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Trouble Genders: “LGBT” Collapse and Trans Fundamentality

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Abstract

This essay considers how deployments of the acronym “LGBT” often obscure and flatten the specificity of the terms the letters reference. Also of concern here is how the “T” might be the more fundamental letter, as reactions to “LGBT identity” are indexed in gender transgression, to which the “T” refers. I argue for holding the trouble of the acronym in the “T” and that the trans underlies how “LGBT,” as a marker of subjectivity or violence, becomes legible. To carry this out, the essay makes a parallel to how “LGBT” functions similarly to “people of color” as the terms obscure the fundamentality of the trans and the black, respectively; clarifies the distinction between queer and trans, and subsequently trans and transgender; and demonstrates how transphobic readings are integral to homophobic responses.

Something is sacrificed with the particular way that nonnormative genders and sexualities are mainstreamed. That is, the specter of assimilation and normalization—or, the incorporation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender life and experience into the fold of the law and normative sphere—has the tendency to empty previously unincorporated identities like gay or transgender of their interrogative posture. To be sure, one could argue that the incorporation proves the success of the interrogation; one could argue that, say, for homosexuality now to be incorporated into the fold in the form of marriage equality demonstrates that homosexuality posed such a critique of the mainstream that it had to listen, which it did. But it remains that incorporation of nonnormative identities marks at base the expansion of the hegemon, its reach encompassing the uncomely edges of nonheterosexual desire and departures from cisnormative modes of embodiment. There is something to be said for the fact that, contra the assimilationist mainstreaming strategy, “to violate the state-sponsored sanctions—to render oneself visible to the state—emphasizes that there is power in coming together in ways that don’t replicate the state’s moral imperatives” (Gossett, Stanley, and Burton 2017, xvi). To hold onto the trouble the acronym LGBT has long referenced is to refuse the replication of the state’s moral imperative.

This utility in violating state-sponsorship is one of the key reasons why the collapsing of LGBT into a hailing of individualistic, discriminated-against identity is so vexing. It is common to find references to “LGBT violence” or a singularized, which is to say homogenized, “LGBT identity” without much analytic sophistication. The acronym congeals into a tamed, neoliberal description, the referential letters equated with one another as something one simply is. The collapse, as I am calling it, results in a failure to understand the stakes in violence—and, to be clear, joyful discourses, legislation, and worldmaking as well—visited upon those whose gender expression or perceived gender expression signifies nonnormatively. Indeed, central to the purview that has in its sights “LGBT identity” is, fundamentally, the effects of the “I.” To be given over to frameworks of encounter (not necessarily legibility or understanding) that index LGBT comes from the transgression of, or playfulness with, or disregard for, gender normativity. And this is to say, trans, fundamentally.

LGBT “Blindness”¹

The kind of assimilative incorporation on trial here is the kind that now champions Stonewall as a watershed moment in gay rights by way of sanitizing the moment with a depiction of a white, cis, gay man sparking the riots rather than, closer to the truth, the black drag queens and trans revolutionaries who “threw the first brick.” In other words, the incorporation of previously nonnormative identities is no mere inclusive gesture but rather a taming and dilution of the radicality endemic to that nonnormativity as a way to uphold and bolster the authority of the mainstream. Contrastingly, my purpose is to retain the “trouble” that these markers of identity index and show that the use of the acronym “LGBT” often obscures that trouble and, further, collapses the specificity of each letter into simply a sexuality historically treated badly. This “trouble” circulates in productive conversation, of course, with Judith Butler’s work, where trouble indexes the questioning of dominant organizing frames for gender or, more broadly, subjective legibility. This trouble is what I want to foreground as the work of trans as a mobilizing analytic. (To be sure, I know very well that some might make the claim that I am using a white cis scholar to hold sovereign sway over trans studies, but I would wager that Butler is, as Jack Halberstam argues in “Nice Trannies,” “by any number of metrics . . . trans, is a gender-non-conforming subject, and has, for the most part, done much of the heavy lifting that has made space for the kinds of fights and debates” in trans studies [Halberstam 2020].) Further, I argue that it is the “I” of the acronym and what is most acutely called transantagonism that makes otherwise privatized sexualities (for example, L, G, B) legible as transgressions. A collapsing occurs in deployments of LGBT as a descriptor; I aim to disaggregate that collapse.

I take my cue in critiquing the collapse from Jared Sexton, who, in his article “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” details a similar phenomenon in the phrase “people of color,” which, by his argument, does a disservice to the qualitatively different effects of antiblackness that cannot be subsumed in notation of oppressions inherent in “people of color.” Insistence on the interchangeability of nonblack people of color’s oppressions with antiblackness, resistance to which often amounts to what Sexton calls a Left version of “playing the race card,” does not capture the gravity of antiblack violence. Structural differences persist that differently position a multicultural glob of “colored” people from the specificity of decidedly black people that necessitate attention to the discrepant histories and contemporaries, ontologies and socialities, of blackened people. Sexton argues his point forcefully in the context of

Giorgio Agamben's meditation on the camp—that biopolitical planetary *nomos*—and his concern with counteracting the increasing institutionalization of exceptional cases into the fold of the state. Sexton subsequently meditates on Achille Mbembe's too-quick abandonment of the "peculiar institution" toward a "proper," more global focus on colonial sovereignty, which Sexton argues results in losing sight of the centrality of "colonial rule [as] already institutionalized, perhaps more fundamentally, in and as the political-juridical structure of slavery" (Sexton 2010, 33). For Sexton, black people are the prototypical targets of the violent panoply in which sociality is ensconced. Thus, purported attempts to broaden the scope of justice by being more multicultural or universal are destined to be insufficient inasmuch as such universalizing gestures increasingly sideline the specificity, which is also a more genuine fundamentality, of black people and blackness. There is, then, an insidious colorblindness inherent in "people of color" that cannot, and refuses to, see the extent to which antiblackness pervades the social and institutional realm that cannot be extricated from, indeed, the *blackness* of it all.

