Centering the "Evil Twin": Rethinking Transgender in Queer Theory

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Rethinking Transgender in Queer Theory

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"Thinking Sex/Thinking Gender," special issue edited by Annamarie Jagose and Don Kulick. GLQ 10.2 (2004).

"The Transgender Issue," special issue edited by Susan Stryker. GLQ 4.2 (1998).

"Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," by Cathy J. Cohen. GLQ 3.4 (1997).

Nearly fifteen years after the publication of *GLQ*'s 2004 forum "Thinking Sex/Thinking Gender," tensions continue between studies of gender and sexuality. The ongoing institutionalization of the category transgender, through the codification of transgender studies as a field of inquiry and increased attention to trans and gender-nonconforming communities in the nonprofit sector, both clarify and complicate the ways scholars can and should study "gender" and "sexuality." The 2004 *GLQ* forum ventured into this terrain positing gender/sex/sexuality as simultaneously separate and related. The articles in the forum refuse to answer the question of whether and how "transgender" can fit neatly into what we conceptualize as "queer theory." While that specific question is beyond the scope of this essay (or any singular project), I am interested in how studies of "sexuality"—particularly queer studies and queer theory—can address the needs of trans and gender-nonconforming communities, and gender (in)justice more broadly.

Here, I take histories of funding for US-based transgender-focused advocacy as an object of inquiry, focusing specifically on the convergence and divergence between LGB(T)Q and "transgender." Institutional relationships between categories—which have also persisted in scholarship—reveal the evident and often necessary interconnections between gender and sexuality. On the flip side,

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precarious realities for trans and gender-nonconforming communities and more recent trans-specific funding demonstrate the need for "transgender" to be seen distinctly. Therefore, despite significant gains for LGBTQ studies and communities in both academic and funding arenas, trans and gender-nonconforming people, particularly people of color, have not unequivocally benefited from the convergence of "LGBTQ" and "trans" as institutionally legible categories: these histories together demonstrate the material and discursive significance of separating the "T" from LGB(T)Q.

In perhaps the most famous essay in the 2004 *GLQ* forum, the historian Susan Stryker (2004: 212) positions then-burgeoning transgender studies as queer theory's "evil twin": transgender studies grows out of the "same parentage" but simultaneously "willfully disrupts" narratives of desire where individuals need a stable and coherent notion of their own gender in order to be attracted to members of the same or "opposite" gender. By disrupting the stability and coherence in the realm of what Stryker describes as "that vast apparatus for producing intelligible personhood that we call 'gender'" (ibid.: 214), *trans* throws a wrench into this narrative of desire. At the same time, however, Stryker warns against the dangers of positioning "transgender" as "the site in which to contain all gender trouble": it is this logic, where "transgender" is the site for all nonnormative forms of personhood (and thus desire), Stryker argues, that leads the "T" to be continually neglected from LGB(T)Q politics. Despite this call, scholars throughout the issue position *trans* as a "compelling site" (Love 2004: 260) or "challenge" for the field (Sinfield 2004). Most scholars would indeed agree that *trans*—and its corollaries in transgender studies and transgender advocacy—has queer(ing) potential as a category that exists *over* and *above* existing and mostly fixed gender and sexual categories (i.e., gender, woman, and man).

I worry, however, about the implications for seeing transgender *only* for its queer potential—that is, as a site for scholars to place their anxieties and visions for what was once imagined as a (radical) queer politic (see also Cohen 1997). Any trans scholar can tell you that we are a diverse people: "trans," with or without an asterisk or other attached signifier, represents a myriad of things to people around the world. At the same time, trans and gender-nonconforming people, particularly people of color, face violence, discrimination, ridicule, and misunderstanding worldwide: it is the lack of coherence in our genders that, while certainly ripe with a beautiful queer potential, makes us targets of this discursive and material violence. Trans of color scholars (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013) and women of color feminisms (Spillers 1987; Stallings 2015) have contended with these realities of violence more explicitly and have sought out radical visions for gender justice.

Queer studies, however, continues to invoke transness as a category of potentiality, expansiveness, and diversity (in many ways, a kind of *ultimate* queer): this positioning can not only obscure the often-precarious realities for trans and gender-nonconforming people (especially people of color) but also risk further marginalization through theoretical emphasis on transgender in name and idea alone.

The contradictions within the category of transgender, particularly in relationship to the LGB(T)Q acronym, become exceedingly clear in the realm of funding: trans and gender-nonconforming people have led the charge for various kinds of issue- and needs-based advocacy, but trans-specific funding has, until recently, been hard to come by. The history of funding for LGBTQ causes appears to be one of progress and growth: between the 1970s and today, funding for LGBTQ causes has grown from only a few hundred thousand dollars to over $150 million in total grants (Kan et al. 2017). A closer look at this relatively short history of growth reveals disparities in terms of grants awarded explicitly to work focused on such populations as LGBTQ people and cis- and transgender women of color, as well as trans and gender-nonconforming and intersex communities.

Funding patterns of growth, accompanied by widening disparities, become even more glaring in the most crucial moment in the history of LGBTQ philanthropy, and perhaps in philanthropy generally: the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. During this time, according to data from Funders for LGBQ Issues, funds given to "LGBTQ" causes and organizations doubled between 1980 and 1984, and then grew exponentially, from $1 million in 1984 to $21 million between 1985 and 1993 (Bowen 2012). Increased stigmatization and homophobia as a result of the epidemic also led to more funding for work in the realms of civil rights, visibility, and community building. During this period, potential funders went from seeing the diverse group labeled as "gay" as a small group of marginalized angry voices (i.e., the Gay Liberation Front) to an aggrieved population in need of a specific philanthropic response. On the receiving end of this philanthropic response, however, were primarily white gay men, whose white (gay) male bodies were newly marked as "other" (Triechler 1987): this meant women, people of color, trans and gender-nonconforming populations (and the intersections between them) continued to receive less attention and funding, often with severe consequences (Cohen 1999; Butler 1997).

