

# The Affective Life of Trans Studies as a Political Field in Academia and Activism

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Trans Studies have become an epistemological project that challenges who has the power to intervene in violent knowledge production that shape trans lives. The field promises to form a radical critical intervention in pathologizing, criminalizing, marginalizing, and dehumanizing discourses. In doing so, it strongly builds on trans activism initiated by trans people and their allies regarding the challenges facing trans persons particularly regarding historical and current medico-psycho pathologizing regimes. This text departs from this specific moment in Trans Studies and trans politics by asking how Trans Studies is rooted in the counter-knowledge production against the pathologizing taxonomies of Sexology.<sup>1</sup>

I will start this text with some reflections on the formation of the field of Trans Studies which leads me to question of what the attachment of trans scholars, activists, and artists to the formation of this field is. I will point out that Trans Studies are rooted in the counter-knowledge production against the pathologizing taxonomies of Sexology in forming its promise to form its critical intervention. In doing so, I will show how Trans Studies strongly builds on trans activism initiated by trans people and their allies

<sup>1</sup> This text is a shortened version of a keynote I was invited to give at the 8<sup>th</sup> Nordic Trans Studies Conference in Tampere, Finland.

regarding the challenges facing trans persons particularly regarding historical and current medico-psycho pathologizing regimes. I refer here to trans activism and the claim for human rights in discussing the question how the figure of the 'Human' is not only linked to the gender binary but inextricably to colonial regimes. In my conclusion, I will ask what Trans Studies might become. How can we imagine the field's future considering its myriad legacies of colonialism? I suggest thinking through a version of *Critical Trans Studies* (Nay and Steinbock 2021) that continues to resist and transform oppressive power systems while building generous and generative worlds in developing knowledge, political and artistic practices.

## The Formation of a Field Trans Studies and the Attachment to the Promise of a Radical Critical Intervention in Knowledge Production

As numerous introductory and overview publications on the question of the emergence and development of Trans Studies have shown so far (Stryker 2006; Stryker and Whittle 2006; Stryker and Aizura 2013; Baumgartinger 2017), Trans Studies does not build – as often assumed by a broad public and hegemonic academic disciplines – solely on the

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trans emancipatory movements that emerged in the 1960s. “Transgender phenomena” (Stryker 2006, 3), in Stryker’s words, were already studied with the emergence of modern sexual sciences in Europe in the late 19th century. The critical examination of these historical manifestations of “transgender phenomena” and its pathologizing taxonomies in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Sexology figures as the background for the later formation of the field of Trans Studies. Trans Studies are concerned with these taxonomies and make them the subject of a critical scholarship on trans. In doing so, Trans Studies address the ontological and epistemological question of the invention of new categories of gender non-conformity. The emergence of the modern subject category *trans* is examined and contextualized with the violent pathologizing, criminalizing, marginalizing, and dehumanizing discourses of so-called *transsexualism* or *cross-sex and -gender identification*. Trans Studies dwells on the question of what *trans* means in its emergence, dissemination and ongoing development. In doing so, Trans Studies become an epistemological project that challenges who has the power to define what “trans” means.

As Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah write in the inaugural issue of the field-forming journal *Transgender Studies Quarterly* *TSQ*, Trans Studies makes it possible for trans people to be both “subjects of knowledge as well as objects of knowledge” (Stryker and Currah 2014, 9). Trans people represent a critical intervention in the production of knowledge that objectifies and pathologizes trans people: “[T]hey [trans people] can articulate critical knowledge from embodied positions that would otherwise be rendered pathological, marginal, invisible, or unintelligible within dominant and normative organizations of power/knowledge” (Stryker and Currah 2014, 9). Susan Stryker’s (2006, 12) understanding of Trans Studies as “(de)subjugated knowledges” is considered a canonical reference for the formation of the academic field Trans Studies, which sees itself as counter knowledge to the pathologizing Sexology. Trans

Studies accordingly examine the normative social, cultural, and political regimes that present certain bodies and identities as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ and reject others as pathological. In this sense, Trans Studies promise a “radical critical intervention” (Stryker 2006, 13) “through desubjugating previously marginalized forms of knowledge about gendered subjectivity and sexed embodiment” (Ibid.).