Given this, I am drawn to a specific passage in Sexton's essay. He writes, and I quote at some length:

The upshot of this predicament is that obscuring the structural position of the category of blackness will inevitably undermine multiracial coalition building as a politics of *radical* opposition and, to that extent, force the question of black liberation back to the center of discussion. Every analysis that attempts to understand the complexities of racial rule and the machinations of the racial state without accounting for black existence within its framework—which does not mean simply listing it among a chain of equivalents or returning to it as an afterthought—is doomed to miss what is essential about the situation. Black existence does not represent the total reality of the racial formation—it is not the beginning and the end of the story—but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system. That is to say, the whole range of positions within the racial formation is most fully understood from this vantage point, not unlike the way in which the range of gender and sexual variance under patriarchal and heteronormative regimes is most fully understood through lenses that are feminist and queer. (48; emphasis in original)

Key here is that blackness is not the beginning and end of racial formation, but it is the fundamental indicator of the political and economic system; blackness is not the beginning and end of people of color, but it is people of color's ostracized sibling, if you will, a sibling who shows you what the family is all about. One understands the vastness and texture of the political system with an understanding of blackness. I am interested in thinking alongside the operation Sexton lays out insofar as his conceptualization of how blackness operates relative to "people of color" shares *similarities* with a conceptualization of transness relative to "LGBT." The aim is not to conflate race and gender (though the terms *blackness* and *transness* are not to be equated with "race" and "gender") but to offer a conjunctive reading toward a more illuminative understanding of sociality's landscape. So, although the two are not the same, they do generatively speak to each other and clarify similar operations in place. To reference black trans scholar and activist Kai M. Green, thinking blackness and transness together and drawing on their differently inflected forces of instability "reiterates the instability that is always already present" to logics of categorization, namely the imposed regimes of

race and gender. “Race and gender are not the same,” Green cogently asserts, “but they are both bio-social-historical categories that help to facilitate and enforce the unequal distribution of power and wealth under capitalism. It is important that in this moment we wrestle with these questions. We cannot just end the conversation” when acknowledging their differences; we must, too, think seriously and rigorously about how they tag-team an encounter with sociality (Green 2015).

Curiously, Sexton makes a parallel to another identificatory vector: “not unlike the way in which the range of gender and sexual variance under patriarchal and heteronormative regimes is most fully understood through lenses that are feminist and queer” (Sexton 2010, 48). It is this parallel that intrigues me, a parallel I want to take up in this meditation on LGBT. (It also seems that “gender and sexual variance” is precisely the afterthought in Sexton’s essay that he warns others of committing with respect to blackness. I am in part remedying this oversight of his, the very gender-and-sexual-variance “blindness” present in his meditation.) I read Sexton’s parallel as providing an opening of sorts into how “LGBT” acts and is used similarly to “people of color”—how, to use Sexton’s words, LGBT often gets deployed as a listing of a “chain of equivalents.” Additionally, I want to argue that transness serves as a corollary to blackness, as transness, delineated more below, provides the fullest understanding of the gendered political realm yet is not the beginning and end of discussions of gender and sexuality. In sum, the indexical *operations* of blackness and transness bear similarities, not necessarily the consolidated identities themselves. Blackness and transness imply ways that power works along different axes, and the intent here is to demonstrate how power functions in certain ways that are given to obscuring radical edges in order to expand the reach of normativity and hegemony.

As a scholar situated not merely in gender studies but in *transgender* studies, I want to make the claim that what is primary in various moments of being “alerted” to one’s “LGBT” identity is in fact an irruption of “T-ness.” But first, a definition, one I will expand upon in the next section. I advance *trans* in a manner that seems trite to delineate by now inasmuch as at least part of this definition is rehashed in essay after essay that even remotely concerns transness. But alas, a clarifying definition. *Trans* is not to be conflated simply with a purported ontological state of being transgender, the limits of which are nebulous at best and beholden to medicalized discourses of the exact boundaries of “gender dysphoric” embodiment at worst. I hold that *trans* refers to, following Susan Stryker’s etymological uptake of it, “*the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition*”; those who “cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender”; or put in a slightly different register, *trans* marks “a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival” (Stryker 2008, 1; emphasis in original; Snorton 2017, 2). As articulable by, but not reducible to, transgender, *trans* is precisely the *trouble* of “trouble genders” in this essay’s title. It becomes the modality that does the work of rupturing, or at least disturbing, the normative assumptions that keep statements like “that person’s LGBT identity” at bay. In other words, LGBT indexes a disturbance in the normative field, and the “T” is the fuel for that disturbance.

