

Critical Trans Studies in and beyond Europe

Histories, Methods, and Institutions

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The introduction to this special issue comes in a time of global transformation and, simultaneously, amidst severe reinforcement of the borders of knowledge, embodiment, life and death, movement, and social value that often work to secure the territories of racialized and gendered civility within Europe, and indeed worldwide. Trans political struggles across European countries have successfully intervened in the legal and medical regulation of the borders of gender embodiment/identification. This includes making over legal gender recognition processes within a self-determination model and increasing the available gender markers for official documents beyond male/female (ILGA World 2020). Activists and experts have also collaborated with the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, to remove the trans-related categories in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11) from the chapter titled “Mental and Behavioral Disorders” to “Sexual Health,” under a new code, “gender incongruence” (Suess Schwend 2020).¹ In terms of public culture and media, the European continent is also gripped by a wave of trans and gender-expansive visibility, heralded by the bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst of Austria winning the hugely popular Eurovision Song Contest in 2014, and capped by the 2020 appointment of Europe’s first openly transgender minister, Petra De Sutter, as the new deputy prime minister in Belgium.

Going to press, Europe is caught up in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that has laid bare the extreme vulnerability of refugees and trans folks in accessing basic services, such as health care, education, and employment, and has brought more attention to their already long-entrenched experiences of social and physical isolation (Fedorko, Ogrm, and Kurmanov 2021). The crisis has served to intensify regimes of cisheteropatriarchal white supremacy that rule

many countries within Europe and at its borders. Since March 2020, trans activist organizations, including 152 assembled under the member organization Transgender Europe, have been grappling with this additional complication while fighting long-standing challenges to survival and holding the line on civil rights for trans communities and other vulnerable groups. The European arena of trans studies and activism is also affected by the conservative positionings of the Vatican's Catholic representatives, whose presumed fixity of "biological" sex is being amplified in feminism appropriating reactionary transphobia (FART) (Council of Europe 2020).² This deadly duo has denounced "gender ideology" across countries like Poland, Hungary, and the United Kingdom, resulting respectively in regions being declared LGBT-free zones, the shutting down of entire departments, and vicious media attacks that cause targets like Lucy Meadows to take her own life. The toxic brew of populism, xenophobia, fundamentalist Christianity, and trans exclusionary radical feminism (TERF) has the combining ingredient of devaluing all expressions of trans gender embodiment/identification that becomes multiplied along the lines of oppressions based on race, class, religion, resident status/displacement, and disability.

The nationalist and xenophobic projects of European governments in 2020 paradoxically rest on the dissolution of borders elsewhere and globalization processes everywhere. Refugee crises that manifest in forced detention, death, and destruction are materializations of the effects of climate change, the industrial revolution, proxy wars, and late-stage capitalism. The enforcement of the borders of nation and body is one-sided, as the leakages of Europe's ongoing colonial project seep into marginalized peoples and states alike. In short, Europe's crises are being brought to its own door despite efforts to contain them elsewhere. For example, the European Union negotiated trade deals with Turkey and Libya to close the southeastern border of Europe. The aim of the deal, from the European side, is to prevent migrants and refugees from ever arriving. So, they end up staying in deportation camps in Libya and Turkey for months or even years. Still, migrants and refugees undertake various routes via Mediterranean passages to flee physical, economic, and environmental violence, while seeking better life conditions (sometimes Europe is not the final destination). Countless are those who do not reach the European shores of the Mediterranean Sea and those who are buried in the Mediterranean seabed. Those who do reach the shores often first end up in refugee camps, such as the largest refugee camp in Europe, Mória, on the Greek island Lesbos, which are notoriously overcrowded and deprived of appropriate housing infrastructure. Right now migrants, including a number of transgender people that scholar B Camminga (2018) has termed as "gender migrants," are locked up: exposed to the COVID-19 virus without having any protection measures installed (HRW n.d.). Gender migrants locked up in a

European place are confronted with violations of their human rights, yet are left to rot in a place where human rights are not even a possibility (Tsourdi 2020). Activists assembled in the group LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome burst into the media spotlight during Documenta Athens in 2017, when they “stole” Roger Bernat’s artwork *The Place Is the Thing*, which consisted of a movable replica of the Philosopher’s Stone around which people could gather to have a democratic exchange (Ieven 2020). The group was angered by how they felt instrumentalized and exploited by the artist’s programming of marginalized groups, for instance offering a donation of a mere 500 euros and asking to conduct a funeral at the stone. Their video response shows the activists joyfully dancing around and drumming on the stone, while in voice-over various members make statements like “your stone may have been deported to Turkey after appealing twice,” and “your stone may be driven to suicide in Mória detention center desperate for freedom” (LGBTQIA+ Refugees Welcome 2017). Their intervention became a means to expose the failures of democracy as being practiced at the border to Europe, and indeed within this participatory artwork. This issue takes seriously their precise targeting of the constitution of borders itself—be they of the nation or the body.

