

Trans in a Time of HIV/AIDS

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COVID-19: Refuse Analogy

Just as we are writing the introduction to this special issue on AIDS, COVID-19 is designated a pandemic. Should we comment on COVID-19? What are the dangers of trying to bring these pandemics into conversation? What can we not yet think or know about COVID-19? In the AIDS intro we discuss the ongoing need to rethink AIDS — we wrote: “Have we begun to ask good questions about AIDS?” — and then everywhere we see coronavirus testing and quarantining graphed with infection and death rates; countries and demographics becoming axes. Many of our contributors start experiencing the effects of COVID-19: some test positive for the coronavirus; friends and family become sick; everyone is in lockdown, and in the deteriorating mental and physical health of quarantine, deadlines become impossible. Crisis provokes a response: asking better questions is replaced with offering quick solutions — what Elaine Scarry, invoking Hannah Arendt, refers to as “emergency thinking” (2012: 19). And yet, having just put together this special issue on AIDS, we cannot help but notice the echoes. COVID-19 exposes and renews the entrenchment of racism and antiblackness in health care, social services, and the US national response. Media outlets report that people with preexisting health conditions and limited access to health care are especially vulnerable, with demographics showing an unequal impact of COVID-19 on Black and brown communities. Antiblackness is carceral; not surprisingly prisons are the most concentrated sites of COVID-19. Perhaps what AIDS and COVID-19 share is antiblackness and racism. Might COVID-19 be a reiteration of these US legacies? COVID-19 has occurred amidst ritualized state sanctioned murder and warfare against Black people by police, from Breonna Taylor to the shooting of Jacob Blake. The moment of COVID-19 has also been one of waves of sustained activism — daily marches and actions against antitrans

and antiblack violence — from the Black trans march in New York City where an estimated twelve to fifteen thousand marched, to the actions and marches and protests for defunding and abolishing the police.

It is uncertain what will happen in the coming months and years of the pandemic, and yet what is already loud and clear is the rhetoric of contagion. Contagion discourse outpaces the virus (about which very little is known, and yet how quickly virology organizes care for the self [Foucault 1988]). “Friends” and “followers” on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter post photos, memes, and videos about the urgency of social distancing and sanitizing. Face masks, latex gloves, hand sanitizer, and Zoom virtual gatherings (from dinners to classrooms) are civic virtues, demonstrating how safety is the responsibility of the individual (as if neoliberalism needed anymore devotion). Through the moralizing of quarantine and social distancing, modes of intimacy, friendship, and “care” disclose an underside of interpersonal surveillance and paranoid positioning. Contagion shapes and reshapes the personal sphere through posting videos that show “how sexy my boyfriend is in cleaning himself and our apartment,” or screen captures of online classrooms that hide student and faculty labor, anxiety, and isolation through responsible and productive connectivity. Our wellness will be determined by personal restraint, abstinence, and abeyance. By this script, the socially distant subject of neoliberal health care is under an injunction to enact proper conduct and protocols figured through personal responsibility alone. Not only does social distancing aim to obscure the state’s culpability through personal responsibility, but it also operationalizes autopoiesis. Given the United States government’s abysmal response to COVID-19, a neoliberal response is necessitated through a lack of a state response. With self-care comes the enforcement of it, which is the crisis of the neoliberal response: there are no “good” personal responses; or better, there are no “personal” responses. Personal options have already been carved out by the state and are designed to reinforce its social engineering through obfuscation and reification. This is demonstrated in how immediately we recognize our social responsibility (as if pandemic thinking was already at work before COVID-19). As such, the morality of self-care is designed to empower the subject so as to conceal the state’s commitment to control.

Self-care is represented as not only well-being, but well-adjustment: a “good” state subject with healthy boundaries. The “bad” state subjects — poor Black and brown communities whose sociality is already criminalized — are further surveilled and targeted by police, who are now also tasked with the enforcement of public health regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The police continue what Walter Benjamin (2019: 301–2) diagnosed as their “law making” and “law preserving” violence in the time of the pandemic. In New York City, police are using social distancing as an alibi to continue the policing of Black life on the one

hand and to protect whiteness as proper citizenship on the other. Given the rapidity of moralizing self-care, it appears that the logic of distance — in what ways is whiteness an account of social distancing? — was already at work such that COVID-19 was simply an affirmation. These distancing strategies eerily echo racist and homophobic state efforts to close down social spaces used and loved by the unwanted. For instance, some COVID-19 responses appear to respond to the AIDS crisis, confirming social logics that ensured the ongoing pandemic of AIDS. Social and intimate behavior is foregrounded as causal and “risky” so as to hide the state’s capitalist and antiblack exploits through globalization, health disparities, economic inequality, environmental injustice, and lack of social services. Another call-and-response to AIDS, there are now instances of the enmeshment of “public health” and criminalization — a woman charged with “bioterrorism” for coughing on food at a grocery store, echoes of HIV criminalization law in which a Black man was charged with bioterrorism in 2010, a charge made possible within the context of HIV/AIDS lawfare and criminalization, which is the backdrop for criminalization of public health — including the criminalization of HIV-positive sex workers.