The “T” bears a peculiar relationship to the other letters, it being the only referent to a gender expression, the others indexing sexualities.² Interestingly, though, the “T” might in fact be the more fundamental letter. What your run-of-the-mill homophobe responds to is not necessarily—without, perhaps, prior knowledge—what someone is doing sexually in the bedroom behind closed doors; rather, it is how they perceive

nonheterosexual desire on and around the body: that is, meanings accrue in, say, the way a hand moves, the inflection of the voice, and the clothes worn, which are then taken as indices of sexuality. To illustrate this and to express my broader argument, I want to turn to a more in-depth meditation on the ways LGBT collapses and flattens its “T.”

I recall a recent experience in which a friend, a cis white woman, shared with me that she thought I’d really like a musical artist she’d heard recently. The artist, whose name I genuinely cannot recall, is a black lesbian woman whose art rests squarely in the more popular iterations of hip-hop. After watching one of the artist’s music videos, the presence of women, money, and blunt smoke an all-too-familiar musical scene, I sat quiet. “What’d you think?” she asked me, to which I responded, simply, “Not a fan.” It is not because of my dislike of the genre (I am, to be sure, very much a hip-hop head), nor is it because of an agreement with the discourse of a certain generation that “scantly clad” women and money fetishization is going to hold back “our people.” Don’t get me caught up out here. I was not a fan only because I found the song, the video, and its aesthetics super, super boring. Same shit, different artist—and this time she’s a lesbian woman, how innovative!

But this is not the critical moment. What made my friend so sure that I would “really like” this artist was because of (and *only* because of) “her LGBT identity.” I queried immediately, “Well, which is it? L, G, B, or T?”³

“Oh, I didn’t really think about that.”⁴

This is not at all, from my reading, an isolated account. Numerous op-eds and think pieces, often written by cis and straight people, deploy this acronym without noting the distinctness of each constitutive letter, or acknowledgment that, indeed, the letters refer to different archives of subjectivity, gender expression, sexuality, and experience (for example, Pullen and Cooper 2010; Gates and Newport 2012; Higgins 2019). There is a violent flattening and disregard for the acronymic specificity of LGBT—what Dean Spade has called “LGB-fake-T,” which signifies the ways trans is often subsumed under the aegis of lesbian and gay studies without meditation on its difference and specificity. This phenomenon occurs even with cis (to the extent one can even call this demographic “cis”) straight black women feminists as well, someone like Feminista Jones writing about the founders of Black Lives Matter, “at least one of the founders of Black Lives Matter identifies as LGBTQ” (Jones 2019, 107). It is often in service of inclusion, but results in erasure and dilution of the “T.” This becomes an obscuration of its acronymic utility. “LGBT,” when cast onto people as a descriptor, depoliticizes the gestural heft of the subjective modalities the letters signify. The subjects onto whom the acronym is cast become simply people whose genders or sexualities have been treated badly and should not be treated badly anymore. The rebellious spirit, the intentionality behind acts in defiance of normative disciplining, and the systems that punished such genders and sexualities fall away, making “LGBT” a mere individual identity. Too, the description assumes three things, at least: a particular meaning—often “gay”—that is collapsed within the acronym and evacuated of specificity; a certain kind of body that falls under the legible rubrics of what “gayness” looks like or what “transgender” looks like; and, last, and perhaps most substantively, that each letter in the acronym is akin to the others and does the same work.

So in the remainder of this essay I will argue that what one often means when they say “LGBT” is gay or lesbian, and thus what goes unthought is what work the “T” in particular is really doing, what it really means, and how in fact it underlies how LGBT manifests as legible. Carrying my argument out in two additional sections,

first I think through the impact of “trans” via its distinction from “queer.” Indeed, what I argue here may be understood as a recapitulation of queer theory’s articulation of queerness as an antinormative analytic—not to mention my conspicuous exclusion of the “Q” from popular inscription of the acronym LGBT—thus it is necessary that I delineate how trans, the “T,” is notably different from queer, the “Q.” I do this through a deep meditation on Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager’s conversation “After Trans Studies” (Chu and Drager 2019), critiquing their assertion of trans’s mere repetition of queer and their depoliticizing of what is deemed “normal.” In the final section, I explore the nuances and specificities of trans fundamentality through its reverberations with homophobia. So often a notable erasure occurs when describing, say, a gay person’s murder as resulting from “their LGBT identity,” an erasure that misguidedly deemphasizes what is likely a murder precipitated by a gender transgression—the “T” of LGBT. This propels my primary argument of trans fundamentality, that transness—gender transgressivity in this context, or troubled and troubling gender—rests at the fundament of the acronym, the letter that in a variety of circumstances brings the other letters and their indexed demographics into a kind of legibility. Trans is a political and politicized subjectivity, a sensorium and inhabitation of sociality that de-sediments normative impositonality, not (“merely”) an identifiable bodily morphology occurring at the nebulous threshold of surgical gender interventions.

Queer ≠ Trans (?)

There is a queer little elephant in the room of trans studies: the thought, or the assertion by some, that the *trans* of trans studies is not as original, not as analytically weighty, as those in the discipline might believe. Indeed, my insistence on the *trans* as theorized in trans studies might be, and has been, read as simply “queer, again,” as Chu has argued (Chu and Drager 2019). For Chu and Drager, trans studies is (almost) over, passé. Trans studies has exhausted its memoiristic narratives—themselves problematic in certain ways, namely that they often perpetuate the troubling discourse of “trapped in the wrong body”—and now that such an era is waning, trans studies is only inserting “trans” where “queer” used to be. Or so the claims go.

