conference. At the conference ball, Gall described a, “feeling of love, warmth and friendship,” that was “beyond words” between themselves and their cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual

---

<sup>83</sup> Deanne Mead, “Hedesthia NGRC Alliance,” *Trans-Scribe*, August 1979, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Young, *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 10.

<sup>85</sup> Xtabay, “The First Time Ever,” 10.

<sup>86</sup> Young, March 1977, 10.

counterparts.<sup>87</sup> Yet, cis-dominated gay and lesbian activist groups did not always welcome their trans comrades. By the late 1970s, American lesbian-separatist currents began to shape New Zealand feminist discourse. At the 1978 National Gay Rights Coalition conference, some of its lesbian-feminist organizers ejected CJ from participation in a woman's workshop.<sup>88</sup> But it is important to note that bio-essentialism never dominated New Zealander lesbian-feminist ideology. At the conference, other lesbian-feminists defended CJ's womanhood and participation at the workshop, and these allies joined a lineage of lesbian-feminists who acted in solidarity with trans activists in Aotearoa.<sup>89</sup>

Despite leadership's commitment to support the gay movement when one reads between the lines, it becomes clear that not all among the membership wanted to associate with lesbian and

---

<sup>87</sup> Joanna F. Gall, "Gay Liberation Conference," *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 2.

<sup>88</sup> CJ, interview; Deborah Jones, "Gay Rights Conference: What's a dyke to do?" *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 16-18; Jacqui, "Two different caucuses," *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 18-20. Local lesbian-feminists were particularly influenced by the harassment campaign targeting trans artist Sandy Stone, a member of women's recording company Olivia Records. Led by Janice Raymond, the campaign resulted in the publication of Raymond's 1979 thesis as *The transsexual empire: the making of the she-male* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994). See Valda, "Women's recording company?" *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 31-33.

<sup>89</sup> Jacqui, 19. For example, a similar discussion occurred at the 1974 Gay Liberation Conference in Wellington, where those who, "felt that people who identified as lesbians are lesbians regardless of the sex they were born with," argued against those who saw trans women as "biologically men," as reported by Allie Eagle, "In Reply to Gender Identity?" *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, May 1974, 12. For more information, see Will Hansen, 'The Long History of Trans Activism in Aotearoa New Zealand,' *bad apple*, 3 May 2023, <https://badapple.gay/2023/05/03/trans-history/>.



gay groups, and not always because of the anti-trans attitudes that they faced. Mead, who was particularly active in the cultivation of the relationship between the group and the NGRC, wrote in 1979 that they understood members would have “mixed feelings” about associating with, “what is basically a homosexual group,” as members tended to consider themselves “basically heterosexual.” However, Mead reminded readers that they were natural allies that faced a shared oppression, and like cisgender gays they too were targeted as, “Queer, Poofs, Queens,” and felt forced to keep their identities secret.<sup>90</sup> Yet even Xtabay, so strident in her support of the gay movement, indulged in subtle homophobia. In the same interview with *Key Contact* where she asserted Hedesthia’s inclusiveness, Xtabay also argued that, “by far the biggest proportion of transvestites,” were, “heterosexual, married, with children,” and that, “only a small minority,” fit the “drag queen” stereotype of the, “limp wrist, the affected speech and camp-mannerism.”<sup>91</sup> Xtabay displayed the contradictions that could arise even within an individual’s politics. Despite her public support for the gay movement and to gay Hedesthia members, Xtabay consistently clarified that most Hedesthia members conformed to hegemonic sexual norms. In this way, Xtabay’s stance feels reminiscent of writers in *Transvestia*, who Hill contends tried to contain the, “most abnormal elements,” of transvestism in order to normalise it, and to, “make it fit comfortably within the cultural narratives of gender, home, and national belonging that circulated with ferocity in the postwar era.”<sup>92</sup> While *Transvestia* writers and FPE members did this through the open denigration and exclusion of homosexuals and

---

<sup>90</sup> Mead, 3.

<sup>91</sup>“Transgenderism,” *Key Contact*, 1980, 6–7.

<sup>92</sup> Hill, 370.

transsexuals, Hedesthia members' attempts to emphasise their own respectability and divest themselves from more "abnormal elements" was far more understated.

### **Transnormativity**

Hedesthia's legacy is more complicated than one of straightforward inclusiveness. Like the writers in *Transvestia*, Hedesthia members feared stigmatization, "as sexually deviant," and this significantly structured their, "ideology, practices, and aesthetics."<sup>93</sup> But unlike *Transvestia's* members those in Hedesthia were less concerned with homosexuality, and they were certainly not against transsexuals. Instead, it was those they labelled "drag queens" or "street queens" – trans sex workers, and this was a largely Māori and Pasifika working-class community. This group bore the brunt of Hedesthia members' scorn. Although officially the group sought to create a space for all "transgenderists," CJ and Simpson explained that Hedesthia members generally saw trans sex workers as "gay men" who "*parodied* women," and this was in contrast to themselves who they saw as "true" transvestites or transsexuals.<sup>94</sup> CJ recalled her frustration with "street queens" who she felt would "cause a scene" when out in public. She distinguished herself from trans sex workers: "that was the difference, as far as I was concerned. *I* was presenting myself as perfectly *ordinary*, heterosexual woman." This concept of what made an "ordinary" (trans) woman was utilised by Hedesthia members like CJ to create distinctions between themselves and those less able to approximate

---

<sup>93</sup> Hill, 369.

<sup>94</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

hegemonic norms. Tellingly, the phrase CJ used – “true transvestite” – was coined by Prince to distinguish transvestites who conformed to heterosexist, racist, and classist norms from those non-conforming others, and for Prince the latter’s “transvestic activities” stemmed from sexual deviance or psychiatric disturbance.<sup>95</sup>

Hedesthia members cast themselves as “ordinary” and trans sex workers as an “other” in generally implicit but consistent ways. Writers in *Trans-Scribe* frequently positioned themselves as non-threatening citizens who should be accepted, and they contrasted themselves with trans sex workers who they depicted as social disturbances. Pauline D reflected such middle-class ideas of propriety in a 1976 poem where she wrote that those, “rocking their boats,” and living, “without a goal or higher ideals,” would, “never experience the comfort,” that Pauline felt.<sup>96</sup> An anonymous Hedesthia writer provides one of the more transparent writings that displayed this politics as she provided this callous summary of the “problem” of trans sex workers in 1987:

The TS [transsexual] ‘drag queen’ of the streets presents a problem: how to reconcile the declared reticence of the usual TV [transvestite]/TS with the DQs [drag queen’s] exhibitionism, which in part seems to hold an element of social protest and a desire to excite disapprobation. Possibly she has come full force to her “oddity” at an early age, suffered familial/peer group rejection, and has

---

<sup>95</sup> Virginia Bruce (Prince), “The Expression of Femininity in the Male,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 3, no. 2 (1967), 129-139.

<sup>96</sup> Pauline D, “Just a Reflection,” *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 2.

thereafter found herself consistently in conflict with society - low self-esteem, a high incidence of criminality and drug-dependency, parasitism, undependability and lack of loyalty, even to their own kind.<sup>97</sup>

For this author the most pressing problem was the public space that trans sex workers occupied, and their disinterest in cooperating with social norms – being “reticent” or discreet about their gender difference. Instead, they purportedly flaunted their ‘deviant’ sexuality in public as if in an act of ‘protest.’ Although the author did not explicitly name trans sex workers as a largely Māori and Pasifika group, her evocation of their unreliability, criminality, and “parasitism,” all evoked powerful racist and classist stereotypes that had long been used to provide justification for ongoing colonisation in New Zealand.<sup>98</sup> This author’s writing also reflected the growing influence of neoliberalism in New Zealand that followed the election of the 1984 Labour Government as their ascendancy reinforced an individualist and victim-blaming approach to social inequality that was ignorant of the structural power of colonialism.<sup>99</sup> In reflection, CJ openly acknowledged

---

<sup>97</sup> “The Only Operation You Want Is On Your Brain!” *Trans-Scribe* June 1987, 17-22.

<sup>98</sup> Darrin Hodgetts, Bridgette Masters, and Neville Robertson, “Media Coverage of ‘decades of Disparity’ in Ethnic Mortality in Aotearoa,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 14, no. 6 (2004): 456; Evan Te Ahu Poata-Smith, “Inequality and Māori,” in *Inequality: A New Zealand Crisis*, ed. Max Rashbrooke (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2013), 151.

<sup>99</sup> Eileen Oak, “‘Rumours of Neoliberalism’s Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated’: Re-Moralisation of the Poor in Aotearoa New Zealand,” *Sites: A*

Hedesthia’s derision of trans sex workers as racist: “those of us who were white, middle-class, and able to find employment – yes, we did see ourselves above them.”<sup>100</sup> For its promotion of white, Western conceptions of transness, and simultaneous denigration of Māori trans communities, Hedesthia’s respectability politics should be read as part of the ongoing process of colonisation,

While racism generally surfaced covertly throughout Hedesthia’s newsletters, members more openly discussed class. A 1987 letter written by Hedesthia member Marcia provides an interesting example of this. She detailed her caution in first approaching Hedesthia as she was fond of “glamorous clothes,” and she felt she would not fit in with other members, “believing that, like similar groups overseas, it catered exclusively for the sort of TV [transvestite] who dresses conservatively in a middle-class image and dedicated to the expression of one’s ‘feminine self’ in a socially acceptable manner.” However, after Marcia visited an Open Night she decided to get vetted by Xtabay and attend a closed meeting. At the gathering she chose to dress “more appropriately,” and she was accepted as a member. As an example of self-policing, the more meetings Marcia attended the more she decided to embrace the “middle-class” culture of Hedesthia, “since the desire to be accepted by others in the group outweighed the pleasure of wearing glamorous clothes...now what I wanted to do was conform!”<sup>101</sup> Another member named Rachel Anthony explicitly distinguished between sex workers and Hedesthia members as she argued that trans sex workers had less to lose and therefore were more able to,

---

*Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 12–13;  
Poata-Smith, “Inequality and Māori,” 151.

<sup>100</sup> CJ, interview.

<sup>101</sup> Marcia, “A Letter from Marcia,” *Trans-Scribe*, June 1987, 5–8.

“take the plunge,” by cross-dressing full time, but others with, “family, possessions, career/income and social stability,” were “sensible and laudable” for controlling their desires, “to avoid upsetting an ordered and socially valuable life.”<sup>102</sup> Anthony’s emphasis on a, “socially valuable life,” points to the role of dominant exploitative class relations in Hedesthia’s politics. Dan Irving argues that part of trans assimilationist politics is the production of the trans person as, “capable of participating in capitalist production processes,” and this is something that sex workers were deemed incapable of.<sup>103</sup> Age reinforced class divides as most Hedesthia members were middle-aged or older while many trans sex workers left home in their teens and early twenties.<sup>104</sup>

At the core of Hedesthia’s politics was the idea that trans sex workers had damaged the public image of trans people, and therefore Hedesthia members needed to emphasise that about them which was most ‘ordinary’ to be accepted by society. Joanne Meyerowitz noted that this was likewise central to the politics of many queer communities in the United States in the 1960s:

Those who identified as homosexual, transvestite, or transsexual sometimes attempted to lift their own group’s social standing by foisting the stigma of transgression onto others. They lived in a social order in which status derived in part from upholding norms of propriety. Asserting one’s upstanding

---

<sup>102</sup> Rachel Anthony, “For what it’s worth: my opinion,” *Trans-Scribe*, Autumn 1984, 7-9.

<sup>103</sup> Dan Irving, “Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive,” *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 40.

<sup>104</sup> Hansen, 67, 103.

middle-class status meant rejecting other behaviours tainted as vulgar, lower class, or deviant.<sup>105</sup>

Hedesthia members were not the only trans people who wanted to be ‘ordinary’ as many trans sex workers too longed for the safety and recognition that came with being ‘ordinary.’ Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the powerful role of medical institutions as practitioners held great authority over trans healthcare, and they prioritised patients they felt were, in the words of New Zealand clinical psychologist Anthony Taylor, “not out to capitalise...not extravagant...not exhibitionistic,” but instead were, “moving very peacefully, and satisfactorily working and living like ordinary members of the community.”<sup>106</sup> Yet there is a vital difference between *desiring* normality and *defining* normality; the latter is inherently violent as the creation and circulation of norms, “creates an idea that undergirds conditions of violence, exploitation, and poverty.”<sup>107</sup> Hedesthia’s definition of ‘ordinary’ or ‘normal’ mirrored those presented by psychologists like Taylor. “True” trans women upheld white middle-class standards of acceptable behaviour, that included heterosexuality, dressing conservatively feminine, keeping their gender difference private, and working legal jobs. Hedesthia’s politics are an example of how transnormativity always intersected with other power structures such as classism, racism, and whorephobia which create standards of

---

<sup>105</sup> Meyerowitz, 177.

<sup>106</sup> A. J. W. Taylor in Dairne Shanahan and Des Monaghan, *Transvestites* (Gallery NZBC, 1971), Television Collection – TZP49891, Ngā Taonga: Sound and Vision.

<sup>107</sup> Spade, 5.

who is considered ‘normal’ and therefore acceptable. Those who are deemed abnormal are more vulnerable to systemic violence.<sup>108</sup>

What consequences did Hedesthia’s transnormativity have for those who existed outside Hedesthia members’ definitions of accepted transness? Some are easier to understand than others. We do know that exclusion of trans sex workers occurred very literally. De’Anne Jackson was a trans woman and sex worker of Māori and Cook Islands heritage who was a proud queen. She was turned away when she tried to join Hedesthia, and group organizers told Jackson that they did not accept transsexuals.<sup>109</sup> Clearly, Hedesthia did accept transsexuals: their issue with Jackson lay in her race and class. Furthermore, unlike trans sex workers, Hedesthia’s members had the opportunity to promote their ideas about transness to the various community groups, organisations and media outlets they connected with – as exemplified by Xtabay’s interview with *Key Contact* – and, from the mid-1980s, Hedesthia was in dialogue with government representatives.

From 1985, Hedesthia member Helen France lobbied both the Human Rights Commission and Minister of Justice Geoffrey Palmer on the legal rights of transsexuals and transvestites.<sup>110</sup> Xtabay celebrated France’s work, and she noted that it was a, “very up-hill task.”<sup>111</sup> This marked the beginning of trans activism’s pivot towards a rights-focused approach. National political trends guided this new approach as it followed the establishment of the Human Rights Commission in 1977, and the increased influence of neoliberalism from 1984, wherein the, “deservedness of rights and access to social

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> De’Anne Jackson, interview by Will Hansen, 25 June 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Helen France, “TransFormation,” *Trans-Scribe*, February/March 1989, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, February/March 1989, 4.



services,” was, “determined through one’s ability to assume personal responsibility for all dimensions of well-being.”<sup>112</sup> By 1989, France had sustained correspondence with Palmer, and she had also begun to write to fellow Members of Parliament David Caygill and Helen Clark. In addition, France and Xtabay began to make joint submissions officially on Hedesthia’s behalf, and the duo visited the Human Rights Commission multiple times to attempt to educate them about trans issues.<sup>113</sup> While the contents of their communications are unknown, it is likely that Hedesthia’s adoption of a rights-focused approach only exacerbated the organization’s adherence to respectability politics and transnormativity. In Dan Irving’s analysis of Canadian trans activism, he argues that since it is through the symbolic recognition rights afforded that, “life becomes increasingly livable for those accepted as citizen-subjects,” and subsequently that, “vulnerable populations must render themselves intelligible through cultivating normative identities.”<sup>114</sup> Hedesthia members would have had increased motivation to emphasise their whiteness, their middle-class propriety, and to further distance themselves from trans sex workers.

The history of Hedesthia demonstrates that trans people are not, as Irving writes, “entirely victims of external authority.” Instead, trans people too can, “participate actively in disciplinary techniques that lend meaning to the transsexual body as productive,” and that this reproduces the privilege that their transness complicates.<sup>115</sup> Hedesthia members’ advocacy was

---

<sup>112</sup> Irving, “Against the grain: Teaching Transgender Human Rights,” *Sexualities* 16, no. 3-4 (2013): 328.

<sup>113</sup> France, 8; Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, June/July 1989, 4.

<sup>114</sup> Irving, “Against the grain,” 320.

<sup>115</sup> Irving, “Normalised Transgressions,” 40; Stryker, 55.

pioneering, but ultimately it did not serve to weaken the system which oppressed trans communities. Instead, they were invested in this system, and many Hedesthia members castigated trans sex workers in order to make a bid for their inclusion in systems of sexual normativity, capitalism, and white supremacy. However, in Emily Skidmore's study of transnormativity in the United States, she makes the important point that this should be seen less as a personal failure on the part of these trans people, and instead it is evidence of the overwhelming power of normative race, class, gender and sexual ideologies. The white trans women in Skidmore's study and Hedesthia alike were, "motivated to articulate transsexuality in exclusionary ways in order to protect their respectability," because white womanhood's ideological power maintains itself through, "the exclusive nature of its construction."<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

By the late 1980s, Xtabay had become, "the heart and soul of Hedesthia."<sup>117</sup> With her eventual passing Hedesthia ceased to exist sometime in the early 1990s. In July 1989 the organization released its last newsletter. Despite the many who felt the organization made life liveable for them, Hedesthia's leadership often felt unsupported, and they often referenced members' unwillingness to put more of themselves into the organisation for fear of being outed: "it would still seem that when Patrick is not Patricia, he forgets all about the

---

<sup>116</sup> Emily Skidmore, "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 294.

<sup>117</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

club.”<sup>118</sup> It was also not uncommon for members to cease all association with the group after they obtained gender affirmation surgery, or after they were being interpreted unproblematically as women or men.<sup>119</sup> For Simpson, Hedesthia was once her entire social life, but after she received vaginoplasty she “moved on” to live, “life as an ordinary everyday woman.”<sup>120</sup> The significance which Hedesthia placed on ordinariness eventually resulted in its demise.

For almost two decades, Hedesthia crucially connected white, middle-class trans people to each other across the country. It fostered trans friendships in an era where trans people were pathologized and marginalised. Hedesthia’s leadership were determined to instigate positive change for trans people, and their work marked a turning point for trans activism in New Zealand that was formalised and rooted in respectability politics. However, in the organization’s desire to advance change for *respectable* trans people through combatting the stereotype that all trans people were “street queens,” Hedesthia engaged in a project of transnormativity. Hedesthia was a contradictory organisation. While on the one hand it was more inclusive than similar groups like the FPE, this inclusivity makes their racist, classist, and whorephobic exclusions all the more transparent. To neutralise the transgressiveness of their gender, they emphasised the normative aspects of their shared identity – class, race and sexuality in particular – through the denigration of non-normative trans others, and the organization ultimately prioritized assimilation. In the end, Hedesthia’s political strategy was less a *resistance* to cis hegemony, and more of a

---

<sup>118</sup> Xtabay, “Central Report,” *Trans-Scribe* October 1986, 3.

<sup>119</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1979, 3; CJ and Simpson, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Simpson, interview.

reconstruction of it, and it ushered in a new era of trans respectability politics.

## **Bibliography**

### ***Primary Sources***

“About Hedesthia,” (Hedesthia Bulletins, n.d.), Agender New Zealand: Records, MS-Papers-11170-073, Alexander Turnbull Library.

Aggie, Aunty. “Trans-Desperata or Aunty Aggie’s Lament.” *Trans-Scribe*, Summer 1984, 19-20.

Anonymous. “Is There Transvestism after Death?” *Trans-Scribe*. February 1980, 5-6.

Anonymous. “Talkback or Backchat.” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1983, 4.

Anonymous. “Letter to the Editor.” *Trans-Scribe*, May/June 1983, 16.

Anonymous. “Obituary, Gillian Cox.” *Trans-Scribe*, Autumn 1984, 8.

Anonymous. “The Only Operation You Want Is On Your Brain!” *Trans-Scribe* June 1987, 17-22.

Anthony, Rachel. “For what it’s worth: my opinion,” *Trans-Scribe*, Autumn 1984, 7-9.

Bruce (Prince), Virginia. “The Expression of Femininity in the Male.” *The Journal of Sex Research* 3:2 (1967): 129-139.

*Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*. (Spring 1976 – Summer 1985), Te Pūranga Takatāpui o Aotearoa, the Lesbian and Gay Archives of New Zealand (LAGANZ).

CJ, and Jan Simpson. Interview by Will Hansen, 3 April 2019.

D, Pauline. “Just a Reflection.” *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 2.

De Milo, Dana. “Dana de Milo on Carmen Rupe.” Interview by Gareth Watkins, 11 December 2012, [https://www.pridenz.com/dana\\_de\\_milo\\_on\\_carmen.html](https://www.pridenz.com/dana_de_milo_on_carmen.html).

Eagle, Allie. “In Reply to Gender Identity?” *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, May 1974, 12.

France, Helen. “TransFormation.” *Trans-Scribe*, February/March 1989, 8.

Gall, Joanna F. “Gay Liberation Conference.” *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 2.

Jackson, De’Anne. Interview by Will Hansen, 25 June 2018.

Jacqui. “Two different caucuses.” *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 18-20.

Jakeman, John. John Jakeman. Interview by Gareth Watkins, 13 May 2017. PrideNZ.com.

Jones, Deborah. “Gay Rights Conference: What’s a dyke to do?”  
*Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 16-18.

Karen. “The First Time Ever.” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1978, 4.

*Key Contact*. “Transgenderism.” 1980, 6.

Lam Sheung, Fiona, Kevin Haunui, Kassie Hartendorp, Lynne Russell, and Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku. *E Oho! Mana Takatāpui*. Wellington, New Zealand, 2022. PrideNZ.com.  
[https://www.pridenz.com/e\\_oho\\_mana\\_takatapui.html](https://www.pridenz.com/e_oho_mana_takatapui.html).

Laundon, Gillian. “Friends.” *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 3.

Laundon, Gillian. “TransFormation.” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 11.

Laundon, Gillian. “TransFormation.” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1979, 3.

Laundon, Gillian. “TransFormation: Report 1976.” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 3-4.

Laundon, Gillian. “TransFormation Report 1977.” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 2.

Maclaine, Wendy. “Why do we need Hedesthia?” *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 3-4.

Marcia. “A Letter from Marcia.” *Trans-Scribe*, June 1987.

Mead, Deanne. "Hedesthia NGRC Alliance." *Trans-Scribe*, August 1979, 3.

*New Zealand Gazette* no. 39 (7 March 1985), New Zealand Legal Information Institute, 1104.

"News and Notes: Personalia." *Taxon* 26 no. 2/3 (May 1977): 308.

Pope, Brenda. "Brenda Pope to Hedesthia, Auckland Chapter." *Trans-Scribe*, August 1983.

Prime, Patricia. "All Dressed Up and No Place To Go." *Trans-Scribe*, July 1978, 1.

Raymond, Janice. *The transsexual empire: the making of the she-male* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).

S.E.L.F. (June 1974 - December 1977), Te Pūrangā Takatāpui o Aotearoa, the Lesbian and Gay Archives of New Zealand (LAGANZ).

"Sex Changes 'Don't Work.'" *Auckland Star*, 26 July 1984, reprinted in *Trans-Scribe*, July 1985, 11.

Shanahan, Diarne, and Des Monaghan. *Transvestites* (Gallery NZPC, 1971). Television Collection – TZP49891, Ngā Taonga: Sound and Vision.

Simpson, Jan. Interview by Will Hansen, 3 April 2019.



Taylor, A.J.W., and D.G. McLachlan. “Further Observations and Comments on Transvestism.” *New Zealand Medical Journal* 62, no. 375 (1963): 527–29.

Taylor, A.J.W., and D.G. McLachlan. “Transvestism and Psychosexual Identification.” *New Zealand Medical Journal* 63, no.382 (1964): 396–372.

“Trans Sexuals’ Twilight World.” *Trans-Scribe*, April/May 1979, 2. *Trans-Scribe* (February 1978 - July 1989), Te Pūranga Takatāpui o Aotearoa, the Lesbian and Gay Archives of New Zealand (LAGANZ).

Valda. “Women’s recording company?” *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 31-33.

Xtabay, Suzan. “Advertising.” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 3.

Xtabay, Suzan. “Central’s Report.” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1979, 1.

Xtabay, Suzan. “Central’s Report.” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1980, 2.

Xtabay, Suzan. “Central’s Report.” *Trans-Scribe*, October 1986, 3.

Xtabay, Suzan. “Dear Members.” *Trans-Scribe*, July 1978, 1.

Xtabay, Suzan. “Membership Numbers.” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 3.

Xtabay, Suzan. “Membership Report.” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1979, 2.

Xtabay, Suzan. "National Report and Round and About."  
*Trans-Scribe*, April 1983, 3.

Xtabay, Suzan. "Observations on the Phenomenon of  
Trans-Genderism." *Trans-Scribe*, December 1978, 2.

Xtabay, Suzan. "Open Night." *Trans-Scribe*, October 1978, 3.

Xtabay, Suzan. "The First Time Ever." *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 10.

Young, Christine. "GREETINGS, Sisters, Everywhere !!" *S-E-L-F*,  
May 1976, 1.

Young, Christine. "GREETINGS, Sisters, wherever you are !!"  
*S-E-L-F*, August 1976, 1.

Young, Christine. "Greetings, trans-people!" *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 1.

Young, Christine. "Hello, Girls!!" *Hedesthia Newsletter*, June 1974, 1.

Young, Christine. "HELLO, Girls ! Christine Calling Again." *S-E-L-F*,  
August 1975, 2-3.

Young, Christine. "How Many of Us Are There?" *S-E-L-F*, March  
1976, 3.

Young, Christine. *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 10.

Young, Christine. "Seven Days (plus three)." *S-E-L-F*, May 1976, 2-3.

Young, Christine. “We have made great strides as a club...” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 9.

## Secondary Sources

Aspin, Clive, and Jessica Hutchings. “Reclaiming the Past to Inform the Future: Contemporary Views of Maori Sexuality.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (2007): 415–27.

Bey, Marquis. *Black Trans Feminism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

Brickell, Chris. *Mates and Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand*. Auckland: Random House, 2008.

Brickell, Chris. “Sex Education, Homosexuality, and Social Contestation in 1970s New Zealand.” *Sex Education* 7, no. 4 (2007): 387–406.

Draz, Marie. “Retro-Sex, Anti-Trans Legislation, and the Colonial/Modern Gender System.” *PhiloSOPHIA* 11, no. 1–2 (2021): 26–48.

Gibson, Stephanie, Matariki Williams, and Puawai Cairns. *Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance*. Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2019.

Guy, Laurie D. *Worlds in Collision: The Gay Debate in New Zealand, 1960-1986*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002.

Irving, Dan. "Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive." *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 38-59.

Irving, Dan. "Against the grain: Teaching Transgender Human Rights." *Sexualities* 16, no. 3-4 (2013): 319-335.

Hansen, Will. "Every Bloody Right To Be Here': Trans Resistance in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1967-1989." MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2020.

Hansen, Will. 'The Long History of Trans Activism in Aotearoa New Zealand,' *bad apple*, 3 May 2023, <https://badapple.gay/2023/05/03/trans-history/>.

Harris, Aroha, and Melissa Matutina Williams. "Rights and Revitalisation, 1970-1990." In *Tangata Whenua: A History*, edited by Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney, and Aroha Harris, 358-86. Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books, 2015.

Hill, Robert. "Before Transgender: Transvestia's Spectrum of Gender Variance, 1960-1980." In *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, 364-79. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Hodgetts, Darrin, Bridgette Masters, and Neville Robertson. "Media Coverage of 'decades of Disparity' in Ethnic Mortality in Aotearoa."

*Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 14, no. 6 (2004): 455–72.

Kerekere, Elizabeth. “Part of The Whānau: The Emergence of Takatāpui Identity - He Whāriki Takatāpui.” PhD dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington, 2017.

Malatino, Hil. “Gone, Missing: Queering and Racializing Absence in Trans and Intersex Archives.” In *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*, 105–28. University of Nebraska Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvckq9pv.9>.

Meyerowitz, Joanne J. *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Oak, Eileen. “‘Rumours of Neoliberalism’s Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated’: Re-Moralisation of the Poor in Aotearoa New Zealand.” *Sites: A Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 62–82. <https://doi.org/10.11157/sites-vol12iss1id271>.

Pihama, Leonie. “Mana Wahine: Decolonising Gender in Aotearoa.” *Australian Feminist Studies* 35, no. 106 (2020): 351–65.

Poata-Smith, Evan Te Ahu. “Inequality and Māori.” In *Inequality: A New Zealand Crisis*, edited by Max Rashbrooke, 148–64. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2013.

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.

Spade, Dean. *Normal Life Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008.

Thomsen, Patrick. "Research 'Side-Spaces' and the Criticality of Auckland, New Zealand, as a Site for Developing a Queer Pacific Scholarly Agenda." *New Zealand Sociology* 37, no. 1 (January 2022): 120–42

# Draft Dodger, Soldier's Wife: Trans Feminine Lives, Civic Duty, and World War II

**Juniper Oxford** (she/her)

University of Vermont

*Abstract: This article examines trans feminine lived experiences in the United States during the Second World War amid persecution amplified by the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, the May Act of 1941, and heightened visibility through local and national news publications. This article contends that there is a longer and more complicated linked history between trans feminine Americans and the U.S. military than has been acknowledged by both scholarship and public discourse. Federal statutes like the STSA and the May Act lent authority to the state and its auxiliaries beyond the singular municipal or county jurisdiction. These factors aided the legal persecution of innumerable Americans with perjury, draft evasion, 'moral', and fraud charges. Through case studies of the disparate circumstances surrounding the 'discovery of sex' of three individuals, Sadie Acosta, Lucy Hicks Anderson, and Georgia Black, this study illuminates the role of various actors involved in investigating and policing their 'moral' crimes and gender variance in the 1940s and 1950s. In the post-war years, the figure of the 'ex-G.I.' woman is seen through numerous well-publicized cases in the U.S. and the U.K., showing that trans feminine experiences of World War II could be found both at home and abroad.*

## Introduction

Except as otherwise provided in this Act, it shall be the duty of every male citizen of the United States, and of every other male person residing in the United States, who, on the day or days fixed for the first or any subsequent registration, is between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five, to present himself for and submit to registration at such time or times and place or places, and in such manner and in such age group or groups, as shall be determined by rules and regulations prescribed hereunder.<sup>1</sup>

In September 1940, a year before America's formal entry into the Second World War, the United States Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act (STSA).<sup>2</sup> This act enabled the first draft for conscription during designated peacetime in United States history. As the STSA was a sex-specific law, individuals who were assigned male at birth and whose gender did not align with that assignment were given an impossible choice: they could either identify themselves as men with the Selective Service System, or

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Congress. United States Code: Selective Training and Service Act, 50a U.S.C. §§ 302-315 Suppl. 1. 1940. Periodical.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1940-005050a003/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



they could ignore the act and risk substantial legal penalty.<sup>3</sup> Through the assertion of their gender and innocence of military-related charges, trans feminine Americans found themselves vulnerable to state violence at a time of expanded wartime powers. Trans feminine lives in the United States were not exempt from the immense impact of global conflict, and indeed they were uniquely affected by World War II.<sup>4</sup> While the potential for persecution was an integral part of WWII-era trans feminine experiences, their relationship to the conflict adds further complexity to their varied experiences. Some were wives and mothers of soldiers, others

---

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. draft law remains sex-specific. The current Selective Service System policy is as follows: "Selective Service bases the registration requirement on gender assigned at birth and not on gender identity or on gender reassignment. Individuals who are born male and changed their gender to female are still required to register. Individuals who are born female and changed their gender to male are not required to register." "Frequently Asked Questions - Who Needs to Register," Selective Service System, <https://www.sss.gov/faq/#who-needs-to-register>.