This promise, I argue, forms the attachment of scholars, activists, and artists to Trans Studies. The “radical critical intervention” – which is filled with hope for transformative justice for trans people – is understood as a response to knowledge production grounded in Sexology’s violent and destructive legacy of dehumanization, shame, and stigma with idealizing alternatives from deviant ascription. Trans Studies in this redemptive understanding offers the possibility of mobilizing political potential and life-forming forces to produce ways and worlds of living that were previously considered as deviant, pathological and criminal. The attachment to this promise is linked to the hope of expanding potentials for the imagination and practical realization of trans lives for all in the here and now.

However, this important and laudable project not only idealizes trans lives and politics but also places high expectations on trans knowledge production, politics, and art. But what happens when these expectations are not met? In what follows, I discuss this question based on trans politics, which are an important critical intervention in the pathologizing medical and legal knowledge production on trans lives. I examine trans activists’ demands for self-determination, who argue that trans rights are human rights.

## Trans Human Rights as a Critical Intervention in Pathologizing Knowledge on Trans

Social and Political Science scholars have observed a significant change in the perception and articulation of the concerns of trans people on a global scale since the new millennium. Political activism initiated by trans people, and their allies has raised the awareness of politicians, legislators, and the general public regarding the challenges facing trans persons (LaGata/Balzer 2014; LaGata/Balzer and Hutta 2012; Vidal-Ortiz 2020). As the European Union Agency of Fundamental Rights (2016) and the Council of Europe (2020), among others, note, access to the labor and housing market as well as education is limited for trans persons; their lived realities are hardly considered in migration and asylum issues; their health care is inadequate; and trans persons are particularly exposed to physical and psychological violence as well as hate crimes.

One of the main focuses of trans activist struggles against gender discrimination is the demand for medical and legal self-determination of gender. Political struggles by and for trans people have intervened in the field of medical regulation of transgender identification and embodiment. This has resulted in a continuous change in the conception of gender within medicine. This is particularly evident in the shifting meanings and new taxonomies for non-norm-conforming gender and sexual modes of life in the context of their medicalization in the *International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD) of the *World Health Organization* (WHO) and in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) of the *American Psychological Association* (APA). This cataloging has pathologized – in a continuum with sexological discourses – numerous deviations from the normative gender binary as a psychological disorder with the effect to maintain and reinforce a naturalized notion of a binary gender order (Güldenring 2015; de Silva 2018; Fütty 2019). This

psychopathologization has been effectively countered by internationally and locally organizing trans activists and their allies with decades of political pressure.

Recently, in the ICD-11 of 2018, which is currently to be ratified in the individual member states of the WHO, transgender identification and its expressions are no longer catalogued as a mental illness in the chapter “Mental and Behavioral Disorders” but are defined under the chapter “Sexual Health” in the category “conditions related to sexual health” as “gender incongruence of adolescence and adulthood” (WHO 2018). The latter is considered an outstanding achievement of trans activists in their efforts towards a depathologization of non-norm-conforming gender identification and embodiment (WHO 2018; Suess Schwend 2020).<sup>2</sup>

These successful claims for the medical and legal recognition of gender identity and embodiment represent a “critical intervention” against the de-humanizing conditions of trans lives as proclaimed by Trans Studies as an academic and political field. Trans activists particularly aim at de-pathologizing the medical discourses and protocols on gender-variance via the claim for the right to self-determine one’s gender as a human right (GATE, ILGA-Europe, TGEU 2021). Carla LaGata / Carsten Balzer (2014, 100) describes this politics of trans rights as human rights as paradigm shift that would challenge the “dominant and globalized

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2 Despite this important change, a wide range of healthcare providers, researchers and trans community organisations have voiced misgivings about the diagnosis “gender incongruence of childhood” (WHO 2018), the ICD-11 diagnosis currently uses for gender-diverse children who have not yet reached puberty (Winter et al. 2019; Cabral Grinspan et al. 2016). Clinical researchers and trans activists argue that the diagnosis pathologises the experiences of children who are merely exploring, embracing, and expressing gender diversity (Ehrensaft et al. 2018).

western medical-psychiatric perspective, which defines gender-variant people as a deviation of an apparently natural binary gender order and thus pathologizes and stigmatizes them”.

Trans activists intervene in the definition of gender as gender self-determination by inscribing themselves into the category of the ‘human.’ This is linked to a notion of a self-determined trans subject that is an extension of what is understood by the term ‘human’ itself. This notion of the human, however, is grounded in two problematic aspects. First, it evokes an understanding of an autonomous and coherent subject that is only attainable for certain trans persons. This subject, the self-determined trans person who can attain state-legitimized rights and medically institutionalized health care, is a normatively charged figure. As Adrian de Silva (2018) as well as Tamás Jules Joshua Fütty (2019) have elaborated for the German context and Persson Perry Baumgartinger (2019) for Austria, inclusion in state recognition is shaped by particular norms and concepts of citizenship.