In light of this, I have been sitting on a response, a rather emotive yet acute response that feels to me to rest on an insistence on trans studies’ political distinction, its necessary specificity, and its intimacy with discourses in black thought. First, though, I want to dwell a bit more at length on Chu and Drager’s conversational article “After Trans Studies,” for it painfully, brutally lays bare all the soiled linens and dirty drawers we in trans studies have been assumed to be hiding. At the outset, Chu is quite clear that there is a tense relationship between trans studies and queer theory. “Trans studies,” she writes, “is the twin that queer studies ate in the womb” (Chu and Drager 2019, 103), alluding to Susan Stryker’s metaphor of trans studies as queer theory’s “evil twin” (Stryker 2004). Those who do trans studies are little more than queer theorists recycling tired tropes of antinormativity because we are merely, devastatingly, “especially susceptible to fads” (Chu and Drager 2019, 105). In addition to this, trans studies has no teeth; trans studies is overwhelmingly in agreement about things, no one really holding a grudge or throwing the book (or article) at the wall at just how *wrong*, say, Stryker is. Chu and Drager want a fight in trans studies. They want disagreement. Not quibbles or bickering, but heady, knock-‘em-down debate. Well, you got one.

They go on to assert trans as queerness’s “junk DNA” (103). There is nothing, in effect, that trans does or is that queer has not already done and been—save for the

transsexual, which Chu argues “is the only thing that *trans* can describe that *queer* can’t” (107; emphasis in original). *Queer* is analytically exhausted, so in order to be revitalized by queer theorists (who are the bulk of trans studies scholars, just rebranded queer theorists for the most part, they argue), “queer-studies scholars have had to entertain other vehicles for the romantic fantasy of criticism as a radical political act”: reworking their definition of “queer” as, simply, their definition of “trans” (105). Queer and trans are synonyms, bearing no true distinction; those who claim to work in trans studies are merely rehashing queer theory’s arguments in trans garb.⁵

Surely it is true that “[t]he critique of queer theory’s allegorization of trans people as the exceptional locus of gender trouble, with its attendant separation of queer and trans categories, still feels as relevant to us today as it was over a decade ago” (Benavente and Gill-Peterson 2019, 25), and that is why I am meditating on it here. It is true not simply that queer theory is the analytic precursor to trans studies but also, as Sally Hines has argued, that queer theory has incorporated transgender into its folds, refusing to emphasize the particularity of different kinds of transgender subjects (Hines 2006). Queer theory, in short, has tended to universalize the term *transgender*, imbuing into transgender subjects a perpetual, dehumanizing ontological gender trouble that queer theory heralded as our salvation. Queer studies has long neglected the *lived experience* (a term that to me is in *desperate* need of some analytic attention, if not sustained critique) of transgender people (see Namaste 1996; Prosser 1998; Ekins and King 1999; Namaste 2009).

But . . . If I may, I feel compelled to make the case for both the analytic distinction between *queer* and *trans*, and to defend (acknowledging the specter of trouble any treatise smug enough to have the title “In defense of . . .” carries with it) trans as lacking—or, refusing, more accurately—specificity. Allow me first to make something clear. That transgender, transsexual, and genderqueer people have been made to bear the weight of queer theory’s professed calling card of “category crisis” (Garber 2011, 30) marks them as having no utility or validity *as trans* outside of a forced and demanded political valence. That is, this disallows some transgender people from being, indeed, conservative, apolitical, or in whatever way not “down with the struggle.” (Though surely I would disagree with such stances, and would approach such lines of thinking with the same vigor as any other conservative or apolitical person, I still want to express these as possibilities for people irrespective of my disagreement with such a position.) This is all to say simply that, yes, transgender—or trans—has long been disallowed in queer theory as an identity in and of, and for, itself, without the burden of political efficacy and behavior. I would argue, as I do a bit more at length later in this section, that this is a neoliberal, even conservative, fantasy, as it presumes that a calm, tranquil, unfettered life is equivalent to a life in which one does not have to “be political” or “do politics.” It fails to consider the capaciousness of *political* as a term—that which concerns and affects the workings of the sociohistorical, discursive, interpersonal world—and fundamentally attempts to absolve one from engaging the world in ways that acknowledge one’s effect on others. To yearn for a life that is outside the political is, in no uncertain terms, a neoliberal, individualist pipedream.

In terms of the differentiations between queer and trans, I assert an understanding of queer as more referential of an explicit departure from an identifiable norm, a “No, thank you,” as it were, to something specific that one is offered. It seems that queerness used to refer “to a life away from identity categories, eroticizing what lies outside them, but today it seems the word often points to a reification of identity, to new rules” (Fleischmann 2019, 64). Trans, in turn, might reference a certain movement that

generates different ways to not be beholden to reactions against a norm: trans, in other words, as a life *in* its etymological crossedness and beyondness. Following Heather Love, “*queer* and *transgender* are linked in their activist investments, their dissident methodologies, and their critical interrogation of and resistance to gender and sexual norms” (Love 2014, 172; emphasis in original). Linked, but not conflated, not synonymous. Queerness strikes my mind as something that breaks with normality. If etymology serves as a legitimate lens through which to discern the meaning and effect of a term, *queer* is rightly viewed as strange and peculiar, odd even, so it carries a sense of departure from a settled norm. *Queer* has simultaneously produced a subject through a certain kind of shame or pathology (hegemonically imposed, of course) and has created the conditions for the emergence of a new subject not beholden to the fetters of normative subjectivity. Transness, conversant with the definition in the previous section, attends to the generative force embedded in the desire for destruction. Transness models an anarchist modality as “the passion for destruction [a]s a creative passion, too,”⁶ and thus posits a *non*normativity in service of other ways to be (or maybe other ways to *be*), irreverent toward any organizing, binaristic stricture or given ontology. Queer has, even in its departure from normality and normativity, buttressed the immutability of the gender binary, implying a departing movement but within the structural edifices of things like the gender binary as well as whiteness. The usefulness of transness and trans studies is their capacity for the spectacular *and* the quotidian, their breadth invitational of genital surgery or a thousand tiny subversive acts seeking to engender the abolition of normativity.