In addition to critiques of European borders from LGBTQIA+ refugee activists and migration scholars, this special issue builds on what some activists, artists, and academics have begun to call “the Black Mediterranean” in order to understand the present moment in the context of Europe’s constitutive history of empire, which involved colonial conquest and transatlantic slavery to build up the wealth that has paid for its famous welfare states. We aim to challenge established interpretations that see Europe as the bastion of democracy, liberty, and universal rights, in an effort to disassemble the project of Europe, as Édouard Glissant (1989) has called it, rather than the place of Europe.³ Inspired by Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* (1993), the term *Black Mediterranean* (*Mediterraneo nero*), coined by Alessandra Di Maio (2012, 2013) invites us to situate the project of Europe as the original locus of Western modernity in a close relation with the creation of colonial empires. Di Maio (2013: 43) uses *Black* as the “non-colour” for the Mediterranean Sea in order to reflect the crossings pursued by millions of migrants and refugees who have “burnt” (43) it in the past decades. The metaphor of burning indicates crossing in colloquial speech by North Africans who have traversed the Mediterranean with the hope of finding better life conditions at the European shores:

Besides its literal meaning, the Arabic verb *haraq* (to burn) is used in Mediterranean Africa, from Morocco to Egypt, in a number of colloquial locutions, always indicating some experience of transgression. In Arabic, to burn a norm, a law, or

even a red light (one says *hargt l-feu rouge*), one is in fact breaking rules, trespassing against norms, infringing laws. Similarly, *harraga* (literally, those who burn) are aware of the *harg*—namely the burning, or crossing, of the Mediterranean—as an act of transgression. (43)

To “burn” the Mediterranean Sea is a complex transgressive act that implies an awareness of a “burned” life as it “becomes a synonym for ‘taking the risk’ (*kanriski*), or ‘gambling one’s life’ (*ghadi mghamar b-haytu*)” (43). “Burning” life also implies a change that is intended to grant a new life in the deterritorialized space not only of diaspora but also of Europe as the other end of the act of “burning” the Mediterranean Sea. The “burning” acts of migrants and refugees are closely linked precisely via the Mediterranean to the influences that the African continent and the Global South/East have on Europe as a colonial empire.

In sum, colonial extraction of natural resources and the commodification of humans in chattel slavery contributed to the growth of industrial racial capitalism in Western Europe and provided the condition of possibility for the formation of Enlightenment thought. Postcolonial, decolonial, and Black studies scholars have produced a rich body of literature that highlights the various ways in which “modernity” is the product of Europe’s self-affirmation as the “center” of a “world history” it inaugurates, and in which the very idea of Europe emerged through a process of differentiation from the “periphery” that surrounds it (see, e.g., Spivak 1988; Hall 1992; Todorova 2005; Dhawan 2014). Therefore, Europe’s colonial projects have established Europe as a mythical identity in opposition to the gendered, racial, religious, and cultural Other. This regime of Othering is in effect today in the fortification of European borders against the figure of the errant refugee-migrant and trans person, who in popular and political discourse is said to compromise Europeans’ “integrity” (El-Tayeb 2011; Thompson and Salem 2016; Wekker 2016).

Europa

The idea of Europe, then, is installed through geographically external and internal borders, through their expansion and contraction, originally referring to the entire continent, but the Greeks in 500 BCE who gave it this name knew only of the lands ringing the Mediterranean Sea. Today’s European Union acts on behalf of member states to enforce a “Fortress Europe” dominated by the will and interests of Northern and Western nation-states. Their defensive border has been bloodied by fighting off populations in distress owing to European (neo)colonialism, proxy wars over natural resources whitewashed by assertions of cultural superiority toward women and queers, and the wreckage of climate change set off by the Industrial Revolution. The ancient Greek myth of Europa, the namesake of

Europe, already deeply embeds these characteristics of gender-based violence, forced migration, and acts of colonization. Europa was a Phoenician princess abducted by Zeus (in the form of a tame white bull) and taken to Crete where he raped her. The Bronze Age legend says that her three brothers searched for her, and on the way they forcibly created Phoenician colonies of the wider Mediterranean societies, a possible reflection of historical reality supported by archaeological findings of raiding parties dating from the twelfth to seventh centuries BCE (Cartwright 2018). By titling this volume “The Europa Issue,” we invoke this long lineage of coloniality to call attention to patterns of injustice established already in classical antiquity. The scope of research presented herein historically cites events and knowledge formations from the medieval period to today, with a heavy emphasis on the global transformations wrought by modernity in epistemologies and technologies of race-sex-gender, a focus that was elicited through the opening provocation of our call for papers: “At the heart of European modernity lies the inscription of the transsexual body.”