<sup>4</sup> A note on terminology: While the three main subjects of this study were trans women, I use "trans feminine lives" as an umbrella under which numerous identities, experiences, and presentations may be subsumed. As Emma Heaney employs in *The New Woman*, I acknowledge trans femininity as a capacious category that includes individuals who identify with, "one or more vernacular trans feminine terms (around the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, Britain, and France these terms include fairy, Mary, molly, queen, tante, and molle) and/or identifying as women." Just as an examination of military policy through the sole lens of homosexuality fails to account for its impact on trans lives, a narrower interpretation of the impact of these policies on trans womanhood leaves out many more caught in the net of the "male citizen" terminology. Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), xiii.

engaged citizens and organizers, and some served in the military at home or abroad.

The 1940 STSA armed the state and its auxiliaries with the purpose and authority to persecute individuals among its population who, “moved away from the gender they were assigned.”<sup>5</sup> As a federal statute the STSA blanketed the United States—it extended beyond the jurisdictions of cross-dressing laws, which were largely, “local innovations, passed by municipal governments.”<sup>6</sup> In doing so, the language of the STSA regarding the regulation of ‘male citizens’ emboldened the federal government to pursue ‘draft dodgers’ while it further expanded avenues to police gender into areas of the United States that heretofore did not have cross-dressing ordinances. Throughout the course of the war over six thousand draft boards encompassed the Selective Service System, and each imbued a local authority with national power to pursue draft dodging and other related charges.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the risk of a perjury charge if one filled out a certificate of marriage that attested to their gender, individuals assigned male at birth and who lived as women were endangered by three military-related charges: draft evasion; fraud, the collection of military spousal support checks; and violation of so-called ‘moral zones’ around military bases, usually by charges related to sex work. These charges extended past the

---

<sup>5</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Seal Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Allan Bérubé, John D’Emilio, and Estelle B. Freedman, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 8.

municipal level, and they could come from the federal courts to the local sheriff's department.

Those who lived as women and were assigned male at birth were subjected to the expectations of patriotic womanhood as well as the civic duties expected of men when their pasts became part of public discourse. It was expected that young men would make themselves available for conscription. Women occupied a variety of roles to support the war effort. These included military enlistment, work in industries where conscripts had left vacancies, the maintenance of victory gardens, procurement of funds or materials, and the purchase of war bonds.<sup>8</sup> Despite trans feminine individuals performance of the civic duties expected of American women during the World Wars, they faced the threat of criminal prosecution if they did not register with the Selective Service System.

When faced with the threat of prosecution for military-related charges or ruin to their reputations, all three main subjects of this study affirmed their womanhood at great risk. These cases are a critical rejoinder to prior historiographic understandings of trans feminine gender embodiment. Peter Boag's *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*, which covers an array of 'cross-dressing' practices and individuals, considers the figure of the,

---

<sup>8</sup> While women were not allowed to take up combat roles in the United States military during the Second World War, they comprised a large force within the military—from 1,500 women in 1940 to an estimated 350,000 over the course of the war. World War I was the first war in which American women could officially serve in roles aside from "nurse," and by WWII each branch of the military formed a division for servicewomen by the midpoint of the war. Gail Marjorie Beaton, *Colorado Women in World War II* (Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2020), 2; Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 28.

“male-to-female cross-dresser,” whose lack of representation in American western history is glaring against the abundance of source material.<sup>9</sup> Boag attributes this absence to the “progress narrative,” which has been used to explain or, perhaps more accurately, contain gender transgression: “It normalizes the cross-dresser by maintaining that ‘she’ changed her clothing for some purpose related to securing personal advancement in a world with a deck that was otherwise stacked against her.”<sup>10</sup> Individuals who ‘cross-dressed’ sometimes offered the rationale that they did so in order to support their families, themselves, or their partners. As Emily Skidmore noted, the explanation that opportunities functioned as the most significant factor in the motivation to cross-dress was commonly provided well into the 1990s in LGBTQ scholarship.<sup>11</sup> While this explanation accurately captures the

---

<sup>9</sup> Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), xi.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 19; Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests* precedes Boag's *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*, and describes the narrative's purpose seen in the case of Billie Tipton: “Whatever discomfort is felt by the reader or audience...is smoothed over and narrativized by a story that recuperates social and sexual norms, not only by reinstating the binary (male/female) but also retaining, and encoding, a progress narrative: s/he did this in order to a) get a job, b) find a place in a man's world, and c) realize or fulfill some deep but acceptable need in terms of personal destiny, in this case, by becoming a jazz musician.” Marjorie B. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Emily Skidmore cites the works of Lillian Faderman and John D'Emilio in her article, “Recovering a Gender Transgressive Past,” as examples, both of whom tie this explanation generally to working-class “passing women,” a term popularized by Jonathan Katz. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Faderman writes “A transvestite woman who could actually pass as a man had male privileges and could do all manner of things other women could not: open a bank account, write checks, own property, go anywhere unaccompanied, vote in elections.” Skidmore

circumstances of *some* cases of gender transgression, it fails to account for such cases in which individuals *affirmed* their gender identity to their material detriment rather than economic or social advancement.

Historical analysis of the wartime popular press highlights both the ubiquity of trans feminine lives across the 'pre-Jorgenson' United States, and it demonstrates trans feminine individuals' commitment to their genders despite the transmisogynistic consequences that often accompanied being outed. Legally, the severity of the charge was relative to the length of time since the beginning of their transition. Socially, since military-related legal charges were extended beyond municipalities, their cases were amplified alongside current events of the war in the popular press. The latest news on the Second World War filled the front pages of the press, and such cases of draft dodging were also given extensive coverage. Yet the investigatory nature of the American press meant that whether merely reporting the facts or sensationalizing the story, these institutions were instrumental in not only stripping the rights and privileges entailed in 'passing' as one's lived gender, but

---

observes that "In this way, many scholars assumed well into the 1990s that masculine identification was a way for women to cope with the historical conditions they found themselves in, and not necessarily an expression of gender identity." Nancy A. Hewitt, Anne M. Valk, and Emily Skidmore, "Recovering a Gender-Transgressive Past: A Transgender Historiography," in *A Companion to American Women's History*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2021), pp. 209-222, esp. 211; John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA* (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1976); Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 44.

also one's right to privacy and to control their own narrative, and they further served as a social institution of gender enforcement through the infliction of humiliation and ridicule. Yet, it is the articles written by the press that both endangered the lives and tarnished the reputations of these individuals that makes research of this kind possible. Jen Manion, in *Female Husbands*, notes the significant role of the newspaper in such cases: "When husbands were outed as being assigned female at birth, newspapers were often the first to spread the word throughout the community," and, "In choosing the tone, length, and section for any given story, editors crafted narratives that gave meaning to events."<sup>12</sup> This article examines the relationships of Sadie Acosta, Lucy Hicks Anderson, and Georgia Black to civic duty and World War II. Through this analysis the roles played by communities, local law enforcement, and the press emerge as consequential factors within each of their respective circumstances. I then examine the experiences of 'ex-G.I.' women, and I argue for the potential and significance of historical research on trans Americans and the military.

### **"She's in Jail Now For Evading the Draft"**

In 1941, the Larimer County Sheriff's Office of Fort Collins, Colorado, received a tip that one of their community members, Sadie Acosta, was, "not a woman."<sup>13</sup> Only a few months prior in late 1940, Acosta received medical treatment, and in the process her

---

<sup>12</sup> Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2, 7.

<sup>13</sup> "Mrs.' Sadie Acosta Didn't Register for Draft, but Sheriff Says He Should," *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, January 7, 1941, 1.

“true sex was revealed.”<sup>14</sup> Despite having transpired in a supposedly confidential setting, the particulars did not remain so. Her private information soon became public knowledge—the subject of town gossip—and ultimately local authorities wielded it against her. Three state entities involved themselves in the matter: the Larimer County Welfare Office, the Larimer County Selective Service Board, and the Larimer County Sheriff's Office. Each carried out a role in policing the gendered existence of Sadie. The story circulated in newspapers across the United States after it was picked up by the *International News Service (INS)* and the *Associated Press (AP)*.

Sadie Acosta was born in Reeves County, Texas on April 10, 1910, to Juan Acosta and Celsa Casildo.<sup>15</sup> Her parents died when she was an infant, and she was raised by her grandmother, Josephine Casildo. The local newspaper, the *Fort Collins Express-Courier*,

---

<sup>14</sup> C. A. King, “Just Around the Corner,” *Mendocino Coast Beacon*, January 18, 1941, 7; This term is featured in Emily Skidmore's *True Sex*, in which the scholar acknowledges the commonplace usage of the term by the press and employs the term in order to “trouble the assumed connection between the sex assigned at birth and gender identity, and to make clear that I am *not* suggesting that biology is (or should be) destiny.” (emphasis in original) Emily Skidmore, *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 10. For the purposes of this article, language related to ‘sex’ is chosen to highlight this “assumed connection” while noting governmental agencies’ attempts to define individuals in order to stabilize that connection. Paisley Currah’s succinct and effective definition of sex applies well in this application. In *Sex Is as Sex Does*, Currah’s use of sex is defined as “whatever an entity whose decisions are backed by the force of law says it is.” Paisley Currah, *Sex Is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 9.

<sup>15</sup> The Larimer County relief rolls and Sadie Acosta’s draft cards differ in the year, with 1909 on the former and 1910 on the latter.

reported that she had lived in the area since 1922.<sup>16</sup> Before her ‘sex’ was known to the town, Sadie appeared in only three instances in the local newspaper. In 1935, her name appeared in the local paper for “Auto Certificates,” which showed that she was the owner of a 1926 Chevrolet.<sup>17</sup> In 1937 when she was around twenty-seven, Sadie helped put on an event for an audience of sixty at the Fort Collins branch of the American Association of University Women in Ammons Hall.<sup>18</sup> The festivities included the “Sanchez sisters” who sang Mexican songs, local high school teacher Miss Henrietta Brown who gave a lesson about, “Spanish American Women on the Rio Grande,” and finally Sadie who taught attendees how to make tortillas or, “Mexican bread.”<sup>19</sup> The third known instance was in 1939 when Sadie applied for a permit to renovate the basement of her home at 622 Maple Street.<sup>20</sup>

As Sadie Acosta was single and without a family, she had to rely on public assistance to survive. She registered with the Larimer County Welfare Office in 1938, and her name was added to the relief roll.<sup>21</sup> The 1940 Federal Census reported that Sadie lived in a rented apartment on 208 First Street.<sup>22</sup> The census indicated that Sadie reported her household was herself, she was widowed, and she lived alone. The original article published shortly after the discovery of her sex mentioned that she was also registered as widowed with the

---

<sup>16</sup> “Mrs.’ Sadie Acosta Didn’t Register for Draft,” *Fort Collins Express-Courier*.

<sup>17</sup> “Auto Certificates,” *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, October 13, 1935.

<sup>18</sup> “Making Mexican Bread Is Shown,” *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, March 11, 1937.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> “Building Permits Include Residence,” *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, October 1, 1939.

<sup>21</sup> “Mrs.’ Sadie Acosta Didn’t Register for Draft,” *Fort Collins Express-Courier*.

<sup>22</sup> US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *1940 United States Federal Census*, Fort Collins, Larimer, Colorado.



County Welfare Office (CWO), but the article did not report the name of her deceased husband.<sup>23</sup> In the portion of the census titled, "Other Work," she was reported as being unable to work.<sup>24</sup> She was said to derive income from other sources—a reference to the public assistance that she received.

Just four months after the passage of the STSA, the front page of the *Fort Collins Express-Courier* carried an article titled, "Mrs.' Sadie Acosta Didn't Register for Draft, but Sheriff Says He Should."<sup>25</sup> Next to the story was a photograph of Sadie Acosta captioned, "Masquerade Exposed."<sup>26</sup> Per the article, Larimer County Sheriff Ted Schaffer received a tip that Sadie was, "not a woman," and Schaffer had her arrested. After she was brought before the local draft board, its officials ordered her to be examined by a medical professional. Sadie was non-consensually examined in order to determine her 'true sex.' According to the newspaper, the doctor told the sheriff that "sure, 'she' is a man."<sup>27</sup> After this violation, County Welfare Director Walter E. Dalby removed her name from the relief roll, and he added her back on with her alleged name assigned at birth.<sup>28</sup> As Sadie languished in jail as she awaited charges, the draft board convened to decide their course of action, for this confirmed case of draft evasion. The story circulated across the United States after it was picked up by the *AP* and the *INS*.

---

<sup>23</sup> "Mrs.' Sadie Acosta Didn't Register for Draft," *Fort Collins Express-Courier*.

<sup>24</sup> US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *1940 United States Federal Census*, Fort Collins, Larimer, Colorado.

<sup>25</sup> "Mrs.' Sadie Acosta Didn't Register for Draft," *Fort Collins Express-Courier*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> It is not definitively clear that the name listed in the article is indeed her prior legal name.

The *INS* article contained three vital pieces of information on Sadie's case: a more detailed timeline of events, a direct quote from Sadie, and a reference to the STSA. According to the *INS*, Sadie's 'sex' was first exposed when she underwent an unspecified operation at the local hospital a few months previous. Shortly thereafter, the CWO changed her name in their system. Lest that change and the occasional local gossip, nothing else came of the 'exposure of sex'—until it was relayed to the draft board months later. In the words of the *INS*, "The incident was more or less forgotten, and Acosta continued to wear dresses, comb his hair down to his shoulders, and bedeck himself with jewelry."<sup>29</sup> In hindsight, Acosta's continuance of dressing as she felt was not likely to have been forgotten, but instead it festered in the minds of the local community, and most of all in its authorities. It seems unlikely that the change of her name in the CWO system was merely for 'accurate' recordkeeping purposes. Instead, it reads as a failed attempt to compel her to alter her presentation.

The Larimer County Selective Service Board was the one who notified the local law enforcement that Sadie Acosta had not registered for the draft. After Sheriff Ted Schafer had her arrested, she was placed in the "bullpen" with ten men.<sup>30</sup> In the face of the charges, Sadie maintained that she was a woman. After the doctor pronounced Sadie a man, she responded, "So? But I would rather be a woman. So I am a woman."<sup>31</sup> Sadie's *definitive* response to the medical professional, if indeed captured accurately by the press, is powerful in the face of adversity and serious legal consequences. By

---

<sup>29</sup> "Declares He's a She; Draft Dodger Held," *Minneapolis Star Journal*, January 26, 1941.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> "Evasion of Draft Laid to 'Woman,'" *Arizona Republic*, January 8, 1941.

contrast the *Express-Courier's* article failed to quote Sadie Acosta though it had ample opportunity to do so. The article appears to take the contention right out of the issue at hand as it provided a depiction of the story, but absent its most central figure, and its allegation that Sadie was a man went unchallenged. The *INS* article concluded with a reference to the newly enacted draft law: "Since there is no provision in the selective service act which permits eligible persons to choose their sex, the draft board plans to proceed with charges against Acosta for evading registration."<sup>32</sup> The STSA established guidelines that are, by and large, *still* present in the current law that pertains to selective service for 'eligible males' in the United States. This lack of provision for eligible persons to 'choose their sex' requires all who were assigned male at birth to register for the draft: whether they are men or not.

Just twenty-four hours after the first article about Sadie Acosta's 'exposure of sex', a local newspaper published a second article with the headline, "Acosta Registers With Draft Board."<sup>33</sup> As put by the *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, the Larimer County draft board "washed its hands" of the Sadie Acosta case. Due to Sadie's immediate acquiescence to the demands of local authorities, the draft board did not pursue the case further:

We are satisfied that Acosta never would have been accepted for military training anyway," said Thomas Gray, Chairman of the board, "and, as far as we are concerned, it is up to county authorities to take any further action against the man..." "The board feels that, since Acosta did not refuse to register as being

---

<sup>32</sup> "Declares He's a She," *Minneapolis Star Journal*.

<sup>33</sup> "Acosta Registers With Draft Board," *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, January 8, 1941.

opposed to military service, the government's interests in the matter were complied with when the man was registered and his questionnaire completed.<sup>34</sup>

The deputy district attorney Winton Ault reported to the press that he did not yet know what action the local authorities would take against Sadie Acosta.<sup>35</sup> At the time of the article, she was held in the local jail without a formal charge levied against her. As there was little recourse for Sadie in the matter of complying with the draft and the United States was still a neutral country, it is apparent why her compliance with the draft was expeditious. As Sadie subsisted on welfare, she relied upon the government for survival, and this meant she may have been ineligible for aid if she did not comply with the draft.

Board Chairman Thomas Gray's belief that Sadie, "never would have been accepted for military training," is a fascinating admission. The statement could either be a reference to her inability to work and thus participate in military exercise, or it was an allusion to her gender modality, either as a woman (unlikely) or as a potential male draftee.<sup>36</sup> The board chairman may have recalled the

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.; Gender modality," a term proposed by jurist and bioethicist Florence Ashley, "refers to how a person's gender identity stands in relation to their gender assigned at birth." The term meant to correct the misconception that individuals who traverse gender and sex boundaries are discriminated against solely for their gender identity but for that relationship; Laura Erickson-Schroth and Florence Ashley, "'Trans' Is My Gender Modality: A Modest Terminological Proposal," in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 22.

provision in the STSA that concerned “moral deficiency.” Reasons for deferral included if the potential draftee was, “physically, mentally, or morally deficient or defective.”<sup>37</sup> As noted by historian Margot Canaday, from the First World War onwards these ‘defective/deficient’ draftees included homosexuals and trans feminine individuals who would be potentially incorrectly categorized as such.<sup>38</sup>

The Larimer County draft board collectively signed as the registrar on Sadie Acosta's draft card.<sup>39</sup> Sadie's draft card is only partially filled in on the front as she did not record anyone who, “will always know your address,” she did not own a telephone, and she only wrote “unemployed” under the employment section.<sup>40</sup> The census and the draft card differ both in birth year and race. The 1940 Federal Census enumerator marked her as white.<sup>41</sup> On the draft card, a faint x is marked by white, but with a more defined x marked

---

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Congress, United States Code: Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, 50a U.S.C. §§ 302-315 Suppl. 2. 1940. Periodical.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1940-006050a003/>.

<sup>38</sup> The revised standards regarding screening that came into use in 1918 were applied inconsistently and the resulting examinations were “cursory at best.” See: Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 62.

<sup>39</sup> Santos Acosta, National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; WWII Draft Registration Cards for Colorado, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947; Record Group: Records of the Selective Service System, 147; Box: 1, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., Lehi, UT, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Santos Acosta, National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; WWII Draft Registration Cards for Colorado, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947.

<sup>41</sup> US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *1940 United States Federal Census*, Fort Collins, Larimer, Colorado.

next to 'Indian.'<sup>42</sup> The draft card recorded that she had brown eyes, black hair, and a dark brown complexion. Sadie's height was listed as five-foot-three that doubtless aided her ability to 'pass.'

After the conclusion of her three-day ordeal, Sadie Acosta dropped from the circulation of the local news. A month later, an update of the story appeared in the *Express-Courier*.<sup>43</sup> While the update was about Sadie Acosta, she did not contribute to the article, nor did it give an update on her life after she registered with the Selective Service. Instead, the short article is about interest in the case from outside the community. The inquirer, a man from Vancouver, Canada, wrote to the newspaper that he had first read the article about Acosta in a New York paper. After the article briefly described the draft case, it included a request from the man: "Would you please send me a copy of your paper that has the story of Acosta in it and maybe a picture of him too?"<sup>44</sup> The first sentence of the short update conveyed the local newspaper's surprise at non-local interest and the broad reach of news organizations: "How news travels!"<sup>45</sup>

A month later, in March 1941, the *Express Courier* published the final update. It concerned the response of the Canadian inquirer. The newspaper included a comment from the reader, who replied:

Thanks for your paper dated Jan. 7 with the picture of Acosta who has lived as a woman for several years. It is hard for one to imagine a guy getting

---

<sup>42</sup> Santos Acosta, National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; WWII Draft Registration Cards for Colorado, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947.

<sup>43</sup> "How News Travels!," *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, February 11, 1941.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> "How News Travels!," *Fort Collins Express-Courier*.

away with a stunt like that for so long a time. I guess Mr. Acosta thinks he has just as much right to wear women's clothes as women have to wear men's clothes.<sup>46</sup>

The *Express-Courier* contributor, Lisle Widman, wrote that the newspaper staff was amused at the "subtle crack" at the end of the reader's comments.<sup>47</sup> The reference to women who wore men's clothing shows the reader connected Sadie Acosta to women's rights activists and the rise in women who wore pants and other articles of clothing associated with masculinity. With the use of press syndication and news organizations to extend the circulation of re-print media, it is entirely plausible that the reader from Vancouver had previously encountered articles that documented other trans lives—which would have included the generally more publicized articles about individuals who were assigned female at birth and lived as men.

Sadie Acosta's name does not appear in the *Fort Collins Express-Courier* after March 1941, and this signals that local law enforcement dropped the case that they built against her after the draft board did not pursue charges. Acosta immediately acquiesced to the demands of the local law and draft board to affirm on paper that she was 'male' while she continued to maintain both through her public appearance and testimony that she was a woman. Acosta maintained her womanhood. But factors like her reliance on welfare to subsist and survive forced her to comply with the Selective Service System. Due to her inability to assert her economic independence, Sadie Acosta found it difficult to *legally* assert her

---

<sup>46</sup> Lisle Widman, "Town Tidings," *Fort Collins Express-Courier*, March 4, 1941.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

gender identity. Acosta was forced to register with the Selective Service, but she did so merely as a formality. The press coverage of Sadie Acosta lasted a total of three months. For another woman targeted by authorities for draft evasion, Lucy Hicks Anderson, the press coverage continued for several years. While the two cases shared the same charge, their outcomes could not be more different.

### **“Draft Charge Seen in Lucy Hicks Case”**

Lucy Hicks was a well-known and admired member of her community of Oxnard, California. She arrived in Ventura County in 1920, after she had previously lived in New Mexico and Texas. Hicks established a reputation as an excellent cook through her temporary work in various homes in Ventura County before she gained a permanent position with the Donlon family of Hueneme.<sup>48</sup> Charles Donlon, the family patriarch, was an influential banker in the local community, and the Donlon family had lived in Ventura County since 1870. Their former cook was a Chinese immigrant named Gee who had cooked impressive dinners for the large gatherings that the Donlon family held at their home.<sup>49</sup> Hick’s demanding new position granted her the stability to put down roots in the local community. Lucy commuted to and from work in her Model T Coupe, and she lived in nearby Oxnard on the corner of Seventh and B street.<sup>50</sup>

Hicks had steady employment with the Donlons that gave her some stability, but the position demanded much from Hicks, and it paid comparatively little. While she was officially employed as the

---

<sup>48</sup> Cynthia Donlon, *The Donlon Family 1815-1969* (Oxnard, 1969), 16.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> “Seven Carloads Fords Received in One Day,” *Oxnard Daily Courier*, December 6, 1922.



family's cook, she also had other responsibilities that included childcare for the Donlon children along with the collection of chicken eggs.<sup>51</sup> Cynthia Donlon, who wrote a family history about the Donlons, characterized the work of those employed by the family—who were primarily immigrants—as, “domestic, menial, poorly paid positions.”<sup>52</sup> While she worked for the family, Lucy also engaged in the sale of liquor during Prohibition. Lucy was caught in possession of a gallon of whiskey and several drinking glasses hidden in a trap board in the wall of her home in 1931.<sup>53</sup> She had previously been brought to court on three separate occasions, once for alcohol possession where she was found guilty, one time for the possession of wine glasses that was thrown out for lack of evidence, and one charge for three counts of the sale of alcohol during Prohibition.<sup>54</sup> After she was found guilty, she was fined a thousand dollars per count on the latter charge.

Lucy Hicks invested the income that she received from both legal and illegal sources into property in Oxnard. Soon, she had an establishment that functioned as a speakeasy and brothel. It seemed an open secret in the community that Lucy owned properties in Oxnard that were rented out to individuals who used them for sex work. At its height, she owned and operated multiple units. Despite her run-ins with the law on charges of violating Prohibition along

---

<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey Wayne Maulhardt, *Oxnard: 1941-2004* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2005), 89; “Lucy Hicks Gathering Eggs,” Identifier: 40387, Research Library at The Museum of Ventura County, <https://photographs.venturamuseum.org/items/show/3021>.

<sup>52</sup> Donlon, *The Donlon Family 1815-1969*, 15-16.

<sup>53</sup> “Lucy Hicks Nabbed On Liquor Charges,” *Oxnard Daily Courier*, March 16, 1931.

<sup>54</sup> “Probation to Be Asked for Oxnard Negress,” *Oxnard Daily Courier*, May 10, 1928; “Arrests Start Yesterday and Continue Today,” *Oxnard Daily Courier*, April 25, 1928.

with her residence and operation of bawdy houses, Lucy continued to engage with the Oxnard community. The local papers featured her donations to several non-profit causes that were in the form of money and baked goods. Lucy balanced between her two reputations, and this behavior was eventually immortalized in the lyrics of a song about her that was written by local folk band the Restless Hillfillies: “Do you waltz back and forth between sin and soufflé?”<sup>55</sup> After she was arrested and released for different charges, she continued to engage with the community.

Lucy’s cooking and baking skills won her accolades at events that she catered, and she consistently won awards at the annual county fair. She won first place for her fruit cake in 1923 and 1925, first place for her fig jam and crabapple jelly in 1926, first place for her light rolls in 1927, and first place for her pumpkin pie and second place for her fig jam in 1928.<sup>56</sup> She was among the prize winners in a cake contest at Lehman Bros in 1931.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, Lucy hosted social gatherings that attracted many a well-known and influential Oxnardian, and most often those named in the newspapers were women.<sup>58</sup> Against the backdrop of World War II, Lucy created strong social ties with women in Oxnard’s community

---

<sup>55</sup> The Restless Hillfillies. *Sin and Souffle*. MP3, 2011. The title of the song was a reference to the national story written by *TIME Magazine*.

<sup>56</sup> County Fair Prize Winners,” *Oxnard Press Courier*, October 9, 1923; “County Fair Prize Winners.” *Oxnard Press Courier*, September 17, 1925; “County Fair Prize Winners.” *Oxnard Press Courier*, September 24, 1926; “County Fair Prize Winners.” *Oxnard Press Courier*, September 19, 1927; “County Fair Prize Winners.” *Oxnard Press Courier*, September 13, 1928; “County Fair Prize Winners.” *Oxnard Press Courier*, September 15, 1928.

<sup>57</sup> “Cake Contest Winners,” *Oxnard Press Courier*, January 27, 1931.

<sup>58</sup> “Church Social Club,” *Oxnard Daily Courier*, November 20, 1925; “Lucy Hicks Entertains at Community Center,” *Oxnard Daily Courier*, August 3, 1927.

at a time in which a great many of the men were drafted. Lucy's role in the community had an even greater effect as she contributed to the public good while she socialized with the other women of Oxnard. This integrated Lucy in with the other women of a 'socialite' status, a label attributed to her in the press. Lest Hick's illegal activities, she embodied the performance of feminine civic and communal virtues that were expected of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American women.

In 1944, Lucy Hicks married Reuben Anderson, a soldier who served in the Army in World War II.<sup>59</sup> Like her previous marriage to Clarence Hicks that had occurred she arrived in Ventura County, the two had a difference in age. This was more pronounced in the Anderson marriage as Lucy married 32-year-old Reuben Anderson when she was 59. Both the couple and Ventura County locals noted that they were happily married, and the two frequently exchanged letters when he was stationed in New York. Though Reuben was in the city for much of their relationship if he had leave from the base, he invariably spent the time with his wife. Some retrospective local accounts, that include Cynthia Donlon's *The Donlon Family*, maintained that the community knew about Lucy's 'sex' well before the events of 1945. If the community had known, although exceedingly unlikely, the Anderson marriage ceremony incurred no scandal nor extensive coverage in the local press.

After a soldier stationed in nearby Port Hueneme claimed that he received a venereal disease from a, "house of ill fame," that was owned and operated by Lucy Hicks Anderson, all the women in the establishment were taken into custody to be medically examined for signs of possible venereal diseases. Anderson protested that she

---

<sup>59</sup> "Lucy Hicks Wed to L.A. Man," *Oxnard Press Courier*, June 15, 1944.

was merely the proprietor and did not engage in sex work, but she was examined last by authorities who claimed that she, “proved to be a man.”<sup>60</sup> Dr. Mangan, who examined Lucy after her arrest on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1945, provided, “Evidence in the case,” to the office of District Attorney Arthur Waite. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, Waite ordered Anderson arrested, and he declared that she was, “actually a man but has been masquerading over a long period of years as a woman.”<sup>61</sup>



Figure 1: “Lucy Hicks with Deputy Sheriffs,” Sheriff’s Office Ventura County, Calif, Research Library at The Museum of Ventura County, Identifier: 1998 [31155] <https://photographs.venturamuseum.org/items/show/3087>.

---

<sup>60</sup> “Waite Says ‘Lucy Hicks’ Is a Man,” *Ventura County Star-Free Press*, October 19, 1945.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

The years that immediately preceded the raid on Lucy Hicks Anderson's establishment saw several Oxnardians arrested and/or charged with prostitution or vagrancy. Lucy Hicks Anderson's operation of a speakeasy and the brothel made her a prime target for legal action as both violated the 'moral zone' of Port Hueneme.<sup>62</sup> The passage of the May Act of 1941, the increased conflict within Oxnard about moral charges, and the proximity to the military port in Hueneme, all were necessary precursors to the legal cases that ensued.<sup>63</sup> She had been charged twice before for charges that related to her ownership and operation of a 'disorderly house,' but those charges were comparatively less severe, and they were seemingly forgotten in the face of charges related to her gender modality after she was examined by the local authorities following the raid.

The first article published by the *Ventura County Star-Free Press* about the arrest of Lucy Hicks Anderson included a quote from the district attorney's original charge: "The said John Doe Hicks, also known as Lucy Hicks, also known as Lucy Anderson, was and is a male person, and he was not capable of being the bride in said license to marry, as he, then and there well knew."<sup>64</sup> *TIME* broke the story on a national level under the title 'Sin and Souffle,' and

---

<sup>62</sup> Frank Barajas extensively covers local factors surrounding the moral anxiety around Port Hueneme, including the arrest of Lucy Hicks Anderson, in his dissertation, "Work and Leisure in La Colonia." Frank P. Barajas, "Work and Leisure in La Colonia: Class, Generation, and Interethnic Alliances among Mexicanos in Oxnard, California, 1890-1945" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2001), 248-256.

<sup>63</sup> The May Act prohibited prostitution within a 'reasonable distance' to military or naval establishments. U.S. Congress. U.S. Statutes at Large, Volume 55 -1942, Chapter 287, H.R. 2475, 77th Congress, Session 1. United States, - 1942, 1941. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/lsl-v55/>.

<sup>64</sup> "Waite Says 'Lucy Hicks' Is a Man," *Ventura County Star-Free Press*.

newswire services broadened the circulation through local papers across the United States.<sup>65</sup> In a follow-up to the original *TIME* article, which had caused a flurry of interested readers to send in letters to the editor and a reprint in the local Ventura County press, the editor gave an update: “the U.S. Army is after ‘her’ for evading the draft.”<sup>66</sup> The follow-up article included a mocking illustration meant to be a caricature of Anderson going to the draft board.<sup>67</sup> The drawing depicted a bearded individual in a dress, a sailor hat, and a purse walking towards the ‘draft board.’