As Stryker remarks in a more recent piece than that mentioned by Chu and Drager, “Trans studies . . . offered a different way to imagine how queerness could be constituted by attending to other registers of difference than sexuality” (Stryker 2019, 40). And I would add, whiteness. Chu and Drager are astoundingly perceptive in noting the analytic exhaustion that occurred with queerness in queer theory, but to negatively connote this exhaustion’s reinvigoration in transness is misguided. The reinvigoration, which is not simply “queer, again” but perhaps queer *otherwise*, perhaps queer *felt differently*, queer *on the outskirts of the margins*, is an avenue into new ways of existence. Simply because a concept bears an affinity with a precursor does not negate its utility and novelty. Trans might, and surely does, do something different from what queer did. There is a blessedly lively generation of people who find in transness—not to mention nonbinariness—new ways of being in and in excess of the world that queerness could not, or that they simply missed since they came of age after queerness’s heyday.

In terms of what is perceived as a lack of specificity in articulations of trans subjects, I want to heed the danger in how this has historically played out. It has had the effect, at times, of dissolving the singularity of individual trans people. What is misunderstood, however, is the intended difference between *transgender* and *trans*. This differentiation hinges on the political as a constitutive characteristic of the latter, whereas the former might be understood as a descriptor of gendered corporeality. I understand “political” here as a general antagonism that exposes the general order, which is to say normativity, and as a project of emancipation that obviates adherence to taxonomized performativities or comportments. The political is “alterity, antagonism, and even epiphany, addressing itself to the reinhabitation of the sociogeographic West and the reconstruction of the Western political that conventionally proscribe it” (Hesse 2011, 977).⁷ Trans (and queer too, though differently) is a political intensity (not category) in a different way from the tired “everything is political” or “the personal is political” discourse. That is, sure, one can be gay or lesbian or bi, and one can be transgender, but these are not

political modalities of subjective deployment. These are, I suppose, identities one seeks to possess as one's own. But *trans* is a political intensity that arises from an antagonistic, subversive relationship to power. To desire to simply *be* trans and live, as Chu writes, a "*normal fucking life*" (Chu and Drager 2019, 107; emphasis in original) is at once an absolution of one's intra-active relationality with the sociohistorical world to which—indeed, to *whom*—we bear a responsibility, and a fallacious presumption that does not acknowledge "[t]here is no domain of the political as opposed to that of the social and domestic obscurity" (Rancière 2013, 207). This is not about making trans *people* the bearers of an always and already politicality and nonnormativity. Instead, I want to understand transness, as noted, as a way of doing things with (our) subjectivity that engenders different ways of making and breaking sociality. One can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, sure, and you can go ahead and have at it. This sense of being, though, does not a politics make (which may be precisely what one wishes). Trans as operating on a political register means that it marks the tearing of bodies and bodyness from their assignation as (gendered) bodies as such. It is, indeed, the introduction of altogether unsanctioned genres of encountering the world order. So one cannot *be* trans; it is what we do, how we engage the world and others, yes, *politically*.

This distinction and care with identificatory language is what is missing in Chu and Drager's conversation, to be sure. Also missing, or overlooked, is a number of assumptions as to what precisely constitutes the things they venerate. Take, for example, Chu's mention of the pseudonymous transsexual woman Agnes, who posed as intersex in the late 1950s in order to receive vaginoplasty. Agnes, she writes, "is regularly celebrated as some kind of gender ninja: savvy, tactical, carefully conning the medical-industrial complex into giving her what she wants. . . . What no one wants to talk about is *what she actually wanted*: a cunt, a man, a house, and *normal fucking life*" (Chu and Drager 2019, 107; emphasis in original). This attachment to normality is what we in fact, as trans studies scholars, must defend "*as we never have before*" in service of what Chu suggests as "transsexual theory" (108). But there are a few assumptions here that must be interrogated.

First, implicit and bordering on explicit in Chu and Drager's conversation is the establishment of the figure of the transsexual—or better, the *actual* transsexual—as the proper object of trans studies, Chu's imagined transsexual theory. Trans studies has almost nothing specific to it, nothing distinguishing it from queer theory, because all of its objects of analysis are the same as in queer theory. The transsexual, then, comes to be the subject who marks trans studies as distinct, which gives the transsexual, as proper object of trans studies, a certain kind of value. It remains, however, that to install the demarcated limits of a proper object of study for a given discipline, which gets read as apostasy if breached, is precisely not the aim, nor should it be, of trans studies. (Nor any radical project concerning gender and, indeed, radical subjectivities in excess of given ontologies.) "The institution of the 'proper object,'" Butler has written, "takes place, as usual, through a mundane sort of violence" (Butler 1994, 6). It is the aim of radical feminist politics, and surely of trans politics, to disturb its very ground, refusing to sediment tenets of inclusion and exclusion in the interest of reckoning, constantly, with those who might not be able to find a home in such a radical politics. Its radicality stems from its insistence that "it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it" (Butler 2011, 175), thus trans studies' openness, its rejection of a singular proper object, is its salvific radicality. I want to insist on trans studies as holding, lovingly, the possibility of subjects more "radical" than

transgender and transsexual people, subjects who have not been permitted to emerge yet, subjects who are not even deemed proper subjects let alone proper for the discipline of trans studies. Trans studies is, on my reading, a proudly *improper* field of study and theoretical apparatus.⁸