And yet, how do we complexify these collapsing resonances of one pandemic into another? Perhaps it starts with asking: what does it mean that the ongoing sociopolitical traumas of AIDS are responded to through COVID-19? Already we see popularized science reports that HIV antiretroviral medications are being tested for efficacy in treating COVID-19. Miami gay festivals have already been reported as “spreading coronavirus.” “COVID-19 parties” suggest antisociality and abject decadence — the affective logic that subtends HIV/AIDS “risk prevention” rhetoric. This is the technology of analogy. Analogy is a rhetorical device that aims to make meaning through the collapse of difference. A false historicity is one way this collapse occurs: the analogy is itself a retroactive response, a redress or “afterwardness.” That we compare these pandemics is a desire to redo (but mostly in the form of repetition) our response. This analogy works to cast AIDS into the past of the novel coronavirus. And yet, for us *TSQ* editors and our contributors — some of whom are living with AIDS, who are Black and trans — we are differently vulnerable to COVID-19. AIDS remains! The expansion of the security state operates in this moment of pandemic as Black and brown trans HIV-positive people are further impacted by joblessness, homelessness, lack of health care. How are those who are disabled facing the state violence of, on the one hand, the robust carceral state apparatus with policing and prisons and, on the other hand, the “organized abandonment” (Gilmore 2015) of the collapse of the welfare state and neoliberal privatization of health so that “remote work” is largely foreclosed? In this “economy of abandonment” (Povinelli 2011), what is inscribed in the self (distance) is the prescriptive discourse of risk and moral

hygiene through an epidemiological grid predicated on antiblackness. In the meanwhile, trans women of color are dying removed from friends and loved ones, in hospitals, by themselves, forced to say impossible goodbyes via phone—a social distancing in and of itself (and a cruel reminder of isolationist logic of racism and transphobia).

In contrast to the repulsion for people dying from HIV/AIDS-related illness—the four *H*'s of AIDS: homosexuals, heroin users, hemophiliacs, and Haitians—with coronavirus the initial media response was to prop up a shared sense of the nation as a unified and unifying body that will persevere and overcome illness, recovering as a whole national body. Eric Stanley reminds us that while COVID-19 had nurses and doctors flying to NYC, during AIDS they were trying to escape. But these differences between pandemics are continually under revision. With COVID-19, scientism is mobilized in the name of a self-possessed national immunity; the bodily self is recast as property so as to reactivate the racial schema that made a coherent and contained subject of the state erectable. The idea of national immunity and coronavirus as universally infecting and the fortification of the nation as a shared body is predicated on xenophobia and anti-Asian violence, shored-up border securitization, and the racial and ableist capitalist flow of vulnerability, the racism of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007: 28) has termed “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” COVID-19 responses are folding people into new biomedical and epidemiological stratagems. What political kinds of organizing will COVID-19 require—echoing the radical health activism of the Black Panthers (Nelson 2011)—to answer Dean Spade's (2020) question: “What would a public health system not rooted in military imperialism and backed by criminalization mechanisms look like? What would a public health system look like in a society grounded in collective care and co-stewardship rather than coercion?”

As we write this response to COVID-19, the rate of coronavirus infection at Rikers Island prison now hugely exceeds New York City to become one of most concentrated and fast-moving sites of COVID-19 in the entire world. Just as AIDS did, COVID-19 is showing the lethality of antiblackness and capitalism as not simply effects of pandemics but the logic on which pandemic deaths are calculated. In the epilogue to *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, C. Riley Snorton brings Stuart Hall's work *Policing the Crisis* to bear on HIV/AIDS in an analysis of Hall's reflections on crisis as a pretext for increased policing, as well as AIDS and analogy. The infection discourse of pandemics capitalizes on the very conditions that made infection not only possible but inevitable. If we follow Snorton and Hall, policing COVID-19 looks like police enforcing social distancing through

continued criminalization of Black sociality and upholding racial capitalism while incarcerated people at Rikers are left to die. The Federal Bureau of Prisons recently purchased \$60,000 of hydroxychloroquine, the drug made infamous by President Trump's hackneyed claim of its effectiveness, to "treat" coronavirus in federal prisons where several have died and nearly two hundred have tested positive. These compounding acts of violence in the name of security echo, as Snorton is proposing, HIV rates for incarcerated people that are five to seven times higher than non incarcerated, and still higher for Black incarcerated people. COVID-19 is reactivating antiblackness through the cultural pathologization and a rhetoric of racial responsibility that has been part of the grammatics of AIDS.

As a way of returning to what we intended to do with our introduction, and in an effort to complicate any simplified analogy between COVID-19 and AIDS, while also foregrounding antiblackness as the structuration of both pandemics, we want to end this brief statement with two reflections by trans women who are navigating this current moment and have also been involved in AIDS activism and prison abolitionist organizing. Both remember the death of Lorena Borjas from COVID-19. Lorena Borjas was a trans Latina activist and a mothering figure for many trans Latinas in Queens. Borjas passed away on March 30 after she was hospitalized due to coronavirus. Memorialized by Cecilia Gentili (2020) in the *New York Times*, Borjas's legacy of resistance included bailing out countless trans people of color and organizing trans sex workers of color "to become" — as Gentili writes — "an unstoppable insubordination." In the article, Gentili contextualizes Borjas's legacy in this time of coronavirus and the landscape of racism and transphobia. Gentili writes,

Jackson Heights is among the areas in New York City that have been hit especially hard by the coronavirus. As a result we've had to rethink what outreach looks like in the age of a pandemic, and what the specific needs of the community are at this critical moment. Trans sex workers and the undocumented folks in our community are not eligible for unemployment, and they most certainly will not be receiving stimulus checks. They need to know what their housing rights are, as well as food, medications and money to pay their phone bills. . . . Some rare magic has left us. But Ms. Borjas leaves a network of activists who she nurtured, and who have mobilized in her wake.

Tourmaline reflects on how the struggle for housing, food, medication, and access to health care for all and against criminalization was the struggle of Lorena Borjas, and that struggle continues in this moment. In a moving reflection on the life and

legacy of Lorena Borjas on Instagram, Tourmaline (2020) writes, “We honor her when we look at the root causes of the pandemic, when we support each other thru mutual aid. When we dream & demand much more than we were trained to and when we come together in the service of that dream.”