---

<sup>65</sup> ‘Sin & Souffle,’ *TIME*, November 5, 1945.

<sup>66</sup> James A Linen, ‘A Letter From The Publisher,’ *TIME*, January 14, 1946, 13; Research on trans jurisprudence of the nineteenth and early twentieth century United States warrants closer study to contextualize later legal histories of trans individuals of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It has been suggested in contemporary histories that Lucy Hicks Anderson may have been the first trans woman to fight for her rights through the legal system. While the Anderson trial was one of the highest-profile cases of its time in trans history, earlier cases have been well-covered in recent scholarship. One excellent account has been written by Kit Heyam on the trial of Thomas(ine) Hall; Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (New York: Seal Press and Hachette Books Group, 2022); Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History* begins with the account of Hall as an introduction to American transgender history. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Seal Press, 2017).

<sup>67</sup> C. Riley Snorton’s *Black on Both Sides* analyses this weaponization of the language of the article and the content of the depiction: ‘The editorial decision to tell her story in the form of a joke brings into sharper focus *Time*’s cover image. Just as interventionist strategies in Argentina were illustrated as a necessary extermination of a scourge of phantasmatic fascism, Hicks Anderson’s racially caricatured speech and the article’s deployment of gender-as-punch line similarly rationalized the violent temporalities that would privilege to sovereignty over liberty within a prosecutorial logic.’ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

Along with the initial state charge of perjury on a marriage license, there was a federal charge of draft evasion. Lucy listed her age as 42 years old on her marriage certificate although she was 59 when she had filled out the application. Her age was quickly ascertained toward the trial's start as she was likely eager to deflect it in self-defense. The disclosure of her age occurred within two days of the trial. The Superior Court of California found Lucy Hicks Anderson guilty of perjury. Rather than a prison sentence, she received ten years of probation. After this trial she was arrested by the FBI. Her federal trial focused on the collection of a soldier's wife's pension. She was charged with eighteen counts of defrauding the government for each of the fifty dollar checks she received which totaled \$900.<sup>68</sup>

Lucy's husband Reuben was taken into federal custody, and he was put on trial in a New York district court. Since Lucy was in custody at the time of Reuben's trial and their marriage was declared void through her previous case, she was legally compelled to testify against him in New York. In turn, Reuben indicated through his testimony that Lucy suggested that they get married in order to collect the spousal support checks—which contradicted Lucy's testimony in her own trial that they had been together for some time before their marriage.<sup>69</sup> Reuben received eighteen months in a federal penitentiary with no financial penalty for his involvement in

---

<sup>68</sup> United States of America v. Lucy Lawson Hicks Anderson (charged as Tobe Lawson) Alias Lucy Hicks, Lucy Anderson, Lucy Hicks Anderson, 1946 (18504) [Electronic Record]; U.S. District Court for the Central District of California; Criminal Case Files, 1907-2004; NAID: 294957; Folder Title: 18499-18504; Box Number: 1066; Records of the District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives at Riverside, Perris, CA.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

the 'fraud.' Lucy was found guilty and sentenced to a year in county jail as the court wished to avoid the difficulties of determining if she should be placed in a men's or women's federal prison. Like many of her previous encounters with the law, the financial penalty was more severe. In addition to the jail sentence, she was ordered to pay back the \$900 along with a \$2,500 fine. After her conviction of perjury, she was released on a bail of \$5,000. Over the course of her time in Oxnard, she paid at least \$10,650 from her various convictions.

After her year-long jail sentence, Lucy Hicks Anderson was still on probation. With the increased scrutiny on her activities, irreparable harm to her reputation, and the dissolution of her marriage, her livelihood was likely far too damaged to be economically independent in Ventura County again.<sup>70</sup> Reuben Anderson remarried in the years after his release, and he appears to have never come back to Ventura County.<sup>71</sup> In 1948, Lucy was brought again to the Superior Court on the charge of violation of

---

<sup>70</sup> While trans marriages were often not acknowledged or were in circumstances to dissolve the union, some managed to marry without the knowledge of the officiant and/or county clerk. One of, if not perhaps the earliest, trans marriage that was legally recognized in the United States was of Frances and Frank Carrick in 1923. The Illinois court determined that Frank could not testify for Frances as the testimony on behalf of a spouse was not admissible. For detailed accounts of Frances Carrick and the Tessmer murder case, see: Jim Elledge, *The Boys of Fairy Town: Sodomites, Female Impersonators, Third-Sexers, Pansies, Queers, and Sex Morons in Chicago's First Century* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2018), 164-186; Adam Selzer, "Frances Carrick, a Chicago Trans Woman Accused of Murder in 1923," *Mysterious Chicago*, September 28, 2022, <https://mysteriouschicago.com/frances-carrick-a-chicago-trans-woman-accused-of-murder-in-1923/>.

<sup>71</sup> "Obituary: Anderson, Reuben 'Andy,'" *Sacramento Bee*, October 29, 2002.



her probation as she purportedly had 'loose women' about her Oxnard property. Her lawyer managed to get the hearing suspended for a month. By November, the two parties came to an agreement. Her ten-year probation was suspended on the condition that she sell the rest of her property in Oxnard and leave the county.

Lucy sold the Oxnard property to her local church, and she complied with the terms of the agreement. She moved to Los Angeles where she resided until her death in 1954.<sup>72</sup> Though the local press claimed that the exile was for at least a year, she never came back to the area aside from the occasional, brief visit. The coverage of Hicks Anderson's case was far more extensive than Acosta's, and it captured national interest and local fascination. While she was given a year sentence in the local jail rather than a federal institution, Lucy and her husband's cases had significant federal involvement, and they exemplified the degree to which the state had sought after individuals who had 'draft-dodged' or 'defrauded' the federal government.

### **"Sex Revelation Follows Illness"**

In early March 1951, Georgia Black received a medical examination when she sought a diagnosis for an undetermined illness at the Fernald-Laughton Memorial Hospital in Sanford, Florida.<sup>73</sup> While the cause of a physical examination differed in Lucy Hicks Anderson and Georgia Black's cases, they both were visibly distressed and adamant in their refusal when they were confronted with the situation. According to her son, the doctor diagnosed

---

<sup>72</sup> Murray Norris, "The Legend of Lucy Hicks," *Oxnard Press Courier*, April 30, 1967.

<sup>73</sup> Willie Sabb, "My Mother Was a Man," *Ebony*, June 1953, 80.

Georgia Black with cancer. Black had previously been treated at home, but her condition worsened, and she began to receive in-patient care at the hospital. During the examination Dr. Orville Barks discovered that Georgia had bodily characteristics associated with the male sex. At the time, Mrs. Black's son Willie did not know about his mother's trans feminine status. Willie's wife Henrietta, who drove her mother-in-law to the hospital, was told by the doctor.<sup>74</sup> It was unknown to either Willie or Henrietta how word spread from there. While they were unsure whether Dr. Banks further violated medical ethics and spoke to other members of the community about the examination, the discovery became known to the local community of Sanford. Several newspaper articles and an *Ebony Magazine* article brought Georgia's private medical matter into national discourse. While *TIME*'s article on Lucy Hicks Anderson reinvigorated local interest and aided an explosion of local press coverage, *Ebony*'s article on Georgia Black did not prompt such a reaction. Fortunately, out of respect for her character and by the direction of local leaders', local coverage of Black ended soon after. The similarities between Hicks Anderson's article in *TIME* and Black's article in *Ebony* are indicative of the impact of the popular press on burgeoning national trans discourses. Both publications ignited and fueled national interest which in turn affected coverage by other mediums.

After the death of Georgia's first husband Alonzo Sabb, whom she married in 1916 in Tavares, she brought her son to live with her in Sanford, Florida. Still quite young, and widowed at the age of twenty-three, she remarried in 1918.<sup>75</sup> She married Muster

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 78-80.

<sup>75</sup> Sanford, Florida, Marriage Certificate no. 233 (1918), Muster Black and Georgia Sabb; Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller Seminole County Florida.

Black, who was a soldier that had served in the First World War, in the home of the local principal, and they were married by a prominent minister.<sup>76</sup> According to the 1920 census, the newlyweds lived together with her son Willie on Myrtle Avenue.<sup>77</sup> Although Muster was born in Florida, both of his parents were from South Carolina like his wife Georgia, and he was employed as a laborer in the "RR Shop."<sup>78</sup> Muster worked late in the railroad yard, and Georgia had their son walk to deliver dinner to his stepfather. After he delivered the meal, Muster brought Willie up into the locomotive seats, and Muster let Willie watch him fire up the engine.

Georgia Black adopted her son from one of her cousins who lived in her home state. Willie's adoptive father died when he was young, and Muster Black helped to raise Willie through his formative years. Unfortunately, in 1925 Georgia's second husband died from dropsy.<sup>79</sup> Willie remembered how in love his parents were, and how much he bonded with his father. Muster's death was an emotionally heavy loss for their family, and they further lost their primary source of subsistence. To earn an income after the death of Muster, Georgia carefully selected boarders to live with her and her son. She also collected a military wife's pension after her husband's death from the county and the state. Though even with these sources, it was not enough to subsist upon. In his teenage years

---

<sup>76</sup> "The Man Who Lived 30 Years as a Woman," 25.

<sup>77</sup> US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *1920 United States Federal Census*, Sanford, Seminole County, Florida.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Sabb, "My Mother Was a Man," 76.

Willie supported the family through work in a crate mill where he earned \$1.50 a day.<sup>80</sup>

According to the 1940 census, Georgia and Willie lived together at their home along with four lodgers.<sup>81</sup> Despite Georgia's various sources of income her annual income was only eighty dollars which was far less than any of her lodgers. Two of her boarders made three- and four-times Georgia's income. Willie's ability to provide for the household was still necessary years after he came of age. However, with the United States' entry into World War II, Georgia's son would not be able to provide an income for his family. On Willie's draft card he listed his mother as the person who would always know his address. After Willie registered for the draft in 1940, he was conscripted in 1942.<sup>82</sup> But his military career was a short one. Willie served for three months before he was diagnosed with an ulcerated stomach.

Upon his return home, Willie found that his mother was worried about losing their family home due to unpaid back taxes.<sup>83</sup> He assured her that he would help take care of the outstanding debt, so she could keep the home. He returned to the crate mill where he now earned twenty-five dollars a week. He stayed there for a short time while he sought out positions which paid even more, and he did all this so that he could help clear his mother's debt. Willie

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>81</sup> US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *1940 United States Federal Census*, Sanford, Seminole County, Florida.

<sup>82</sup> Willie Sabb, National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; WWII Draft Registration Cards for Florida, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947; Record Group: Records of the Selective Service System, 147; Box: 391, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., Lehi, UT, 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Sabb, "My Mother Was a Man," 77-78.

eventually moved to Philadelphia where he worked in a steel mill during the height of the war industrialization boom. Through his move north, Willie earned forty-five dollars a week, and he sent money back to his mother until she cleared her debt.<sup>84</sup> Willie's actions are a straightforward demonstration of a son's love. But, they also ensured that Georgia avoided becoming a public ward which would have substantially increased the exposure of her gender modality.

Months after her cancer diagnosis, Georgia Black was hospitalized. Sanford Police Chief Roy Williams visited Georgia in the hospital on March 8, shortly after the rumors became known to the local community.<sup>85</sup> At this visit Williams questioned Georgia about the gossip, and she insisted that she was a woman. But he was chiefly concerned with her previous relationships. Williams questioned her about the income that she derived from a pension after the death of her second husband—likely the military spousal pension.<sup>86</sup> She gave him information about the years of their deaths and where they died. When he spoke to the press, Williams stated that there would be an investigation into the deaths of her husbands. While the Sanford community was aware of her previous two marriages, it was only after the 'exposure of sex' that the local law enforcement suspected criminality and pursued an investigation. *Ebony* later reported that Williams changed course away from prosecution when met with his investigation's findings:

I see no basis for prosecuting Black. At first we believed he might have been a criminal in disguise.

---

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>85</sup> "Negro 'Woman' Revealed as Man," *Tampa Times*, March 8, 1951.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

We carried the investigation clear back to his native South Carolina. We could find nothing to show that Black had done anything legally wrong. She—er—I mean he has lived decently, is highly respected by everyone in town.<sup>87</sup>

Six months after her cancer diagnosis, Georgia Black died on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1951 at the age of 57. Though her death certificate indicated her sex as male, there were no other attempts to impose on her the sex she was purportedly assigned at birth. Her name was unaltered, and recorded as Georgia Black. She was also marked as “widowed” instead of “never married,” which was another option listed on the form. Willie Sabb’s signature was written on the informant line. The lines for Georgia’s parents were filled in by a quick “D.K.” which presumably meant that the registrar or Willie did not know her parents’ names. The registrar relied on the information provided by her son, as evidenced by his signature in the personal information portion of the record, and so the registrar filled in information about Georgia’s gender that was seemingly contradictory with contemporary perceptions of gender acceptability in 1950s America.<sup>88</sup> The death certificate preserves Georgia Black’s gender modality. Furthermore, it signifies that communities like Sanford could hold more nuanced understandings of sex and gender when one of their own defied those conventions. With her trans femininity disclosed shortly before her death, and her name defended by the community to local investigations, her

---

<sup>87</sup> “The Man Who Lived 30 Years as a Woman,” 26.

<sup>88</sup> This is confirmed as Willie Sabb’s signature on the death certificate matches the signature written on his draft card.

marriages and collection of a soldier's wife's pension were deemed nonthreatening and there was, essentially, no one left to prosecute.

As the wife and mother of a soldier, Georgia Black's family connected her directly with the Second World War. Fortunately, through the careful connections she made and the support of her family, Georgia Black herself was not subjected to scrutiny about the draft like Sadie Acosta and Lucy Hicks Anderson were. Citizens of Sanford came to her defense around the time of her death, and many cited her importance as an involved and integral part of their community. Strong local support for Georgia Black stifled transmisogynistic media spectacles seen elsewhere, and the national coverage essentially was just one magazine: *Ebony*. In turn, this magazine relied extensively on Sanford locals that were willing to speak to the press.

### **'Ex-GI' Women and the Post-War Years**

There are several notable cases of trans feminine Americans who served in the military during the Second World War who then transitioned. These include Christine Jorgensen, Charlotte McLeod, and Tamara Rees.<sup>89</sup> Their experiences highlight that some trans feminine Americans fulfilled their 'civic duty' as citizens during World War II through military service. Despite serving their country, they were not given the full rights as citizens of the United

---

<sup>89</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); These three women were also examined in Emily Skidmore's article "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual'." 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, <https://doi.org/10.1353/fem.2011.0043>.

States. They could not legally wed, transition, or be protected from discrimination based on their gender modality. For Christine Jorgensen, hers meant the rejection of her marriage application. Despite these common experiences, trans feminine people joined the military for a variety of reasons. Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed* provides one such explanation for some: "A number of MTFs had joined the armed services in a futile attempt, as one described it, to 'make a man of myself,' but their peers in the military had not necessarily welcomed them."<sup>90</sup> Articles about their transitions often referred to their previous careers in the military, most famously the famed *New York Daily News* article, "Ex-G.I. Becomes Blonde Beauty," about Christine Jorgensen.<sup>91</sup> Newspaper articles across the United States also referred to both McLeod and Tamara Rees as "Ex-G.I." in their titles and, in the case of Rees, "Ex-Paratrooper" and "Ex-Chuter."<sup>92</sup> The press capitalized off of the intrigue around these 'Ex-G.I.' women, and coverage did not normalize their womanhood, but often provided exoticizing coverage that worsened their ability to attain marital rights and/or economic security.

In addition to the consistent references by the press to their time with the military, a fact that evidently bore repeating, articles featured the 'before' and 'after' photographs side by side for each to highlight the drastic transformation of a 'sex change.' If a trans feminine individual served during the war, these side-by-side comparisons sometimes featured a 'before' photograph where the

---

<sup>90</sup> Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 136.

<sup>91</sup> "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth," *New York Daily News*, December 1, 1952.

<sup>92</sup> "Father to Welcome Ex-GI Home As His 'Daughter'," *Tampa Tribune*, April 18, 1954; "Ex-Paratrooper Weds Her Business Manager," *Press Democrat*, July 28, 1955.



subject is dressed in her military uniform, and so embodied the ideals of patriotic masculinity.<sup>93</sup> Trans veterans and this kind of side-by-side comparison were of course not limited to the United States as emphasized by the cases of Roberta Cowell, Linda Broderick, Jan Davies, and Susan McIntyre.<sup>94</sup>

In the fifties, while articles about Jorgensen, McLeod, and Rees could be found in newspapers across the nation, there was another woman who enlisted in the military before her transition: Joanna Clark.<sup>95</sup> Clark enlisted with the Naval Reserve in 1955 before

---

<sup>93</sup> Susan Stryker notes how the media's focus on the "ex-G.I." label suggests, "profound anxieties about masculinity and sexuality," and that, "if a macho archetype such as 'the soldier' could be transformed into a stereotypically feminine 'blonde bombshell,' what might that mean for a man of average— and now apparently more precarious—virility?" Stryker, *Transgender History*, 66; *Sacramento Bee*. "Held Over!! - One More Week." Clipping. 1955. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/wm117p15b>; *Associated Press*. "Sex-Change Pioneer Has Party, Not Funeral." Clipping. 1989. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/w66343760>.

<sup>94</sup> International News Photos. "Sex Changeo." Clipping. 1954. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/w6634370b>; Mount, Ron. "Attenshun, you 'orrible little men Don't call me Sarn't -call me Linda!." Clipping. 1973. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/kw52j8199>; Du Pre, John. "Why Ex-Airman John Wants to Join the W.I.." Clipping. 1981. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/05741r787>; "Ex-Guards Sergeant Has Sex Change." Clipping. 1978. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/nv9352973>.

<sup>95</sup> Joanna Clark had also been subject to the 'before' and 'after' side-by-side comparison in the pages of the press, with her 'before' photograph showing her in uniform. Shearlean Duke, "Transsexual Served as Man in Navy, Fights Discharge," *Baton Rouge State Times Advocate*, October 5, 1977.

she formally entered the Navy two years later.<sup>96</sup> She served for seventeen years before she was discharged after a medical evaluation. Clark transitioned in the mid-1970s shortly after her time in the Navy. Not long after, she was approached to enlist once more, and she served in the U.S. military as a woman for a year and a half before she was discharged again.<sup>97</sup> In this instance, she took the case to court for wrongful dismissal where it was eventually settled in 1985.<sup>98</sup> She received an honorable discharge, and she made history as one of—if not *the*—earliest documented instances of a transsexual woman who openly served both before and after transition.

The differing relationships of Sadie Acosta, Lucy Hicks Anderson, and Georgia Black to their respective communities, the state, and World War II, all drastically altered their outcomes. In addition, these three cases provide a much more intimate view of gender policing beyond cross-dressing laws. Sadie Acosta registered with the Selective Service System with little alternative, and the local draft board believed that she was not fit for service, so she managed to scrape by without legal penalty—as there was seemingly no law, or at least no knowledge of one by the local authorities, that prohibited her dressing and living as she did. The state's options exhausted, Acosta faded from the pages of the local press. Lucy Hicks Anderson's downfall came not from ownership and operation of a brothel, but by the location of her establishment as it was near the military port of Hueneme. Authorities first sought charges

---

<sup>96</sup> Joanna Clark and Margot Wilson, *Before My Warrant Runs Out: Human, Transgender, and Environmental Rights Advocate* (Victoria: Transgender Publishing, an imprint of Castle Carrington Publishing, 2021), 17.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

against her for evading registration before they realized her age. The government proceeded with charges of perjury for her marriage license, and they charged her husband with perjury on his spousal support form. The two were both convicted on the charge of defrauding the government by collecting checks meant for the wives of soldiers. Georgia Black's case was quite different from the other two. Until near the end of her life she successfully evaded situations in which her 'sex' could be 'revealed', and her community did not know about her gender modality until she was on her deathbed, and both of her husbands had passed away. In this sense, there was no one able to be punished for the potential charge of perjury that related to her marriages nor fraud for the collection of military spousal support checks.

Trans military history has immense research potential, and its possibilities have only grown with the digitization of newspapers and other primary source materials made available through the effort of museums, research libraries, and other archival repositories. While individuals who moved away from the gender they were assigned were actively denied the full rights of citizenship, there is a rich historical record of soldiers and others who transgressed gender boundaries both in a military context and around conflict that stretches back to the earliest years of the United States. The lived experiences of trans feminine Americans in the Second World War and the post-war years in particular provide vital context and historical background to contemporary public discourse about trans Americans and the military. As the first U.S. draft law to be enacted in peacetime, the STSA of 1940 continues to guide current policy and—for its impact as a tool of gender policing—is both relevant to a broader trans military history in addition to current discourse about those who serve and transition

openly while they are in the military. On October 11, 2022, after a viral tweet by the Selective Service System's Twitter account that reminded Americans of the requirement to register, the organization posted a clarification: "The Military Selective Service Act, as it is written, only authorizes the registration of 'male persons'. For SSS to be authorized to register women, Congress would have to pass legislation amending the current law."<sup>99</sup> The language of the STSA that has been used by the government to imperil trans lives and livelihoods is *still* an active part of today's draft law. It holds the potential to be weaponized against American trans feminine lives should there be another draft.

---

<sup>99</sup> Selective Service. Twitter Post. October 3, 2022, 6:01 PM.  
[https://twitter.com/SSS\\_gov/status/1577056216144125965](https://twitter.com/SSS_gov/status/1577056216144125965).

## **Bibliography**

### ***Primary Sources***

*Albuquerque Journal*

*Arizona Republic*

*Baton Rouge State Times Advocate*

*Clovis News-Journal*

*Ebony Magazine*

*Fort Collins Express-Courier*

*Great Falls Tribune*

*Mendocino Coast Beacon*

*Minneapolis Star-Journal*

*New York Daily News*

*Oxnard Daily Courier*

*Oxnard Press Courier*

*Press Democrat (Santa Rosa, CA)*

*Sacramento Bee*

*Tampa Times*

*Tampa Tribune*

*TIME Magazine*

Du Pre, John. "Why Ex-Airman John Wants to Join the W.I." Clipping. 1981. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/05741r787>.

"Ex-Guards Sergeant Has Sex Change." Clipping. 1978. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/nv9352973>.

"Frequently Asked Questions - Who Needs to Register." Selective Service System. <https://www.sss.gov/faq/#who-needs-to-register>. Illustration in "A Letter From The Publisher," *TIME*, January 14, 1946, 13.

"Lucy Hicks Gathering Eggs," Identifier: 40387, Research Library at The Museum of Ventura County, <https://photographs.venturamuseum.org/items/show/3021>.

"Lucy Hicks with Deputy Sheriffs," Sheriff's Office Ventura County, Calif., Research Library at The Museum of Ventura County. Identifier: 1998 [31155] <https://photographs.venturamuseum.org/items/show/3087>.

"Sex Changeo." Clipping. 1954. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/w6634370b>.

Mount, Ron. "Attenshun, you 'orrible little men Don't call me Sarn't -call me Linda!" Clipping. 1973. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/kw52j8199>.

Sanford, Florida, Marriage Certificate no. 233 (1918), Muster Black and Georgia Sabb; Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller Seminole County Florida.

Santos Acosta, National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; WWII Draft Registration Cards for Colorado, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947; Record Group: Records of the Selective Service System, 147; Box: 1, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., Lehi, UT, 2011.

The Restless Hillfillies. *Sin and Souffle*. MP3, 2011.

United States of America v. Lucy Lawson Hicks Anderson (charged as Tobe Lawson) Alias Lucy Hicks, Lucy Anderson, Lucy Hicks Anderson, 1946 (18504) [Electronic Record]; U.S. District Court for the Central District of California; Criminal Case Files, 1907-2004; NAID: 294957; Folder Title: 18499-18504; Box Number: 1066; Records of the District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives at Riverside, Perris, CA.

United States of America v. Reuben Anderson, 1946 (40902) [Electronic Record]; U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York; Criminal Case Files, 1865 to 1988; NAID: 583516; Records of the District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives and Records Administration at Kansas City, MO.

U.S. Congress. United States Code: Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, 50a U.S.C. §§ 302-315 Suppl. 2. 1940. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1940-006050a003/>.

U.S. Congress. U.S. Statutes at Large, Volume 55 -1942, Chapter 287, H.R. 2475, 77th Congress, Session 1. United States, - 1942, 1941. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/llsl-v55/>.

US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *1920 United States Federal Census*, Sanford, Seminole County, Florida; Roll: T625\_231; Page: 9A; Enumeration District: 181, Ancestry.com Operations Inc, Provo, UT, 2010.

US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *1940 United States Federal Census*, Fort Collins, Larimer, Colorado; Roll: m-t0627-00467; Page: 5B; Enumeration District: 35-46, Ancestry.com Operations Inc, Provo, UT, 2012.

US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau, *1940 United States Federal Census*, Sanford, Seminole County, Florida; Roll: m-t0627-00617; Page: 13A; Enumeration District: 59-2, Ancestry.com Operations Inc, Provo, UT, 2012.

Willie Sabb, National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; WWII Draft Registration Cards for Florida, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947; Record Group: Records of the Selective Service System, 147; Box: 391, Ancestry.com Operations Inc., Lehi, UT, 2011.

### ***Secondary Sources***

Ashley, Florence. "Trans' is my gender modality: a modest terminological proposal." *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, 2nd ed., edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth, 22. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Barajas, Frank P. "Work and Leisure in La Colonia: Class, Generation, and Interethnic Alliances among Mexicanos in Oxnard, California, 1890-1945." PhD., Claremont Graduate University, 2001.  
Beaton, Gail Marjorie. *Colorado Women in World War II*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2020.



Bérubé, Allan, John D'Emilio, and Estelle B. Freedman. *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Boag, Peter. *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Canaday, Margot. *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Clark, Joanna, and Margot Wilson. *Before My Warranty Runs Out: Human, Transgender, and Environmental Rights Advocate*. Victoria: Transgender Publishing, an imprint of Castle Carrington Publishing, 2021.

Currah, Paisley. *Sex Is as Sex Does Governing Transgender Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 2022.

D'Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Donlon, Cynthia. *The Donlon Family 1815-1969*. Oxnard, 1969.

Elledge, Jim. *The Boys of Fairy Town: Sodomites, Female Impersonators, Third-Sexers, Pansies, Queers, and Sex Morons in Chicago's First Century*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2018.

Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Garber, Marjorie B. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Heaney, Emma. *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017.

Hewitt, Nancy A., Anne M. Valk, and Emily Skidmore. "Recovering a Gender-Transgressive Past: A Transgender Historiography." Essay. In *A Companion to American Women's History*, 2nd ed., 209–22. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2021.

Heyam, Kit. *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender*. New York: Seal Press and Hachette Books Group, 2022.

Katz, Jonathan. *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA*. New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1976.

Manion, Jen. *Female Husbands a Trans History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Maulhardt, Jeffrey Wayne. *Oxnard: 1941-2004*. Charleston: Arcadia, 2005.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Sears, Clare. *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Selzer, Adam. "Frances Carrick, a Chicago Trans Woman Accused of Murder in 1923." *Mysterious Chicago*, September 28, 2022.

<https://mysteriouschicago.com/frances-carrick-a-chicago-trans-woman-accused-of-murder-in-1923/>.

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.

Skidmore, Emily. *True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. 2nd ed. Boulder: Seal Press, 2017.

# Fascism and the Trans Villain: Historically Recurring Transphobia in Far-Right Politics

**Penelope Higgins** (she/her)

Concordia University

*Abstract: This article builds a base of historical and theoretical context to understand the resurgence of transphobic propaganda and violence led by the American far-right through an examination of the connections between trans politics and global political economies of capitalism. Through a synthesis of established theories of fascism, a historical analysis of fascism, and a case study of propagandistic transphobia in two American films from the height of the Cold War, I argue that the proliferation of contemporary anti-trans sentiment reflects the state of crisis that the American empire is experiencing as domestic and international resistance threatens its global hegemony. Further I argue that a historical and theoretical examination of fascism and trans issues show the capacity for fascist anti-trans violence not as a departure from the norm of liberal democratic nation-state systems that developed through the processes of capital, but rather as a constitutive part of that norm. Trans historians must mobilize historical knowledge and practice to disseminate public facing works that furnish a wide base of readers with the tools to understand and contextualize contemporary trans panic as it metastasizes.*

## **Introduction: The Current Climate**

To date, there have been approximately four decades of American neoliberal global dominance. This epoch began in the 1970s, and it came to prominence in the Reagan era. Factors such as the deindustrialization of the North Atlantic, the offshoring of manufacturing labour, the mass construction of carceral state apparatuses, the imposition of destructive sanctions and economic structural adjustment upon Global South countries, and the brokering of international free-trade deals have all reshaped the global political economy. These influences have decimated much of the progress of anti-colonial resistance made in the early years of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> The sudden dissolution of the USSR and the rest of the Eastern Bloc ensured unipolar American dominance as Soviet economic support for newly independent post-colonial nations that counterbalanced Western neocolonial interests swiftly disappeared.

Now, in 2023, even Western economic publications have begun to acknowledge that the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the increased cooperation of the BRICS states<sup>2</sup> have accelerated the emergence of a more multipolar global system. Key to this change is the decline of the power of the US dollar in international markets that has been crucial to the maintenance of American economic hegemony.<sup>3</sup> The stability and

---

<sup>1</sup> See Damien Cahill et al., eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism* (Los Angeles: SAGE Reference, 2018); Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and The Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> BRICS stands for the increasingly formalized organization of international cooperation between Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wolff, "The Emerging New World Economy," *Economy for All*, April 19,

omnipresence of the American empire seems increasingly fragile and less effectively responsive to the changing world. As labour movements resurge in power and widespread anti-capitalist consciousness continues to grow, the “West” is a far cry from Francis Fukuyama’s post-Cold War declaration of the end of history and the eternal victory of Western liberal democracy. For a moment in the 2010s, it seemed that perhaps the unipolar American world order had the capacity to make greater space for trans forms of life. Since then, anti-trans backlash has gained steady ground in the early 2020s, and trans people are a long way away from the 2014 ‘transgender tipping point’ that promised progressive change. Though burgeoning trans culture is ultra-visible on the internet and in popular media, the rise of representation in the 2010s has not prevented the reactionary right’s fixation on trans people as public enemy number one. The trans optimism of the past decade has left trans people unprepared for the harsh reality that anti-trans violence has surged to the centre of contemporary politics. Though changes in the world economy and the rise of far-right anti-trans politics may seem tenuously connected, historical analysis compellingly demonstrates that they are inseparable.

As a means to contextualize the current climate, this paper establishes a starting point for examining what kinds of modern political and economic conditions have historically contributed to violent mobilizations of anti-trans hatred. It does so through an appraisal of the trans ‘enemy’ as a figure of fascist propaganda. To do

---

2023, [https://www.rdwolff.com/the\\_emerging\\_new\\_world\\_economy;](https://www.rdwolff.com/the_emerging_new_world_economy;)

S’thembele Cele and John Bowker, “BRICS Nations Say New Currency May Offer Shield From Sanctions,” Bloomberg, June 1, 2023,

[https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-01/brics-nations-say-new-currency-may-offer-shield-from-sanctions.](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-01/brics-nations-say-new-currency-may-offer-shield-from-sanctions)

so, this paper considers the historical and theoretical nature of fascism and its relationship to moral panics about gender. Two films exemplify this connection, and they are cogent historical case studies that we can utilize in consideration for our contemporary situation: the 1970 films *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* and *Myra Breckinridge*.

