

Transversal Tipping Points

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ABSTRACT This short intervention examines the relationship between Black trans life and coral bleaching through discourses of tipping points.

KEYWORDS transversality, tipping point, coral bleaching, anti-Blackness, queer ecology

Momentum gathers, and something shifts: a tipping point opens an unknown horizon. Here, I stage an encounter between three so-called tipping points: racial integration in US cities (1950s), transgender politics in the United States (2010s), and the onset of mass coral bleaching (2016). Drawing on the work of Félix Guattari, I propose “transversality” as a conceptual framework for approaching these encounters.¹ Doing so highlights how tipping points index both threat and vulnerability under conditions of colonial racism.² Read transversally, tipping points augur an unknown horizon and set the conditions for encountering it, involving the familiar logics of emergency, abandonment, and defense.

The term *tipping point* became commonplace in the 1950s as a precursor to the now-familiar “white flight.” In 1957, Morton Grodzins wrote about the so-called tip point when the influx of Black people into a neighborhood (a “slum”) caused white people to leave: “Many people for many purposes have explored how the tip point operates. Real estate operators, seeking the higher revenue that comes with Negro overcrowding, talk freely among themselves about ‘tipping a building’ or ‘tipping a neighborhood.’”³ Grodzins describes the other side of this tip point as a transition from “complete white to complete Negro occupancy.”⁴ Grodzins discusses how cities are transformed into high-density, high-crime areas devoid of social investment. Published in *Scientific American*, this text spoke directly to the collective unconscious. It mapped a tipping trajectory that continues to imagine the urban as unsafe, unruly, and unwhite.

Three years prior to the publication of Grodzin's essay, Ed Wood directed the semi-autobiographical film *Glen or Glenda* (1953), which sought to depict Christine Jorgensen's public gender-affirming surgery. Decades later, in 2014, *Time* magazine released a cover featuring Laverne Cox and the title "The Transgender Tipping Point: America's Next Civil Rights Frontier."⁵ In the libidinal logic of racist sexology, a tipping point is thought to mark the destruction of the former order. But what ontological foundation is afforded to Black trans life? In the interview, Cox calls the contemporary period "a state of emergency," aligning the refusal of the trans body with other violent realities. Whereas "white flight" imagined Black people moving in numbers that would outpace the reproduction of white populations, this other tipping point indicates not a movement of existing bodies but a paradigm shift in embodiment itself.

Susan Stryker discusses the recent cultivation of and investment in transgender subjects along the fault lines of race. Rather than including trans wholesale as one category among others, state power seeks to manipulate the terrain on which democratic rights are extended. One's worth thus depends on the unworthiness of the other. Either/or: trans life is striated through categories of inclusion. Stryker writes,

Transgender phenomena—anything that calls our attention to the contingency and unnaturalness of gender normativity—appear at the margins of the biopolitically operated-upon body, at those fleeting and variable points at which particular bodies exceed or elude capture within the gender apparatus when they defy the logic of the biopolitical calculus or present a case that confounds an administrative rule or bureaucratic practice. Consequently, transgender phenomena constantly flicker across the threshold of viability, simultaneously courting danger and attracting death even as they promise life in new forms, along new pathways.⁶

Transgender phenomena expose the work of trans at stake in the tipping point. Stryker urgently calls for "noncompliance" and "noncomplicity" when we are faced with the trappings of identity formation and subject making.

Stryker elucidates Guattari's notion of transversality. While Guattari explores molecular transsexuality, particularly in his writing with Gilles Deleuze, the promise or possibility of transsexuality never fully materializes in his thought. This is likely because his instinct is to *trans* sexuality, rather than consider transsexuality as an additive identity category. He presents it as a provocation and in doing so opens a way to attend to contemporary violence against minoritarian life. As an extension, I am gesturing toward a common impossibility within the body politics of Black trans life: even "correct" performances of Black and trans embodiment can be targeted. The message is not subtle: you are not like us, do not pretend to be us.

These unsteady fault lines of race and gender (among others) should be enough to inspire a new form of militancy, an invitation to deterritorialize.