With this statement we wanted our issue to address the problematic origin stories of what has come to be known as trans lived experience, and as trans studies, that still bears—though acknowledged, not yet fully distanced from—the hallmarks of Eurocentrism and whiteness, including upholding Humanism, the medical gaze, and rights-based discourse. Since the mid-nineteenth century, European empiricism has organized knowledge production according to structures of observing material “truths” in nature, birthing manifold practices for studying human beings. The modern Western European worldview remains inextricably linked to this rise in the stature of the human sciences and their preoccupation with registering the difference between bodies and developing representational practices for their social classification, moral hierarchization, and ranking as human, subhuman, and nonhuman. While the charge of US-centrism is more frequently made within trans, gender, women’s, and sexuality studies—clearly reflecting the new world order—our collection of current writing within critical trans studies in and beyond Europe exposes the enduring, only somewhat covert history of epistemologies specific to European concepts of temporality, space, and difference, and even more so to continental philosophy and scientism that emerged as an arm of justifying and spreading colonial logics and mentalities.

Hence, despite the possible promise seeded in an area-studies-type issue on European formations of trans studies, we have decided not to include research focused exclusively on a national articulation of transness that a more survey-oriented issue might do. The work herein tends to examine relays of epistemologies, of technologies and *dispositif* across the trans-Atlantic, fields of study, and periods of time. Building on earlier *TSQ* issues that interrogate the presumptive

whiteness, settler-colonial context, and US-based orientation of the field, namely, “Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary” (2014, vol. 1, no. 3), “The Issue of Blackness” (2017, vol. 4, no. 2), “Trans-in-Asia” (2018, vol. 5, no. 3), and “Trans Studies en las Americas” (2019, vol. 6, no. 2), we have sought to continue to do the necessary investigatory work of tracing histories of colonialism and white supremacy that underwrites dominant concepts of gender and sexuality which have accompanied the formation of our field. In this effort, along with many of our authors, we take courage from Black feminist philosopher Sylvia Wynter (2003: 260), who framed the struggle of our new millennium as follows: to secure the well-being of the ethnoclass Western bourgeois conception of the human, white man, “which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself,” and the “full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.” In Wynter’s wide scope of history that undergirds how the Caribbean and Americas (new worlds) came to be an arena to test out and brutally invent the human for various European powers, she identifies the “degodding” and 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” (263). This legitimating logic for the rise of Europe that shapes the wholly constructed notion of a world civilization, Wynter wryly notes, is accompanied by the empirical effect of “African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation” (263).

The hydra-headed creature of the coloniality of being splits colonial difference into the heads of racial difference, sexuality difference, and sex/gender difference. This was experimented with in the colonies but also relayed back to become instituted in the heart of the empire as well. The regulation of “social monstrosity” provided the ground for “regimes of normalization” to sprout and spread across all of society (Foucault 2003; Stoler 1995). The legitimization of formal and informal forms of governance of these regimes seeded the development of *scientia sexualis*, psychiatry, endocrinology, surgery, and other medical fields engaged in not only the social regulation of newly identified populations but also the “better breeding” programs of nation-states furthered by the academic discipline of eugenics. Jonah I. Garde elaborates in this special issue the entanglements of endocrinology with the histories of enslavement and colonialism evident in the “racial underpinnings of the idea of plasticity so central to the malleability of sexed embodiment” through his analysis of the *Steinachfilm* that was widely disseminated in European sexology.

It was in this milieu that the elaboration of the sexological sciences, studying what we would now call “transgender phenomena” (Stryker 2006: 3), was led by European figures such as Richard von Krafft-Ebbing with his taxonomy of

social deviance, Karl von Westphal and his concept of contrary sexual sentiments, Magnus Hirschfeld and his terminology of transsexualismus, or Havelock Ellis's notion of eonism. In the wake of twentieth-century fascism in and across various parts of Europe and its colonies, sex scientists like Harry Benjamin, together with their concepts for cross-sex and cross-gender identification, found refuge mainly in the United States. As a consequence, the official terms of medical pathologization—*tran(s)sexualism*, *gender identity disorder*, and *gender dysphoria*—took root in North American private clinics and university programs. This special issue departs from this historical background while at the same time challenging the hold of “European” knowledge production and its traditions in two interrelated clusters of articles, one that elaborates critiques on the disciplinary, cultural, and political aspects of field formation and one that decenters European inflections of transgender studies by provincializing, delinking, and decolonizing.