The term trans panic comes from a trans specific adaptation of the gay panic defense. They refer to arguments used in court by perpetrators that the sexuality/gender of the victim was sufficient cause for violent actions to be ‘self-defence.’<sup>4</sup> Often such cases have involved the direct accusation of seduction or advances by the victim towards the assailant. This rhetoric holds cultural currency beyond the judicial system as titles of anti-trans books such as the 2020 publication, “Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters,” demonstrate.<sup>5</sup> This paper uses ‘trans panic’ to refer to the wide range of anti-trans rhetoric and political attacks that posit transness and trans people as inherent threats to the integrity of the moral and social order of the contemporary world. One of the articulations of this is the ‘contagion model’ of transness. This refers to the capacity of transness to spread through the social body, like a contagious disease, through the seduction and entrapment of the vulnerable.

Recently, the political currency of trans panic has gained significant ground. Far-right news outlet *The Daily Wire* recently

---

<sup>4</sup> Alexandra Holden, “The Gay/Trans Panic Defense: What It Is, and How to End It,” American Bar Association, March 31, 2020, <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/member-features/gay-trans-panic-defense/>.

<sup>5</sup> Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2020).

reported that ‘radical gender theory’ is a key wedge issue in the 2024 Republican primary race.<sup>6</sup> *The Daily Wire* cited an NBC voter poll that suggested trans panic rhetoric and policy are key tools in the American far-right political establishment’s attempts to court public support. Conversely, the poll showed that cuts to state Medicare and Social Security spending are *very* unpopular with polled Republican voters.<sup>7</sup> Notably but unsurprisingly, climate issues are not on the agenda. If seen as a test sample of the current temperature of right-wing American politics, these results reflect the difficult economic times that Americans have faced since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the knock-on effects from the Russia-Ukraine war. Americans who lean far-right seemingly do not want a state that abandons them as they face difficult circumstances – what they want is a state that will protect them from the people they perceive as their enemies: ‘threats’ - both internal and external to the nation - to their ways of life, security, and moral values.

In current circumstances, any trans person with a basic

---

<sup>6</sup> The article cites a recent NBC poll that surveyed registered voters and Republican primary voters, and it found that the suppression of the perceived radical gender threat falls only behind border security as an issue of concern for Republican voters. Brandon Drey, “Radical Gender Theory Emerges As Key Wedge Issue In 2024 Presidential Election,” *The Daily Wire*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/radical-gender-theory-emerges-as-key-wedge-issue-in-2024-presidential-election>; Alexandra Marquez, “Poll: Sending Troops to U.S.-Mexico Border Is Popular. Other GOP Policy Planks Are Struggling.” *NBC News*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/poll-sending-troops-us-mexico-border-popular-gop-policy-planks-are-str-rcna91245>.

<sup>7</sup> This same NBC poll noted that many Republican primary candidates have gone so far as to promise not to cut state funded social safety nets.



knowledge of twentieth-century history has begun to look backwards to the fascist regimes of the 1930s, and this includes Nazi Germany. The last decade's parallel emergence of a blooming visible trans social life and the violent rise of trans panic in state-centred politics undoubtedly resonate with the memorialization of queer social life in the Weimar Republic and its criminalization and persecution by the Nazi state. The historical parallels that exist must be thoroughly examined and contextualized. This pursuit enables us to better understand our contemporary political situation and the historical nature of fascism, along with why the persecution of gender and sexual variance has often been a key part of state-centric political movements to show that they are 'cleaning up society.'

Recent trans scholarship has responded to contemporary developments in trans life and trans panic, and the publication of works such as *Transgender Marxism* and the 2022 issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* on, "Trans-Exclusionary Feminisms and the Global New Right," are two salient examples.<sup>8</sup> Recent work by C. Heike Schotten is of particular note, for it traces funding and rhetoric linkages between American TERFs and Zionists, and the Israeli occupation of Palestine.<sup>9</sup> These works demonstrate the possibilities for the integration of trans life and theory with Marxist and anti-colonial theory. These collaborations between trans studies and

---

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Jules Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, eds., *Transgender Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021); Serena Bassi and Greata LaFleur, eds., "Trans-Exclusionary Feminisms and the Global New Right," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 9 no.3 (2022): 311–333, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836008>.

<sup>9</sup> C. Heike Schotten, "TERFism, Zionism, and Right-Wing Annihilationism: Toward an Internationalist Genealogy of Extinction Phobia," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (August 1, 2022): 334–64, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836022>.

wider political traditions of analysis deepen our understanding of the place of gender in capitalist modes of economic production and social reproduction. To contribute to this contemporary project of situating trans lives in wider contexts, the question I seek to explore is: *why* are trans people being targeted *now*, and *why* are trans people *an effective target for reactionary political discourse*.

### **The Historical Task: Moving Beyond Structuralism**

History as a study of the past has the capacity to explore and theorize the change and movement of life and socio-political formations over time. In the study of and resistance against capitalism, this has the crucial potential to contribute to the thinking of societal ‘machines’ rather than structures as elucidated by Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>10</sup> As Michelle Koerner demonstrates in her study of the intellectual links between the works of Deleuze and George Jackson, the analysis of societies through the theoretical concept of machines rather than structures in a Deleuzian manner presents an alternative to the tendency for structuralist analyses to produce static images of social organizations of power. Machinic analysis hopes to explore power and social organization in motion – as it changes and evolves.<sup>11</sup> Historical study, as a practice that necessarily entails the definition of chronological and geographical scope, holds the capacity for the study of motion and change through time and space. This function enables the study of

---

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Koerner, *Lines of Escape: Gilles Deleuze’s Encounter with George Jackson* (Ill Will Editions, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> The goal is to analyze capitalism in motion – as a set of machinic processes that change rapidly and have shown a historical tendency to successfully react to revolutionary movements through evolving processes of counterinsurgency.

capitalism as an evolving and machinic system of political-economic organization. The integration of histories of modern trans life and transphobic reaction with wider histories of political economy, society, and culture reveals how the conditions of queer and trans life move and change with wider political and economic shifts. The ability of the historian to analyze the political in motion can provide intellectual and strategic clarity on the nature of fascism and fascistic reactions to trans life.

### **Understanding the Historical Nature of Fascism: Liberalism and Counterinsurgency**

Within a historical context, fascism is a nebulous concept. Though the term is often used to describe both contemporary and historical phenomena, the imprecise and changeable nature of fascism, and the debate about how to define and understand it lends it the capacity to be distorted and misused. The top result for a peer-reviewed database search of my university's library returns the 2018 book *Fascism: A Warning* by Liberal academic and politician Madeleine Albright. Her work is a Trump-era polemic aimed at the non-academic public. Her status as a widely respected, former top American state official and diplomat bestows her with a perceived authority on fascism, and especially to readers in the American imperial sphere of influence. Albright and I begin similarly as she acknowledges that fascism is a difficult concept to pin down. Her definition is that "fascism should be viewed less as a political ideology and more as a means for seizing and holding power."<sup>12</sup> This

---

<sup>12</sup> Madeleine Korbel Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 9.

is not necessarily an incorrect argument to make, but it is imprecise and her explanations falter. She characterizes twentieth-century socialist projects as, “Marx’s dream of a workers’ paradise [that] had degenerated into an Orwellian nightmare,” before she dismisses the United States’ complicated and violent past as she notes that, “Hitler fantasized that the United States so fully shared his racist views that it would ultimately side with the Third Reich... Still, the story of America’s birth... has always been powerful enough to overcome internal contradictions.”<sup>13</sup> If not altogether limited, Albright’s account and understanding of fascism are rather simplified. But there is value to be found in her text for our analysis here, for her work provides an excellent example of a contemporary propagandistic caricature of fascism that can be dissected. Above all, Albright’s book underlines that mainstream voices on fascism in the contemporary context can be deeply misleading, and especially in Anglophone North America these perspectives can often further mystify and mythologize the real nature of modern political economy. Her book also shows that contemporary liberalism offers no real alternative or proper rebuttal to fascism. Beyond Madeleine Albright, other intellectuals offer rich theorizations and historiographic analyses as to how to understand fascism.

Fascism is often presented as an ‘other’ to liberal capitalism, and as an antithetical ideology to liberal electoral democracy. But it is a constituent part of liberal capitalism and of liberal electoral democracy. Ultimately, it is an expression of the counterinsurgent machines of capitalism. Fascism is contiguous with liberalism. It is entirely contained within its borders, it uses its tools, and it mobilizes its strategies, rhetoric, and methods of governance. When

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 208.

in the heart of the American empire in the Anglophone world, capitalism appears inescapable, and its machinic and libidinal nature seems to rapidly respond and adapt to any changes. This is only heightened by the incredibly diffusive nature of economic power as it is shared and wielded by individuals, multinational corporations, and states alike. It is no coincidence that the neoliberal era, with the systematic dismantling of many of the victories of proletarian and anti-colonial struggles has been described through the concept of ‘capitalist realism,’ explained by the late Mark Fisher as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”<sup>14</sup> To understand the historical nature of fascism, it must be emphasized that capitalism is an unstable organization of political economy that by its very nature will experience economic crises that affect the majority of working people on a regular basis. To that end, economist Richard D. Wolff writes:

Wherever capitalism became a society's economic system over the last three centuries, business cycles recurred every four to seven years. Capitalism has mechanisms to survive its cycles, but they are painful, especially when employers fire employees. Widespread pain (unemployment, bankruptcies, disrupted public finances, etc.) brought the label ‘crisis’ to capitalism's cyclical downturns.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Wolff, “There’s a Crisis in U.S. Capitalism,” *Economy For All*, June 12, 2020, [https://www.rdwolff.com/theres\\_a\\_crisis\\_in\\_us\\_capitalism](https://www.rdwolff.com/theres_a_crisis_in_us_capitalism).

The latest cyclical downturn of these market crises funnelled wealth upwards, and the masses have been left both more impoverished and facing a more uncertain and unstable future. Out of these latest crises, working people have grown more discontented with the status quo of their position under capitalism. It is in such periods that mobilizations of the far-right and fascistic counterinsurgency respond to mass unrest, and these constellations fortify class society to ensure capitalism's continued dominance.

In the twentieth century, fascism emerged as a counterinsurgent machine that responded to the proliferation of revolutionary movements which threatened class-stratified, European capitalist empires when they faced moments of economic crisis. As Black Marxist guerrilla intellectual George Jackson argued, "both Marxists and non-Marxists agree on at least two of [fascism's] general factors: its capitalist orientation and its anti-labor, anti-class nature... at its core, fascism is an economic rearrangement. It is international capitalism's response to the challenge of international scientific socialism."<sup>16</sup> In Italy, fascism, as Mussolini laid out and codified it as an ideology, sought to centralize the process of anti-communist action through a strong and authoritarian state. Mussolini identified socialism as the primary ideological enemy of the fascist movement as he noted that, "Fascism [is] the precise negation of that doctrine which formed the basis of the so-called Scientific or Marxian Socialism."<sup>17</sup> For Mussolini, liberal democracy was not the panacea to societal woes and he further argued that,

---

<sup>16</sup> George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye: George L. Jackson* (London: J. Cape, 1972), 134-137.

<sup>17</sup> Benito Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," in *Ideals and Ideologies: A Reader*, ed. Terence Ball, Richard Dagger, and Daniel I. O'Neill, 10th ed. (New York; London: Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group, 2017), 377.

“after Socialism, Fascism attacks the whole complex of democratic ideologies and rejects them both in their theoretical premises and in their applications or practical manifestations... In face of Liberal doctrines, Fascism takes up an attitude of absolute opposition both in the field of politics and in that of economics.”<sup>18</sup> For Mussolini fascism was the only means to address the turmoil that rocked interwar Europe as he wrote in 1932 that, “From 1929 up to the present day [Fascism’s] doctrinal positions have been strengthened by the whole economic-political evolution of the world. It is the State alone that grows in size, in power. *It is the State alone that can solve the dramatic contradictions of capitalism.*”<sup>19</sup> The modernization of capitalism and inter-imperial warfare stoked intense class contradictions and conflicts, and for Mussolini only fascism could maintain the bourgeois dominated, class-stratified order. Only a fascist state possessed a logistically primed governing capacity that could control counterinsurgency. For Mussolini, there was no alternative.

Though Mussolini’s words provide some clarity in understanding the origins of fascism, his conception of his movement must be read critically. The historical reality of Mussolini’s fascism contradicts many of its purported aspects, and none more so than his assertion that fascism is opposed to liberalism. Both Benito Mussolini and Madeline Albright emphasize that liberalism and fascism are diametrically opposed to each other. Critical historical and ideological analysis contradicts their viewpoints, for there is a rich body of scholarship that locates the origins and methodologies of fascism within liberalism. Unless one

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>19</sup> My italics for emphasis. Ibid., 380.

understands liberalism as the ideology and systematic organization of political economy that perpetrated the violence of modern imperialism and colonialism, one cannot grasp the connections between fascism and liberalism. In the fourth chapter of Lisa Lowe's book *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, she explores the relationship between liberalism and colonial violence. Lowe presents an overview of liberal politics in the British colonization of South and East Asia, and she traces the emergence of modern forms of state governance to these colonial contexts. She then turns to the words of John Stuart Mill to support her arguments on the undemocratic and violent nature of Liberalism. As part of her summarization of his work, she writes:

Mill's *On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government* make evident that liberal notions of education, trade, and government grew out of the conditions of colonial encounter and were themselves precisely philosophical attempts to grapple with and manage colonial difference within an expanding empire. While liberty would appear to eradicate or vanquish despotism, Mill discussed despotism, not as counter to liberty, but as the very condition out of which liberty arises and the condition to which it was integral and bound. He elaborated liberty as a principal of justice, which required the extent of power that state and society may exercise over members of society, and wrote of representative government and despotism as joined, as two parts of the same project of liberal political reason. In Mill's work, we see clearly that the



governing of those with liberty was not inconsistent with what he deemed the necessary constraints involved in governing those without it. He famously defined “the best government” as the one that may discern those who were “unfit for liberty” or not capable of self-determination; his ideas on liberal government combined the state’s necessary use of force to maintain “order and progress” with the civil education of people for self-government.<sup>20</sup>

Racial and colonial hierarchies underpinned liberalism’s ontological formation. This context ideologically legitimized the rulership caste of imperial state powers to deny freedoms to those defined as not yet worthy of them. It was not just their right, for it was their responsibility. This ideological framework justified agents of the imperial state to plunder colonized territories and subjugate colonized peoples, and all for the enrichment of the enlightened imperial state and liberal citizens that it deemed worthy of freedoms. Sixty-five years before Lowe’s study, Aimé Césaire conducted a similar genealogical analysis of liberalism, race, and fascism in his seminal 1950 work on these topics, *Discours sur le colonialisme*. In it, he concluded that European fascism was an application of colonial methods of liberalism against European people as he noted that, “[Hitler] applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the [c\*\*\*\*\*s] of India and the [n\*\*\*\*\*s] of Africa.”<sup>21</sup> Historian of African-American studies Robin G. Kelley

---

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Lowe, “The Ruses of Liberty,” in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015), 106.

<sup>21</sup> Redaction of racist terminology mine. While it is important not to sanitize the

situates Césaire within the longer Black radical tradition as he draws attention to preeminent Black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois's point in 1947 that:

I knew that Hitler and Mussolini were fighting communism, and using race prejudice to make some white people rich and all colored people poor. But it was not until later that I realized that the colonialism of Great Britain and France had exactly the same object and methods as the fascists and the Nazis were trying clearly to use.<sup>22</sup>

The Nazis used the political and economic crises of the interwar period to seize power, and they did so with the eventual goal to build a race-based empire to restore glory and prosperity to the German Reich. This would be achieved through the conquest of 'inferior races' and the elimination of internal enemies. The latter was partially realized through the attempted genocide of the Jewish people in the Shoah. This was the same kind of race-motivated mass violence as the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. While the application of the colonial mode of liberal governance and the power of the state to grant and revoke freedoms based on ideological grounds may have been most obvious within Europe during the Nazi period, its domestic use in the imperial metropolises

---

language that I am quoting, I do not wish to reproduce violent words in full as though they were mine to speak. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 36.

<sup>22</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 205-206, quoted in Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," introduction to *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 20.

of the North Atlantic West preceded the 1930s.

Though coined in the 1920s, Giorgio Agamben's 2005 book *State of Exception* reintroduced the term 'the state of exception' into contemporary political thought. It refers to a sovereign governing body's suspension and dismissal of constitutional limits that restrict the actions of state authority. Agamben's genealogy of the concept begins in ancient Greek and Roman texts on politics and governance that modern Western political theorists draw from. For Agamben Western 'democratic' states conceptualize and legitimize their authority through the state of exception which manifests in its frequent invocation by modern states. Though he wrote the work in response to the post-9/11 rise of Western regimes of illegal securitization and hyper-surveillance, Agamben traces the usage of 'states of exception' across the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This concept is critical to understand fascism and modern governance, for it demonstrates that European and American imperial powers have frequently suspended democratic laws in both colonies and metropolises. The authoritarianism many associate with a mythologized fascism is not antithetical to liberalism and modern democracy. It is a constituent feature of liberal democracy.<sup>23</sup>

The question to ask now, is: why distinguish fascism from liberalism if they are on some level indistinguishable? Here is where

---

<sup>23</sup> Agamben cites Schmitt who wrote in 1925 - years before he joined the Nazi party - that, "no constitution on earth had so easily legalized a coup d'état as did the Weimar Constitution". Agamben, *State of Exception*, 15. He continues to explain that, "it is well known that the last years of the Weimar Republic passed entirely under a regime of the state of exception; it is less obvious to note that Hitler could probably not have taken power had the country not been under a regime of presidential dictatorship for nearly three years and had parliament been functioning." *Ibid.*, 15.

the shift from structuralism to the machinic is particularly useful. If we conceptualize fascism not as a structure of capitalism, but as a machine of capital then we can think about how to name and describe the functions of that machine. To do this, I suggest that fascism is a machine, and that it functions as an 'immune system' of capital and the state. In Marla Stone's analysis of the rhetorical structures of the internal and external enemies of Mussolini's Italy, she notes the frequent usage of, "disease or germ metaphor[s]," in fascist propaganda.<sup>24</sup> The use of these metaphors to conceptualize threats to a state are consistent with the concept of the 'body politic' that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines as, "an ancient metaphor by which a state, society, or church and its institutions are conceived of as a biological (usually human) body."<sup>25</sup> If the state is a body and threats to it are germs or diseases, the machine of the body that deals with these threats is the immune system. This fits with fascism's counterinsurgent nature.

If fascism is often conceptualized as the state turning against its own citizens, fascism can also be conceptualised as a bodily autoimmune response. Oftentimes fascist violence is also associated with the perceived 'improper' use of apparatuses and machines of the state. In these instances, the fascist machine is a mobilization of aspects of the pre-existing immune system of the state. If fascism reacts to capitalist crises, the full extent of fascist violence is a chemotherapy-like response to a metastasis of cancerous cells (i.e., those that attack the very body that they make up). Fascism, if it is

---

<sup>24</sup> Marla Stone, "The Changing Face of the Enemy in Fascist Italy," *Constellations* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 333, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2008.00495.x>.

<sup>25</sup> Joëlle Rollo-Koster, "body politic." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/body-politic>.

understood in a machinic manner, is the capacity of a capitalist state to unleash its immune system on a scale that might indiscriminately target its inhabitants. The state's current level of 'status quo' violence is not the full extent of violence that the state is capable of, or willing, to unleash. Though this capacity for intensified violence is a concern, anti-fascists must not get lost in the spectacle and hysteria of the fascist process. The locus of anti-fascist attention must be the machines of state authority and capitalist political economy that the counterinsurgent machine functions to protect.

### **The Aestheticization of Politics and the Trans Enemy in Film**

While the daily political news cycle drives mass hysteria, fascist aesthetics are found across all art and communication media, and film as multi-sensory spectacle is an excellent medium to examine the ideological and rhetorical construction of the internal enemy to the fascist machine. Walter Benjamin wrote at length on the development of film as a mass medium of art and the transformations that it brought about in his essay on, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." In this he argues that fascism functions through the aestheticization of politics. Benjamin likened the political and economic conditions of film production in the interwar to fascism as he noted the mass-poverty of the era meant:

The film industry has an overriding interest in stimulating the involvement of the masses through illusionary displays and ambiguous speculations. To this end it has set in motion an immense publicity machine... All this in order to distort and corrupt the

original and justified interest of the masses in film - an interest in understanding themselves and therefore their class.<sup>26</sup>

He concluded that, “the same is true of film capital in particular as of fascism in general: a compelling urge toward new social opportunities is being clandestinely exploited in the interests of a property-owning minority.”<sup>27</sup> In vivid spectacle film could deliver to mass audiences aestheticized renditions of politics that served the fascist state. Marla Stone focuses on several films in her analysis of Italian fascist cultural production. She notes that during the Second World War, the production of films in Italy increased, and she connects the two as, “making feature films, in genres from combat films to melodramas, [became] a primary means of wartime communication between the regime and the population.”<sup>28</sup> She outlines how the enemies of fascism were given visual forms as in the case of Augusto Genina’s 1940 film *L’assedio dell’Alcazar* - “a popular film that also served the regime’s desired political purposes,” - that, “visual markers, such as unkemptness, unshavenness, and tattered, soiled, and worn clothes announce[d] the enemy’s bodily opposition to normative social and ethical codes. Such visual cues lead the viewer toward the possibility that ideology is written, like race, on the body.”<sup>29</sup> Like other forms of visual art, film could

---

<sup>26</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Stone, “The Changing Face,” 345.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 339.

express the aestheticization of politics, and through its development into a mass, multi-sensory spectacle it became a compelling, entertaining, and effective means of the mass-dissemination of ideology.

### **A Case Study: Trans Villains and Cold War Counterinsurgency**

In the same week in June 1970 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox released two perfect examples of the capacity of film to be fascist mass propaganda: *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Works of Hollywood cinema are often particularly rich for this kind of rhetorical and aesthetic analysis because the United States' military apparatus has been directly involved in the production of film since at least the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> In the death throes of the old Hollywood studio system, 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox attempted to court young audiences through sex and shock factor, and so these two X-rated studio films reproduced the mores of exploitation cinema.<sup>31</sup> These texts emerged as part of a counterinsurgent reaction to the wider political and cultural upheavals at the start of the 1970s, and both works are fascist, Cold War American works that *both* feature a trans person as a perfect 'internal enemy' figure.

---

<sup>30</sup> Brandie Weikle, "How Hollywood Became the Unofficial Propaganda Arm of the U.S. Military," *CBC*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-hollywood-became-the-unofficial-propaganda-arm-of-the-u-s-military-1.5560575>; Haidee Wasson, and Lee Grieveson, eds., *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Craig Fischer, "Horror and Exploitation: 'Beyond the Valley of the Dolls' and the Exploitation Genre," *Velvet Light Trap* 30 (Fall 1992): 18.

The end of the 1960s was a time of crisis for the American empire. While the period directly after the Second World War is often remembered as the peak of American prosperity and ease, the temporary alliance with the Soviet Union turned once again into open rivalry as Red Scare paranoia overtook the United States.<sup>32</sup> The American ruling classes faced significant internal and external threats to political and economic stability. Mass student and worker movements, the American Indian Movement, Black power, revolutionary wars of decolonization like Vietnam, and even the sexual revolution, all seemingly demonstrated the pervasive growth of anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiment.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> J. Michaels, *McCarthyism: The Realities, Delusions and Politics Behind the 1950s Red Scare*, Critical Moments in American History (New York: Routledge, 2017).; J.R. Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> By 1970 more than 15 years had passed since the Vietnamese communist guerrillas defeated the French at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ and soon after, in 1962, the French also lost the colony of Algeria. The American empire stepped in and went to war with Vietnam, but the 1968 Tet offensive launched by the communists, “made it clear that a U.S. victory in Vietnam was not imminent, and the American public's support began to wane.” Domestically, by 1970, after more than a decade of the civil rights movement radical movements towards decolonization and communism like the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party were gaining ground and support, representing a big enough threat to American establishment power to receive the full force of counterinsurgent violence in the form of the FBI-led COINTELPRO program. Katie Lange, “Highlighting History: How ‘Tet’ Began the End of Vietnam,” *U.S. Department of Defense News*, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/3291950/highlighting-history-how-tet-began-the-end-of-vietnam/>; Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002).



As films made in this period, *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* reflected the turmoil of the time, and they attempted to address younger audiences with different values and worldviews than their parents. As fascistic spectacles of the aesthetic machine of Hollywood cinema, the films simultaneously satirized and reinforced Cold War paranoias of the time. The trans villains of *Myra Breckinridge* and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* served in both films as the internal enemy figure, and both exemplified the threats to a capitalist, suburban, and white American way of life.

Top studio executives originally intended *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (*BVD*) to be a serious sequel to the 1967 film *Valley of the Dolls*, but poor financial conditions in the film industry prompted Twentieth Century-Fox to instead make a low-budget satire. The studio hired exploitation director Russ Meyer and critic Roger Ebert to produce a sensational film that was to both titillate audiences, and amuse them through parodies of popular Hollywood tropes.<sup>34</sup> While the film itself is hard to take seriously, it perfectly exemplifies the fascistic tropes that it sought to play with. In *BVD*, three young women in a band and the lead singer's boyfriend go to Hollywood in search of fame and fortune, but they have their lives almost destroyed by the lurid and morally dubious world of show business. From the start, Cold War anxieties underpin *BVD* as the film opens with a performance by the girls' band at a high school prom where they sing about, "lunatic skies of red destruction," before one of the band members remarks that the prom chaperones, "were built like Khrushchev."<sup>35</sup> The film builds its characters and story on pre-existing racist, misogynistic, and homophobic

---

<sup>34</sup> Fischer, "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls."

<sup>35</sup> *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, directed by Russ Meyer (1970; Los Angeles, Twentieth Century-Fox), 35 mm film.

cinematic tropes, and with one critical caveat this includes the villain who we learn at the film's climax is Ronnie 'Z-Man' Barzell. He is a Jewish, queer show-businessman. As part of his villainous reveal, we learn one final aspect about Z-Man: that he is a 'woman cross-dressing as a man.' The film depicts Z-man as ambiguously sexed, perverted, manipulative, corrupt, and violent. He has power and influence in Hollywood, and he eventually becomes the manager of the young women's band. At the climax of the film Z-man hosts a private, costumed psychedelic-fueled orgy, that includes a butler dressed in a Nazi uniform, where Z-man galivants around and then brutally murders all of his guests. Z-man's rejection by a young, Aryan-looking man is the catalyst for his violent rage. After the man turns him down, Z-man tears open his costume to reveal a pair of breasts, and then he decapitates the young man with a sword before he hunts and kills the rest of his party guests in similarly gory fashion.<sup>36</sup> While Ebert stated that Z-Man is a woman in drag,<sup>37</sup> cis male actor John Lazar played him, and Lazar wears prosthetic breasts as part of his role. Z-man's body and gender presentation do not match that of a cisgender person, but the film obscures this fact from the audience prior to its bloody climax. As Z-man reveals his ambiguous body that the film portrays as 'foreign,' his murderous rampage further reveals his violent nature. Z-man's gender transgression and villainy are inseparable.

Z-man simultaneously embodies Jewish, queer, trans, and communist threats to American nationalism. The reveal of his transness shows him to be a villain who could hide his 'true' nature and be undetectable to the incautious American. The queer Jewish

---

<sup>36</sup> Meyer, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*.

<sup>37</sup> Roger Ebert, "Russ Meyer: Ten Years After the 'Beyond,'" *Film Comment* 16, no. 4 (August 1980): 43.

body as a threat to national order predates the American context of the 1960s. Z-man's character is representative of a trope that historian Helga Thorson describes in an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century German context:

The threat of the mixed-sexed body was used to heighten the fear of emancipation movements, whether in terms of the emancipation of women or of Jews within German society. The body of the virago (Mannweib), often associated with members of the bourgeois women's movement and educated middle-class women, as well as the body of the so-called "feminized" male Jew were constructed as contaminants within the metaphorical body politic of the nation since, it was argued, they represented a biological step backward.<sup>38</sup>

Z-man's character also reflects long-running twentieth-century American antisemitic paranoia that there exists a cabal of Jewish immigrants who deviously disseminate anti-Christian, immoral, and communist propaganda through the Hollywood film industry.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Helga Thorson, "Masking/Unmasking Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Germany: The Importance of N. O. Body," *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2009): 149–150. The characterization of sexual 'deviance' as a political threat can also be traced back to the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century psychiatrists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing. See: Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study.*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock, Authorized Translation of the Seventh Enlarged and Revised German Edition (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1892), 6.

<sup>39</sup> Harold Brackman, "The Attack on 'Jewish Hollywood': A Chapter in the History of Modern American Anti-Semitism," *Modern Judaism* 20, no. 1 (2000): 5-6.

Scholar Harrold Brackman describes how the Red-Scare environment of the 1950s and 1960s reignited the popularity of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that centred on Hollywood.<sup>40</sup> The various villainous archetypes that make up Z-man are all aestheticized depictions of the threat of domestic and global resistance to the American, capitalist way of life. Z-man is an identifiable villain with embodied, identifiable traits who encapsulates the historically recurring anti-semitism, anti-queerness, and anti-communism of twentieth-century fascism.

When examined alone *BVD* perfectly exemplifies the trans villain as a favourite figure of the fascist aestheticization of politics, the fact that it was released alongside a sister film with more or less the same themes further highlights film as a locus of Cold War era counterinsurgent propaganda. Alongside *BVD*, Twentieth Century-Fox produced *Myra Breckinridge* (*MB*) as a big-budget, blockbuster adaptation of Gore Vidal's 1968 novel by the same name. The film opens with Myron Breckinridge on an operating table somewhere in Europe. After he undergoes a sex-change, he becomes the gorgeous bombshell, Myra Breckinridge. She then goes to Hollywood to infiltrate her uncle's acting school, and her cover is as Myron's widow. Though Myra wants a share of her uncle's money, she also has a plan to destroy patriarchal American masculinity.<sup>41</sup>

Moments into the film, director Michael Sarne jump cuts away from a happily dancing Myra to the first of many shots of an atomic bomb explosion. It is terrifyingly loud and engulfs the screen in angry red fire. Myra then bombastically announces that: "My

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>41</sup> *Myra Breckinridge*, Directed by Michael Sarne (1970; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 2004, DVD).

purpose in coming to Hollywood is the destruction of the American male in all its particulars ... the destruction of the last vestigial traces of traditional manhood, in order to realign the sexes, while decreasing population thus increasing human happiness and preparing humanity for its next stage."<sup>42</sup> The film presents Myra's attack on the American male as an attack on the American *nation*, and the constant presence of atomic explosions reinforces the movie's paranoid conflation of queerness and communism. Her character simultaneously embodies anxiety and paranoia about queerness, feminism, and communism, and through this the film portrays the technological and social changes of the 1960s as emergent threats to the American way of life.

Myra focuses her plan to destroy American masculinity and conventional sexuality on the young and picturesque couple Rusty Godowski and Mary Ann Pringle. At the film's climax, Myra straps a bent-over Rusty to a table under the pretense of performing a medical exam. Then clad in a sparkling American flag bathing suit, Myra puts on a harness and dildo before she anally rapes Rusty. While readying herself to sodomize Rusty, Myra explains that she is doing a practical educational demonstration to show him that, "there is no such thing as manhood."<sup>43</sup> The film visually simulates Myra's orgasm in the scene with a repeat of the film's opening shot of an atomic bomb, and this time with a subsequent flash of people engulfed by the explosion. As she sodomizes Rusty, Myra Breckinridge as the transsexual, feminist, and communist villain-protagonist sodomizes the American nation.