An additional troubling assumption is embedded in the propounding of a normal life: that such a normal life is innocent. What constitutes a normal life is a decidedly violent life for others, or what contributes to a normal life—a normality that is structured by certain historical biases and mechanisms orchestrating a kind of decorum and propriety—is never delinked from hegemonic discourses. Often it is conveyed as *just* wanting a normal life, the “just” functioning as an exasperation with having to *do* political life. *I just want to be left alone*, it implies, *and not have to deal with all the politics*. It is a misstep to think that an escape from the public realm means that one is unfettered by politics. It wrongly takes up the logic of “the political” as absorbing “politics,” an institutional reading that has been prevalent “from Plato to NATO,” presuming the political as “emphatically associated with public matters of law, government, sovereignty, and electoral representation in the constitution and regulation of a polity and its social order.” This definition of political “identifies politics as dispute and debate in the administration of the public space and public life” (Hesse 2011, 975). It seems that the assumption is if Agnes simply wanted to have a husband and vagina and a house, she was not trying to be political, just Agnes. (It goes unremarked upon that just wanting to be [insert one’s name™] is a classic neoliberal maneuver whereby one asserts an individualistic identity that is to hold sway over and against the ways that [one’s name™] is rooted in whiteness, cis heteronormativity, wealth, and so on.) The normal life Agnes seeks, and that Chu seems to validate, is far from the innocuousness of normality, free of any impact on how the sociopolitical plays out; normality itself is constituted via a certain kind of whiteness and heteronormativity, and perhaps in this case a transnormativity. I do not mean to denigrate a specific phenotype or sexual desire (that is, being white or being heterosexual). I do, though, mean to interrogate a *desire* for these things as normal.

Trans Fundamentality

Having argued for the import of *trans*, I now turn to how transness acts as fundamental to LGBT-ness, as it were. To illustrate, I convey a case Butler has spoken of on a number of occasions.

There is a story that came out around, I don’t know, eight years ago. Of a young man who lived in Maine and he walked down the street of his small town where he had lived his entire life. And he walks with what we would call a swish, a kind of, his hips move back and forth in a feminine way. And as he grew older that swish, that walk, became more pronounced, and it was more dramatically feminine. He started to be harassed by the boys in the town, and soon two or three boys stopped his walk and they fought with him and they ended up throwing him over a bridge and they killed him. So then we have to ask: why would someone be killed for the way they walk? Why would that walk be so upsetting to those other boys that they would feel that they must negate this person, they must expunge the trace of this person. They must stop that walk no matter what. They must eradicate the possibility of that person ever walking again. It seems to me that we are talking about an extremely deep panic or fear or anxiety that pertains to gender norms. Someone

says: you must comply with the norm of masculinity otherwise you will die. Or I kill you now because you do not comply. (Zadjermann 2006)

If I may be so presumptuous, I would wager that my aforementioned friend would say that the young man in the above anecdote was murdered because of his “LGBT identity.” This would be a disservice, not to mention inaccurate. The young man may have been gay, or he may not have been. In some ways, his sexuality, or more precisely what kinds of bodies and gender expressions and erogenous objects he found sexually desirable, was irrelevant in that it was in fact not the target of the boys who killed him. The locus of rage was his “swish.” His swish was a way of walking, moving his hips a bit too much for a boy, which is to say, from the perspective of normative scripts for those deemed boys, that boys don’t move their hips when they walk. Hip-swishing is what women and girls do, and you are a boy, which means you cannot also be a girl, so your hips must not swish. If your hips swish, that means something that cannot have meaning; it means something that does not exist. But you exist. So we, real boys, must make you not exist.

Fundamentally there is the prohibition of transness, or the mutual exclusivity and incompatibility of “boyiness” commingling with “girliness.” The boys killed the boy who walked with a swish because of an antagonistic relationship to the trans. The murder was a form of cisnormativity, indeed cis male supremacy, showcasing how, though this boy may have been gay and that sexuality surely contributed to the motivations to (accidentally?) kill him, the register on which his sexuality became an issue resulted from what I am understanding, as my subtitle professes, as a trans fundamentality.

Butler asks poignant questions: what *is* it that makes a walk killable? Why is it that certain movements by certain bodies invite extermination, or what Butler calls negating a person? I can hear someone like my friend, or a surfeit of other well-meaning liberal people, remark that this young man from Maine was killed “because of his LGBT identity.” But this is not the case, not simply and easily stated because he was not “L” and perhaps not “B.” What such a remark would do is cower from grappling with both which term (s) in the acronym ignited the murderous flame as well as, more fundamentally, how the “T” was the operative term—and is very often the primary operative term—in the scenario. The young man was killed because of his swish, and a swish is not a sexuality: it is, on a boy jammed into normative scripts of coercive, compulsory heteronormative masculinity, a deviant and transgressive gender expression. It is, in short, a trans way of being.