Introduction: Trans in the Time of HIV/AIDS

As opposed to a crisis of the present, AIDS in the United States is imagined as over, a past that has been overcome. AIDS is a disease of another time, and those with AIDS are either dead or are somehow now well. Even the acronym AIDS calls to mind newsprint, grainy photographs, wavering of VHS tapes, weathered ACT UP posters, and impossibly sick bodies in hospitals. These representations of AIDS define the pandemic as past tense. Even the media of these representations — video, photographic, paper, and other materials — archive AIDS as history, as historically contained. Most are populated by white gay men, ensuing the homophobia of AIDS so as to never remember the racism and sexism of the pandemic. We struggle to use the acronym *AIDS*. At best it sounds antiquated; at worst, a slur. Language itself aims to relegate AIDS to something unbearable that the present might be free of. This overness of AIDS is a refusal to know through the act of remembering. What is remembered serves to memorialize what we think AIDS “was,” ensuring that we never know what AIDS “is.” This is the brutality of the AIDS pandemic in the United States: a cruel afterimage — we grieve so as to misunderstand, which makes possible the updating of history to make unthinkable the continued violence of AIDS.

In contemporary representations, Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) has been replaced with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). The biological virus of HIV works as “bare life” (Agamben 1998), as a material reality that symbolically misrecognizes the failure of governments, the forsakenness of the social order that AIDS marks. HIV is the bright, shiny tool of the present; it is another nail in the coffin of thinking AIDS, of grappling with the catastrophe that the AIDS pandemic remains. HIV drug advertisements are full of smiling, healthy, and sexually and racially diverse faces. HIV prevention campaigns emphasize safety over “risk,” while continuing to promote Black trans women as a “high risk” and “target” population. This virus — the problem with virology and the immunological — becomes a new representation of AIDS, but strategically designed without attention to the structuration of AIDS: the racism of AIDS, the trans/homophobia and sexism of AIDS. The biologization of AIDS through HIV pivots around good/bad behavior, personal responsibility, and proper care of the self. The focus shifts to prevention — and a discourse of “resilience” — its own form of “post-AIDS” existence wherein there is no unhappy or failed subject living

with the devastation of AIDS, only the reformed subject of prevention and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). In the social imaginary, HIV is no longer a sign of the abjection and negation of AIDS, but a symbol of pharmacological success and inclusion, a reformed subject able to participate in seemingly “post” AIDS epidemic sociality. This is the contemporary (in)visibility of AIDS. The time of AIDS — these new representations seem to propose — is either an obliterated past tense or an HIV+ pharmacological futurity.

Yet, AIDS remains. AIDS continues.

It is the persistence of AIDS that prompted this special issue of *TSQ*. The question that guided this was “How do we think trans with AIDS?” Surely, AIDS is central to trans life and trans death: among the 3 million HIV testing events reported to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2017, the percentage of transgender people who received a new HIV diagnosis was three times the national average, and nearly half of all new HIV diagnoses are Black trans women. But then again, this is the CDC’s story about HIV infection. What about AIDS? Which is to ask about the overlapping with questions about citizenship, belonging, exile, the carceral, the border, antiblackness, disability, queerness, feminism, racialization, biopower, and necropolitics, and much more. It was not until the writing of this issue that the CDC made a trans-specific register public (Johnson 2020). In 2016 the distribution of HIV infection was such that 84 percent of trans women tested positive, 15 percent were trans men, and less than 1 percent had another gender identity. These numbers suggest that thinking AIDS with trans must also theorize difference — to think AIDS, trans theory cannot misrecognize trans as without race. The racial difference of trans and AIDS is significant, so much so that even the shorthand “trans and AIDS” threatens to hide the centrality of blackness in the AIDS pandemic. Moreover, trans theory cannot be sexless and genderless (even if our political ambitions are to abolish sex/gender systems recognizing sex/gender as racial logics). In other words, if we want to start thinking about AIDS and trans, we must break apart a general trans theory. Not just in terms of racial difference, but in terms of the radical differences between, say, trans men/masculine theoretical investments, trans gender-nonconforming analytics, and trans femme/woman heuristics. Equally, we must question that which obfuscates the sexualizing and racializing violence of trans and AIDS, such as the cis/trans binary, non/binary gender, and others. The difficult truth of transgender studies — one that this special issue tries to elaborate — is how transphobia has structured its own interrogatives and analytics. Simply, it is time to recognize an implicit racial, sexual, and transphobic violence in the generalizability of trans and to start thinking trans in terms of differences, bodily and otherwise. To think AIDS and trans, then, means we must think racial and

sex/gender differences together, even as those investigations destabilize the familiar logics, investments, and protocols of trans theory. But how? In what way? There are so many questions—so much that requires attention—and yet outside public health and the social sciences (both of which rely on the general field of transgender studies to refine their languages, questions, and conclusions), there is little to no theoretical engagement with how AIDS “defines” trans people’s experience and—even more startlingly, perhaps—the very field of transgender studies itself.

Special journal issues aim to fill gaps in thinking—ideally—in what has not yet been thought. Mostly, the aim is additive: how to add an issue to another issue, or to divide one theme by some problematic. Transgender studies—and *TSQ*—is no exception to this mathematical logic. Ever proliferating, transgender studies finds attachment to an endless array of questions: trans + aesthetics, trans + decolonialism, trans + feminism, trans + blackness, trans + futures, and onward. Sometimes new knowledge is forged out of these special issue equations. New analytics. New insights. Other times these efforts show the aporetic impossibility of the intersection; that is, how the social organization of one domain actively refuses to think another. Antidisciplinarity. For example, in foregrounding blackness, Treva Ellison, C. Riley Snorton, Kai Green, and Matt Richardson in their special *TSQ* issue “The Issue of Blackness” (2017) question the order of analysis. This is to say, transgender studies and trans theory must confront the racialized logics of sex/gender that have organized its central analytic. To study trans + blackness cannot be simply additive; instead, this line of inquiry demands attention to how trans/cis and sex/gender are effects of (and are made meaningful through) blackness. In other words, sex and gender—what transgender studies often isolates, and centralizes—are what blackness does, what it animates and activates.