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The first article by SA Smythe leads the charge by their demonstration of non-binary methods for wayward Black thinking in “Black Life, Trans Study,” which insists on the institutional independence of trans study in European contexts that delinks from an investment in sexological thought and is oriented to the abolition of whiteness and the decentralization of the white trans body. In a careful critique of the discipline of history and of trans histories, author C. Libby interrogates the origin story of the study of transgender phenomena in Europe through their tracking of interlocking and recursive uses of the same trans and intersex figures in the study of medieval saints and of the sexologists who draw on these examples to conjure up validity to their pathologizing claims. Turning from the “early” study of transgender as phenomena to present-day struggles for the project of “depathologization” of trans identities, gender variance, and gender-nonconforming persons around the world (Cabral et al. 2016; Suess Schwend 2020), Nat Raha's essay looks at how the practice of exchanging ideas on trans healing and access to health care in contemporary European transfeminist zines has amplified radical understandings of health and forged mutually aided forms of embodied consciousness. Elia A.G. Arfini's microhistory of Italian transsexual social movements since the 1980s also underlines the power of collective action while highlighting the importance of being visible and en masse to lodge protest, citing the ways that Italian trans politics—once the vanguard—is being recast by the “liberated North” as a part of the “backward South,” concluding with calls for taking the location of Southern Europe seriously. These writings draw on examples and cases that do not fit easily into an archive of a seemingly European history of the study of transgender phenomena. Their critiques refer to what Michel Foucault (2003) has called “subjugated knowledges,” including what Susan

Stryker (2006) has instructively referred to as the basis of transgender studies, thus to local and historical accounts that have been excluded from the systematization of knowledges that aim at producing coherence by disqualifying embodied knowledge and its expression outside authoritative venues (the university, scholarly press, government halls) as nonscientific or inferior.

The second cluster of articles employs the methods of provincializing, delinking, and decolonizing in the tradition of “decentering” European inflections of postcolonial, gender, and sexuality studies (Chakrabarty 2000; Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011). The terms of decentering can be applied to an area (such as through a post-Soviet position that Tija Uhlig takes that queries, where lies Europe, in what does it consist?) and, in turn, to the related epistemological tradition (such as through curriculum building that Alyosxa Tudor evaluates by asking, what does it mean to decolonize trans/gender studies, in what does it consist?). We have selected three diverse approaches of conducting trans scholarship in coordination with European postcolonial and decolonizing projects, each set in different periods: Garde in the turn of the nineteenth century in Vienna, Uhlig before and after German reunification circa 1990, and Tudor on the rise of the global right with UK incidents occurring around 2018. Implicitly and explicitly, these articles question the temporality and timelines of a so-called progression within modernity, showing how modernity has been experienced differentially, within the context of past and ongoing genocidal European practices of exterminating “deviant” or “unnatural” forms of embodiment. Garde wrestles with the limited archival materials that point definitively to colonial histories couched within European sexology, expanding on Christina Sharpe’s and Saidiya Hartman’s theorizing of the asterisk’s standing in for Blackness as the ontological non-zone and/in the transatlantic in order to provincialize trans studies by resisting the idea of Europe as the center of history. (Like Garde, the field note titled “Unboxed” by Sebastian Felten and Rebecca Kahn included in the arts and culture section also discusses a trans-focused exhibition at the Berlin Schwules/Gay Museum, but from the perspective of curators who in their hands-on practice of bringing archival materials and present-day communities together share their learnings about how institutional memory and identity politics intersect with archival technologies.) In “Failing Gender, Failing the West,” Uhlig writes an autoethnodrama in the voice of a disobedient clown, scenes that are rooted in their embodied experience of being genderqueer and growing up in Eastern Germany, a post-Soviet space and former part of the Western project of “modernity,” providing a double articulation of living in the borderlands. Tudor argues “that a decolonial perspective on gender means conceptualizing the category of gender as always already trans,” showing how this operates in their writing on the interconnections between the resistances to global attacks on

gender studies and against transphobic feminism and the decolonizing-the-curriculum movement in the United Kingdom. From the perspective of what might be termed critical trans studies, these contributions critically scrutinize the (pre-)legacy of the term *transgender*; what its European colonial heritages are; and how race, ethnicity, class, and geopolitical location complicate its circulation and the ways in which it may (or indeed may not) “vitalize” trans studies and activism. These articles invite us not only to contemplate the formation of the category “trans” but also call on trans studies, as Garde suggests in this special issue, to “further consider the limitations of desubjugation as a mode of knowing.”