Trans is not to be subsumed by LGBT, nor is it simply to say transgender. The oppression of gay and lesbian and bisexual people is not parallel to that of trans people, and to voice the oppression of “LGBT” people misguidedly flattens the differing histories and subjectivities of them. So often the response to this mirrors a quick “But gay people are oppressed too!” which, though indeed true, does not reckon with the extent to which L, G, and B cisness shrouds otherwise “private” sexualities, only to be purportedly revealed when a transgression of gender emerges. Surely, the young man who lived in Maine is not at all to be blamed for his death. My point here is that his death, a death that resulted fundamentally from transantagonistic violence, was the product of how his deviant *gender* expression, his, if you will, transness—his refusal to remain “on this side of” young man-ness, which is to say cis, which the *OED* defines as opposed to *trans*; across, beyond—aroused the violence. Trans, in other words, rests at the foundation of LGBT violence. Trans, to purloin Sexton again, “does not represent the total reality of the [sexual/gender] formation. . . but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system”; transness and its fundamentality

asserts, per my argument, that “the whole range of positions within the [sexual/gender] formation is most fully understood from this vantage point” (Sexton 2010, 48). If a parallel would help illuminate my claim: certainly violence is visited upon brown and Asian people, for example (that is, “people of color”), but I would maintain that not only is this violence visited overwhelmingly on black people, which “people of color” would not do justice to and which would in fact overshadow the specificity of antiblackness; too, the violence that befalls people of color broadly defined is structured by, gets its playbook from, antiblackness. Such is also the case, I would argue, for “LGBT” violence (as substitute, *argumentatively* here, for people of color) and its orchestration by a foundational transness (as substitute, *argumentatively* here, for blackness).

Note too that a parallel and similarity is being drawn, not an analogy. Folks are a little prickly right now, especially in light of some recent claims,⁹ so I want to make plain precisely what I intend here. The above substitution is an argumentative one, not an identificatory one. The substitution, thus, is used to highlight forces and flows that work in tandem and operate along similar axes of power—or, that enact power in ways that have at their basis the obscuration or sanitization of other, more uncomely modalities of living. Blackness and transness can illuminate how certain *related* things work, and to demand their separability is to do a disservice to capturing the expanse of the topic at hand. And that topic is how normativity and the status quo expand their reach by assimilating certain historically marginalized populations in order to maintain themselves, indeed to strengthen themselves. But I also want to assert here, as noted by thinkers like Green, Treva Ellison, Snorton, and myself, that blackness and transness bear similarities and overlap with each other. As Snorton has written, there is a “transitivity and transversality of blackness and transness” (Snorton 2017, 136); as I have written, they are “nodes of one another, inflections that . . . flash in different hues because of subjects’ interpretive historical entrenchment” (Bey 2017, 278); as Green has said, “Trans* is the colored” (Green 2016, 67); and as Green and Snorton and their collaborators Treva Ellison and Matt Richardson “think about . . . the transversality of blackness and transness,” they assert “If we ask what is new about Black queer studies, the answer is ‘trans’ . . . If we also ask what is old and still relevant about Black queer studies, the answer is still ‘trans’” (Ellison et al. 2017, 165, 163). In other words, to adamantly demand that one make epically clear that blackness and transness in general, and how Sexton and I utilize blackness and transness respectively, is to unwittingly foreclose a relationship that in fact needs to be tethered more tightly. The move to quickly demarcate a hard line between race and gender, and subsequently blackness and transness, disallows an immersion in the deep ontological, existential, epistemological ways they are in fact related and at times constitutive. Ergo, the parallel I make between blackness’s position relative to people of color and transness’s position relative to LGBT is not only illuminative; it is also an insistence on the inextricable, “appositional” (to use Snorton’s term) collision and overlapping between the two.

What I have tried to hammer home throughout this meditation is that it is transness, the deployment of a transgressive movement that demonstrates “the insufficiency of current classificatory systems,” that serves as the quintessential index of recognizing LGBT-ness, and yet is, simultaneously, refused as a way to craft LGBT as a monolithic identity to be more easily digested (Halberstam 2018, 50). The violence of sexual or gender oppression, at least in the scenario Butler provides above, is at best assumed to be transphobic, which is just one of many equally harmful “biases,” or at worst, just another form of LGBT “discrimination.” Neither recognizes the fundamentality, in my view, of transantagonism—that deeply specific reaction not simply to “being”

gay, lesbian, or bisexual, but to how fracturing the integrity of gender cohesiveness, transgressing gender normativity, and interrogating gender's naturalization threatens the fortress of that hooksian "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," *all of which are shot through with a cisnormative instantiation of personhood*. It is more than simply patriarchal requirements for proper gender roles that manifest as misogyny. It cannot be overlooked that what constitutes the propriety of a gender role is a cisnormative conception of human difference, an added intensity in the very *crossing* of the binary roles (buttressed by the disallowance, too, of non-assigned-male-at-birth people into manhood and masculinity, implying that it is more than just veneration of the "M" side of the M-F binary), and the instantiation of the immutability and naturalness of gender roles. The victims and survivors and fighters of "LGBT violence" encounter deadly threats when walking home from bars, walking to and from bus stops and subway stations, walking to and from work (if they can or want to secure a [recognized] job), and a myriad of other places, public and private, when they are read as breaching "classificatory systems." From the gaze of the hegemonic, the metrics by which we are classified act as barometers for how safe we deserve to be as they measure the extent to which we stay in line. To put the same sentiment differently, classificatory systems demand that we remain within them, that we remain on this side of the classification, traversal of which requires reprimand. They demand that we remain cis, the transing of which requires reprimand.