The notion of the self-determined state-recognized trans subject is significantly characterized by its social conformity and neoliberal production as a rights-conforming, dignified, and vital citizen. Trans rights as human rights are part of a logic of state rights that Dan Irving aptly describes as follows: “Rights are not understood as the responsibility of the benevolent state; rather, rights are earned through individual’s actively demonstrating their worth. Those who have attained material ‘success’ measured by one’s participation in labor and consumer economies and demonstrate financial, physical, and spiritual fitness prove themselves deserving rights” (Irving 2012, 157). Hence, the demand for human rights extends the social inclusion of certain trans persons, while producing exclusions of trans persons who cannot or do not want to comply with these normative notions of a self-determined subject. This illustrates that trans

political struggles for human rights have paradoxical effects. The partial inclusion simultaneously entails trans normative exclusions of unequally positioned trans persons. Second, this understanding invokes a universal figure of ‘the human’ that has been produced by colonial violence which continues to this day. To understand this present moment of trans activism in the Global North/West and its impact on the knowledge production in Trans Studies, I suggest to critically assess the history of the Western cisheteropatriarchal white empire, that involved colonial conquest and transatlantic slavery to build up the figure of the universal human.

### **The Coloniality of Gender, the Figure of the Universal Human and its Historical Present in Trans Politics**

Black feminists, feminists of Color and trans scholars have outlined the nexus of an apparently clearly demarcated gender binary and a seemingly civilized white race as the foundations for the construction of the universal figure of the human. María Lugones (2007) for instance draws on the colonial matrix of power from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which established a new global order built on the genocide of indigenous peoples and the African slave trade, to highlight the racialized and gendered human versus non-human distinction. In the colonial narrative, only the so-called civilized are human, whereas the colonized are deemed animalistic and “non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful” (Lugones 2010: 743). In a similar vein, Hortense Spillers (1987) provides an analytic for thinking gender that exceeds the terms of human biology or social construction. Spillers shows how Blackness is disqualified from the privilege of traditional gendered categories in order that Black existence becomes something other, or in Spillers words “a symbiotic blend” (2007, 304) of categories that is unrecognizable as gender.



Consequently, we need to challenge the established interpretations that see human rights located in the Global North/West, and particularly in Western Europe, as the bastion of democracy and liberty to dissemble and de-centralize the imaginary of human rights as universal rights (Dhawan 2014). In Sylvia Wynter's analysis on how the Caribbean and Americas came to be an arena to test out and brutally invent the Human for various Western colonial powers, she identifies the geopolitical shifts in Europe from the medieval period, in which hierarchical ordering of people was sanctified by God, to the Enlightenment mode of secularization, in which the idea of race and its hierarchies defines humans in a chain of "colonial difference" (Wynter 2003, 263). This legitimating logic for white supremacy that shapes the wholly constructed notion of a world civilization, Wynter argues, is accompanied by the empirical effect of "African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation" (Wynter 2003, 263). In other words, Western colonial projects have established the universal human, "the white Man" (Wynter 2003, 260), as a mythical identity in opposition to the gendered, racial, religious, and cultural "Other."

It is this blend produced by the *longue durée* of the coloniality of power, racial capitalism, the afterlife of slavery, and white supremacy that builds the ground for thinking about the construction of the white, Western, and bourgeois gender binary. This analysis of the coloniality of gender has significant impact on the "critical intervention" Trans Studies aim at the ontological and epistemological question of what gender beyond the gender binary might signify. Black Trans Studies play a crucial role here in a new formation of the field of Trans Studies. In his work, Black Trans Studies scholar C. Riley Snorton examines "how captives were rendered as raw materials" (Snorton 2017, 53) "for mediating and remaking sex and gender as matters of human categorization" (Snorton 2017, 20). In his attempt to find Black and trans life in the de-humanizing conditions of slavery and beyond, Snorton traces Black figures who made use of the

"fungible ungendered flesh" they were ascribed to for fugitive movements. Snorton shows how Black slaves attained personal sovereignty in the Antebellum North via the recurrence of "cross-dressing" and cross-gender modes of escape. In addition, Snorton provides what he calls a "shadow history" of trans embodiment in the aftermath of World War II and in the early Cold War period against the backdrop of Christine Jorgensen as an exceptional figuration of trans embodiment.

