

# General Editor's Introduction

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SUSAN STRYKER

That *Perspectives on History*, the house organ of the American Historical Association, recently ran a lengthy feature on “transgender studies and transgender history as legible fields of academic study” says a great deal about how transness has become a significant object of both disciplinary and interdisciplinary inquiry at this historical moment (Agarwal 2018). In their introduction to this special issue of *TSQ* on “trans\*historicitities,” guest editors Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici note the plethora of recent conferences, symposia, and journal issues on the contemporary interconnectedness of the topics of transness, time, and temporality, and ask, “What is it about the gesture of comparison to the past—be it ancestral, asynchronous, or properly contextualized—that provokes such urgency now?”

Perhaps urgency itself holds an answer to their question about the time-ness of trans\*.

In his celebrated theses on the philosophy of history, Walter Benjamin asserts that “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’” In the present, rather, the past appears only as a fleeting image that can be grasped, or not, in the instant it appears in our vision, illuminated by the light of whatever calamities characterize the current moment. To write history, Benjamin said, means “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” The danger he observed, writing in 1940 as the Nazis rolled over Europe, was all too clearly visible. He continued, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism” (1940).

Whether our own present “state of emergency” is best characterized as a “struggle against Fascism” or against some virulent new form of populist authoritarian reaction is up for discussion, but that we are in a “moment of danger,” in which trans\* lives are simultaneously more visible and more precarious, can

scarcely be argued. Since 2016, when the United Kingdom awoke to news of Brexit's passage and the United States joined a growing list of countries where the government has lurched away from liberal democratic forms of governance, and as right-wing movements continue to make inroads across Europe, trans\* lives are increasingly targeted as unwelcome presences in bodies politic animated by nativist, racist, and xenophobic fantasies.

Emma Heaney, in *The New Woman* (2017), her recent study of the “trans-feminine allegory” that she finds to be a central if unmarked feature of transatlantic literary modernism, suggests that the figure of the feminine-identifying individual assigned male at birth, who occupies a lacuna between cis-feminist aspirations to overturn the debilitations of conventional femininity in order to enter the masculinist public sphere and cis-male homosexual efforts to assert masculinist privilege through the disavowal of effeminacy, has been enlisted to stage the conundrums of modern gender, identity, and public belonging ever since the advent of modernism in the late nineteenth century. Her literary analysis is compatible with biopolitical perspectives that cast the political oppression of trans\* people as an expression of the “administrative violence” provoked by the difficulties gender-noncompliant bodies pose for the routine bureaucratic operations of civil society, through troubling the categories of personhood through which modern populations are settled on territories and their lives administered for collective political and economic ends, and by subverting the logics through which those categories are affixed to the flesh (Spade 2015). It is to be expected then, as Eurocentric modernity frays at the seams, perhaps on the verge of disintegration, that genres of beings who have long served as grist for modernist identity machines should be experiencing heightened levels of visibility, attention, scrutiny, and interrogation.

Trans\* life at this moment in history, amid ecological and sociopolitical catastrophe, is rife with transformative potential. It demonstrates the fraught viability of enlivening movements across the hierarchized categories of being. It bears witness that deep change is truly possible—that the flesh can, at times, come to signify anew; that life canalized into familiar traces can overflow its banks and water other ways of being. Similarly, the radical alterity of the past itself offers testimony that deep change actually happens. Demonstrable difference over time is a promise that change will continue, that the present ordering of existence is not natural, inevitable, or eternal. But how, to follow Benjamin's injunction, can we attain “a conception of history,” through the study of trans\* oppression, that will allow us to grasp and enact the transformative potentials needed to make life otherwise than it is, for all of us who need another world?

The articles in this issue of *TSQ* provide no simple answers to that vital question. But in tackling the question of trans\* historicity, they reframe the present

in ways that let us see the past anew, and to perceive there, perhaps, in an electrifying flash, new pathways for life to follow.

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**Susan Stryker** is associate professor of gender and women's studies and director of the Institute for LGBT Studies at the University of Arizona and general coeditor of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*.

### References

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