Our special issue tries to refuse the certainties and closures of transgender studies and, for that matter, AIDS studies. We have curated this issue to complicate the relationship between trans and AIDS, to stay with uncertainty and a conceptual openness that might incite new and different questions. Our contributors are artists and performers, cultural and media theorists, social scientists, and archivists who think about the relationships between race, immigration, transgender, representation, and HIV/AIDS. Kiyan Williams—who generously allowed us to use their art for the cover of this issue—discusses how their work remembers AIDS through re-imag(in)ing. Art, for Williams, is the AIDS archive, and, through desire, actuality is illuminated into political refusal. Cecilia Gentili refuses the injunctions of visibility as respectability through the brilliant and cutting comedy performances of *The Knife Cuts Both Ways*. Gentili discusses sex

worker activism, trans struggles against policing and detention, and working in HIV/AIDS services to expand trans access and programming. Monica Jones discusses her work as a Black trans woman for sex worker decriminalization, how decriminalization is an HIV/AIDS activist struggle (and vice versa), her relationship with and to Sharmus Outlaw, and the pathbreaking report on HIV/AIDS policy on sex worker organizing: *Nothing about Us, without Us: HIV/AIDS-Related Community and Policy Organizing for US Sex Workers*. Through self-retrospection of their work, P. Staff suggests how art can be an effort to feel what has not yet been made sensible or shareable. Art, in this way, is experimental desire intervening in the resistance of the real to symbolization. Christopher Lee and Laura Stamm investigate and question the representation of trans women of color and AIDS in visual and popular culture. In different fields and interpretive frameworks, Adam Geary and Bahar Azadi et al. examine the problem—the impossibility—of trying to study AIDS and trans without attention to anti-blackness and xenophobia. Geary provocatively argues that theorizing transgender with AIDS risks obscuring the antiblackness of the US epidemic and reifies the “queer paradigm” that has shaped the pandemic. Through a public health analysis, Azadi et al. shows how high HIV rates for trans women cannot be understood without thinking about anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments in France. Ellis Martin and Zach Ozma reflect on Lou Sullivan’s diaries and how AIDS mediated sexual and gender identity for Sullivan. Matilda Sycamore reflects on her involvement in political movements, her fiction and nonfiction writing, a long history of AIDS organizing with ACT UP and in radical queer/trans collectives, and on San Francisco as a psychic and material landscape across multiple times of AIDS.

Given the lack of scholarship in transgender studies on AIDS—and conversely, the lack of attention to trans in AIDS scholarship—we do not aim to fill this chasm, but instead to foreground this absence as a provocation. How might lack of attention to AIDS in transgender studies be an opportunity to refocus the field, to redefine its investments, to challenge its assumptions? This special issue works to 1) deconstruct analytic frameworks to better understand how foreclosure (a refusal to think) has been installed (for instance, why has transgender studies not produced much scholarship on AIDS?); 2) help build an account that will aid in unraveling the work that this unthinking has done in forming interpretive logics; and 3) gesture to work, mostly creative and political, outside transgender studies (as an academic field, given that the field, especially in the United States, has remained so silent on AIDS) that has taken seriously the problem of trans people living/dying with AIDS. Given that our special issue sits with these absences, these voids in thinking, we stay with these questions: What is

it about transgender studies that refuses to think AIDS; and what is it about AIDS scholarship that refuses to think trans? How might we think about trans and HIV/AIDS in the present tense? How might the present conjuncture of trans and HIV/AIDS differ from earlier moments? How can we understand the relationship between HIV/AIDS and “trans visibility” and representation (Tourmaline and Stanley 2017)? Thinking alongside Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (2017: xxiv), who argue in the introduction to *Trap Door* that trans visibility is predicated on whiteness, on white trans visibility, how then might the inability to think trans and AIDS be a symptom of the field’s own allegiance to whiteness. Even more boldly, what is it about transgender theory and studies that must be abolished to think about AIDS and difference? These are some of the questions that guide this introduction, but also our effort to bring together scholarship, art, and activism that considers “Trans in a Time of HIV/AIDS.”

Transgender Studies Is AIDS

Given that *TSQ* is an academic journal and an outgrowth of transgender studies, it is important to puzzle over the omission of AIDS in the formation of the field (even as transgender studies has become many things in many different disciplines). Theory—that poetry of thinking—originates from embodied subjects, but never directly, never without contingency, never without the representational field of language. Because theory does not escape representation it never escapes politics. Theory is political—at its most base level—because it is made through representation through symbolization; what Stuart Hall (1997) described as “articulation.” Importantly, every effort to represent embodied experience is marked by repression, marked by that which constitutes the subject. Given that AIDS is recognized in the same few years that transgender studies originates itself in the United States, we cannot but wonder how repression is at work. By the 1990s, transgender studies was institutionalizing its specific interventions into the cultural meaning of sex, gender, and sexuality. In that same time nearly 5 million people were reported to be HIV+, and the homophobic and racist stigmas of pandemic were entrenched. So, by repression, we do not mean simply a disregard, but a defense built into the field formation: its figurations and representations, its methodological and interpretive devices.