In contrast to *BVD*, the audience knows about Myra's

---

<sup>42</sup> Sarne, *Myra Breckinridge*.

<sup>43</sup> Sarne, *Myra Breckinridge*.

transsexuality from the start of the film. But in both films, the villain's transness is not revealed to the other characters before a climactic moment. After she rapes Rusty, Myra Breckinridge has a dramatic meeting with the acting school's board of directors to finally secure her inheritance. At the meeting, she takes off her panties and shows her genitals to the executives before she announces that she is the same person as Myron Breckinridge.<sup>44</sup> She was a villainous enemy of the American way of life who hid in plain sight while she covertly acted against American values. For the paranoid American audiences of 1970, who were in the midst of global and domestic political challenges to the American empire, Myra's aptitude for deception showed that enemies to their way of life could truly be anywhere. In his historical overview of the convergence of American anti-communist and anti-gay paranoia, Douglas M. Charles wrote:

Gays and Communists exhibited similar traits in the popular American mind: gays and communists both kept their true identities hidden, both seemed to move around in a secretive underworld, both had a common sense of loyalty, both had their own publications and places to meet, both recruited members to their ranks, and people believed both were mentally abnormal.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Sarne, *Myra Breckinridge*. Despite the film opening with what is heavily implied to be a vaginoplasty, this climactic scene contradictorily implies that Myra has retained some element of 'male-genitalia.'

<sup>45</sup> Douglas M. Charles, "Communist and Homosexual: The FBI, Harry Hay, and the Secret Side of the Lavender Scare, 1943–1961," *American Communist History* 11, no. 1 (April 1, 2012): 103–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2012.666097>.

Myra's desire to destroy the virility of the American male exemplifies fascist paranoia about threats to whiteness, racial health, and the safety of the United States against the communist threat. Myra's eugenic mission is a sensationalized analog for the fears that ascendant communism or Black and Indigenous power would interfere not just with patriarchal gender, but with American settler-colonial sovereignty and the economic and social orders of a nation built on the fragile machine of white supremacy. Myra is the perfect cinematic embodiment of the fascist aestheticization of politics.

### **Conclusion: How Might the Historian Respond?**

This paper has ultimately sought to demonstrate that queer, trans, and gender variant people have been targeted as political enemies before in moments of increased counterinsurgency, and we can, or perhaps *should*, look to this past to understand our present. Further, this paper has hoped to show that the embodied, nature of transness has historically provided ideal material for the fascist process of the aestheticization of politics and therefore the production of counterinsurgent spectacle and propaganda. An expansion of this work would seek to add further evidence and nuance through the use of a wider variety of historical examples. By exploring the historical relationship between transness and fascism, I have hoped to show that historical amnesia threatens the ability of trans and non-trans people to respond to the ever-changing conditions of our world and the violence directed against all of us. Despite the limits of scholarship and the ultimate need for organization outside of academic spaces, there is a critical role for trans historians in political organizing. Though formulated as a

means of Black liberation, Walter Rodney's concept of the 'Guerrilla Intellectual,' is an expansive and useful framework to what this could look like. Scholar Tunde Adeleke noted that Rodney, "emphasized the critical role of education in the black struggle... the knowledge thus acquired would constitute the foundation for developing what he called 'concrete tactics and strategy necessary' for black liberation."<sup>46</sup> Historical scholarship is not the end of political work, but it can be a beginning which provides a vital tool that can be mobilized as part of larger agitation. The production of critical historical scholarship takes enormous amounts of time. In speed, it cannot compete with the quick and easy production of fascistic trans panic discourse. Instead, it must compete in quality. In our contemporary moment, the trained trans historian must use archives to produce and widely disseminate the kind of public-facing historical work that can provide the necessary knowledge for collective organization.

---

<sup>46</sup> Tunde Adeleke, "Guerilla Intellectualism: Walter A. Rodney and the Weapon of Knowledge in the Struggle for Black Liberation," *Journal of Thought* 35, no. 1 (2000): 45.



## Bibliography

Adeleke, Tunde. "Guerilla Intellectualism: Walter A. Rodney and the Weapon of Knowledge in the Struggle for Black Liberation." *Journal of Thought* 35, no. 1 (2000): 37–59.

Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Albright, Madeleine Korbel. *Fascism: A Warning*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.

Bassi, Serena, and Greta LaFleur. "Introduction: TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2022): 311–33.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland, 19–55. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

*Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Directed by Russ Meyer. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1970.

Brackman, Harold. "The Attack on 'Jewish Hollywood': A Chapter in the History of Modern American Anti-Semitism." *Modern Judaism* 20, no. 1 (2000): 1–19.

Brands, Hal. *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and The Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016.

Cahill, Damien, Melinda Cooper, Martijn Konings, and David Primrose, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Los Angeles: SAGE Reference, 2018.

Cele, S'thembile, and John Bowker. "BRICS Nations Say New Currency May Offer Shield From Sanctions." *Bloomberg*, June 1, 2023.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-01/brics-nations-say-new-currency-may-offer-shield-from-sanctions>.

Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Charles, Douglas M. "Communist and Homosexual: The FBI, Harry Hay, and the Secret Side of the Lavender Scare, 1943–1961." *American Communist History* 11, no. 1 (2012): 101–24.

Churchill, Ward, and Jim Vander Wall. *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: South End Press, 2002.

Drey, Brandon. "Radical Gender Theory Emerges as Key Wedge Issue In 2024 Presidential Election." *The Daily Wire*, June 30, 2023. <https://www.dailywire.com/news/radical-gender-theory-emerges-as-key-wedge-issue-in-2024-presidential-election>.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*. Edited by Herbert Aptheker. New York: International Publishers, 1968.

Ebert, Roger. "Russ Meyer: Ten Years After the 'Beyond.'" *Film Comment* 16, no. 4 (August 1980): 43–48.

Fischer, Craig. "Horror and Exploitation: 'Beyond the Valley of the Dolls' and the Exploitation Genre." *Velvet Light Trap* 30 (Fall 1992): 18–33.

Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books, 2009.

Gleeson, Joanne Jules, and Elle O'Rourke, eds. *Transgender Marxism*. London: Pluto Press, 2021.

Holden, Alexandra. "The Gay/Trans Panic Defense: What It Is, and How to End It." American Bar Association, March 31, 2020.  
<https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/member-features/gay-trans-panic-defense/>.

Jackson, George. *Blood in My Eye: George L. Jackson*. London: J. Cape, 1972.

Kelley, Robin D.G. "A Poetics of Anticolonialism." Introduction to *Discourse on Colonialism* by Aimé Césaire, 7–28. Translated by Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Koerner, Michelle. *Lines of Escape: Gilles Deleuze's Encounter with George Jackson*. Ill Will Editions, 2011.

Krafft-Ebing, Richard von. *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study*. Translated by Charles Gilbert Chaddock. Authorized Translation of the Seventh Enlarged and Revised German Edition. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1892.

Lange, Katie. "Highlighting History: How 'Tet' Began the End of Vietnam." *U.S. Department of Defense News*.  
<https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/Story/Article/3291950/highlighting-history-how-tet-began-the-end-of-vietnam/>.

Lowe, Lisa. "The Ruses of Liberty." In *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 101–33. Duke University Press, 2015.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw8zh.6>.

Marquez, Alexandra. "Poll: Sending Troops to U.S.-Mexico Border Is Popular. Other GOP Policy Planks Are Struggling." *NBC News*, June 27, 2023.  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/poll-sending-troops-us-mexico-border-popular-gop-policy-planks-are-s-tr-rcna91245>.

Michaels, J. *McCarthyism: The Realities, Delusions and Politics Behind the 1950s Red Scare*. Critical Moments in American History. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Mussolini, Benito. "The Doctrine of Fascism." In *Ideals and Ideologies: A Reader*, edited by Terence Ball, Richard Dagger, and Daniel I. O'Neill, 10th ed. New York ; London: Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group, 2017.

*Myra Breckinridge*. Directed by Michael Sarne. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1970.

Rollo-Koster, Joëlle. "Body Politic | Definition, History, & Facts | Britannica." October 2, 2017.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/body-politic>.

Schotten, C. Heike. "TERFism, Zionism, and Right-Wing Annihilationism: Toward an Internationalist Genealogy of Extinction Phobia." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2022): 334–64.

Shrier, Abigail. *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2020.

Stone, Marla. "The Changing Face of the Enemy in Fascist Italy." *Constellations* 15, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 332–50.

Thorson, Helga. "Masking/Unmasking Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Germany: The Importance of N. O. Body." *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 25, no. 1 (2009): 149–73.

Wasson, Haidee, and Lee Grieveson, eds. *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.

Weikle, Brandie. "How Hollywood Became the Unofficial Propaganda Arm of the U.S. Military." *CBC*, May 11, 2020.  
<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-hollywood-became-the-unofficial-propaganda-arm-of-the-u-s-military-1.5560575>.

Wolff, Richard. "The Emerging New World Economy." *Economy for All*, April 19, 2023.  
[https://www.rdwolff.com/the\\_emerging\\_new\\_world\\_economy](https://www.rdwolff.com/the_emerging_new_world_economy).

Wolff, Richard. "There's a Crisis in U.S. Capitalism." *Economy For All*, June 12, 2020.  
[https://www.rdwolff.com/theres\\_a\\_crisis\\_in\\_us\\_capitalism](https://www.rdwolff.com/theres_a_crisis_in_us_capitalism).

Woods, J.R. *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2003.

# ***Hijas de la Putisima: A Trans Femme Perspective on Juana María Rodríguez' Puta Life***

**Sam Dolores Sanchinel** (they/ella)

University of Toronto

*Abstract: To be a “puta” means to be a whore, a prostitute, a slut, or more formally, a sex worker. More commonly, it is used as a derogatory term against women who do not conform to “proper” sexual and gender norms. In Puta Life, Juana María Rodríguez explores the histories of Latina sex workers through archives, documentaries, pornography and social media. In this paper I outline the methodological tools Rodríguez uses to read “puta lives.” As such, I argue that her model of queer affective kinship, and loving personal readings of puta life provide ample resources for work in trans studies as well.*

*“The racialized classed markers that cling most fervently to Black and Latina bodies — skin-tight clothes, animal prints, red everything, bold lipstick and nails, high heels, visible cleavage, short skirts, and the performative attitude to pull it off.”*

– Juana María Rodríguez (1982)<sup>1</sup>

*Put a Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex* came to my life at a very opportune time. With five years of hormone replacement therapy done, and two breast augmentation consultations set for the future, I was lucky enough to meet Juana María Rodríguez. Her hot pink boots, fuchsia dress, statement necklace, and fur coat could not have been more perfect for the author of *Put a Life*. I, of course, made sure to wear my biggest hoop earrings, skinny jeans cinched as tightly as possible at the waist, and a semi-see-through mesh shirt with a romantic scene of virginal white women being serenaded by lute-wielding men.

As a Latina trans femme, I do not usually have the opportunity to find role models in mainstream media. Rather, my main transition goals growing up (and I have to admit, even now), came from the world of trans porn.<sup>2</sup> A monochromatic Vanessa del Rio wearing burlesque, fringed lingerie, dark eye-makeup, enormous breasts, and a heart-breaking glare on *Put a Life’s* cover, though, gave me that same affective feeling of “goals.” We see how it

---

<sup>1</sup> Juana María Rodríguez, *Put a Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 119.

<sup>2</sup> For a trans person, someone being your “transition goals” (or more simply, just “goals”) is when a person (usually a celebrity) represents what you would like to look like once you transition. Folks like Vanessa del Rio, la Veneno, and Mia Isabella are my goals.



works similarly through Rodríguez herself, as she notes that del Rio is one of her “most cherished puta icons” as well as “an early role model for [her] teenage version of a sexual life.”<sup>3</sup> Vanessa del Rio also places herself in the genealogy of Latina *puta*-becoming by having the Argentinian soft-core porn star Isabel Sarli<sup>4</sup> be the role model of her own self-fashioning.<sup>5</sup> What this all alludes to is how *Puta Life* creates kinship through Latina desire, and excess.

The book is, in itself, excessive. And having a porn star on the cover is just the beginning. Each chapter gives the reader a framework of understanding of how Latina gender aesthetics become read through the *puta*, and how the readers themselves are implicated within this process. To be called a *puta* generally means to be a “hooker, slut, or bitch, and sometimes it is used to simply mean woman.”<sup>6</sup> In *Puta Life* we see how the idea of the *puta* works along all these lines. While Rodríguez thankfully focuses on Latina sex workers (in various styles of sex work, such as street walkers, escorts, porn stars), she reads the *puta* aesthetics in a queer affective way. That is to say that in Rodríguez’ reading of the *puta* she finds herself, and through such reading, the reader may find themselves too. As highlighted above, *puta* could also simply mean (as derogatory) woman. The *puta* is a woman who is too excessive, whose skirts are too short, who wears too much make-up, who speaks out of turn, who knows what she wants.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Rodríguez, 107 and 121.

<sup>4</sup> Of all the porn stars, Rodríguez honours Sarli as “*la putisima*” (the sluttiest).

<sup>5</sup> Rodríguez, 123

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> I appreciate the insight from the journal editor here, where this definition of *puta* as excessive quite easily spills into how transness is conceived. From the “trans” prefix of going beyond or over, we see how transness is defined through

Again, as a trans femme reader, it becomes easy to fall into the category of excess, and as such, *puta*. Not only aesthetically, where the rule for breast augmentations is “the bigger the better,” but economically as well.<sup>8</sup> As Kai Cheng Thom highlights, “If you’re a trans girl with trans feminine friends, you’re probably, at most, two degrees of separation away from sex work.”<sup>9</sup> With all my friends, it is less than two degrees. Perhaps then, in a bit of a skewed sense, we can rehash what Viviane Namaste states as a conclusion to her book *Invisible Lives*: “[trans] people are perhaps better aligned with prostitute activists than with lesbians and gay men.”<sup>10</sup> The natural assumption, of course, is that LGBT+ people stick together, but as similarly demonstrated in this book, or at the very least in my reading of it, I find myself more aligned with Latina prostitutes.<sup>11</sup>

In a literal connection to the importance of this book for trans studies, almost every chapter of *Put a Life* includes some reference to transness, or genderqueerness in the least. In the Introduction we see reference to Sylvia Rivera and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). In Chapter 1 we meet Félix Rojas, a more “masculine” looking *mujer pública* who

---

the state of being beyond the normative. For example, trans femmes are often banned from women’s sports for being perceived as too good, or banned from beauty pageants for being too beautiful; excess follows trans femme embodiments.

<sup>8</sup> Not all trans femme’s get surgery, or even do hormone replacement therapy. There is no consensus on sizing for trans femmes in those that do get a breast augmentation, though in Latina trans and travesti circles, it would not be heretical to say “go big or go home.”

<sup>9</sup> Kai Cheng Thom, *I Hope we Choose Love* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), 138.

<sup>10</sup> Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 268.

<sup>11</sup> Cis and trans.

Rodríguez refers to with “they/them” pronouns.<sup>12</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 give us tastes of gender nonconforming male presentations. Chapter 4 shows us Ángeles, a trans woman documented in *Plaza de la Soledad* who is a sex worker in La Merced. Lastly, Chapter 5 is all about Adela Vásquez, a trans Cuban sex work activist. In a strictly historical sense, there is excellent content in these chapters on the pastness and contemporaneity of transness in Latin America as it relates to sex work.

I do not aim to deride this aspect, as it is certainly important; however, I found that these inclusions did not have as fruitful of a trans reading than other sections of *Puti Life*, and these were the sections where some suspicion seeped through. For example, in Chapter 1, all we have is a portrait of Félix Rojas, a “masculine” woman who was included in the registry of *mujeres públicas* in 19<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. As Rodríguez notes “nothing in the short bio offers anything suggesting Félix is different from the other women in the book.”<sup>13</sup> As such, I question her decision to change the assumed pronouns of she/her to they/them. It seems like a reading of masculine features (in dress, hairstyle, name) pushes that decision, but the lack of further information on Rojas’ life makes the short inclusion somewhat suspect. Similarly, in Chapter 4, we are first shown a picture of Ángeles in the middle of a dance, and later we are told that she is a trans woman.<sup>14</sup> The challenge of this inclusion comes from an absence once again. As Rodríguez mentions, Goded (the director of *Plaza de la Soledad*) does not reference Ángeles’ transness in the documentary; rather, as

---

<sup>12</sup> Public woman. Used to refer to the sex workers in Mexico being registered through the state for health and sanitation.

<sup>13</sup> Rodríguez, 59.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 175-76.

Rodríguez reads through Trinh T. Minh-ha, Goded aims to make meaning “not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empt[y] or [decentralize] it.”<sup>15</sup> As such, there is some irony in providing that source of authority in reference to Ángeles’ history, of which the book, unwittingly, outs.

These rhetorical choices change the way the book is read. As with Félix, we may read transness on a face or body, but the absence of designation makes that reading not easily stabilized (as Trinh Minh-ha writes).<sup>16</sup> Many of the other photos included in the book could have been of trans women or trans femmes as well. Even the cover of Vanessa del Rio gave me a feeling of transness, but I am of two minds here. While I hold my suspicions of the inclusion of some trans narrative because of the inevitable gaps in the history presented, I also appreciate the inclusion. Again, these inclusions are important. The visibility of transness historically is important and acknowledging the history of sex work in trans lives is integral to modern trans activist movements as well. Rodríguez is doing important work in this aspect. Further, the designation of transness does not entirely delimit who is trans in the photographs reproduced; rather, these clear inclusions (for which the Chapter on Adela Vásquez stands as model) not only show the entwinement of trans history with sex worker history, but also the direct kinships that are developed around them.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Documentary Is/Not a Name” *October* 52 (1990): 89; quoted in Rodríguez, 177. The direct connection to this reference is to Raquel (another subject of the documentary) and her mental health, and the fact that her explanation of experiencing hallucinations isn’t explained in the documentary either.

<sup>16</sup> Minh-ha, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Jamey Jespersion, “Trans Sex Work in Colonial North America: A Herstory,” in

This is precisely where I find the book to have the largest impact for a trans reading. If we return to the examples above, we may say that the trans women (or suspected trans women) have some form of kin around them. For Ángeles, she has her long-time partner Esther who states, “*Cuando estamos solas nos amamos intensamente, desde donde somos, desde quienes somos*” (when we are alone, we love each other intensely, from where we are, from who we are).<sup>18</sup> If we look to Chapter 5 on Adela Vásquez we see how Rodríguez herself is Adela’s kin. With Rodríguez sharing with a photo of her embraced with Adela, the reader witnesses how *Putá Life* is a work of kin-making and love.<sup>19</sup> Rodríguez consistently shares with the reader that she does not have all the meanings or the only meaning, where “even if Adela, Vanessa ... or indeed any of the women I have profiled over the course of this book were here with us now, representing themselves, we wouldn’t really know them, not fully. And that is as it should be.”<sup>20</sup> Where Rodríguez works from a standpoint of not having all the information (and not aiming to provide all the meanings), she guides our reading through love.

As such, it is Rodríguez’ ethical standpoint which holds great value for a trans reading of *Putá Life*. I briefly showed above how Rodríguez implicates herself in the genealogies of *putá* life. She is especially careful in making sure she does not totalize a story for her own purposes, and instead reads a photograph, an interview, a pornographic film, with love and tenderness. Perhaps this might be where I have some suspicion in her trans readings, but it is where

---

*History of Global Sex Work*, ed. Catherine Phipps (forthcoming, Spring 2024).

<sup>18</sup> *Plaza de la Soledad*, directed by Maya Goded (Monstro Films, 2006); quoted in Rodríguez, 175.

<sup>19</sup> Rodríguez, 209.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

we learn from Rodríguez a queer affective methodology. Rodríguez speaks to a “sensory encounter,” and a lingering as a methodological tool in reading history.<sup>21</sup> By bringing herself into the fold of the narratives she does not attempt to tame the excessive or give pity to those categorized as being excessive. Rather, Rodriguez shows us how we are bound to each other. It may be something as simple as a shared name (as Rodríguez notes, there are many Juana Maria’s in the *mujeres públicas* registry – I myself share a name in Dolores with a handful), or a shared history (of Santería, of geography, of upraising). This touching becomes a loving embrace of creating kinship.

The most stunning example of this comes with Chapter 4, “Touching Alterity: The Women of Casa Xochiquetzal.” When writing on the photographs of aging sex workers who live in the house, Rodríguez expresses a lot of shame from looking at a close-up photograph of Amelia, one of the residents. The shame she encounters (or, in other words she begins to touch) is *femme* aging. As she writes, “I am ashamed of how sad this photograph makes me feel, how far away from my own attachments to performances of feminine beauty imagined to be past their prime [...] a seemingly universal image of sexy that is far away from us.”<sup>22</sup> This sober take on Amelia’s photograph is one that Rodríguez does not shy away from, and further, forces the reader to come into contact with as well. And the reading of the photograph does not end there.

If we linger with Rodríguez a bit longer, we would “look more carefully, to look beyond despair, to fabulate other possibilities for the pasts that these women carried with them into this frame.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 204 and 211.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 148.

In my own experience with this chapter, I saw myself in the photograph of Paola Pacheco Juárez. In the photo she stands naked for the camera, with bold makeup, curved tattooed eyebrows, and a necklace related to Santería. Rodríguez writes that Paola's body bears the traces of "the five children she bore and abandoned [...] and she dreams of one day finding them."<sup>24</sup> To me, Paola's small breasts reflect my own and, I am sad to say, her body shape shares similarities to my own as well. While lingering I encounter my own anxiety surrounding my transition that has taken so long already and seems to never end. But, as Rodríguez shows us, the shame we experience as a result of the face of the other (and specifically, another who is excessive) should not leave us unmoored. As such, I also question my own aims towards passing (while being open with my visibility) paired with the need for *puta* aesthetics as something already always separate from my embodiment.

*Putas* teaches us to not read *putas* in tragedy, or as some moral lesson – those stories are everywhere, aimed at controlling the excessive. At the same time Rodríguez does not speak over anyone's story, despite my criticisms. Rodríguez' reading is done through a loving perception to develop kin.<sup>25</sup> As such, when I linger even more with Paola, I see a *puta*. Her makeup is flawless, her Santa Muerte tattoo is badass, and her large ribs pushed forward makes her stand with authority. She does not try to hide her stomach. She holds her sexuality as she ages and looks directly back into the camera with a slight smirk. Through her history, she still looks back at the camera, as a proud *puta* who is still here.

If it has not been noted yet, my own writing is a bit facetious

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>25</sup> María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3-19.

and excessive. My experience as a Latina trans femme is my own. Trans femme embodiment ranges from tomboy to high femme, to everything in between and more. This is one of the reasons why *Put a Life* holds importance for trans studies. As a methodological framework, Rodríguez' work of love and queer affective kinships present us an agential reading of those who live in excess. In the image of the *puta*, she implicates us all. As she says, "this text has invited you to become entangled with *puta* life because you already are."<sup>26</sup> If anything, in my own individual reading of *Put a Life*, I come out of it wanting even bigger breasts, and I am now glad to say, like Juana Maria Rodríguez, I am also a *puta*.

---

<sup>26</sup> Rodríguez, 212.



## Bibliography

Jespersion, Jamey. "Trans Sex Work in Colonial North America: A Herstory." In *History of Global Sex Work*, edited by Catherine Phipps (forthcoming, Spring 2024).

Lugones, María. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3-19.

Minh-Ha, Trinh T. "Documentary Is/Not a Name," *October* 52 (1990): 76-98.

Namaste, Viviane. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000.

*Plaza de la Soledad*. Directed by Maya Goded. Monstro Films, 2006.

Rodríguez, Juana Maria. *Putá Life: Seeing Latinas, Working Sex*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023.

Thom, Kai Cheng. *I Hope we Choose Love*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019.

# Constellating Trans Activist Histories

**Niamh Timmons** (she/they)

Mount Holyoke College

*Abstract: The narrative that the 1969 Stonewall Riots were the origin of queer and trans liberatory movements is common in queer and trans communities and institutions. This emphasis on Stonewall, however, has come at the price of minimizing or erasing other queer and trans activist histories and legacies. I propose using the framework of 'constellating' as a means of thinking about multiple points of trans activist histories and how they relate to one another. Such a reading enables us to see trans brilliance in and beyond Stonewall.*

I want to begin with a story. Requesting a show of hands, I ask the students in my Feminist/Queer/Trans Disability Studies class if they are familiar with Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera. *The majority of students proceed to raise their hands.* I then ask them if they are familiar with Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.). *Only two students raise their hands.* Finally, I ask my students if they know of Johnson and Rivera as part of the Stonewall riots. *Nearly all my students raise their hands once more.* We discuss how Johnson and Rivera are remembered in queer and trans communities as part of a spark that “ignited” queer and trans organizing because of their involvement at Stonewall, and then we shift the conversation to how Johnson and Rivera’s many years of organizing in its aftermath is minimized.<sup>1</sup> I share this story not to shame my students for knowing only certain trans histories; on the contrary, I do so to illuminate the single moment that is often repeated, memorialized, and enshrined in trans and queer activist histories: that Stonewall was the beginning, and, often, the isolated origin of trans and queer activism.

I see this narrative rhetorically deployed all the time in both queer and trans communities, as well as in popular media.<sup>2</sup> As evidenced by my second question to my students, such a narrative obscures other trans activist histories, including those that directly

---

<sup>1</sup> See Niamh Timmons, “Towards A Trans Feminist Disability Studies,” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 17 (2020): 46-63.

<sup>2</sup> For example, this is evident in popular press spaces such as *National Geographic’s* “What was the Stonewall Uprising” or the *History Channel’s* description of the riots. These are not the origins of such discourse, rather a popular continuation of rhetoric embodied in many communities about Stonewall and queer/trans activism. This is part of the larger “Stonewall Myth” or “Stonewall Exceptionalism” narratives.

followed the momentum of Stonewall. In this critical commentary, I wish to illuminate how the dominance of the Stonewall narrative risks eclipsing not only activism that followed the riots but also regional histories of trans activism throughout the U.S. and Canada around the same time. I do not believe we should minimize the importance of Stonewall; rather, I want to imagine what it would look like if we began to ‘constellate’ trans histories. Constellating is an intrinsically relational framework which enables readings within trans histories, as well as what Kyles Gemmell, Kobe Natachu, and Dharmakrishna Mirza call “pre-binary” gender histories.<sup>3</sup> My focus on “trans” activism here includes some Two-Spirit activist histories as part of what I call a “trans activist constellation,” but with the acknowledgment that “Two-Spirit” itself is its own distinct constellation that is, at times, in relationship with a trans constellation. Thus, the trans activist constellation I conceive of here intrinsically highlights relationality between trans and pre-binary genders. Further, “trans” as a gender category is relatively modern, so a trans activist constellation also includes histories predating the usage of the term and recognizing the dynamics of gender terminology in these histories. Constellating the abundance of regional trans activist histories and their importance alongside that of Stonewall allows for opportunities to view the

---

<sup>3</sup> The notion of “pre-binary” reflects gender systems that predate the introduction of the colonial gender binary. This concept comes from the work of Kyles Gemmell, Dharmakrishna Mirza, and Kobe Natachu. “Pre-binary” is not limited to Indigenous gender systems, but is inclusive of them and other genders such as khwaja sira, hijra, and others that predate the colonial gender binary. Kyles Gemmell, “haʔł kʷ(i) adsəslabcebut/Watch Over Yourself Well: (Re)writing Two-Spirit Coast Salish Bodies through Canoe-Based Practices,” June 12 2022, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon.

dynamism and brilliance of trans organizing.

Rhetoric scholar Malea Powell (Miami and Eastern Shawnee) describes the potential of centering constellations within the scope of cultural rhetorics:

A constellation [...] allows for all the meaning-making practices and their relationships to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses, among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding the subject captive.<sup>4</sup>

Constellating differs from a linear or intersecting path in that it speaks to multiple points of emergence that operate in conversation with one another. There is no defined point of center, much like a constellation in the sky; rather, all points are in flux, allowing for the possibility of new generative meanings and conversations. Writing about constellation approaches in trans U.S. history, Andrés López (Mayan) and Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee) write:

Constellating is a way of weaving histories and stories together that do not focus on one particular center. In this case, we move away from the idea of what being ‘transgender’ or ‘gender expansive’ means. Instead, we put multiple stories together as part of a larger type of storytelling. Through

---

<sup>4</sup> Cultural Rhetorics Lab, “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics,” *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, October 25, 2014.

constellating we can change our storytelling from the traditional ways we narrate history and shift it without the pressure of fitting into preconceived notions or ideas of what any of the categories we use (e.g., trans, community, history) might mean.<sup>5</sup>

As López and Driskill describe, constellating as a practice enables readings that acknowledge the relationality between points that are in constant dialogue with one another. In other words, as applied to trans activist histories and Stonewall, we may decenter Stonewall and read it alongside countless other points of trans activism in a constellation of people, events, and radiance.

Before thinking about alternatives to a dominant Stonewall narrative, it is important to trace what happened at the Stonewall Riots and how they became the focal point for queer and trans histories. When the New York Police Department (NYPD) raided the Stonewall Inn in 1969, it was one event in a series of routine police raids on queer gathering spaces. The riots at Stonewall, located in Greenwich Village — a heavily populated queer neighborhood at the time — quickly brought out the queer community in droves to confront the NYPD. What differed Stonewall from other riots across the city and country at the time, however, was the gathering *outside* rather than *inside* the bar. Further, it attracted media sources with national distribution such

---

<sup>5</sup> Andrés C. López and Qwo-Li Driskill, “U.S. History,” in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities* Second Edition, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022): 585. López and Driskill trace U.S. trans history in terms of the violence and resistance to settler colonialism and anti-Black structures (including but not limited to chattel slavery).

as *The Village Voice*, *New York Daily News*, and *The New York Times*.<sup>6</sup> The formation of the Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade on the one-year anniversary of the Riots began to solidify the narrative of Stonewall exceptionalism.<sup>7</sup> Yet, trans activists remained at the fringe of these celebrations and in the memorialization of Stonewall. As Black trans revolutionary Miss Major describes in her reflection on Stonewall:

It goes back to the fact that Stonewall, for *my gurls*, wasn't a monumental moment. Especially when it started, it was just another night — cops coming in and raid the place, drag us out of the bar, and you're just hoping it's not your turn to get into the paddy wagon that night. It was just life.<sup>8</sup>

Sylvia Rivera's infamous "Y'all Better Quiet Down" speech at the third Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade in 1973 — first found and distributed by Black trans activist and artist Tourmaline — decried the ways that non-trans queers refused to show up for their trans kin in solidarity.<sup>9</sup> Often I hear white queer and trans

---

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Armstrong and Suzanna Crage, "Moments and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (2006): 737. While Armstrong and Crage's study is useful, it is also limited in that it largely doesn't engage race or trans communities and how intersecting identities might challenge readings of these events. These publications on the Stonewall Riots were either homophobic or deeply buried in the newspaper yet they still gave attention to the Stonewall Riots.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 741-742. These parades would then become the foundation for contemporary Pride parades.