It is not that I am arguing that homophobia proper does not exist. A substantive archive details how knowledge of one's homosexuality—and that primarily—precipitates hatred that manifests as verbal and physical assault leading to depression, suicidal ideation, unemployment, homelessness, or death (see Kruks 1991; Bagley and Tremblay 1997; Rubin 1999). My argument is not intended to disappear the specificity of homophobia or homosexuality, as they are integral strains of the kinds of mechanisms at play upon which I have been commenting. It remains, though, that LGBT, when used to describe an individual or the violence that happens to an individual, or when used to denote *an* identity, precipitates a marked obscuration and erasure. It remains the largely sidelined case that, as Hil Malatino argues, "What is targeted in many instances of trans and queer phobia is perceived gender nonconformance" (Malatino 2019, 192), and, further, it remains the case that, as Gabriel Rotello writes, "Homophobes don't merely hate us because of how we make love. They hate how we make love because it violates our expected gender roles. *Really, we are hated for gender transgression*" (Rotello 1996; emphasis added; see also Wilchins 2017, 139).¹⁰ To assume that casting LGBT over a violent act or a singular identity is sufficient in its capaciousness prevents one from understanding the fullness of what in fact is occurring. Transness, I have argued, is not the totality of LGBT but is the angle from which the fullest scope of vision can be assumed when thinking through gender and sexual phenomena.

Notes

1 The placement of scare quotes around *blindness* signals my distance from it, a distance I want to maintain due to the term's ableism and trivialization of ocular impairment, yet what I see as the term's utility only insofar as it is used similarly to how Jared Sexton uses it (Sexton 2010).

2 Surely, too, one could read a sexuality as having or dictating a certain kind of gender expression; that is, one might be coerced or choose to perform heterosexuality, homosexuality, and so on (though this is not outside of problematic notions of something like "acting gay"). Nevertheless, trans is largely a gender expression whereas the others designate, primarily, sexualities.

3 To be sure, I do not mean to imply that each term is mutually exclusive of the others. One can of course be trans and gay/lesbian/or bi.

4 Of note is that the musical artist above was a butch black woman—justifiably described under the racially specific gendered heading of “aggressive” or “AG” (see Peddle 2005; Rees 2011)—and thus my friend was privy to the artist’s “LGBT identity” because of the artist’s transgression of expected femininity, her gender transgression.

5 The most forceful claim to this effect is their noting of Karen Barad’s recycling of her new materialism, initially rooted in queerness, as trans. Chu cites Barad’s “On touching: The inhuman that therefore I am” (Barad 2012), where Barad argues for the *queerness* of intimacy, and then, published three years later, Barad’s “TransMaterialities: Trans*/matter/realities and queer political imaginings” (Barad 2015), where Barad argues for the *queerness/transness* of intimacy. Barad, Chu reveals, literally recycled the same sentences, plugging in *trans* where *queer* was.

6 This is a quotation from famous anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (see Bakunin 2002).

7 The reference cited here reveals itself as a specifically *black* politics, an appropriate description of the project presented in this essay at the very least for Sexton’s spectral presence and thus the reverberation of blackness within an analytic conception of the trans I describe herein.

8 This sentiment is also found in the work of Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, whom Chu and Drager cite, namely Stryker, Currah, and Moore’s utilization of trans to reference “the explicit relationality of ‘trans-,’ which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix” (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 11). This is also found in C. Riley Snorton’s work, his book *Black on Both Sides* largely a quest to find what he calls “other ways to be trans” (Snorton 2017, 175), ways that do not rely on preconceived and often medicalized (as in the “transsexual,” which Chu prefers to assert as the best object of study for trans studies) understandings of what has long qualified as trans identity.

9 I am referencing, of course, Rebecca Tuvel’s article “In defense of transracialism,” which caught an enormous amount of backlash, sending this very journal into a crisis (Tuvel 2017). Green, Theodora Sakellerides and I, and Stryker, among others, have written cogently in varying degrees of opposition to the popular opinion of Tuvel’s essay and the person (Rachel Dolezal/Nkechi Amare Diallo) who was the subject of the whole “transracial” debate (Green 2015; Stryker 2015; Bey and Sakellerides 2016; see Brubaker 2016). I am drawing on the ethos of their thinking throughout this article, attempting to think rigorously yet carefully about the relationship between race and gender, though more specifically blackness and transness.

10 Malatino, usefully, goes on to write, “This sometimes manifests as perceived contradiction between the biological ‘truth’ of sex and performed gender, but it also often manifests as a perceiver’s inability to place a subject stably with respect to both performed gender and biological sex” (Malatino 2019, 192). In turn, Rotello goes on to say—in deep alignment with what I’ve called trans fundamentality—“When I was 10 and was taunted for throwing a ball ‘like a girl,’ those schoolyard bullies didn’t suspect me of sleeping with men. They bashed me for not being boy enough. That goes for almost all of us. Whether we face prejudice for being too butch or too femme . . . or being perceived as gay or lesbian, we are all ultimately disliked for the same basic reason: transgressing our expected gender roles. Sexual transgression in the bedroom is just one aspect, although a very important one. *All gays are in a basic sense transgendered*” (Rotello 1996, n.p.; emphasis added).

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