In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Jay Prosser (1990) proposed that some of the early architects of queer theory, specifically Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler, needed a “transgender position” to unify gay and lesbian studies (to find a shared political orientation to sexism and homophobia), particularly in response to the AIDS crisis: “It is transgender that makes possible the lesbian and gay overlap, the identification between gay men and lesbians, which forms the ground for this new theory of homosexuality discrete from

feminism.” Prosser continues, “And it is surely this cross-gendered identification between gay men and lesbians—an identification made critically necessary by the AIDS crisis—that ushers in the queer moment” (22). Sedgwick (1990: 22) in particular argued for an “irreducibility” of sexuality to gender, which intermeshes desire and identification, transgender and homosexual respectively. Significantly, in this gendering of sexuality, processes of egoic identification are thought to supersede—and then analytically define—the unconsciousness of sexuality. Queer theory, in this form seems to operationalize “transgender” so as to bind the anarchic dimensions of libidinal life. To further illustrate his point, Prosser cites Sedgwick’s (1993: 23) confession of her “identification? Dare I, after this half-decade, call it with all a fat woman’s defiance, my identity?—as a gay man.” Prosser goes on to track the transgender position in the work of Kobena Mercer, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Marjorie Garber to demonstrate how the foundations of this queer theory are organized by a conceptual “transgendering.”

While Prosser’s genealogy deserves more attention—indeed, it is worth tracking in detail how transgendering emerges and shapes (often whitening—gender is a racial technology; transgendering, then, is made meaningful through race—and normalizing analytics—egoic sexuality—in) both queer theory and transgender studies—what stands out to us is his passing reference to “an identification made critically necessary by the AIDS crisis.” What was it about the AIDS pandemic that necessitated transgendering? Was the crossing of genders—as an analytic—a reaction to the particular trauma and silence of AIDS in the 1990s? Prosser’s assertion, while insightful, that the AIDS crisis necessitated a transgender position so as to build a shared sense of suffering, solidarity, and personal investment between gay men and lesbians seems an insufficient account of the racism, sexism, and homophobia that is AIDS. Instead, rather than the transgender position functioning as a joint—a point of contact and care—it may also serve as a conversion and translation (repression) of these social violences *into* and *as* theory. More simply put, this queer theory acted out rather than worked through AIDS phobia in its turn to transgendering. Given that queer theory emerges out of a direct critique of homophobia and heteronormativity, why were thinkers like Sedgwick so keen in the late 1980s and early 1990s to displace sexuality with gender *as its* sexuality? This is to ask, what is it about AIDS that activated the displacement of sexuality through cross-gendering as an egoic queer eros? To answer this question exceeds what an introduction to a journal issue can do, but we want to deepen it as a way to invite more scholarship, art making, and activism. So, let us follow a few lines of inquiry.

Cindy Patton argued in *Inventing AIDS* (1991) against the “queer paradigm” of the AIDS epidemic in the United States. This paradigm relied on homophobic and racial abjection to structure a response to AIDS, giving rise to

the idea that risky behavior and sexual deviation (particularly among Blacks and gays) were the cause of the epidemic. The paradigm enabled the representation of AIDS as a gay disease, which helped obscure the impact the disease has on Black and Latino men and women. In consolidating homosexuality with illness, the queer paradigm was (and remains) successful in collapsing homophobia with (libidinal) sexuality. The crisis of AIDS, then, was also the danger that unbound sexuality always already poses to the subject itself, making racial and sexual identities the representatives of this threat. It is this collapsing of threats—what we have called, early in this introduction, “compounding”—that may help elucidate Prosser’s claim that a transgender analytic emerges as an effect of AIDS. Might the transgender position—gender as sexuality; identification as “the” sexual investment—in queer theory be a disciplining of sexuality (drive sexuality or libido) that was already at work in the US response to AIDS? Contrary to the liberatory power of the transgender position that queer theory promised, it served as a binding of the imagined threat that sexuality posed. It comes as no surprise then that identity (the sexuality as gender) would be asserted (and championed) over the problem of sexuality. Transgendering, for queer theory, was a triumph of processes of identification (at most, the binding of libido into an object of selfhood; mastering the self) over sexuality that had been designated—through the racism and homophobia of AIDS—as a threat in need of administration. Even in the endless permutations of transgendering, the subtending logic is the maintenance of sexual drive through, and as, identity—leaving only the processes of binding (specifically, identification) as acceptable expressions and conceptualizations of sexuality.

That transgender studies has struggled to distinguish itself from queer theory is evidence through the fact that the transgender position has been taken up by both, with only a narrowing investment (though, Jack Halberstam called it a “border war” in 1998) in identity as a distinguishing feature (Chu and Drager 2019; Stryker 2004). The territorialization of gender, for much of the 1990s transgender scholarship, would be a central stake for understanding what transing did that queering did not nor could not. Because of this propped-up relationship between queer theory and transgender studies, to propose a uniquely transgender analytic required ever-expanding or, conversely, ever-narrowing understandings of sexuality, gender, and sex so as to perform a coherent argument. While transgender studies is many things in contemporary academia, it is worth considering how queer theory’s 1990s version of transgendering took hold and shaped, and indeed named, transgender studies (the object of study, and site of divestment in the more current trans/trans* studies). David Valentine, Viviane Namaste, and Talia Mae Bettcher have all provided superb accounts of the theoretical and political

divides between transgender and queer, but none have foregrounded AIDS as structuring this schism. Transgender studies emerged with—and perhaps, as Prosser suggests, of—AIDS, and it took up the cross-gendered position as its central heuristic, spending over four decades to distinguish itself from queer theory. It would be impossible to not think transgender with AIDS, and yet, curiously, the refusal to think AIDS in transgender studies is pervasive.