<sup>8</sup> Toshio Meronek and Miss Major, *Miss Major Speaks: Conversations with a Black Trans Revolutionary* (New York: Verso Books, 2023), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Sylvia Rivera, "L020A Sylvia Rivera, 'Y'all Better Quiet Down' Original

folks claim that Black and Brown trans women fought for queer rights, with little attention to the frustrations of these same trans women with queer communities both historically and in the present moment. This hollow claim also does not account for white queer and trans responsibilities to this foundational activism and how they might be in solidarity with Black and Brown trans women today. I hope that thinking about the pluralities and dynamism of trans activist histories beyond Stonewall can honor these responsibilities and highlight the diversity and brilliance of trans activism.

Of course, I am not the first to think about the limitations of a singular emphasis on Stonewall in activist histories. Emily Hobson, in *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, describes the myth that gay and lesbian activism flared for a spontaneous moment in 1969 at Stonewall as “Stonewall Exceptionalism.”<sup>10</sup> Hobson argues that such a mythologization of Stonewall disregards and minimizes other queer organizing, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area. At the same time, popular depictions of Stonewall such as Roland Emmerich’s 2015 film *Stonewall* perpetuate a whitewashed narrative of the Stonewall Riots.<sup>11</sup> While I find these critiques useful and important, they do not consider “Stonewall Exceptionalism” within trans communities, nor the larger history of trans activism, broadly. Given all this, how could the constellating of trans activist histories begin?

---

Authorized Video, 1973 Gay Pride Rally NYC.” The backlash Rivera experienced from her speech led to the eventual floundering of S.T.A.R. and Rivera retreating from activist activity. The video clip was found and digitized by Tourmaline.

<sup>10</sup> Emily Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Gay Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 6. Hobson describes the term as emerging from an unnamed person in the editing process of her book.

<sup>11</sup> *Stonewall*, DVD, directed by Roland Emmerich (Roadside Attractions, 2015).



One starting point would be to think about S.T.A.R. and other trans activism in New York City immediately following Stonewall. S.T.A.R. was founded as a separate group from the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) in order to focus on the needs of what we now call trans communities.<sup>12</sup> S.T.A.R. activists established S.T.A.R. House — a space for houseless queer and trans youth — advocated for the needs of trans people, and called for the end of psychiatric violence. S.T.A.R.’s organizing was a synthesis between the demands of queer organizing and other radicals of the time, such as the Black Panthers and Young Lords.<sup>13</sup> In addition to local activist histories, there should also be an emphasis beyond New York City. This would include the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot in 1966, as depicted in Susan Stryker’s 2005 documentary *Screaming Queens*.<sup>14</sup> Occurring in the years prior to Stonewall, the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot is part of a larger trans activist history in San Francisco in the Tenderloin neighborhood.<sup>15</sup> In the Midwest, we could look at drag

---

<sup>12</sup> The GLF was more interested in creating non-queer alliances and was arguably intersectional in its approaches, while the GAA was largely focuses on sexuality as a means of oppression. While S.T.A.R. was established because the failures of these two groups, they still collaborated with them when needed.

<sup>13</sup> For an extensive account on S.T.A.R.’s organizing see the chapter “Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.)” in Stephen Cohen’s *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York: “An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail.”*

<sup>14</sup> This documentation also needs to be complicated and it also minimizes the contributions of trans people of color.

<sup>15</sup> This particular local history was partially a reason for San Francisco’s reluctance to embrace the national Stonewall narrative via the Christopher Street Day Parade (Armstrong and Cragge, 732-733 and 741-742). Parts of the Tenderloin are now recognized as the “Transgender District” (formerly “Compton’s Transgender District”), the first legally recognized transgender district to honor this history of trans activism, specifically by trans women of color, in the neighborhood.

performances and the visibility of early activism of individuals such as Miss Major.<sup>16</sup> In this region, the work of Joy Ellison illuminates the influence of spaces such as the Jewel Box Revue, a drag show at The Apollo Theater in Chicago, which billed itself as “The Most Exciting Deception in the World.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout the mid-twentieth century, its cross-country tours brought visibility to trans drag art throughout the U.S.<sup>18</sup> It is also important to expand the scope beyond just the U.S. Although Canada’s trans activist histories have no direct lineage to that of Stonewall, they share similarities in how they often centered trans women of color sex workers and later organized around HIV/AIDS. In particular, we could look at Mirha Soleil-Ross and Xantra Mackay’s work with trans homeless folks and sex workers in Toronto during the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> Or, during the same time, Sandra Laframboise’s work at the High Risk Project Society, which addressed HIV/AIDS in trans communities and was based in a Native health center in Vancouver.<sup>20</sup> These are but a sampling of the many points in the trans activist constellation.

As mentioned, “trans” and its variations is relatively modern vocabulary, so that also means one has to be conscious of the language we use(d) to describe people. This requires us to read

---

<sup>16</sup> Ellison presented some of this research at the 2023 National Women’s Studies Association Conference in Minneapolis.

<sup>17</sup> Meronek and Major, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ross and Mackay were involved in providing social services in Toronto for trans people. In 1999, she founded Meal-Trans at 519 Church Street Community Centre, which provided meals and peer support for trans people. They also expanded existing services to provide peer support and other resources for HIV positive and sex workers trans people.

<sup>20</sup> Laframboise also is Two-Spirit and her activism operates? at the intersection of Indigenous and trans politics.

closely and imagine when historians mention, for example, “men who wear women’s attire,” or vice versa, in their writings.<sup>21</sup> By doing so, we can begin to think of the temporal nature of gender systems, how they have evolved, and how they might relate to our present moment. Thus, we might further extend the trans activist constellation to consider relational points of activism beyond the scope of “trans,” primarily outside the colonial gender binary. Kai Pyle (Ojibwe and Métis) has argued that the emergence of Two-Spirit organizing coincided with the early stages of trans studies and “transgender” activism during the early 1990s, yet is often dismissed by contemporary trans activists and scholars.<sup>22</sup> Kalaniopua Young (Kānaka Maoli) similarly argues how *Māhū* (a pre-binary gender) activists fought alongside other Native Hawaiians against displacement in O’ahu in the same year as the Stonewall Riots.<sup>23</sup> As I described at the beginning of this paper, pre-binary gender activism should be part of the broader conversation with recognition that “trans” as a label does not encompass them but can be constellated in relation to trans activism.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> See C. Riley Snorton’s work in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* to unpack some of the complexities of Black trans life pre-Stonewall. In addition, see Jules Gill-Peterson’s recent work on Mary Jones. Both scholars show the nuances and messiness of Black “trans” histories in the nineteenth-century US.

<sup>22</sup> Niamh Timmons, host, “Kai Pyle,” *Campus to Community* (podcast), August 22, 2022, accessed June 22, 2023. Much of Pyle’s writing engages Two-Spirit histories, particularly in Anishinaabe and Métis contexts.

<sup>23</sup> Tom Boelstroff et al., “Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 430.

<sup>24</sup> This is building off a conversation Kai Pyle, Andrés López, and myself had at the “Reimagining the Origins of Trans Studies” roundtable at the 2022 National Women’s Studies Association Conference. Pyle specifically emphasized the notion

It is for all these reasons that I am fond and adamant of a constellating approach to trans activist histories. Constellating allows us to see the dynamism, complexities, messiness, similarities, differences?, and brilliance of all those trans and pre-binary activists who came before us. Stonewall will always be a brilliant flashpoint in trans activism, but so much more radiance is missed out on if it is our only narrative of the past. Constellating the countless histories of trans and pre-binary gender activism reveals the resilience and dreams of these communities. And it is by thinking of these histories in relation to one another that we can truly appreciate such resilience and dreaming.

---

of a “relational politic” rather than a “coalitional politic” in order to think of the relationship between “trans” and Two-Spirit communities.

## Bibliography

Armstrong, Elizabeth and Suzanna Crago. "Moments and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth." *American Sociological Review* 71, no.5 (2006): 724-751.

Boelstroff, Tom, Mauro Cabral, micha cárdenas, Trystan Cotton, Eric A. Stanley, Kalaniopua Young, and Aren Z. Aizura. "Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 419-439.

Cultural Rhetorics Lab. "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics." *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, October 25, 2014.

<https://www.enculturation.net/our-story-begins-here>.

Gemmell, Kyles. "haʔl k<sup>w</sup>(i) adsəslabcebut/Watch Over Yourself Well: (Re)writing Two-Spirit Coast Salish Bodies through Canoe-Based Practices." June 12 2022. Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon.

Hobson, Emily. *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Gay Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.

López, Andrés and Qwo-li Driskill. "U.S. History," in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource by and for Transgender Communities* Second Edition, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth, 585-613. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Meronek, Toshio and Miss Major. *Miss Major Speaks: Conversations*

*with a Black Trans Revolutionary*. New York: Verso Books, 2023.

Rivera, Sylvia. "L020A Sylvia Rivera, 'Y'all Better Quiet Down' Original Authorized Video, 1973 Gay Pride Rally NYC."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb-JIOWUw1o>.

*Stonewall*. Directed by Roland Emmerich. Roadside Attractions, 2015.

Timmons, Niamh, host. "Kai Pyle." *Campus to Community* (podcast). August 22, 2022. Accessed June 17 2023.

<https://tunein.com/podcasts/Education-Podcasts/Campus-to-Community-p2034710/>.

Timmons, Niamh. "Towards a Trans Feminist Disability Studies." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 17 (2020): 46-63.

# **Androgyny in the Archives: 1970s Trans and Feminist Encounters with the Promise and Politics of Non-Binary**

**Emily Cousens** (they/she)  
University of London

*Abstract: Despite the recurrent appeal to androgynous myths, imagery and research in the US mid-twentieth century transgender archive, the affects and politics motivating these have been subject to little consideration. This paper explores the possibilities and problems contained within the mobilisation of androgynous ideals for gendered liberation. It argues that androgyny offered a basis for affective and subjective investments in non-binary gender to be pursued and articulated and considers how a philosophy of androgyny might complicate current discussions of queer and trans taxonomy.*

**BEM'S GENDER ROLE INVENTORY**

DESCRIBE YOURSELF

1 /	2 /	3 /	4 /	5 /	6 /	7 /
NEVER OR ALMOST TRUE	USUALLY NOT TRUE	SOMETIMES BUT INFREQUENTLY TRUE	OCCASIONALLY TRUE	OFTEN TRUE	USUALLY TRUE	ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS TRUE
1. <input type="checkbox"/> Self reliant		21. <input type="checkbox"/> Reliable		41. <input type="checkbox"/> Warm		
2. <input type="checkbox"/> Yielding		22. <input type="checkbox"/> Analytical		42. <input type="checkbox"/> Solemn		
3. <input type="checkbox"/> Helpful		23. <input type="checkbox"/> Sympathetic		43. <input type="checkbox"/> Willing to take a stand		
4. <input type="checkbox"/> Defends own beliefs		24. <input type="checkbox"/> Jealous		44. <input type="checkbox"/> Tender		
5. <input type="checkbox"/> Cheerful		25. <input type="checkbox"/> Has leadership abilities		45. <input type="checkbox"/> Friendly		
6. <input type="checkbox"/> Moody		26. <input type="checkbox"/> Truthful		46. <input type="checkbox"/> Aggressive		
7. <input type="checkbox"/> Independant		27. <input type="checkbox"/> Sensitive to the needs of others		47. <input type="checkbox"/> Gullible		
8. <input type="checkbox"/> Shy		28. <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding		48. <input type="checkbox"/> Inefficient		
9. <input type="checkbox"/> Conscientious		29. <input type="checkbox"/> Willing to take risks		49. <input type="checkbox"/> Acts like a leader		
10. <input type="checkbox"/> Athletic		30. <input type="checkbox"/> Secretive		50. <input type="checkbox"/> Childlike		
11. <input type="checkbox"/> Affectionate		31. <input type="checkbox"/> Makes decisions easily		51. <input type="checkbox"/> Adaptable		
12. <input type="checkbox"/> Theatrical		32. <input type="checkbox"/> Compassionate		52. <input type="checkbox"/> Individualistic		
13. <input type="checkbox"/> Assertive		33. <input type="checkbox"/> Sincere		53. <input type="checkbox"/> Does not use harsh language		
14. <input type="checkbox"/> Flatterable		34. <input type="checkbox"/> Self sufficient		54. <input type="checkbox"/> Unsystematic		
15. <input type="checkbox"/> Happy		35. <input type="checkbox"/> Eager to sooth hurt feelings		55. <input type="checkbox"/> Competitive		
16. <input type="checkbox"/> Strong Personality		36. <input type="checkbox"/> Conceited		56. <input type="checkbox"/> Love children		
17. <input type="checkbox"/> Loyal		37. <input type="checkbox"/> Dominant		57. <input type="checkbox"/> Tactful		
18. <input type="checkbox"/> Unpredictable		38. <input type="checkbox"/> Soft spoken		58. <input type="checkbox"/> Ambitious		
19. <input type="checkbox"/> Forceful		39. <input type="checkbox"/> Likable		59. <input type="checkbox"/> Gentle		
20. <input type="checkbox"/> Feminine		40. <input type="checkbox"/> Masculine		60. <input type="checkbox"/> Conventional		

Figure 1: Bem's Gender Role Inventory. In the Ari Kane/Joseph DeMaio's collection. Acc.No.:2008-006. Box2. 219. In the Rikki Swan Institute Collection at the University of Victoria Transgender Archives.



## Introduction

If, like myself, one was unfamiliar with Sandra Bem or her gender inventory, this list resembles a light-hearted, popular magazine-style personality test. Across 60 adjectives the reader marks on a scale from 1 to 7 as to how strongly they identify with each trait. As one begins to answer the questions, it turns out that the document is also fairly amusing. Would I say I am, 2: usually not gullible? And/or 7: always or almost always gullible? How 12: theatrical am I? And if I strongly identify as 48: inefficient, what clues will I be giving about my gender? However, far from an ephemeral or ironic attempt to classify personalities, this inventory, which was also known as the “sex role inventory” and the “androgyny test,” became widely adopted in psychology classrooms and research studies, and it has been used, “persistently since its inception.”<sup>1</sup> So, what is this document doing in the collection of Ariadne (Ari) Kane at the University of Victoria Transgender Archives?

Kane, who is an androgyne and uses he/him pronouns, was an influential driver of the early transgender community in the twentieth-century United States. Kane led Boston-based crossdressing social organizations from 1974,<sup>2</sup> and in 1975 he

---

<sup>1</sup> Hilary M. Lips, and Sandra Bem, “Naming the Impact of Gendered Categories and Identities,” *Sex Roles* 76, no. 9-10 (2017): 631.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1960s-1980s, many crossdresser organisations formed and they were either short lived due to grassroots organisational pressures around time, money and leadership structure, or they morphed into new organisations. Members of The Tiffany Club (which itself was born out of a split within the Boston Gamma Chapter of Virginia Prince’s Tri Sigma) later led separate, splinter organisations which better reflected their ethos around leadership, as well as their perspectives on gender. The Tiffany Club was an offshoot of the Cherrystone

founded Fantasia Fair which is an annual and ongoing week-long event that initially catered to crossdressers and transsexuals in 1975.<sup>3</sup> Through these actions, he played a critical role in the establishment of connections between trans communities. In addition, Kane was a successful and influential sexologist who was committed to educating “helping professionals” on gender-related issues to improve the perceptions and understanding of trans people amongst clinical gatekeepers, psychologists, and the general public. To this end, Kane founded the Human Outreach and Achievement Institute in 1975 (later the Outreach Institute of Gender Studies) which sought to counter ignorance and misinformation in the fields of Education, Counselling, Medicine, Law, Nursing and Human Services. Like Kane’s Fantasia Fair, the organization continues to this day.

Kane was among a significant number of trans individuals in the 1970s and 1980s whose research into their own gendered subjectivities led them to be prominent theorists of sex, gender, and sexuality. Kane and those like him were some of the most well-read authorities on the available clinical, historical, trans, and feminist literature on sex and gender diversity. The presence of this inventory in Kane’s collection can tell many stories if one reads it as continuous with the engagement of trans people with pioneering sex/gender research. It highlights the academic sophistication with which trans-centric theories of sex/gender were constructed in the

---

Club, and the latter further evolved into the Mayflower Club in 1979 with the ambition of creating a more progressive culture (which typically meant less hostility to non-normative sexualities and trans articulations). crossdressers). See Merissa Sherill Lynn, “The TV-TS Tapestry Newsletter,” no.7 (January 8, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Fantasia Fair is now called Trans Week. After an initial focus on transfeminine people, it is now open to nonbinary and transmasculine people.

second half of the twentieth century, and one where embodied knowledge was put into dialogue with extant scientific research. The inventory contributes to discussions regarding the faith that some trans individuals had in emergent psychosocial and clinical gender research. Finally, it contributes to genealogies which complicate the notion that non-binary gender is a new phenomenon. These are all valuable arguments, and they have been made elsewhere by myself and others.<sup>4</sup> But, I wish to use the placement of this inventory in Kane's collection to explore the way that "androgyny" was articulated and appealed to within trans and feminist knowledge production during the 1970s, and the affective and political investments contained therein.

### **Sandra Bem and the Androgyny Test**

Sandra Bem, whose research findings appear throughout the Ariadne Kane collection in the University of Victoria Transgender Archives, was a reputable feminist psychologist from the early 1970s. Her work theorized and championed androgyny, and it

---

<sup>4</sup> See Aaron Devor, and Nicholas Matte, "Building a Better World for Transpeople: Reed Erickson and the Erickson Educational Foundation," *The International Journal of Transgenderism* 10, no.1 (2007): 47–68; Nicholas Matte, "Historicizing Liberal American Transnormativities: Medicine, Media, Activism, 1960-1990," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2014. For more on the faith that trans people such as Reed Erickson placed in the role of science to lead to the increased social acceptance and accommodation of trans people. See Greta LaFleur et al., *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021). For a longer history of non-binary gender identities see Emily Cousens, *Trans Feminist Epistemologies in the US Second Wave* (London: Palgrave, 2023).

sought to disrupt prevalent and “gratuitous” gender categorizations.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Bem’s categorization inventory contains 20 “masculine”, “feminine,” and “androgynous” traits, and then classifies respondents as either “feminine”, “masculine”, “androgynous” (above the median in both masculine and feminine characteristics), or “undifferentiated” (below the median in both masculine and feminine categories). Critically, Bem’s inventory reads as radical *and* conservative in equal measure. On the one hand, through her presentation of masculinity and femininity as independent scales, with “feminine” and “masculine” both listed (no. 20 and no. 40 respectively), the inventory contests what Julia Serano terms, “oppositional sexism,” that is, “the belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories, each possessing a unique and nonoverlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities and desires.”<sup>6</sup> Yet the inventory upholds the Western, colonial gender binary as it reifies as ‘objective science’ culturally specific and stereotypical understandings of what attributes represent each (binary) gender. For example, masculinity is aggressive, analytical, and causes one to, “act like a leader.” By contrast, femininity is gullible, cheerful, and makes one, “sensitive to other’s needs”. But Bem’s intention for the scale was to counter the idea that expressions of “masculinity” in women or “femininity” in men were signs of poor psychological well-being.<sup>7</sup> To the contrary, she hypothesized that, “a

---

<sup>5</sup> Lips, and Bem, “Naming the Impact,” 628.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville: Seal Press. 2007), 13.

<sup>7</sup> It was conceived as the, “Sex Role Inventory,” in 1974 and comprised 200 personality characteristics that seemed positively valued and stereotypically masculine or feminine, as well as 200 gender-neutral characteristics. For more on

*non-androgynous sex role* can seriously restrict the range of behaviours available to an individual as he or she moves from situation to situation [emphasis mine].”<sup>8</sup> This argument is quite radical, and it is far from an uncritical endorsement of binary gender. Indeed, Bem’s hypothesis reads that if one is cisgender then they are a *socially maladapted* person. By contrast, psychological androgyny (the possession of masculine *and* feminine attributes), is socially and psychologically advantageous. Bem’s codification of forms of expression *as* masculine, feminine, or androgynous, does bake into the inventory conservative, racialized, and classed gender ideals. But at the same time, one can identify on a 7-point scale with each of the 60 different attributes which means there are an enormous  $7^{60}$  possible subject positions available. This is far from a restrictive catalogue as the inventory contains one of the most manifold taxonomies around.<sup>9</sup> Although, perhaps rather than an interpretation of Bem’s inventory as a taxonomy, it instead demonstrates the impossibility of categorizing people according to gender. In this instance, androgyny becomes an index of the infinite and often seemingly contradictory gendered possibilities contained within everyone. In what follows, I propose that the presence of Bem’s inventory in Kane’s archive demonstrates the currency androgyny, that was conceived of as “masculinity and “femininity”

---

Sandra Bem and the Bem Sex Role Inventory see the 2017 special issue of *Sex Roles*.

<sup>8</sup> This essay, “Sex Role Adaptability: One Consequence of Psychological Androgyny,” is also in the Ari Kane collection at the UVIC archives.

<sup>9</sup> This makes

508,021,860,739,623,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 possible combinations.

within the same individual, attained within certain subsets of the mid-twentieth-century US trans community.

### **The Appeal of Androgyny in 1960s-1980s Trans Community Publications**

The extent to which androgynous myths, imagery, and ideals circulated within the trans community periodicals of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s makes the absence of scholastic attention to the appeal of androgyny for early trans communities all the more striking. The notion that [cis] gender was something that could be transcended through the incorporation of masculine and feminine elements in a single individual was a *central* theme in trans community philosophies of the 1970s. Many of these attitudes drew from Virginia Prince's transvestite philosophy of, "Full Personality Expression". Prince's first peer-reviewed article about gender appeared in *The American Journal of Psychotherapy* in 1957.<sup>10</sup> The article was titled, "Homosexuality, Transvestism and Transsexuality: Reflections on Their Etiology and Differentiations," and it was accompanied by a preamble from Prince's friend and future medical expert on gender variance, Harry Benjamin.<sup>11</sup> In addition to her

---

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Prince, "Homosexuality, Transvestism and Transsexuality: Reflections on Their Etiology and Differentiation," *The International Journal of Transgenderism* 8, no. 4 (2005): 17–20. Previously published as, "Homosexuality, Transvestism and Transsexuality: Reflections on Their Etiology and Differentiation," in *The American Journal of Psychotherapy* 11 (1957): 80–85.

<sup>11</sup> As a trained pharmacologist, Prince had contributed to the field of Chemistry prior to her focus on gender. For a list of the research Prince published in Chemistry see Zagria Cowan, *Virginia Prince (1912-2009): A Conflicted Life in Trans Activism* (Gender Variance Who's Who, 2013), 54.

academic contributions, she developed her philosophy of sex and gender, which can be briefly summarized as biologically essentialist on sex and socially constructionist on gender, in the 100 “Virgin Views” columns she penned in her bi-monthly journal *Transvestia*. Prince was highly influential and well-connected, yet she was divisive and exclusionary. One of Prince’s more valuable contributions was her popularization of a critique of what Serano has subsequently termed effemimania which is the, “obsession and anxiety over male expressions of femininity,” that leads to the social and individual policing of femininity in subjects assigned male at birth.<sup>12</sup> Transfeminine individuals like Prince resisted the social devaluation of femininity, but they maintained a conservative view of certain attributes as properly feminine. Many trans community organizations or publications that were influenced by, or that followed Prince’s idea of Full Personality Expression adhered to this understanding of androgyny as a combination of gendered traits. This often aesthetically took the form of group logos that combined traditionally masculine and feminine imagery.<sup>13</sup>

This conceptualization of androgyny reflected a transgender philosophy in which liberation from the constraints of assigned gender was not necessarily about *resistance* to gender stereotypes altogether, but instead, it was based on the obtainment of non-stigmatized access to characteristics conventionally restricted to the ‘opposite’ gender. This idea encompassed the non-binary

---

<sup>12</sup> Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 286.

<sup>13</sup> For some examples see: Virginia Prince, *Transvestia* vol. 7 no. 40 1966, front cover; Virginia Prince, *Transvestia* vol. 10 no. 55 1969, front cover; Fredericks *Turnabout* no.1 1963, front cover; *Journal of Male Feminism* 1977, front cover.

gendered possibilities of the day.<sup>14</sup> Orientalist adoption of Yin and Yang, and Carl Jung's concepts of anima (the feminine principle, especially as it is present in men) and animus (the masculine principle, especially as it is present in women) often embellished this ontological framework. This androgynous/nonbinary ideal appealed to those who wished to explore diverse gendered possibilities, and often such adherents viewed these gendered subjectivities as less repressive and more adaptable. Much of the 1970s androgynous discourse relied on the notion of 'crossing' gender, thereby the gender binary remained intact. But, for many transfeminine individuals in the 1970s, though especially those with access to whiteness and wealth, overcoming the prohibitions of gender 'crossing' was a socially risky and radical endeavour. As theorists of misogyny, transmisogyny, and the politics of femme remind us; for one to embrace feminine affects and aesthetics requires daring: it is not the default or dominant position.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> The sex/gender distinction is present through much of the trans community literature. In fact, it is a staple in many of the trans epistemologies at the time which emphasised the normality of gender fluidity and sought to educate those who conflated sex with gender. Elsewhere (Cousens, *Trans Feminist Epistemologies*, 2023) I have argued that trans individuals including Virginia Prince played a key role in shaping the sex/gender distinction as it became embedded within clinical narratives (e.g. Stoller 1968) and then adopted by second wave feminists (e.g. Millett 1970, Rubin 1975). For more on trans adoptions of androgyny in print culture, and the appeal to Yin and Yang, anima and animus, see Lynn & Carter, *The TV-TS Tapestry* no. 43 (1984): 40.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Nat Raha, "Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no.3 (2017): 632–646; Lola Olufemi, "Transmisogyny: Who wins?" in *Feminism, Interrupted* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 49–66.



Kane was one of the pioneers of androgyny theory from a trans perspective. In an undated late-1970s essay in his collection, "Toward Realization of an Androgynous Lifestyle," Kane defines androgyny as:

a comfortable blending of manners, clothing choices, styles, values and attitudes- typically assigned to only one of the other sex- but is more and more becoming a realizable alternative to polarization effects of gender differentiation. It replaces the stereotypic roles that polarize the sexes. Furthermore, it offers the individual an opportunity to express the totalness of one's self. When discussing the concept of androgyny, there is a transcendence from the prison of gender roles from which many negative judgements are made about one's lifestyle choice.<sup>16</sup>

For Kane androgyny, as the combination of masculinity and femininity, was both a potential site of transgendered subjectivity and, given the socially credible scientific research he was able to draw on, it offered a politically viable grammar for trans normative inclusion.<sup>17</sup> It appears his engagement with Bem's research represented a shared sense that androgyny was an overlooked and potentially liberatory set of ideals. For Bem, "It may well be- as the women's liberation movement has urged- that the androgynous

---

<sup>16</sup> See Ariadne Kane, "Toward Realization of an Androgynous Lifestyle," in Ari Kane records, 1943-2003, the Rikki Swin Institute collection at the University of Victoria Transgender Archives. (n.d.), 4.

<sup>17</sup> See Matte, "Historicizing," for a discussion of the dynamics of liberal transnormativity that subtended a white, middle-class pursuit of inclusion.

individual will someday come to design a new and more human standard of psychological health".<sup>18</sup> Likewise for Kane, the realization of the androgynous aspects of one's personality results, "in allowing full flowering of one's full self-expression and directing it in positive ways".<sup>19</sup> These utopian investments in the possibilities that androgyny contained for the liberation of gender from its cisnormative constraints also made their way into second-wave feminist books. For example, Andrea Dworkin wrote that androgyny might be the, "one road to freedom open to women, men and that emerging majority, the rest of us".<sup>20</sup> However, whilst these arguments are publicly available, if perhaps unacknowledged and under-theorised, most openly trans people constructed and circulated their meticulously researched theories of gender outside of the elitist system of academia and the patriarchal, profit-driven, and exclusionary, mainstream publishing industry. Community literature like newsletters, journals, and zines, are a rich source of sex/gender knowledge production in the second half of the twentieth century, and they are a key site of trans community consciousness. Many trans individuals in the 1960s and 1970s also amassed highly impressive collections of available gender-related literature, and in scrapbooks and private collections they amassed stories of androgynous individuals or emergent scientific and psychological theories of androgyny which encompassed a vast trans knowledge base that challenged prevailing sex/gender dualisms. Yet contemporary queer, trans, and feminist discussions make scant reference to this late twentieth-century androgynous moment

---

<sup>18</sup> Sandra L. Bem, "Sex Role Adaptability: One Consequence of Psychological Androgyny," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31, no. 4 (1975): 643.

<sup>19</sup> Kane, "Toward Realization", 4.

<sup>20</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974), 154.

despite its potential to historicize and inform discussions of gender.

### **1970s Androgynous Ideals and Today's Taxonomical Renaissance**

Kadji Amin has discussed the apparent explosion of sex and gender identity categories, which he terms the “taxonomical renaissance,” within contemporary queer culture in the Global North. “Vernacular discourses,” Amin writes, “have subdivided the ‘tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes’ of gender and sexual orientation to which Sedgwick refers into a series of more precise distinctions.”<sup>21</sup> However, taxonomy is far from new, and the trans archive is full of constantly evolving attempts at divisions and subdivisions of gendered subjectivities and identities. There are endless lists, that are often handwritten, of the subculture’s vernacular at that point in time and countless visual illustrations of these distinctions. For one example, Kane’s drawing of the, “plant-growth-continuum spectrum.” It represents cross-dressing as the seed on the ground which gives rise to major developmental points on the continuum that is represented as a branching tree. The first branch is, “TV [transvestite]”, then “TG [transgender]”, and finally “TS [transsexual]”.<sup>22</sup> Amin rightly cautions that the contemporary queer taxonomies borrow from the racist universalizing history of scientific taxonomy, and the trans archive

---

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Kane, A., “Descriptive model,” in *The Phenomenon of Cross-dressing*. P7. Handwritten document. The University of Victoria Transgender Archives, Rikki Swin Collection. Box 3. Folder 3.3.

is not exempt from these associations. However, what stood out to me about my encounter with this inventory in Kane's collection, is the affective currency of the inventory, and the creative combinations of gender feelings that it gave voice to. This formulation of androgyny offers a historically specific and valuable articulation of non-binary subjectivities that is animated by a resistance to the coercive, compulsory, and restrictive gender binary. I highlight Bem's inventory to push back against Amin's interpretation of the recent increase in non-binary identifications as a reinforcement of its corollary which is the possibility of a 'binary' uncontaminated gender identity.<sup>23</sup> Bem's inventory and the androgynous discourse it participated in foregrounds categorical contamination and complexity as an inevitable dimension of gendered life. For example, if one can be equally 6: happy and 15: moody, or neither happy nor moody, then conventional notions of gender role essentialism and mutual exclusivity, as well as a metaphysics where categories are made possible by their constitutive outside, become undone. This inventory is ontologically animated by an understanding that multiplicity and self-authorship are inseparable from the realization of a non-binary and androgynous subjectivity.

For both the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and the trans community groups that formed in the same decade, myths and theories of androgyny were appealed to as a means to imagine or comprehend non-binary and trans-gendered embodiments and possibilities. Perhaps one value of returning to these androgynous investments in the archive is that they give historically grounded

---

<sup>23</sup> See Kadji Amin, "We are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents," *Representations* 158, no. 1 (2022): 106–119.

resistance to the external imposition of identity. Rather than multiply identities and corresponding descriptors, à la Magnus Hirschfield's 1910 postulation of eighty-one possible sexual variations, or the purported contemporary explosion of queer taxonomies identified by Amin, the promise of androgyny as it appears in collections such as Kane's was the promise of one's liberation from their assigned gender role through the adoption and embrace of a 'bi-gendered' set of possibilities. Within this framework aspects of subjectivity and relationality are not discrete, for the possession of various gendered attributes was obtained via self-authorized subjectivity, and not through the coercive, external 'expertise' of the professional.