With this special issue, we refer to this critique of the dominant conceptualization of Europe as the racially homogeneous and demarcated geographical location, and the bastion of “modernity” and “liberty.” Together with our authors of this issue, we assert the necessity of dismantling/decentering this idea of Europe by addressing the multiple transformations and severe means taken to reinforce and close borders of knowledge, embodiment, and movement. While in no way comprehensive, our selected articles highlight multiple points of entry to disassemble the project of Europe and, in doing so, sever the notion of coherence through emphasizing regional singularities and disparities. It is our hope that this issue generates further research in critical trans studies that engages with the project of dismantling Eurocentrism and protectionism. This is particularly necessary in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic that is symptomatic of the larger hardening and reifying of embodied and national borders.

3x3x6

With the notion of enclosures and policing of deviance in mind, we will close with a short analysis of the cover image, from the documentation portfolio shot by trans visual artist and filmmaker Johanna Jackie Baier of queer digital artist and filmmaker Shu Lea Cheang’s (2019) *3x3x6* installation for the Taiwanese Pavilion of the Fifty-Eighth Venice Biennale. The title *3x3x6* refers to the industrial standard of prison architecture that calls for cells that are three meters square and are monitored by six cameras. Curated by the trans Spanish philosopher Paul B. Preciado, Cheang’s installation draws attention to the (dis)continuity of disciplining, surveilling, and imprisoning from 1755 until today, with contemporary queer and trans performers reprising roles of ten historical and current cases of imprisoned gender and sexual dissidents: Casanova (Italy), de Sade (France), Foucault (in Poland), as well as cases from Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Taiwan, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Their fictionalized portraits include composite prisoners as well, like D X, a transgender man who in the 2010s was imprisoned for the crime of “rape by deception” for not revealing his gender status. The viewers’ interaction with their narrative storylines work to expose the

outer limits of cultural norms that are carved with the hard line of criminality. The pavilion makes use of the Palazzo delle Prigioni, a Venetian prison from the sixteenth century in operation until 1922, by reimagining a panopticon structure as a space now overlaid with three-dimensional facial recognition, artificial intelligence, and internet tools of surveillance and control. The public program took place in a former psychiatric hospital located on an isolated island to highlight the procedure of removal and segregated containment central to both forms of incarceration, in a prison or asylum. The so-called treatment of “mental illness” conducted there included early on “a vast array of gender-, sexual-, and class-excluded subjects such as ‘repugnant poor people wandering the city,’ ‘unruly women,’ ‘hysterics,’ and ‘deviants’” (Venice Biennale 2019).

The group portrait taken by Baier is of FSB X, a group of women “sperm bandits” from Gweru held at Harare’s Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison in December 2011 for allegedly raping men and harvesting and selling their semen. Other sperm bandits have been reported active in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The FSB X trio depicted here is performed by Yudi Barrueto, Adrian Blount, and Joey, who are all trans or nonbinary identified and based in Berlin. (Cheang is often based in Berlin and regularly works with the producer Jürgen Brüning, a renowned figure who directs the Berlin porn film festival.) The documentation is defiantly not a mug shot: it shows them cast with the chiaroscuro lighting of jail bars, but still wearing masks and holding up weapons—ready for action. They seem to advance toward us, but rather than threatening us, the slight smile of the ringleader at the front beckons us to join them. The costuming in fun queer party gear, like pleather leggings, a bomber jacket, and a sequined tube top, exudes an aura of festive jubilation. This gender and sexual dissident gang is enticing, not vilified. The image acknowledges the spatial captivity of the cell but refuses to confine the bodies to that space with literal bars between them and us. Those cultural and social norms might be nothing more than smoke and shadow. From the vantage of being on the edge of the light source, we could be inside there with them. Or, we could be just on the outside with the keys to unlock the cage. Will we welcome them and ourselves to greater freedom of movement?

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Notes

1. The new code "gender incongruence" in the ICD-11 entails subcodes for adolescence and adulthood, and children, which have been since the beginning of the revision process the subject of important and trenchant critique from trans activist organizations such as Global Action for Trans* Equality (GATE 2013; Cabral et al. 2016).
2. The detrimental effects of these movements are reflected in the 2020 edition versus the 2017 or 2016 editions of the ILGA World (2020: 9) *Trans Legal Mapping Report*—in every region of the world where they have been documenting legal gender recognition, regressions have occurred.
3. Glissant (1989) has argued that Europe is not a place but a project.

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