To be clear, our inquiry into the inability of the academic field of transgender studies to think AIDS should not be generalized to trans/gender/sexual subjectivity or lived experience. On the contrary, given the alarmingly high rates of HIV infection among transgender people, especially Black and of color trans women, this inability to think about AIDS is specific to the production of cultural and critical theory. We might simply call this absence symptomatic, and leave it at that, but let us consider that transgender studies maintained the enmeshment that Prosser charged Sedgwick and other queer theorists with—the collapsing of identity and sexuality so as to master sexuality through gender. Sandy Stone’s germinal “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1991) and Susan Stryker’s field-defining essay, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” (2004) offer some guidance for thinking through this question. While the essays do different things—Stone proffers a queerer ontology for transsexuals, and Stryker works to demarcate and constitute the field of transgender studies—both theorists are central to transgender studies, and both essays are constitutive of the ongoing US AIDS epidemic. Indeed, provocatively, transsexualism—a figuration that both Stone and Stryker importantly attend to in their theorization—was not accorded the status of an official “disorder” in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* until 1980, which was a year earlier than the first AIDS cases (classified as such) in the US were reported. While neither essay reflects on AIDS—and this is not a critique, as these essays were significant in institutionalizing transgender studies that allowed and welcomed questions posed by and for trans/gender/sexual people—we are interested in how these essays help illustrate—in ways not necessarily intended by either author, but by the epistemology itself—but also complicate Prosser’s claim regarding the transgender position in theory as an effect of AIDS.

Stone (1991: 2) calls on transsexuals—whom she describes as subjects that “commonly blur the distinction” between the “performative character of gender with the physical ‘fact’ of sex”—to forgo “passing” and to be “read,” and to “multiplicatively divide the old binary discourses of gender and sex.” There are a number of considerations: firstly, Stone relies on the overcoming of the dualed dynamics of sex and gender through blurring and crossing—that the relationship between these domains unsettle the facticity of both. Secondly, “multiplicatively”

serves as unresting of “fact” through the “performative”; that is to say, gender and sex are not simply undone, but sex itself is understood as a domain of gender through the workings of blurring, reading, and passing. Said differently, the posttranssexual *is* the transgender position, and the problem of sex/ism is resolved through the dynamism of gender. In the conclusion of the essay, Stone writes, “Transgender theory would appear to be successfully engaging the nascent discourses of Queer Theory in a number of graceful and mutually productive respects, and this is reason for guarded celebration” (15). Stone brings queer theory’s transgender analytic to trans subjects (to be “mixed genres”) and to the field of transgender studies. Stone gives trans people another account of themselves—and the importance of this should not be dismissed—and she also authenticates queer theory’s own innovation. The self-determination and autonomy that Stone’s theory performs on the body may also be symptomatic of the logic of whitening that forms much contemporary trans thought on gender. The posttranssexual is the transgender position in transgender studies—indeed the term *transsexual* is abandoned in the field for the progressive *transgender* and now *trans*. Within transgender studies (and, interestingly, queer theory) the transsexual is rendered as essentializing—as an investment in sex—but with Prosser’s reading, one cannot help but wonder if the problematic “sex” of transsexual is the lost sexuality—and whiteness—of queer theory’s own transgenering. Which is to ask: How might disinterest in sex and sexuation—what the transsexual complexifies—be part of the erasure of AIDS in transgender studies?

In an effort to differentiate queer theory from transgender studies—and to insist that queer theorists not simply transform trans/gender/sex people’s bodies and experiences into heuristics—Stryker (2004) playfully stages a sibling rivalry between sexuality and gender. She writes, “While queer studies remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work, all too often *queer* remains a code word for ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’” (214). Transgender studies, here, is proposed as a gendered study, distinct (to a recognizable degree) from queer theory’s privileged object of sexuality. And while this effort at differentiation is important, Stryker also maintains the enmeshment that Prosser charges Sedgwick with—the collapsing of identity and desire. The gendered identities of gay and lesbian, here, subsume the sexuality of queerness itself. In other words, the transgender position in queer theory is claimed by transgender studies, and the claim act becomes differentiation. Stryker continues, “all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity” (214). While this critique remains pivotal in thinking about the inclusions and exclusions of “transgender phenomena” in queer theory, it helps to confirm Prosser’s

suspicions. It leaves us wondering about Prosser's suggestion that the AIDS crisis produced queer theory and its transgender position that would be claimed and reinvested through the institutionalization of transgender studies. This brief rehearsal of a conceptual theme within transgender studies is meant to refocus the absence of AIDS scholarship in transgender studies (and equally, trans scholarship in AIDS studies—because the confusion of sexuality/identity has not been isolated). Stryker and Stone are not the progenitors of transgenering—they inherited the analytic—nor are they alone in how the analytic of transgenering (and its whitening and desexualizing logic) has defined the field of transgender studies. In many ways, transgender studies only reifies a problem that originates in queer theory.

To answer what about AIDS inaugurated transgender requires many more questions. For the purposes of this introduction, we can propose some directions and routes of inquiry. The contributors to this special issue offer their own insights into this question, sometimes departing from those we offer here. One direction that emerges—what we follow here—is informed by trans of color and Black trans critiques that complicate the ontology of gender. Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) and Jules Gill-Peterson's *Histories of the Transgender Child* (2018), to name only two monographs, have challenged the field's understanding of gender by demonstrating that trans studies' investment in gender as ontological obscures the ways race—and blackness in particular—makes meaningful (makes ontological) sex/gender. In other words, the question of race cannot be additive to the problem of gender, but instead schematizes the logic on which “gender trouble” rests. Queer theory's and transgender studies's transgenering—in its nominative claim to cross gender and sex—is already an account of racialization. How, then, might we complexify Prosser's account of transgenering—as an analytic predicated on race—as an effect of AIDS?