The widespread “state of emergency” to which Cox referred in *Time* magazine also pushes us to think beyond state-authorized identity politics. We must read these claims alongside current announcements of another tipping point—namely, the planetary ecological crisis happening at the oceans’ edge. Read together, these interactions teach us about risk, visibility, and regeneration: the urban and the ocean are connected; the impending Blackness of cities is inseparable from the middle passage; the imagined encroachment of Black, trans, and Black trans people threatens to overwhelm hegemonic norms. Thinking about these three separate (and asymmetrical) discourses *transversally* offers a way to consider the human and its interactions with the nonhuman world. Transversality as a method informs this conversation.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the prefix *trans-* as “across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another,” providing some insight into Guattari’s fashioning of *-versality*. In the narrowest sense, *trans* (as it has become associated with the body and *scientia sexualis*, the science of sex) allows for an understanding that there is more than either/or. A broader understanding of *trans* as a form of cross-pollination, or murmur, provides a useful supplement to transversality.

Transversality is an attempt to explode communication across and at every level, and importantly it offers a modification to psychoanalytic and capitalist frameworks that reproduce conditions of repression.⁷ Guattari pays special attention to militant sexual minorities who direct their performances toward liberation. His writings are concerned with the struggles of women, people of color, queer people, and transsexual people, and with politically important minoritarian experience, read alongside questions of ecology and aesthetics.⁸ What we can borrow from Guattari’s concept of transversality is a way of rethinking, together and against each other, environmental, social, and psychic ecologies, and a collective awareness of what it means to change life.

As the editors of this special issue noted in their invitation to contribute to this section, “ecological devastation exceeds the recursive and reiterative logics of crisis and emergency.” The last tipping point that I consider here—the effects of pollution and warming on coral reefs—is thus both already here and still on the horizon, sutured to the logics of colonial racism. The tipping point of American cities was met with policies of policing and divestment. The trans tipping point has become a popular talking point for a new wave of social conservatism. The coral tipping point, on the other hand, is ostensibly different. With the ocean temperatures continuing to rise, numerous social and political factions have begun to realize the myriad ways our ecosystem depends on coral.

Coral reefs are beautiful, colorful, immediately recognizable wonders of our world dating back at least five hundred million years. They are as diverse in their form as any animal could be, generating their own nutrients, auto-reproducing, morphing, assembling, and becoming. Woven together, felt-like, and beaded, these reefs are dying. Over the past forty years, as a result of warming ocean temperatures, more than half the earth's coral reefs have turned to bone, taking with them the sustaining symbiosis that makes much ocean life—and therefore all life—possible. In the process of coral bleaching, algae leave coral under conditions of stress, causing coral to lose its biggest source of nutrients and turn a shocking white in the process. Coral is bleached when it is starved of nutrients, starved because it can no longer produce its own life-giving sustenance under the pressure of rising temperatures.

Donna Haraway reminds us that “at least 250 million human beings today depend directly on the ongoing integrity of these holobiontes for their own ongoing living and dying well.”⁹ Eva Hayward pushes this provocation further: “If coral teaches us about the reciprocal nature of life, then how do we stay obligated to environments—many of which we have made unlivable—that now sicken us?”¹⁰ She asks: “How might we conceptualize coral bleaching, and more general ecological destruction, as an effect of colonial racism (vulnerability negated through violence) that is ‘World’ building (Worlding)?” Attending to this Worlding, Hayward reads ecological destruction as the “crisis necessary to ensure the World.”¹¹ She elucidates the paradoxical way that discourses of vulnerability (including the figure of the tipping point) can themselves be defenses against vulnerability: a state of emergency with uneven effects.