Snorton refers to media reports of Jorgensen's "sex change" that cast her embodiment as a testament of the magnitude of modern science consolidating a notion of trans (sexuality) as the result of medicalized treatments aimed to inscribe gender as an anatomical and biological premise. Jorgensen's spectacularized trans embodiment worked not only as a promise of freedom to live as a trans (sexual) woman, but as a national narrative of somatechnical advancement, and thus as a figure of national freedom. Snorton argues that "if Jorgensen's media figuration came to represent a form of freedom, it also signified upon the various kinds of unfreedom that marked and continue to animate black and trans temporalities" (Snorton 2017, 142). By focusing on the mediated narratives of Black trans figures during this period, Snorton illustrates the role Jorgensen played within the structure of America's national racial identity for a global audience. The shifting notion of human valuation herein becomes clear with the Black trans figures Hicks Anderson, Black, The Browns, and McHarris and Grant Snorton illuminates from the shadow of history as "they lay the groundwork for understanding trans/gender embodiment in relation to the kinds of violence that inflect black and trans life, only one of which is the violence of erasure, and for which that erasure is about not an absence but a persistent and animating presence" (Snorton 2017, 144). Snorton aims to re-figure trans historiography while focusing on both un-becoming and becoming, on presence and disappearance as well as on haunting.

Against this backdrop, I argue that the critical intervention in the production of knowledge Snorton provides us with as its shadow history shows the colonial legacies of sexological and medical regimes that regulate the access to medical care and access to legal gender recognition (see Gill-Peterson 2018). This critical intervention is crucial for the contestation of transnormativity in trans politics as human rights activism today. With the above-mentioned paradigmatic turn to human rights, trans politics builds on the figure of the universal trans person. This does lead to a certain visibility and recognition for some and simultaneously fortifies the dominant white gender normativity while masking the various lives of trans people beyond this privileged position (see Valentine 2007; Aizura et al. 2014; Ellison et al. 2017). Therewith, it reiterates the coloniality of the universal human as the ground for accessing medical treatment and towards legal representation. In line with trans historiography's accentuation of the first widely noticed and visible trans figure Jorgensen, the normative figure of the white middleclass, able-bodied, and mentally abled trans person persists as the legitimate subject of trans human rights activism.

### Critical Trans Studies – Or, What is Critical about Trans Studies Now?

As I have shown so far, the early formation of the field of Trans Studies as a “critical intervention” in pathologizing knowledge production in medicine and psychology, which emerged in the Sexology in Europe in the late 19th century, is built – according to Susan Stryker – on a concept of “desubjugated knowledge.” The aim in critical knowledge production as well as in activism to counter the ascription to trans as ‘unnatural’ and ‘monstrous’ has proven to be oriented in a reifying way towards a colonial universal figure of the Human. The Human as a universal figure becomes the focus of the “critical intervention” in Trans Studies as counter-oppressive

knowledge production. This desubjugating stance becomes evident in the version of trans politics as human rights politics. Such politics reaffirm the dehumanizing colonial regime, as their dominant subject remains the white trans person as the recipient of human rights. The promise of Trans Studies as a project of “desubjugated knowledge” providing a “radical critical intervention” in the production of epistemological knowledge on “trans phenomena” and of trans politics as a transformative justice project for all trans people is thus not fulfilled.

In this version of Trans Studies, “desubjugation” alludes to a subject position that can free itself from subjugation. As I have exemplarily shown with the work of C. Riley Snorton (2017), Black Trans Studies show that ways of “desubjugation” during slavery as well as in its afterlife are to be understood more broadly. Thus, to de-center Trans Studies from its focus on the white subject, multiple formations of power must be considered in an understanding of what a “critical intervention” might mean. I suggest thinking of this attempt as the desire for a revised “radical critical intervention” Susan Stryker set out Trans Studies do be, and thus an altered attachment to what Trans Studies might encompass by asking how we could imagine the field's future considering its myriad legacies of colonialism in knowledge production on gender.

I propose thinking through a version of what Eliza Steinbock and I termed *Critical Trans Studies* (Nay and Steinbock 2021). Building on earlier work that interrogate the presumptive whiteness, settler-colonial context, and US-based orientation of the field (Aizura et al 2014; Ellison et al. 2017; Chiang et al. 2018; Garriga-López et al. 2019), Eliza and I “have sought to continue to do the necessary work of tracing histories of colonialism and white supremacy that underwrite dominant concepts of gender and sexuality which have accompanied the formation of our field” (Nay and Steinbock 2021: 149-150). In doing so –and this exceeds Eliza and my

thoughts so far – I will examine what the term *trans* might mean here as well as what the “critical” in *Critical Trans Studies* might signify.