In his book *Antiblack Racism and the AIDS Epidemic: State Intimacies*, Adam Geary (2014: 1) writes, “The color of AIDS in America is black.” Working against the “queer paradigm” of the US AIDS epidemic that relied on “risk behavior” discourse, he asks, “How does the racial blackness of the US [AIDS] epidemic challenge what we think we know about it?” (2). Geary carefully outlines how AIDS is an effect not of deviancy—the homophobic and racist script of the epidemic—but of “the unequal and violent conditions in which they [people] are forced to live and that are embodied as ill-health and vulnerability to disease” (2). Cathy Cohen (1999) also demonstrated that racist and sexist representations of the AIDS epidemic worked to displace attention from how Black communities were made vulnerable through state formations that resulted in

disproportionately high HIV rates. Cohen describes how antiblackness structured disparities in the response to AIDS, and those disparities, particularly among Black women, further differentiated health and life expectancy. Even as womanhood (gender) is forged out of colonial and antiblack violence, gender/sex regimes continue to differentiate vulnerability and livability of Black women—the AIDS epidemic is one such instance. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2020: 9) proposes, “antiblackness itself is sexuating, whereby so-called biological sex is modulated by ‘culture.’ In other words, at the register of both sign and matter, antiblackness produces differential biocultural effects of both sex and gender.” AIDS is an effect of antiblackness, and this effect further materializes differentiations in terms of race, sex, and sexuality. In *Nobody Is Supposed to Know*, Snorton (2014: 5, 42) foregrounds the metaphor of the “glass closet” to show how Black sexuality and genders are dramatized as devious, duplicitous, and errant—figured in a time of HIV/AIDS through the “down low,” “marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle and speculation,” and surveilled in an extension of racial slavery’s “vertical sovereignty” and “biopolitical and necropolitical” regulatory ends. In describing how deviancy AIDS discourse served to displace attention from state-sponsored antiblack racism, Geary (2014:19) offers the trope of “screen discourse” that names the social structuration of displacement and disavowal. He writes, “Telling the story of queers and deviants in AIDS discourse, then, has always been a way of *not* telling the story of how vulnerability to disease is structured” (19). If, then, the AIDS epidemic was administered through a homophobic “screen discourse” that concealed the structuration of antiblack racism, then how too were major threads of queer theory and transgender studies susceptible to the homophobia and racism of AIDS, building the affective force of both into the foundations of their analytics? Did transgenering not only background sexuality but also foreground gender so as to misread (or fail to read altogether) race?

The question is not to propose a canceling of these critical projects—in both, Black queer and trans critiques have intervened in the contemporary debates. Instead, we ask this question to imagine what a transgender studies would look like that did not disavow the centrality of AIDS in its formation. What might transgender studies have been without a specific liberatory and hyper investment in gender that aimed at subsuming sexuality (and sex), such that questions of race or nation could be theorized—problematically—as simply additive? It might start by not knowing how to think trans and AIDS together, to start from a place of uncertainty and unknowing. It might have to consider how AIDS for trans people is first a question of race and sex, not of gender or sexual identity, which is to complicate how the field often thinks about intersectionality and ontology.

A transgender studies aware of its origin would need to start with this: AIDS is a story of race and of Black death, and Black AIDS activism is part of the duration of Black freedom struggle against the violence of premature death. Che Gossett (2014: 31) precisely describes the inextricable “vectoring” of criminalization, transphobia (especially transmisogyny), antiblack racism, and AIDS phobia when they write, “We are living in a time of ‘chains and corpses,’ death, loss and mourning, of outrage and activism in response to mass incarceration, mass detention and deportation, HIV criminalization, AIDS phobia and the ongoing AIDS epidemic, anti-queer and anti-trans police violence.” Abolition, then, is also the end of AIDS. A transgender studies attentive to AIDS would want to be, could only be, a study of racialization, sexuation, and libidinal sexuality.

Trans Art *Is* the Trans AIDS Archive

Given that the field of transgender studies has not adequately thought the question of AIDS, we look beyond the academy for direction. Specifically, how have art and activism engaged the ongoing relationship between blackness, trans, and AIDS? Art and activism are not here as metaphors for thinking, but as figuring poetics, arguments, and theory. Working through AIDS contemporary Black and trans artists offer an account of the pandemic that refuses the homophobic, transsexist, racist representations that have structured AIDS. These artists make living records of AIDS—loving, lusting, and fighting archives. Artists like Tourmaline and Kiyana Williams further challenge, edit, and alter the representation of AIDS through particular archival modalities? In this, their work asks, how do we archive social violence, and when is the archive itself a violence? This question highlights the problem of representation: the AIDS archive is one of visibility and representation, and yet how have race and trans been the story of hypervisibility, of overrepresentation, of not just visibility but the brute force of the visual, the optical, the perceived real. In turning to art and activism, we are not suggesting these are solutions to the racist and antisexual foreclosures that have structured transgender studies’ inattention to AIDS, nor are we proposing that the path forward is only about art making or voice raising. We turn to art for guidance in better understanding how transgender studies and AIDS studies might change or reimagine their own possessive investments.

In attending to the archive of slavery and antiblack violence, Saidiya Hartman (2008) invites us to question the meaning of the archive itself and its institutionalization, to question its authority and expertise. She asks, “Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive?” (11). Given that AIDS *is* antiblackness—AIDS is part of what Hartman terms the afterlife of slavery—Hartman’s interrogative extends to questions of archiving and

representing this pandemic. The archive—the problematic representation of AIDS that we described earlier in our introduction—is offered as a complete record; it is built to desire a real account while disavowing the desire that built it. The archive is a promise to the real and, more generally, a contract with what is real, what real-*ly* happened. But, how does the real-ism of the social order—and here, Hartman’s proposal is most urgent—reinvest in this orientation to historicizing, collecting, and cataloguing? Michel Foucault (1976: 144) elucidates this question: the archive encompasses the “domain of statements” that are articulable. What creates the archive is “the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use. They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call archive” (145). He continues, “The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (145). For Foucault, it is the work that can be done that incites thought—it is what drives (desire) the making of archives. And here, perhaps, we see what “exceeds” the archive: its incitement, its “fever” (Derrida 1998). How does desire summon archives and then occult them? Might the drive to systemize also, paradoxically, be the unbinding of the archives’—to return to Hartman—“constitutive limits”? And with Foucault’s attention to the governing role of “the appearance”: What of the aesthetic investments *of* and *in* the archive as the record of archival incitement?