The philanthropic response to HIV/AIDS was not only about prevention and treatment of the disease but also about battling homophobia and stigma through civil rights advocacy and community-building efforts. Numerous gay and lesbian organizations leveraged the epidemic as a way to receive funds and sustain their organizations. The growth and expansion of lesbian and gay organiza-

tions led to the emergence of a transgender-specific funding agenda: some of the largest funders to transgender issues domestically and internationally are HIV/AIDS-focused funders, and many large-scale LGBTQ service agencies in the United States that now serve trans communities grew out of responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In my ethnographic field site of Philadelphia, the organizations that serve trans and gender-nonconforming people were initially funded for HIV/AIDS-focused prevention, education, and advocacy efforts. The Mazzoni Center, for example, which provides necessary health and legal services to thousands of trans-identified clients and hosts the Philadelphia Trans Health Conference (the largest annual trans-focused convening in the world), was founded as Philadelphia Community Health Alternatives (PCHA), expanding tremendously in direct response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Most recently, Mazzoni has received sizable grants for trans-focused work from AIDS-focused funders. It is true that trans and gender-nonconforming communities continue to face high rates and risk for HIV/AIDS: it is not the epidemic that is new but, rather, targeted funding and resources that are.

In terms of funding, then, attention to trans communities in relationship to broader LGBTQ institutions functions much like transgender studies in relationship to queer studies, where "queer" is often synonymous for "gay and lesbian" and transgender studies emerged "in the shadow of queer theory" (Stryker 2004: 214). Even outside HIV/AIDS-focused funding, that is, the work of the trans philanthropist Reed Erickson (whose life and institutional relationships are described in detail in the same 2004 issue of *GLQ* that features the "Thinking Sex/Thinking Gender" forum), fraught relationships between "gender" and "sexuality" as funding agendas abound. As Aaron Devor and Nicholas Matte detail in their historically rich article, Erickson, who founded the Erickson Educational Foundation in the 1960s to support transgender research, services, and educational programming, maintained "uneasy" relationships to early gay rights activism and institutions, specifically ONE, Inc. While Erickson's family fortune supported trans causes, including the medical work of Harry Benjamin and John Money, his work at ONE was rife with tension—these difficulties were due not only to Erickson's personal troubles but also to tensions between "gay-" and "transsexual-" focused work. One of the leaders at ONE, Jim Kepner, is quoted in Devor and Matte's article as being "kind of nervous" about whether ONE was primarily a "homophile" organization or a transsexual one. Kepner wondered, "If transsexuals define themselves as gay, well then, they're part of our community; if they define themselves as straight, well, we'll counsel them or help them or so on, but they're not really part of our community, by their own definition" (Devor and Matte 2004: 197). As Kepner's bound-

ary making—unsurprisingly, bereft of attention to the material needs of "transsexuals"—demonstrates, the question of whether trans belongs inside or outside of the "gay community" has long been prevalent in considerations of LGB(T)Q philanthropy. The HIV/AIDS funding imperative and the Erickson example together reveal tensions between "gay" and "trans," desire and identity, and sexuality and gender, as they have been conceived historically through and within institutional contexts, particularly in terms of questions of resource allocation.

This (limited)[1] history of funding for transgender-focused issues demonstrates the ways in which a "queer" or "LGB(T)Q" agenda has historically marginalized the "T," only to attend to it as an afterthought or in deep, complicated relationship to gay and lesbian identities. Throughout this history, transgender and gender-nonconforming folks have always been present and needed funding: this fact is most clearly demonstrated by the historical significance of Erickson's donations, which, though not necessarily remarkable in the grand scheme of funding dollars, stands out as the first iteration of a trans-specific funding agenda. This background helps contextualize and historicize our so-called transgender moment, marked by increased visibility in a number of institutions, including the media, advocacy, and funding, as well as by the publication of the first issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* in 2014, ten years after the publication of this *GLQ* forum and sixteen years after the publication of *GLQ*'s "Transgender Issue" in 1998. The "transgender moment" also has an ugly flip side in heightened violence against gender-nonconforming people, particularly people of color, and antitransgender bathroom legislation. By focusing on the numerous iterations of "trans" in a variety of contexts, transgender studies must contend with this complicated historical and present-day reality. To do the same, queer studies must take the lead from transgender studies (and not the other way around): rather than being new, trendy, and theoretically sexy, trans studies has always been there, often lurking in the theoretical shadows, with little attention or resources to back up its importance. To fully contend with the "transgender moment," then, queer studies must thus attend to the full, messy, and institutionally fraught picture of, to draw on the language of David Valentine in his contribution to the *GLQ* 2004 forum, the "category itself."

Notes

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1. A fuller history of trans-focused institutions would include such moments as the 1990s to early 2000s, where transgender begins to emerge as an institutionally legible category through organizations like the Transgender Law Center and the National Center for Trans Equality. For the purposes of drawing out the relationship and tensions between gender and sexuality in trans-focused funding, however, I have left this piece of the story out.

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