### **Politically Correct Gender and the Policing of Androgyny**

Androgyny, as it became mobilized in the 1970s and 80s, is far from an altogether rosy story. Not only do the frameworks discussed rely on traditional gender stereotypes to conceptualize 'masculinity' and 'femininity,' but as with many of the political aspirations of the 1970s when the personal became political it was a slippery slope from the contestation of the patriarchal domain of 'proper' politics to the policing of the personal. As Gayatri Spivak explains, "The good insistence that 'the personal is political,'" often transformed itself into something like, "only the personal is political,"<sup>24</sup> and suddenly new prescriptions of politically correct behaviour flourished. This trajectory is well known in the context of the sex wars where a politicization of previously 'private' issues:

---

<sup>24</sup> See Gayatri Spivak, and Ellen Rooney, "'In a Word' Interview," in *The Second Wave Feminism Reader: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London. Routledge, 1997), 358.

rape, sexual harassment, battery (now domestic violence), so led to a regulatory impulse among a faction of the movement who blamed porn and S/M practitioners for the normalization of violent sexual behaviours.<sup>25</sup> The aesthetics of androgyny also took on a similar trajectory. Leslie Feinberg, who traversed the feminist, gay and lesbian, and trans liberation movements, recalls that, “As the women’s movement in the seventies examined the negative values attached to masculinity and femininity in this society, some thought that liberation might lie in creating a genderless form of self-expression and dress. But of course, androgyny was itself just another point on the spectrum of gender expression”.<sup>26</sup> Likewise within some transfeminine communities, Virginia Prince’s concept of Full Personality Expression was conceptualized to both make feminine-coded attributes, expressions, and embodiments (such as heels and emotional openness) available for those assigned male at birth, and it acted as an ideological justification for the vicious distinguishment between politically correct forms of gender variance (transvestism) and more deviant transfeminine embodiments (transsexualism).<sup>27</sup> Prince argued against surgery on the grounds that subjects assigned male at birth could live full-time

---

<sup>25</sup> For more on the feminist sex wars, see C.S. Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger : Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984); Lisa Duggan, “Introduction,” in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, eds. by Lisa Duggan, and Nan D. Hunter (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), 1-14.

<sup>26</sup> Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 114.

<sup>27</sup> See Pihlak, “A Moveable Closet,” which provides a detailed discussion of the gender normativity that infused many of the US transfeminine magazines that existed between 1960 and 1995.

as women without surgery.<sup>28</sup> In Prince's view if the woman is already within, why the need to change what's on the outside? For Prince then, androgyny, which she defined as, "the absence of a role to live up to," influenced a transphobic political climate which sought to deny surgery to trans individuals, and it eventually led to the closure of the majority of gender identity clinics in the United States.<sup>29</sup> These arguments against trans healthcare are also distressingly close to many of those made by Janice Raymond. Her infamous 1979 polemic *The Transsexual Phenomenon* put in motion the contours of trans-exclusionarity in the name of feminism.<sup>30</sup>

Androgyny in some parts of the trans and feminist movements of the 1970s became a regulatory ideal, and at this point, the concept's potential as a means for exploding and multiplying gendered subjectivities and expressions was resignified into a narrative for politically correct forms of gender conceptualizations and embodiments. Yet there is a rich philosophy of androgyny particularly in the collective imaginaries of early trans communities. In these subcultures androgyny was not just a collective aspiration, but a means to negotiate complexly gendered subjectivities, and act as an aspirational horizon for a utopian, non-binary,

---

<sup>28</sup> See Denny, Dallas. "First Contact." *Chrysalis Quarterly*. 2013.

<http://dallasdenny.com/Chrysalis/2013/08/21/first-contact/>.

<sup>29</sup> Virginia Prince, "Virgin Views by Virginia: Androgyny-Gyandry; The Integrated Self," *Transvestia* 16, no. 92 (1977):90.

<sup>30</sup> Raymond argued that trans subjectivities were the product of a patriarchal medical conspiracy, an entirely ahistorical, unresearched argument which overlooks the well-documented fact that it was trans people who informed medical professionals about trans subjectivity in the first place, and that resistance to recognising and accommodating transness are longstanding in clinical settings. On this point see Denny, Dallas. "The Politics of Diagnosis and a Diagnosis of Politics". *Chrysalis Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1992): 9-20.

polymorphously gendered future. Bem's gender inventory and its placement within Ari Kane's collection points to the complex grappling with gender that took place in the 1970s, and its presence offers an insight into the creative entanglement of embodied and embedded trans knowledges with emergent academic research. Beyond taxonomy, beyond mutually exclusive binaries, and beyond gender as subjects situated in the English-speaking Global North know it, the androgynous moment in the archive offers a rich insight into the plurality of gendered feelings and possibilities that 1970s trans epistemologies contained.



## Bibliography

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.

Amin, Kadji. "We are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents." *Representations* 158, no. 1 (2022): 106–119.

Bem, Sandra L. "Sex Role Adaptability: One Consequence of Psychological Androgyny." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31, no. 4 (1975): 634–643.

Bullough, V. L. (Vern L.), and B. Bullough. *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. (1993)

Cowan, Zagria. "Virginia Prince (1912-2009): A Conflicted Life in Trans Activism." *Gender Variance Who's Who*, 2013.

Cousens, Emily. *Trans Feminist Epistemologies in the US Second Wave*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

Denny, Dallas. "The Politics of Diagnosis and a Diagnosis of Politics." *Chrysalis Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1992): 9-20.

Denny, Dallas. "First Contact". *Chrysalis Quarterly*. (2013).  
<http://dallasdenny.com/Chrysalis/2013/08/21/first-contact/>

Devor, Aaron, and Nicholas Matte. "Building a Better World for Transpeople: Reed Erickson and the Erickson Educational

Foundation." *The International Journal of Transgenderism* 10, no.1 (2007): 47–68.

Docter, Richard F. *From Man to Woman: The Transgender Journey of Virginia Prince*. Northridge: Docter Press, 2004.

Duggan, Lisa. "Introduction." In *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, edited by Lisa Duggan, and Nan D. Hutner, 1-14. New York; London: Routledge, 2006.

Dworkin, Andrea. *Woman Hating*. New York: Dutton, 1974.

Factor, Rhonda J., and Esther D. Rothblum. "A Comparison of Trans Women, Trans Men, Genderqueer Individuals, and Cisgender Brothers and Sisters on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory: Ratings by Self and Siblings." *Journal of Homosexuality* 64, no. 13: (2017), 1872–1889.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996

Fredericks, Siobhan. "Turnabout: A Magazine of Transvestism, No. 1 (June, 1963)." Periodical. 1963. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/37720c919>.

Hill, Robert S. "'As a Man I Exist; As a Woman I Live': Heterosexual Transvestism and the Contours of Gender and Sexuality in Postwar America." PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2007.

"Journal of Male Feminism, Vol. 77, No. 1." Newsletter. 1977. *Digital Transgender Archive*,  
<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/z316q178>.

Kane, Ariadne. n.d. "Toward Realization of an Androgynous Lifestyle". File 3.1. in Ari Kane records, 1943-2003. In Series 2008-006-C- Textual Records, 1990-2004. In the Rikki Swin Institute collection, 1990-2001. AR421. At the University of Victoria Transgender Archives.

Kane, A. "Descriptive model" in *The Phenomenon of Cross-dressing*. P7. Handwritten document. Box 3. Folder 3.3. Ari Kane records, 1943-2003. In the Rikki Swin Institute collection, 1990-2001. AR421. In Series 2008-006-C- Textual Records, 1990-2004. At the University of Victoria Transgender Archives.

Keener, Emily, and Clare Mehta (eds.). "The Past, Present, and Future of Masculinity, Femininity and Gender: Honoring Feminist Scholar Sandra L. Bem (1944–2014), Part 1". *Sex Roles*. 76 (2017): 525–528.

LaFleur, Greta, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska. (eds.) *Trans Historical : Gender Plurality before the Modern*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021.

Lips, Hilary, and Sandra M. Bem. "Naming the Impact of Gendered Categories and Identities." *Sex Roles*. 76, no. 9-10 (2017): 627–632.

Lynn, Merissa Sherrill. "The TV-TS Tapestry Newsletter #7 (January 8, 1979)." Periodical. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/fq977t858>.

Lynn, Merissa Sherrill, and Delores Carter. "The TV-TS Tapestry Issue 43 (1984)." Periodical. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/b2773v73c>.

Matte, Nicholas. "Historicizing Liberal American Transnormativities: Medicine, Media, Activism, 1960-1990". PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2014.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago, 1977 [1970].

Olufemi, Lola. "'Transmisogyny: Who wins?'" In *Feminism, Interrupted*, 49-66. London: Pluto Press, 2020.

Pihlak, Chris Aino. "A Moveable Closet: Constructions of Femininity Among Twentieth Century Transfeminine Periodical Communities." Master's thesis, University of Victoria, 2023.

Prince, Virginia. "Transvestia vol. 7 no. 40." Periodical. 1966. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/n296wz391>.

Prince, Virginia. "Transvestia vol. 10 no. 55." Periodical. 1969. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/1831ck23>.

Prince, Virginia. "Transvestia vol. 11 no. 63." Periodical. 1970. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/sf268543x>.

Prince, Virginia. "Virgin Views by Virginia: Androgeny-Gyandry; The Integrated Self." *Transvestia* 16, no. 92 (1977): 86-92. Periodical. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/ng451h795>.

Prince, Virginia. "Homosexuality, Transvestism and Transsexuality: Reflections on Their Etiology and Differentiation." *The International Journal of Transgenderism* 8, no. 4 (2005): 17–20. Previously published as, "Homosexuality, Transvestism and Transsexuality: Reflections on Their Etiology and Differentiation," in *The American Journal of Psychotherapy* 11 (1957): 80–85.

Raha, Nat. "Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no.3 (2017): 632–646.

Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, 33-65. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville: Seal Press. 2007.

Spivak, Gayatri, and Ellen Rooney. "In a Word' Interview." In *The Second Wave Feminism Reader: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson, 356–78. London: Routledge, 1997.

Stoller, Robert J. *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*. London: Routledge: 1968.

Vance, C.S. (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984.

# **A Trans, Autistic, and Neurogender Jewish Monster: The Story of the Golem**

**Dean Leetal** (they/ze)

Kibbutzim College

*Abstract: This critical commentary revisits the Jewish story of the Golem and reads it as a transgender text. Some say that the Golem inspired Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, a story famously interpreted by Susan Stryker as an allegory for her own trans experience: living on the edge of society, her humanity debated, defined by a morally questionable medical establishment. But there are important differences between Frankenstein and the Golem. The Golem is brought to life through language, particularly the Hebrew word 'emet,' and is an animated clay tasked with protecting Jewish marginalized communities. Today, questions of language and truth are at the center of many debates regarding the validity and nature of transgender people. The concept of protecting marginalized communities, even while being rejected from them, is also painfully relevant. Unlike Frankenstein, though, the Golem is nonverbal, which is linked to autism. Thus, I argue that a neurogender analysis of their story that accounts for both gender and neurodivergence is critical. This reading focuses on these points of relation and what they may bring to light.*

*As legend has it, the Jewish community of sixteenth-century Prague was hounded by a particular antisemitic priest, Tadeusz, who often concocted plots to harm them.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes he used his social power, and other times he would manipulate the judicial system to frame innocent Jewish people.<sup>2</sup> Once, he convinced a Jewish girl to meet him in secret, kidnapped her, and then kept her locked up in his house. He hoped to convert her to Christianity and marry her off to a Christian man.<sup>3</sup> But the groom selected by the priest, who knew nothing of her captivity, truly loved her. He even gave her a ring, which she kept close.<sup>4</sup> Worried and upset, the girl's parents begged the great Rabbi Maharal for help. Unbeknown to them, Maharal had a secret: one of those in his employ at the temple was not a regular human, but a Golem he had brought to life. The Rabbi pretended to refuse helping the girl's parents in public, but, in secret, called them to meet, made some inquiries and investigations, and devised a plan. He gave the Golem a talisman that enabled it to become invisible and explained to the Golem how to sneak into the priest's house undetected. The Golem waited hours for the right moment to get inside and sneak her out. The Rabbi then faked the girl's death, and, once they were all reunited, the girl's parents took her and fled the area immediately.*

*The mourning groom found solace in study. He learned more and more, and his studies led him towards Judaism. Eventually, he converted and became respected as a Jewish student.<sup>5</sup> With time, he was to seek a new wife with the help of a matchmaker. The matchmaker suggested a young*

---

<sup>1</sup> Ali Yasif and Yehuda Rosenberg. הגולם מפראג ומעשים נפלאים אחרים [The Golem of Prague and other Wondrous Actions]. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, (1991), 89.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



woman whom he felt as if he'd known before; she even had his ring.<sup>6</sup> The two had a happy wedding, and everyone lived happily ever after, except for the thwarted evil priest. Unknown to the story, however, is the happiness of the Golem.

This critical commentary reads this Jewish legend as a transgender text. According to Hillel J. Kieval, the Golem inspired Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.<sup>7</sup> Stories of the Golem appear in various Jewish cultures and communities over centuries; in some stories as a servant, pseudo-wife, or even cattle, and in others, as the protector of marginalized Jewish people and communities.<sup>8</sup> This paper focuses on one iteration of the Golem legend written by Rabbi Yehuda Rosenberg in *Nifle'ot Maharal* 1909.<sup>9</sup> Almost as soon as this book was published, there was controversy; some believed that it was a historical account, while others did not.<sup>10</sup> There have been compelling arguments against reading *Nifle'ot Maharal* as a historical account, but debates on its historicity are not the purpose of this paper. This paper treats it only as a literary text.

The story is about a sixteenth-century Rabbi named Judah Loew ben Bezalel, or as he is known, Maharal, a well-known historical figure in many Jewish cultures. In Rosenberg's iteration of

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Hillel J. Kieval, "Pursuing the Golem of Prague: Jewish culture and the invention of a tradition," *Modern Judaism* 17, no. 1 (1997): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Edan Dekel and David Gantt Gurley, "How the Golem Came to Prague," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no.2 (2013): 242; Eli Eshed, "גולם למניין חלק א'" [Golem La'Minyan (Part I)], "האייל הקורא" [The Calling Reindeer], August 31, 2000; Aryeh Maidenbaum, "The Golem of Prague: An Archetype," *Psychological Perspectives* 64, no. 2 (2021): 201-210.

<sup>9</sup> Yasif and Rosenberg.

<sup>10</sup> Eshed.

the legend, Maharal secretly takes his son-in-law and another scholar to the river. There, Maharal gathers clay and creates the shape of a human. Together, they use sacred words combined with magic to bring the figure, the Golem, to life.<sup>11</sup> The Rabbi then brings the Golem into his home and gives him a job at the temple. He tells everyone that the Golem was just a person that he met, felt sorry for, and took in. What nobody knows is that the Rabbi and the Golem secretly work to protect the Jewish community.

### **A Trans, Autistic, and Neurogender Jewish Monster**

This paper reads the Golem as trans, as well as autistic and neurogender. One might wonder about the validity of using such words to discuss works and characters created before they existed. Sawyer Kemp discusses the anachronism of using contemporary words to describe those living in social structures that have significantly changed.<sup>12</sup> Discussing Shakespearean productions that frame characters as trans, Kemp comments that, as people abandon (currently harmful) Shakespearean era words for gender nonconforming such as ‘transvestite’ and ‘hermaphrodite,’ it is worth pausing to try to sort out exactly what the connection is (or might potentially be) between Shakespeare and contemporary social justice movements.<sup>13</sup> As they explain, social structures have changed meaningfully since Shakespearean times, and these words and social concepts exist in the context of society. Thus, while using such words may be useful politically, one should make sure it

---

<sup>11</sup> Yasif and Rosenberg, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Sawyer K. Kemp, “‘In That Dimension Grossly Clad’: Transgender Rhetoric, Representation, and Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Studies* 47 (2019): 120-26.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

actually is useful in every specific case. As Kemp puts it: “If we are going to visit the past to serve the present, it should actually and meaningfully serve those populations whose language, identities, and communities we are borrowing.”<sup>14</sup> I agree that this needs to be taken into account. Social structures regarding transgender people have changed, as have a lot of other social structures. But no one seems to object to reading Dr. Frankenstein as a man, or even reading Mary Shelley as a woman, despite these words having different meanings today. Juno Richards states that while words and concepts do not capture the truth of the past, using them may be about the present, about living people and movements.<sup>15</sup> Kemp seems to partially agree, yet cautions that one must not assume every reading does in fact benefit marginalized people. The editors of *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* suggest that both ahistorical and historical approaches can exist alongside one another. They suggest that caring for current transgender people and that discussion of historically marginalized genders beyond language are both important. Although I understand the aforementioned scholars’ hesitation to use modern-day words in the past, I argue that applying the lenses of trans and autism can serve important purposes for trans and autistic people today.

Another issue one should consider is that the notion of “trans” or “transgender” is often understood through limiting conceptualizations popular in the field of transgender studies. This may make trans readings inaccurate, if not appropriative of gender experiences of people marginalized in other ways. Scholars such as Gayle Salamon demonstrate that current understandings of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>15</sup> Juno Richards, “Claude Cahun’s Pronouns,” *Visualities*, April 29, 2021.

separation between gender and embodiment are not always relevant to the types of oppression society links with gender.<sup>16</sup> Jenny C. Mann shows that this is true of historical research as well.<sup>17</sup> C. Riley Snorton and Abdulhamit Arvas also demonstrate that, in at least some cases, gender identity is inseparable from race and time.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, and as will be key for my analysis, M. Remi Yergeau explains that neurodiversity and gender are inseparable for some people as well.<sup>19</sup> Yergeau uses the term “neurogender” to discuss lived experiences and identities that are an inseparable mix of neurodivergence and gender. For example, some autistic people feel disconnected from social structures such as gender, and their lack of gender comes from this experience of society. These identities and experiences are erased by the notion that neurotype and gender are disparate. In an introduction to their special issue on Colonial Unknowing, the editors link transgender and disability studies. They point out the potential of putting into question the fictional stability of categories through multiplicity.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps this may be achieved through use of intersectional identities, or identities that take into account multiple social positionings. Stephanie Burt

---

<sup>16</sup> Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Jenny C. Mann, “How to Look at a Hermaphrodite in Early Modern England,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>18</sup> C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Abdulhamit Arvas, “Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 116-36.

<sup>19</sup> M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016):

suggests that some authors may be read as trans, not in the sense that they identified as transgender, but in the sense that themes of their work may strongly resonate with transgender people.<sup>21</sup> I argue that this may work specifically for reading characters who are marginalized in the above ways, such as neurogender people.

Alexander Eastwood and Burt suggest trans readings do not have to mean literally deciding whether a person or character is trans; rather, they can be based on being trans in characteristics, as identified by trans people today.<sup>22</sup> A trans person may find a story resonates with them regardless of the author's intent, identity, or environment. Such readings provide a liminal space for creativity, intuition, and art. These readings enable one to side-step the discussion of unknowable questions and refocus on the trans reading itself. At the same time, they require attention so that one does not appropriate cultures or figures of marginalized groups to which one does not belong. For example, a non-autistic reader may identify with a story about disability through shared experiences of marginalization, while inadvertently erasing the disability aspects it gives voice to. Similar to the history of "trans," scholars such as Val Cumine, Julia Dunlop, and Gill Stevenson assert that autism has existed throughout time, but has only been given a name in the past century.<sup>23</sup> As Sarah Pripas-Kapit and Martin Stepney explain, autistic texts written by autistic people only started being

---

<sup>21</sup> Stephanie Burt, "Twitter Stevens, Tumblr Stevens, Trans Stevens," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 46, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Eastwood, "How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read?: Notes toward a Trans Literary History," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 590-604.

<sup>23</sup> Val Cumine, Julia Dunlop, and Gill Stevenson, *Autism in the Early Years: A Practical Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

recognized in the early 1990s, and as such, one might implement a structure similar to the one Eastwood and Burt apply to trans people for the exploration of historical autism.<sup>24</sup> I argue that the Golem may be recognized now by autistic people as one of us regardless of the authors' intent and of the social structures prominent at the time of writing.

Following these scholarly arguments, my next two sections will argue exactly how the Golem is autistic and then trans. Since the story is, at least in this one case, a work of fiction, there is not one truth about the character. As such, this statement holds as much truth as non-trans readings. However, asserting that the Golem is trans and autistic holds significant meaning for readers who are as well. Trans people are continuously learning how to be our genders. This is particularly true for trans people outside of the gender binary, and those of us who are marginalized in more ways than one. This story may contribute something to a neurogender Jewish reader and uplift them. It may allow them to reclaim a piece of their heritage that may otherwise be erased.

### **The Golem as Autistic**

The Golem can be read not only as trans but, as framed by the Rabbi, autistic as well. Unlike *Frankenstein's* Monster, the Golem looks like a non-Golem human.<sup>25</sup> There is only one difference: the

---

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Pripas-Kapit, "Historicizing Jim Sinclair's 'Don't mourn for us': A cultural and intellectual history of neurodiversity's first manifesto," in *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline*, ed. Steven K. Kapp (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 23-39; Martin Stepney, "The Evolution of Autism in Education," *Making Waves in Education* (2008): 163.

<sup>25</sup> Norma Rowen, "The Making of Frankenstein's Monster," in *State of the*

Golem “doesn’t talk,” at least not in the hegemonic sense. As discussed by Victor Román Mendoza, the very act of talking can be dangerous to transgender people, who may opt for not speaking.<sup>26</sup> Being nonverbal is also a common autistic trait and is linked with other disabilities as well. As Rosenberg explains, the Rabbi tells people that the Golem is a poor and mute man that the Rabbi met and took pity upon. The Golem is created for a life somewhat removed from society, where he is not quite at home. This is an existence that not only transgender people, but some autistic people would relate with.<sup>27</sup> As Koppers puts it, “There is not even enough cultural visibility that would allow many of us to form chosen families, chosen affinities.”<sup>28</sup> Trans bodies, Susan Stryker explains, are perceived as “less than fully human.”<sup>29</sup> Some Jewish scholars have suggested that Golems cannot be human, and therefore cannot be Jewish, because they do not speak.<sup>30</sup> Other Jewish scholars have strongly negated these notions. I want to join them and link this

---

*Fantastic: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Fantastic Literature and Film*, ed. Nicholas Ruddick (Westport: Greenwood, 1992), 169-77.

<sup>26</sup> Victor Román Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899-1913* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> James Berger, *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Petra Koppers, “Crip/Mad Archive Dances: Arts-Based Methods in and out of the Archive,” *Theater* 52, no. 2 (2022): 93.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 245.

<sup>30</sup> Eshed. Like many nonverbal autistic people, the Golem communicates in ways other than standard speech. The Golem reads and writes, and is able to communicate with animals and possibly divinity. Framing this as an inability to communicate is quite inaccurate.

idea to ableism, specifically.

In this context, the Golem may best be described as neurogender, someone whose neurodivergence and gender are inseparable. Yergeau, one of the creators of the word, writes, “Given autism’s particular threats to social orders, autism’s queerity is often storied by means of disorientation: Autistics are so rhetorically impaired that they remain unoriented toward all that is normative and proper, whether empathy or eros or gender (performance and concept unto itself).”<sup>31</sup> And indeed, as discussed, many scholars have framed Golems through ‘othering’ them as being neither human nor Jewish. Philosophers from the sixteenth century onwards have even discussed whether killing the Golem is acceptable. Some compared it to children, autistic people, and animals, concluding that killing the Golem is permissible.<sup>32</sup> In a discussion of whether sex with a Golem would be permissible, Eshed suggests most agree that a human man may penetrate a “female Golem,” but a “male Golem” may not penetrate a human woman.<sup>33</sup> Eshed does not discuss queerness, or the obvious questions about the status of Golems who do not fit the gender binary (if any do). Eshed brings up the question of whether Golems be allowed to marry Jewish men, and what the status of their children would be. Ada Smailbegović suggests that in some of Gertrude Stein’s work, humans use non-human animals to establish their identity as human through othering and differentiation. Animals, at the same time, did not necessarily need humans to know themselves.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, while

---

<sup>31</sup> Yergeau, 27

<sup>32</sup> Eshed; Dekel and Gurley.

<sup>33</sup> Eshed.

<sup>34</sup> Ada Smailbegović, “Of Poodles, Mockingbirds, and Beetles: Gertrude Stein’s Zoopoetics,” *College Literature* 46, no. 1 (2019).



human scholars debate the nature of humanity against the question of the Golem's Jewish potential, the Golem does not seem to be haunted by such questions. Whether we consider the Golem a literal animal — as some Golems are considered in other texts — or focus on their status as “different from human,” it is clear the Golem is the Other in this comparison.

This Otherness is, unfortunately, common in the experiences of autistic people. Indeed, The Rabbi himself introduces the Golem to their community as “חסר חכמה ובינה,” “אלם,” “תם” – “mute”, “innocent” and “lacking brains and wisdom.”<sup>35</sup> These are all stereotypes of autistic people.<sup>36</sup> The Rabbi's portrayal of the Golem as autistic to the community, along with the Golem's inability to talk, and social position as anormative in some illusive way, make reading the Golem as autistic an obvious choice.

The Golem displays another autistic stereotype: rigid and straightforward following of rules.<sup>37</sup> In one of the stories in the book, the Rabbi's wife orders the Golem to fetch water, and never orders it to stop, resulting in a flood. This is an example of the Golem's rigid approach toward rules. In all of the stories in the book, the Golem follows orders without questioning them, dedicated and straightforward.

The Golem is involved in another dynamic many autistics unfortunately experience: multiple marginalization. As Yergeau explains, “autistic politics routinely reward those who are multiply privileged.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, there is multiple discrimination of

---

<sup>35</sup> Ali Yasif and Yehuda Rosenberg, הגולם מפראג ומעשים נפלאים אחרים [The Golem of Prague and other Wondrous Actions] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1991), 18.

<sup>36</sup> Yergeau, 12-13.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 3.

those who are multiply marginalized. Within the marginalized Jewish community, the Golem is further marginalized as neurogender, an unfortunately common problem.<sup>39</sup> Stryker talks about how trans people are marginalized within their community; for example, she discusses how queer and feminist communities are often cruel and even dangerous towards trans people.<sup>40</sup> Stryker suggests following the Monster's reaction to oppression: rage. I want to follow Stryker here and assert that neurogender people deserve to claim monstrosity, too, in all of its subversive and fierce beauty.

The Golem, however, takes more of an assimilatory approach and protects the community that rejects them. The Golem works time and again, often putting herself in danger to defend a thankless community. The Rabbi may take credit for some of the achievements, but the Golem generally does not. Transgender and autistic people, particularly those who are multiply marginalized, are often treated similarly. As a neurogender being, the Golem must be used to the Rabbi exploiting its labor completely uncritically. In conclusion, the Golem seems to be positioned in her community as autistic, as well as possessing characteristics linked with autism.

### **The Golem as Trans**

In Susan Stryker's 1994 "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix," she discusses identifying with Frankenstein's Monster as a transgender woman. She reads the Monster as trans and calls trans people to embrace their rage against

---

<sup>39</sup> Dara Z. Strolovitch, *Affirmative advocacy: Race, class, and gender in interest group politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Stryker, 239-240.

a society that oppresses them and to take on the mantle of Monster. It is worth discussing the similarities and differences between Stryker's reading of Frankenstein and my reading of the story of the Golem. As Rowen describes it, had Frankenstein's Monster been aware of sources other than the Christian world of its birth, it might not have felt so alone with the Golem for company.<sup>41</sup> As a Jewish, neurodivergent genderqueer person, I might have felt less alone with the Golem as well. The following sections will relate the Golem to three components of trans experience: embodiment, language, and truth.

### ***Embodiment***

Embodiment is a ubiquitous question when it comes to gender, and the Golem is no exception. The Golem, like many neurogender people, was brought into embodiment fully formed as neurogender. Another way some trans people experience themselves is described by Stryker. Stryker explains the similarity between the way that Frankenstein's Monster and herself as a trans woman were brought into embodiment: both were done by a cisgender man who was powerful in his community, a doctor who did it for his career, not for their wellbeing.<sup>42</sup> This can also be true of the Golem. While the Rabbi who creates the Golem's embodiment is marginalized as Jewish, he is a well-respected and powerful person in his community. The Golem is brought into its embodiment to serve the Rabbi's agendas and the Jewish community, where it is not quite a member. The Rabbi also assigned

---

<sup>41</sup> Rowen.

<sup>42</sup> Stryker, 242.

the Golem's gender, never asking the Golem's opinion. Therefore, in this paper, the Golem receives various pronouns.

We are never told the Golem's opinion regarding the form chosen for her. Maybe the Golem has other things that she might prefer doing, instead of being a secret superhero and working in the temple. Maybe the Golem liked being clay, being part of the river. The ever-shifting embodiment of being a river seems potentially very appealing, particularly for some nonbinary people. It may be pleasant and affirming to have a literally fluid embodiment, changing matter and shape, having small creatures move in and out of one's being, and taking shape anew time and again.

It may be interesting to note that object personification - considering objects to have needs or feelings - is a common experience for a lot of autistic people.<sup>43</sup> This is a little-discussed aspect of being neurogender, because some objects are gendered, but many are not. If one's gender is river mud that probably means they are outside the gender binary. Golem, here, is an object, and can be identified with.

### ***Language***

Another similarity between trans people and the Golem is the importance of language. Language is regularly used to validate or to harm trans people. For example, microlabels such as demigender and agender may be the validation a person needs, but these labels are often mocked or erased. Another example of the

---

<sup>43</sup> Nathan Caruana, Rebekah C. White, and Anna Remington, "Autistic traits and loneliness in autism are associated with increased tendencies to anthropomorphise," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 74, no. 7 (2021): 1295-1304.

importance of language for trans people is using correct pronouns, refusing to use them, or mocking the concept of pronouns. Quatrini discusses the language choices in some transphobic tweets: "Public opinions used by people in a position of power may pose a contributing factor in social injustice matters that can lead to language evolution and how language itself may be shaped to adapt to a certain social phenomenon."<sup>44</sup> As Andrey Uspenskiy explains, power is mostly used to harm those already marginalized.<sup>45</sup>

The Golem and Frankenstein's Monster seem to have similar struggles. Susan Wolfson discusses Frankenstein's endeavor to learn human language in hopes that it will encourage normative humans to consider him with compassion.<sup>46</sup> Stryker discusses the lack of language for a body that transitioned.<sup>47</sup> Stryker explains that both she and Frankenstein's monster do not have words to talk about the journey that they have made. There had not been words in the English language or in human language for having had such a different embodiment like theirs. Like the Monster, the Golem must not have had words to discuss the significant change ze had been through. Had the Golem ever learned to speak human language like the Monster, what words would be able to describe zir lived experience? Being brought into humanoid form after having an embodiment always shifting and flowing, part of a different system

---

<sup>44</sup> Amerigo Quatrini, "On JK Rowling's Discourse on Transsexual Issues, An Analysis of the Language Used on Rowling's Twitter and the Sociolinguistic Implication of Hate Speech," *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (2022): 97.

<sup>45</sup> Andrey Uspenskiy, "Wumben, Wimpund, Woomud: An Exploration of Social Censure in the Internet Age," *The Morningside Review* 18 (2022): 25-33.