Public discourse focuses our attention on the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), where mass bleaching events in 2016 and 2017 left nearly two-thirds of the reef damaged. Australia's Reef 2050 Advisory Committee concluded that the GBR was beyond saving. The committee understood that the coral could not be regenerated. Having passed the tipping point, there remained only risk mitigation. Scientists in the United States are more optimistic about ocean reefs. In September 2022, a report from *60 Minutes* titled “We Have No Time to Lose: Rescuing the World's Coral Reefs” opened with Anderson Cooper announcing that “coral reefs prevent billions of dollars in damage to the US each year.” Framed through their economic utility and ability to rescue us from human-caused warming, the impact of hurricanes, and erosion, coral reefs have become big business. With funding from the Department of Defense, the University of Miami has built a coral nursery off the coast of the Florida Keys to attempt to regrow and transplant some of the 90 percent of the coral reef that has been lost. Cooper calls this an acceleration of “natural selection,” in a homage to Darwin, and promises that we will learn “more than we ever thought we'd need to know about the sex lives of coral.”¹² Researchers breed coral that is more resistant to

warming and disease by subjecting it to warmer and warmer waters, growing and transplanting coral that is more likely to survive our warming planet. Coral nurseries allow scientists to grow large amounts of coral quickly by clipping healthy coral, placing it on “trees” and letting it drink the sun near the ocean’s surface, later transplanting it back to the reef using a limestone cement for grafting. But breeding and natural selection are long processes, too long for our planetary crisis. To provide quicker protection against hurricanes and ocean tides, scientists at the University of Miami are also developing “hybrid” reefs for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to protect military bases near coasts. These hybrid reefs are made of concrete with small amounts of coral growing on top. DARPA is funding similar projects at Rutgers and the University of Hawaii, which use different types of materials (like oysters) to attempt to mitigate the impacts of warming.

These massive projects of scientific optimism, with their auguring of and defenses against the tipping point, echo a familiar logic. Even the forms of destruction they combat reoccupy earlier terrain. As Hayward writes, “Coral bleaching disproportionately occurs in former colonial territories of East Africa; as Adam Geary has noted in his work on the HIV/AIDS epidemic and anti-black racism, it is as if the retroactive effect of colonization is ecological and social demise.” Environmental science, Hayward suggests, is “subtended by a racial-sexual imaginary.”¹³ In the effort to repair damaged reefs, the collective unconscious of difference-making subtends both coral destruction and coral rescue. If tipping points mark a difference in our midst, what disavowal is sustained in this scene? What logic of vulnerability and threat is reproduced by the tipping point itself?

When corals bleach, they are not actually dead quite yet. Rather, they are starved and suffocating in the rising ocean temperatures brought about by human activity and pollution. It is not hard to think about suffocation as a condition of life both for corals in warmer waters and for Black trans people living amid persistent and ongoing threats. Corals are starved: they exhaust their nutrients, turning their surfaces a translucent color and exposing their limestone skeletons. In the 2016 bleaching at the Great Barrier Reef, coral made use of sunlight by turning purple, attempting to cool the reefs with an auto-produced “sunscreen.”¹⁴ Modifying the figure of the tipping point, this is a regeneration that follows a different logic than that of emergency, intimating a different relationship between traumatic destruction and the capacity for renewal.

Corals are dreamy, otherworldly, striking, and evocative of a different time and place. In the midst of the loss of that window into another dimension, we pay

heightened attention to how to be otherwise with coral, how to engineer its survival, and protect what little remains. The coral evokes something both human and more-than-human, and can provide a way to think about trans-of-color life amid the simultaneous impulses to destroy and propagate it. Reading coral transversally alongside Black trans life and mattering discloses generative capacities in the face of suffocation, declared death, and defensive investments in their continued utility.

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Notes

1. Guattari, *Three Ecologies*, 22–23.
2. Transversality is here understood as an ethical, political, and aesthetic tool that maximizes communication and creates linkages between topographies, while still retaining the specificity of minoritarian life. Its potential exists in curves and intensities that pollinate social movements. See Guattari, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*, 172.
3. Grodzins, “Metropolitan Segregation,” 36.
4. Grodzins, “Metropolitan Segregation,” 36.
5. Steinmetz, “Transgender Tipping Point.”
6. Stryker, “Biopolitics,” 40.
7. Guattari, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*.
8. Guattari, *Three Ecologies*, 22–25.
9. Haraway, *Staying*, 56.
10. Hayward, “Fingeryeyes.”
11. Hayward, “Afterwardness.”
12. Cooper, “We Have No Time.”
13. Hayward, “Afterwardness.”
14. The use of sunscreen in oceans has had catastrophic effects on coral reefs.

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