The widely discussed question what the term *trans* might encompass starts with *trans* as a historical category, and asks how the term has circulated globally, and how race, class, ability and location have complicated the desire to do justice to the complex ways in which people inhabit gender variance (Stryker 2006; Stryker et al. 2008; Stryker and Aizura 2013; Stryker and McCarthy Blackston 2023). Here, an attachment to a radical critical intervention in providing conditions for transformative justice for all trans people remains important while deferring from an understanding of *trans* as a subject position. However, it is important to focus on the previously outlined problematic of the universal human without simply deconstruct the human by – in Treva Ellison, Kai M. Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton’s (2017, 163) words – “(...) instrumentalizing those not-quite humans and sometimes humans whose violability forms the abstracted imaginative surface (to borrow from Saidiya Hartman [1997]) upon which the human and its metrics are conjured.” The question what *trans* might mean must therefore encompass the racialized production of gender. Black Trans Studies scholars work on such repressed genealogies of the role of Blackness for social political subjectification. C. Riley Snorton for example elaborates on the “transversality” of theorizing Blackness and transness while pointing out that *trans* is more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival, and *blackness* signifies upon an enveloping environment and condition of possibility. “Here, *trans* – in each of its permutations – finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness, and blackness is transected by embodied procedures that fall under the sign of gender” (Snorton 2017, 2).

Against this backdrop, we might think of *trans* as an asterisk – a sign often used in trans activism and theory to hold a place for various meanings of

*trans*. The asterisk would stand for the past not yet past, or the past in the present. Black Feminist theorist and historian Christina Sharpe uses the term “the asterisked human” (Sharpe 2016, 30) in her analysis of Black lives in the afterlives of slavery. Sharpe refers to “Trans\*” as “a variety of ways that try to get at something *about* or *toward* the range of trans\*formations enacted on and by Black bodies” (Ibid., original emphasis). “Trans\*” refers furthermore “to a range of embodied experiences called gender and to Euro-Western gender’s dismantling, its inability to hold in/on Black flesh” (Ibid.). Following Sharpe, the asterisk might hold space for ways of being in the history of the ascribed monstrosity of gender and sexuality to Black bodies. *Critical Trans Studies*, as I want to argue here, might then be an asterisk itself which moves critical knowledge production across different temporal sequences each of which move but back to the past and forward to its afterlife.

I will close with a few thoughts on the term *critical* in *Critical Trans Studies*. It alludes towards a seemingly more elaborated version of Trans Studies. Here again, an attachment to radical critical intervention in providing conditions for transformative justice for all trans people remains important. I understand *critical* as a perspective that scrutinizes knowledge production in a power-critical way. Here, the critique of existing knowledge becomes a precondition to produce new knowledge. Ideally, this knowledge is more comprehensive, more complex, and more power sensitive.

However, this term invokes a logic of progress. It refers to the figure of the critical intellectual, who is genuinely part of an academic industrial complex. This complex is based on the production of so-called innovative knowledge – often measured with various impact factors. This logic of the academic industrial complex is grounded in capitalist extractive productivity. It not only jettisons previous knowledge in a revolving door of prestige and attention but also contributes to the exhausting conditions

of mostly institutional precarious trans scholars in academia as well as in activism and art. The question here is: How can we move beyond these extractive conditions in the (future) formation of the field of Trans Studies?

I suggest sticking to the attachment to a knowledge production that follows the desire for transformative justice for all marginalized people. This desire encompasses the relational aspects of the ambivalent power dynamics at work in contemporary imperial and colonial logics of disciplinarity in academia. *Critical Trans Studies* might in this sense strive to dismantle these logics. This needs a different way of care (see Malatino 2020) within academia, activism, and art as the extractive racial capitalist logic of the academic industry complex demands. The latter demands a competitive logic within conditions of scarcity of resources that translates in an understanding of the term “critical” as delimiting from the many scholars who work within, despite, and beyond this academic industrial complex. I suggest continuing to follow the desire for a radical critical intervention in providing conditions for a transformative justice for all trans people in a version of Trans Studies as *Critical Trans Studies* that continues to resist and transform oppressive power systems while building generous and generative worlds in developing knowledge, political and artistic practices.

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