<sup>46</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, "Frankenstein's Origin-Stories," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2020): 687.

<sup>47</sup> Stryker, 240-41.

of nature. Taking into consideration the Golem's past forms of communication is also meaningful in this context. Supporting animals' treading feet, being drank, cuddled, used for protection and as a home, are ways that part of a river may interact. They may be more significant or meaningful than human language. Joy Ladin, following Rabbi Maimonides, suggests that human language is not useful for discussing the Lord – in some ways similar to how language cannot sufficiently discuss Ladin's gender and experience. Human – or cisgender – languages are intrinsically based on the experiences and understanding of the speakers, who do not understand experiences other than their own. Perhaps, then, the Golem as well would not be able to express their experiences using human languages, even had it used them normatively.

This is of course also an issue of being neurogender. Maybe human language has no words for the Golem because the Golem's languages are different. Perhaps saying “human language” is vastly incorrect in this context and should be phrased as “cisgender nonautistic language.” The Golem does not speak that language, much like many of us. To make a marginal example, the process of writing this paper is an act of translation. Academic English is several times removed from my languages as an autistic person. For you to read this paper, it has been proofread and edited many times over by reviewers, by professional proofreaders and by the lovely editors of this issue.

For the Golem, the words that the Rabbi puts on their body decides their fate. For trans people, what word other people choose to describe them in front of a bigot may be a matter of life or death. This is true for the Golem as well in some iterations of the story. As Rosenberg describes, the Rabbi uses words to bring the Golem to

life, or into Golemhood.<sup>48</sup> It should be noted that in some iterations, such as the telling about Rabbi Elijah Bal-Shem of Khelm, when he creates the Golem's body he writes on the Golem's forehead the word *emet*, אמת, truth.<sup>49</sup> At some point in these stories the Golem becomes too powerful or too much of their own person, and the Rabbi decides that it is time for the Golem to die. He erases the first letter of the word *emet*, to make it *met*, מת. This word means "dead," and the Golem becomes dead.

For trans people, language sometimes is literally a matter of life or death, such as in the wording of laws that wish to take away our autonomy or deny us medical care. It may manifest as an issue of immediate survival or as a matter of mental health, physical health, or employment opportunities in our capitalist hellscape. This is even more severe for BIPOC, autistic, and otherwise further marginalized trans people.<sup>50</sup>

## **Truth**

The concept of "truth" is also used to validate or to harm trans people. Butler discusses the idea of "authentic" gender as gender so normative it can be imagined as being natural and essential.<sup>51</sup> This is opposed to less normative genders, which are

---

<sup>48</sup> Yasif and Rosenberg, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Kieval, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Tosh Chabot, "Hypocrisy in Higher Education: Racism and Transphobia as Barriers and Harm in Mental Health," (Master's thesis, Lesley University, 2022); Alyosxa Tudor, "Terfism Is White Distraction: On BLM, Decolonising the Curriculum, Anti-Gender Attacks and Feminist Transphobia," *Engenderings* (blog), June 19, 2020; Uspenskiy.

<sup>51</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 30.

often framed by bigots as contrived or fake. Butler explains, however, that no gender is essential; rather, gender has always been shifting, developing and changing. No gender presentation is 'natural,' in the sense that it is not linked with society. While the Golem may seem linked with nature through their animality, its gender is contrived, since as a river it was not gendered.

Moreover, some transphobic people use the rhetoric of "truth" to tell trans people that they are not "real."<sup>52</sup> Bigots like to ask us, "But what are you *really*?" in an attempt to impose their false notions of truth on our bodies. Many trans people also find ourselves asking, "What am I *really*, underneath all the pressures and threats from society?" or for some, "What do I know myself to *really* be?"

For the Golem to be branded as either truth or dead is horrifying. The Rabbi takes the right of branding the Golem through a notion of truth, based on his own agenda. In other words, the Golem does not even have to be untruthful to be put to death; he simply becomes too powerful. This is unfortunately similar to the way transphobic people in power brand transgender people, as fits their agendas.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

---

<sup>52</sup> Uspenskiy, 26.

<sup>53</sup> Another noteworthy aspect of the Golem's story is the word "Golem." Eli Eshed tells us that the word 'Golem' is linked with the Hebrew word "*golmi*," גולמי, which means "formless" or "unfinished." I would suggest considering another close Hebrew word, "*gilum*," גילום, which means in Hebrew, "portrayal," or "performance." As Butler tells us, performance of gender is at the base of all genders and is in no way specific to those whose performance is called into attention. I think it is really interesting that a story that is so trans in vibe and subtext centers a word so synonymous with queer studies and with Butler.



When I first told someone that I was genderqueer, I didn't have a word for it. At the time, there were no people outside the gender binary in popular media, and I had no way of knowing whether there was anybody other than me who was the same. I held onto stories about cis gay men who used to have similar concerns and told myself it had to be that way. I made up a word for it. I searched and searched the internet, looking for it in books, in music, and in fashion. The first person I told was my best friend at the time. I really trusted him. But he told me to never tell anyone, and that no one was ever going to accept me—that being attracted to more than one gender was cute, but this was beyond anything I could do. For a day or two, I hid in bed. I happened to be reading *Frankenstein*, which was not the best choice for my mental health at the time. I identified with the Monster, and the accounts of his being rejected by society and hated by everyone were troubling. But my story ends well: I did talk about my gender identity, a lot. I got kicked out of very many places, but I built a genderqueer community and found my people. Years later, I came across one of the establishing papers in Transgender Studies by Stryker and found that I was not alone in identifying with Frankenstein's Monster.

The Golem's story and lived experiences strongly resemble the experiences of trans people and autistic people. Like many trans people, the Golem is brought into a specific embodiment by a powerful man who does not share her experiences or identities. As Stryker stresses, this is sometimes done without consideration of the trans person's needs and wants, prioritizing the powerful man's agenda. Such attitudes are clearly true of the Golem, who is regularly used as somewhat of an object. Her opinions are rarely addressed, and when they are, it is mostly to show her presumed

consent. As is the case for many trans people, language is used to control the Golem, both conceptually and directly. So is the notion of “truth,” as truth is framed by those in power. Perhaps this reading may provide a small way for transgender and autistic Jewish people to reclaim a bit of their heritage.

The weekend I spent hiding from my best friend’s transphobia could have gone differently. Perhaps, had I been reading about a Jewish neurogender Golem, I would have felt less horrified and alone. A character to identify with and to celebrate, who was not persecuted and isolated, would have been better reading material. Even as I write, transphobic people are trying to frame trans people as a trend, and autistic people as unfit for agency or knowledge. Claiming the Golem can help disprove these notions and offer a better representation, for trans people as well as for cis.

## Bibliography

Arvas, Abdulhamit. "Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 116–136.

Bhabha, Homi K. "The Barbed Wire Labyrinth: Thoughts on the Culture of Migration." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45, no. 4 (2019): 403–412.

Burt, Stephanie. "Twitter Stevens, Tumblr Stevens, Trans Stevens." *Wallace Stevens Journal* 46, no. 1 (2022): 27–42.

Butler, Judith. "Bodies that matter." In *Feminist Theory and the Body*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, 235–245. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Caruana, Nathan, Rebekah C. White, and Anna Remington. "Autistic traits and loneliness in autism are associated with increased tendencies to anthropomorphise." *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 74, no. 7 (2021): 1295–1304.

Chabot, Tosh. "Hypocrisy in Higher Education: Racism and Transphobia as Barriers and Harm in Mental Health." Master's thesis, Lesley University, 2022.

[https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive\\_theses/617](https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/617).

Daniel, Drew. "Dagon as Queer Assemblage: Effeminacy and Terror in Samson Agonistes." In *Queer Milton*, edited by David L. Orvis, 229–253. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Davis, Jenny L. "Refusing (Mis)Recognition: Navigating Multiple Marginalization in the U.S. Two Spirit Movement." *Review of International American Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 65–86.

Dekel, Edan, and David Gantt Gurley. "How the Golem Came to Prague." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no. 2 (2013): 241–258.

DeVun, Leah. "Heavenly Hermaphrodites: Sexual Difference at the Beginning and End of Time." *Postmedieval* 9, no. 2 (2018): 132–46.

Eastwood, Alexander. "How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read?: Notes toward a Trans Literary History." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (November 1, 2014): 590–604.

Eshed, Eli. "האייל האיייל [Golem La'Minyan (Part I)]" גולם למניין חלק א' הקורא [The Calling Reindeer]. August 31, 2000. <http://www.haayal.co.il/story.php3?id=300>.

Hager, Lisa. "A Case for a Trans Studies Turn in Victorian Studies: 'Female Husbands' of the Nineteenth Century." *Victorian Review* 44, no. 1 (2018): 37–54.

Kemp, Sawyer K. "'In That Dimension Grossly Clad': Transgender Rhetoric, Representation, and Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Studies* 47 (2019): 120–26.

Kieval, Hillel J. "Pursuing the Golem of Prague: Jewish culture and the invention of a tradition." *Modern Judaism* 17, no. 1 (1997): 1-23.

Kuppers, Petra. "Crip/Mad Archive Dances: Arts-Based Methods in and out of the Archive." *Theater* 52, no. 2 (2022): 66-77.

Ladin, Joy. "Excerpt from The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2019): 409-17.

LaFleur, Greta, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska, eds. *Trans historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021.

Maidenbaum, Aryeh. "The Golem of Prague: An Archetype." *Psychological Perspectives* 64, no. 2 (2021): 201-210.

Malatino, Hil. *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

Mann, Jenny C. "How to Look at a Hermaphrodite in Early Modern England." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46, no. 1 (2006): 67-91.

Mendoza, Victor Román. *Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899-1913*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Nealon, Christopher. *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Perleberg, Ellen, and Grace Elizabeth C. Dy. "Growing Up on the Wrong Side of the Mechitza: A Case Study of Contemporary Queer Jewish Language." *Journal of Jewish Languages* 10, no. 1 (2022): 120–39.

Pripas-Kapit, Sarah. "Historicizing Jim Sinclair's 'Don't mourn for us': A cultural and intellectual history of neurodiversity's first manifesto." In *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline*, edited by Steven K. Kapp, 23-39. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Quatrini, Amerigo. "On JK Rowling's Discourse on Transsexual Issues, An Analysis of the Language Used on Rowling's Twitter and the Sociolinguistic Implication of Hate Speech." *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics* 8, no. 2, 2022.

Richards, Juno. "Claude Cahun's Pronouns." *Visualities* (blog). April 29, 2021.

<https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/richards-claude-cahun-pronouns>.

Rowen, Norma. "The Making of Frankenstein's Monster." In *State of the Fantastic: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Fantastic Literature and Film*, edited by Nicholas Ruddick, 169-177. Westport: Greenwood, 1992.

Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Smailbegović, Ada. "Of Poodles, Mockingbirds, and Beetles: Gertrude Stein's Zoopoetics." *College Literature* 46, no. 1 (2019): 204–242.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Spencer, Leland G. "Bathroom Bills, Memes, and a Biopolitics of Trans Disposability." *Western Journal of Communication* 83, no. 5 (2019): 542–559.

Strassfeld, Max, and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza. "Introduction: Mapping Trans Studies in Religion." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2019): 283–96.

Strolovitch, Dara Z. *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 237–254.

Tudor, Alyosxa. 2020. "Terfism Is White Distraction: On BLM, Decolonising the Curriculum, Anti-Gender Attacks and Feminist Transphobia." *Engenderings* (blog). June 19, 2020.

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/06/19/terfism-is-white-distraction-on-blm-decolonising-the-curriculum-anti-gender-attacks-and-feminist-transphobia>.

Uspenskiy, Andrey. "'Wumben, Wimpund, Woomud': An

Exploration of Social Censure in the Internet Age.” *The Morningside Review* 18 (2022): 25-33.

Vimalassery, Manu, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein. “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing.” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016).

Wolfson, Susan J. “Frankenstein’s Origin-Stories.” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2020): 663–690.

Yasif, Ali, and Rosenberg, Yehuda. הגולם מפראג ומעשים נפלאים אחרים. [The Golem of Prague and other Wondrous Actions]. Jerusalem, Bialik Institute, 1991.

Yergeau, M. Remi. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.



# The Museum of Transology and Radical (Trans) Trust

**Moira Armstrong** (they/them)

Birkbeck, University of London

*Abstract: In this critical commentary, I reflect on the radical possibilities of trans public history raised by the practices of the London-based Museum of Transology. First, I introduce the museum and its goals. Then, I discuss the museum's community archiving and rapid response collecting practices in connection with scholarship about the activist and communal implications of such practices. Finally, I connect the museum's work to the concept of radical (trans) trust, a term that combines the idea of radical trust from the field of public history with interdisciplinary research on trans community, concluding with the benefits of adopting radical (trans) trust on a wider scale in the heritage sector.*

## Introduction

In 2014, inspired by a collection of mementos from his gender affirmation surgery, trans historian and curator E-J Scott founded the Museum of Transology (MoT), a collection of objects representing the histories and lived experiences of trans people across the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The project has grown exponentially in the past nine years, with a collection that today consists of over 400 objects donated by trans people, each accompanied by a handwritten tag describing its significance. Objects are lent out to museums, archives, and community spaces to add trans voices to exhibits and other public history projects, and will soon be available to the public to view through an online platform.<sup>2</sup> The collection is now physically housed at the Bishopsgate Institute (BI), a cultural institute in London. The BI provides dedicated archival space that meets professional standards, permitting MoT to safely store objects and allowing room for the collection to grow.<sup>3</sup>

MoT has an inherently radical mission. Scott emphasizes his desire for the museum to provide space for “trans people to talk for themselves, about themselves” in contrast to the existing historical record, which is dominated by legal and medical records and media coverage that often marginalize trans people.<sup>4</sup> However, MoT’s

---

<sup>1</sup> Tijen Tunali, “The Museum of Transology,” *Afterimage* 47, no. 4 (2020): 71.

<sup>2</sup> E-J Scott, “The Museum of Transology, London, England,” in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQ+ Places and Stories*, eds. Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell (Milton: RIBA Publications, 2022), 190.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Dickers, “Bishopsgate Institute, London, England,” in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQ+ Places and Stories*, eds. Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell (Milton: RIBA Publications, 2022), 160.

<sup>4</sup> Birgit Bosold, E-J Scott, and Renaud Chantraine, “Queer Tactics, Handwritten Stories: Disrupting the Field of Museum Practices,” *Museum International* 72, no.

radicalism is not just theoretical; it is also evident in their archival practices. This is another unique element of the museum, as many public history institutions have struggled to incorporate the voices of the communities represented within their spaces.<sup>5</sup> In this critical commentary, I will describe the ways that MoT approaches community archiving, and then analyze this procedure through the lens of “radical (trans) trust,” which I define as radical trust, as it is understood by the field of public history, that takes on a uniquely trans character.

### **Community Archiving**

At the time of writing, MoT volunteers meet at BI each month to participate in community archiving. These events are promoted through social media and word of mouth, and most volunteers are members of the local trans community. Though some are students or professionals from the heritage sector, there are no formal requirements to volunteer. After a brief introduction to the museum and archiving process by Scott, volunteers are given objects that have been donated to MoT, then they fill out forms documenting objects’ titles, descriptions, dimensions, dates, and a list of associated keywords, allowing the items to be categorized and searched in the online repository, hosted through BI’s website. Community archiving practices such as this have become common for public history projects, particularly after the social turn in history beginning in the 1960s, and especially for the histories of

---

3-4 (2020): 218.

<sup>5</sup> Annette Furo, “What Is in a Voice? A Pedagogy of Voice for Museums,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 27, no. 1 (2011): 109.

marginalized communities.<sup>6</sup> The Community Archives and Heritage Group provides an intentionally broad definition to include the diversity of community archiving projects that exist today, describing community archiving as archival projects in which the subject matter is a community of people, and the process of creation has involved the community, often working as volunteers.<sup>7</sup> This definition emphasizes direct involvement, indicating one of the reasons that community archiving is valued: democratization of heritage and creation of community.<sup>8</sup>

In general, heritage has become increasingly democratized over time. Cultural historian Michael Kammen outlines that since the beginning of the twentieth century, the heritage sector, including museums and memorials, have aligned themselves with “democratic values and assumptions” in order to remain relevant to the public.<sup>9</sup> While there is still progress to be made, a broader constituency, including marginalized communities and non-academic experts, contributes to historical and commemorative

---

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Caswell, “Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation,” *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 27.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Gilliland and Andrew Flinn, “Community Archives: what are we really talking about?,” transcript of speech delivered at CIRN Prato Community Informatics Conference, Prato, Italy, 2013, [https://www.monash.edu/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/920626/gilliland\\_flinn\\_keynote.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/920626/gilliland_flinn_keynote.pdf), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens, “‘It Is Noh Mistri, Wi Mekin Histri.’ Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the UK, Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream,” in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, eds. Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), 702.

projects today than in the past.<sup>10</sup> Community archiving projects are a popular form of this democratization. Archival scholars Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens argue that, when community archivists identify ties “between the production of history, education, and political struggle,” it becomes a new social movement concerned with grassroots, local change.<sup>11</sup> MoT follows both the democratizing and activist trends, allowing any person who attends the community archiving sessions to contribute to a trans heritage project and actively connecting historical production to contemporary political struggle. For example, a post from MoT’s Instagram account (@museumoftransology) on January 26, 2023 reads, “Tonight our STOP SECTION 35 protest signs go down in transcestry!”<sup>12</sup> This post centers trans voices and encourages the documentation of a trans-related historical event — the UK government’s decision to use Section 35 of the Scotland Act to block a new Scottish law establishing a self-identification system for trans people — through a trans lens, which will create a historical record that is uniquely inclusive.

Flinn and Stevens also describe how community archiving can “deliver a strong sense of belonging or of identity, and that such feelings or identities are socially productive.”<sup>13</sup> Michelle Caswell et al.’s ongoing research demonstrates that community members are impacted ontologically, epistemologically, and socially through

---

<sup>10</sup> Carole Blair and Neil Michel, “The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 598.

<sup>11</sup> Flinn and Stevens, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Museum of Transology. “Getting ready for tonight...” Instagram, January 26, 2023, accessed June 26, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn4oWC6szSh/>.

<sup>13</sup> Flinn and Stevens, 19.

archival work.<sup>14</sup> By participating, community archivists come to “realize ‘I am here,’ ‘we were here,’ and ‘we belong here’” — three overlapping realizations that the researchers call “representational belonging.”<sup>15</sup> Representational belonging facilitated by community archiving work helps volunteer archivists develop and understand their sense of self, sense of history, and sense of community. As these researchers demonstrate in a later article, the sense of representational belonging cultivated through community archiving practices can be so impactful that archivists come to consider the archive a home away from home: “a welcoming space in a hostile climate” and “a space where their experiences and those of their ancestors are validated.”<sup>16</sup>

MoT’s Instagram emphasizes the community aspect of their collective archiving practice. Multiple social media posts frame archiving events as a chance for trans people to unite as a community and emphasize the centrality of community to the museum’s goal of trans self-representation. The communal goals also extend beyond the bounds of heritage spaces to contemporary activism. For example, a January 18th Instagram post about the Stop Section 35 protest offered protestors who did not have a group to attend with to “join the Museum of Transology volunteer community team – all welcome, and you’re safer together with us.” MoT archiving events act as a source of community, and that

---

<sup>14</sup> Michelle Caswell et al., “‘To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise’: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation,” *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 5-26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Michelle Caswell et al., “Imagining Transformative Spaces: The Personal–Political Sites of Community Archives,” *Archival Science* 18, no. 1 (2018): 82.

community extends to other contexts.

### **Radical (Trans) Trust**

Community archiving projects have great confidence in their participants. I argue that in the case of MoT, community archiving represents what is known in the public history field as radical trust. Rose Sherman of the Minnesota Historical Society defines radical trust as when historical institutions become “centers for civil engagement, where people gather to meet and converse and participate in collaborative problem solving [...] an active, visible player in civil life.”<sup>17</sup> Meg Foster argues that radical trust has flourished in the digital age, as the internet has enabled more members of the public to become involved in history projects and new methods for institutions to involve them.<sup>18</sup> Relatedly, Christopher Michael Jannings points out that “it has inspired a younger audience to engage history.”<sup>19</sup> Both Foster and Jannings mention that radical trust can be a controversial concept, citing Jim Gardner of the National Museum of American History who believes that “abdicating [historians’] role and privileging the public’s voice or simply doing what the public votes for” will undermine “real” history.<sup>20</sup> There are legitimate debates related to radical trust; for example, if a consensus about a historical topic cannot be reached by

---

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Michael Jannings, “Lest We Forget: The Library of Congress’s Veterans History Project and ‘Radical Trust’” (PhD dissertation, Western Michigan University, 2010), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Meg Foster, “Online and Plugged In?: Public History and Historians in the Digital Age,” *Public History Review* 21 (2014): 5.

<sup>19</sup> Jannings, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Foster, 5; Jannings, 3.

the community, museums may need to focus on the fact-finding process or incorporate multiple narratives rather than presenting a singular “truth” in exhibits and other outcomes, which is a complex undertaking that requires thoughtful consideration.<sup>21</sup> Bernadette T. Lynch argues that the field of public history tends to oppose radical trust for this reason; institutions desire simplicity and stasis, and tend to remain “out of step with the dynamics of changing ideas” instead of engaging with new ideas and practices.<sup>22</sup>

Lynch, along with Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, elaborates that radical trust can be particularly contentious, but also especially important, when related to marginalized communities. They note that museums have contributed to and promoted many entrenched societal prejudices, including racism, sexism, and queerphobia and argue that “radical trust may help museums to become more aware of their legacies of prejudice, and unlearn them in order to openly and honestly negotiate knowledge and power with others in the future within a spirit of genuine reciprocity.”<sup>23</sup> When public history institutions are working with a subject such as race or colonialism, it is necessary to cultivate “a radical trust in which the museum cannot control the outcome” but the affected communities can.<sup>24</sup> Radical trust can play a similar role in relation to trans histories, helping institutions understand their complicity “in constructing frameworks of sexual normalcy” and “defining sexual deviancy” to

---

<sup>21</sup> Bernadette T. Lynch and Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, “Legacies of Prejudice: Racism, Co-Production and Radical Trust in the Museum,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 25, no. 1 (2010): 16.

<sup>22</sup> Bernadette Lynch, “Reflective Debate, Radical Transparency and Trust in the Museum,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 28, no. 1 (2013): 11.

<sup>23</sup> Lynch and Alberti, 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



ultimately work against their legacy of transphobia, and allow trans communities to control their own histories and portrayals.<sup>25</sup>

Radical trust is a common feature of queer history, particularly oral history, though the form differs and scholars writing about the subject often do not use the term “radical trust.” Oral history is commonly identified as a radical research methodology because, as Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers describe, “our sources talk back,” requiring researchers to build and maintain a reciprocal foundation of trust with narrators.<sup>26</sup> Elspeth H. Brown and Myrl Beam contend that “these relationships of trust enable a level of intimacy and care in the interview process that makes the process of oral history uniquely valuable,” but require a significant commitment “to the messiness of competing ideas of process and quality.”<sup>27</sup> Though not using the exact term, these oral historians are describing the process of radical trust within a queer project.

Such work on radical trust is relevant to MoT. At community archiving nights, a group of people gathers to work, discuss, and solve problems together, a ritual that Sherman centers in her definition of radical trust.<sup>28</sup> MoT’s mission to allow “trans people to talk for themselves, about themselves” rather than rely on transphobic records, archives, and museums is also ideologically

---

<sup>25</sup> Craig Middleton and Nikki Sullivan, “KINQ Manifesto,” KINQ = Knowledge Industries Need Queering, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://kinqblog.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>26</sup> Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers, “Introduction: Archives of Disruption,” in *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* (London: Routledge, 2022), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Elspeth H. Brown and Myrl Beam, “Toward an Ethos of Trans Care in Trans Oral History,” *The Oral History Review* 49, no. 1 (2022): 43.

<sup>28</sup> Jannings, 2.

aligned with Lynch and Alberti's statements about the legacy of racism, colonialism, and other prejudices in these spaces.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, community archiving provides space for "sources" to "talk back."<sup>30</sup> For example, the process of writing down the history of an object to donate to MoT parallels the oral history process. Additionally, many community archivists have direct knowledge of the objects being archived. As most of the community archivists are also members of the local queer community, many attended the protests and pride events from which MoT is archiving signs, allowing the archivists to provide additional context to the information on archiving forms. Sometimes the connection is even more direct. At the April 2023 session, community archivists worked to catalog the performance archives of performance artist Nando Messias, who attended the session and answered questions that arose throughout the process about the items' backgrounds, uses, and materials. When problems arise, the group collaboratively discusses how to proceed, often with that historical context in mind, demonstrating a commitment to "the messiness of competing ideas of process and quality."<sup>31</sup>

Trust is central to facilitating a positive experience for trans people, and that trust often requires that trans identity, or at least a deep understanding of trans life, is shared between participants and organizers. In a study about trans young people's experiences with sex education, Nova J. Bradford et al. found that trans youth were disinclined to trust cisgender, heterosexual sex educators, noting that these sources tended to be uninformed or malicious toward

---

<sup>29</sup> Bosold, Scott, and Chantraine, 218; Lynch and Alberti, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Summerskill, Murphy, and Vickers, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Brown and Beam, 43.

trans sexual health.<sup>32</sup> As one participant described, “trust means material by and for queer and trans people.”<sup>33</sup> Trust was not considered a possibility if the educator and the young person did not share a basis of queer identity. Similarly, Summerskill, Murphy, and Vickers argue that “trust and rapport can only be established in a queer framework” — not necessarily that queerness is a prerequisite for engaging with queer people, as Bradford et al.’s findings suggest, but that cisgender, heterosexual researchers need to enter queer research projects with a queer mindset.<sup>34</sup>

In MoT’s space, the radical trust of the public history sector takes on this uniquely trans character. Community archiving events are led by Scott, who is trans, and while one does not have to be trans to attend, most participants are. Additionally, Scott frequently reminds participants that it is their trans identities and belonging to trans communities that provides them the expertise to do this archiving work. For example, at the February 2023 community archiving session, as part of their introduction, Scott emphasized that trans people know the terminology for objects and identities and are familiar with the contexts in which these objects were created and used in a way that cisgender people would not be. An object that might be cataloged by a cisgender archivist as a “prosthetic penis,” for example, would be referred to by trans community archivists as a packer, making it easier to find for trans people browsing the museum’s collection. This statement demonstrates radical trust with a trans inclination: trans people are

---

<sup>32</sup> Nova J. Bradford et al., “Sex Education and Transgender Youth: “Trust Means Material By and For Queer and Trans People,”” *Sex Education* 19, no. 1 (2019): 84-98.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Summerskill, Murphy, and Vickers, 11.

at the helm of MoT, and their knowledge is uniquely valued within its work.

## Conclusion

In this critical commentary, I described the Museum of Transology, an independent museum project dedicated to archiving objects representing trans lives with trans people guiding the work. In particular, MoT uses community archiving sessions, a tool of democratizing public history in which participants help catalog objects donated to the museum and in turn, helps those participants feel connected to trans history, current events, and community. I argue that this represents radical trust, in which public history spaces become part of public discourse, particularly benefitting communities that have traditionally been marginalized by museums and archives. However, it provides a uniquely trans lens to this concept, as it centers trans voices and knowledge, and advances MoT's desire to "halt the erasure of trans lives from history, tackle the misrepresentation of trans people in the political sphere, and combat the spectacularization of trans bodies and experiences by the mainstream media."<sup>35</sup> Radical [trans] trust expressed through community archiving is beneficial both to institutions and communities, and must be considered by any museum or archive hoping to do trans history in a way that centers actual trans voices and lives, avoiding "horribly biased representations" and focusing on "self-determined, self-confident testimonies of queer life."<sup>36</sup> Only approaches informed by radical [trans] trust can truly represent

---

<sup>35</sup> Scott, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Bosold, Scott, and Chantraine, 218.

trans people well in public history.

## Bibliography

Blair, Carole, and Neil Michel. "The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2007): 595-626.

Bosold, Birgit, E-J Scott, and Renaud Chantraine. "Queer Tactics, Handwritten Stories: Disrupting the Field of Museum Practices." *Museum International* 72, no. 3-4 (2020): 212-25.

Bradford, Nova J., James DeWitt, Jilyan Decker, Dianne R. Berg, Katherine G. Spencer, and Michael W. Ross. "Sex Education and Transgender Youth: 'Trust Means Material By and For Queer and Trans People.'" *Sex Education* 19, no. 1 (2019): 84-98.

Brown, Elspeth H., and Myrl Beam. "Toward an Ethos of Trans Care in Trans Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 49, no. 1 (2022): 29-55.

Caswell, Michelle. "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation." *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 26-37.

Caswell, Michelle, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci, and Marika Cifor. "'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': Community Archives and the Importance of Representation." *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 5-26.

Caswell, Michelle, Joyce Gabiola, Jimmy Zavala, Gracen Brilmyer, and Marika Cifor. "Imagining Transformative Spaces: The

Personal-Political Sites of Community Archives.” *Archival Science* 18, no. 1 (2018): 73-93.

Dickers, Stefan. “Bishopsgate Institute, London, England.” In *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQ+ Places and Stories*, edited by Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell, 160-63. Milton: RIBA Publications, 2022.

Flinn, Andrew, and Mary Stevens. “‘It Is Noh Mistri, Wi Mekin Histri.’ Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the UK, Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream.” In *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, edited by Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander, 3-27. London: Facet Publishing, 2009.

Foster, Meg. “Online and Plugged In?: Public History and Historians in the Digital Age.” *Public History Review* 21 (2014): 1-19.

Furo, Annette. “What Is in a Voice? A Pedagogy of Voice for Museums.” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 27, no. 1 (2011): 104-116.

Gilliland, Anne, and Andrew Flinn. “Community Archives: what are we really talking about?” Transcript of speech delivered at CIRN Prato Community Informatics Conference, Prato, Italy, 2013.

[https://www.monash.edu/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/920626/gilliland\\_flinn\\_keynote.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/920626/gilliland_flinn_keynote.pdf).

Jannings, Christopher Michael. “Lest We Forget: The Library of Congress’s Veterans History Project and ‘Radical Trust.’” PhD dissertation, Western Michigan University, 2010.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/848628631/abstract/820EEDD6B7BB40CDPQ/1>.

Kammen, Michael. *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011.

Lynch, Bernadette. "Reflective Debate, Radical Transparency and Trust in the Museum." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 28, no. 1 (2013): 1-13.

Lynch, Bernadette T., and Samuel J.M.M. Alberti. "Legacies of Prejudice: Racism, Co-Production and Radical Trust in the Museum." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 25, no. 1 (2010): 13-35.

Middleton, Craig, and Nikki Sullivan. "KINQ Manifesto." KINQ = Knowledge Industries Need Queering. Accessed February 27, 2023. <https://kinqblog.wordpress.com/>.

Museum of Transology. "Getting ready for tonight..." Instagram, January 26, 2023. Accessed June 26, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn4oWC6szSh/>.

Scott, E-J. "The Museum of Transology, London, England." In *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQ+ Places and Stories*, edited by Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell, 190-93. Milton: RIBA Publications, 2022.

Summerskill, Clare, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers.



“Introduction: Archives of Disruption.” In *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption*, 1-18. London: Routledge, 2022.

Tunali, Tijen. “The Museum of Transology.” *Afterimage* 47, no. 4 (2020): 69-73.