It is this question of aesthetics as a record of the wanting to remember, of artfulness that guides us as editors to try and work through Hartman’s call to “exceed” and “renegotiate” the archive, particularly the archive of AIDS. Just as AIDS discourse relied on the “queer paradigm” to “screen” structural forms of antiblack racism, the archive of AIDS has also worked to remember so as to forget. This problem is as much an effect of the unbearableness of AIDS—how do institutions remember death?—as it is a result of failing to ask better questions regarding the pandemic. That is to ask: do we yet know what AIDS was and is? Rather than answer this question, we instead pose it as a provocation. We wonder how aesthetics and art—and the incitement that shapes and reshapes both—offer different insights into the problem of remembering AIDS. Our issue includes artist statements and artwork as a different kind of record or archive, perhaps one that does not want to forget because the problem of desire is foregrounded.

Turning to art as archival is to ask: in what ways is the archive bound up with its own destruction (anarchival)? As much as organization structures the archive, there is also a disorganizing principle that is prior to organizing, to gathering, to collecting. Okwui Enwezor (2007: 16) argues, “The archive achieves

its authority and quality of veracity, its evidentiary function, and interpretive power—in short, its reality—through a series of designs that unite structure and function.” The archive is an effect of design and artfulness, of aesthetic practice. Enwezor proposes that “archival legacies become transformed into aesthetic principles, and artistic models become historicizing constructs” (22). This aesthetic—rather than a philosophical orientation, we suggest aesthetics as sites of sublimation (Freud 1957, 1990)—*in* and *as* design is a form of delimiting, delimit of the disorderly, of the disorganized that preexists organization. Aesthetic thought, then, exists both before and against the archival thought: ante- and anti- organization.

The organization Visual AIDS foregrounds the constitutive forces of aesthetics and archives. As Esther McGowan recounts: “At the height of the AIDS crisis, many people were ostracized from their families and neighbors, and their art would be thrown out. Frank and David Hirsh came up with the idea of creating an archive of images. People now are living long-term with HIV, so it’s not just the legacy of people who passed away, but also of those living with HIV who continue to make work” (Ansari, Reisman, and Bolster 2019). In projecting the images of Kay Rosen’s *AIDS On Going Going On* onto the facade of St. Vincent’s Hospital and the Guggenheim, Visual AIDS (n.d., 2016) and collaborating artists showed how AIDS haunts the institution of the museum and its archive. Even more than an institutional critique of the “museumological” construction of the memorialization and archiving of AIDS, the projection forces the museum to reckon with the imagined absence and “screen discourse” (screen, here, takes on a literal dimension) of the AIDS crisis.

To illustrate how art serves as an archival archive, we turn to the artists Kiyani Williams and Tourmaline, who respond to Hartman’s stirring interrogation of the archive. They make work that desires through the historical record while also exploring how the historical record is constituted through effacement. Both artists confront the historical erasure of Black trans femmes and women and seek to imagine the un-archivable through an archival engagement. Tourmaline’s films—*Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018), *Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones* (2017), and *Salacia* (2019) have all been works of speculative Black trans cinematic imagination. *Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones* was commissioned by Visual AIDS for the program “Alternate Endings, Radical Beginnings,” curated by Erin Christovale and Vivian Crockett.

Thinking about Black queer/trans art in a time of antiblack and antitrans state of emergency that *is* the ongoing AIDS epidemic, Christovale and Crockett commissioned work by Mykki Blanco, Cheryl Dunye and Ellen Spiro, Tourmaline, Thomas Allen Harris, Kia LaBeija, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, and Brontez Purnell. Christovale and Crockett brought Black queer and trans visual theorizing

to AIDS. “ALTERNATE ENDINGS, RADICAL BEGINNINGS as a title came from a conversation we had around the idea of radicality and its roots in a black art tradition” (Christovale and Crockett 2017). In their statement, Christovale and Crockett articulate how their work was shaped by and in conversation with Angela Davis’s definition of radicality as seizing problems at the root and with Robin Kelley’s work on the imaginary that lies at the core of the Black radical tradition. Christovale and Crockett emphasized the radical imperative of Black queer and trans art about AIDS at a time when the AIDS epidemic is being historicized and institutionalized within the space of the museum, even as the epidemic is continuing to disproportionately impact Black communities:

We’ve been thinking about what it means to practice radical imagination and what that does for those who are usually marginalized. That notion really speaks to all the filmmakers and visual artists that we commissioned for this program. The artists are radically thinking about the HIV/AIDS epidemic as Black people in this country, asserting themselves and their creative narratives amidst an ongoing discourse around who is invited into institutions.” (Christovale and Crockett 2017)

Christovale and Crockett’s work in and as “Alternate Endings, Radical Beginnings” is a Black queer and trans radicalization of the museumology and political genealogy of AIDS art and activism. Their bringing together Black queer and trans artists to reckon with AIDS at a moment of the museum archiving of AIDS activism on the one hand and antiblackness as a mechanism of AIDS crisis on the other brings Black queer/trans art to bear not only on collective memory but also its ongoing urgency.

Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones, whose title invokes Lucille Clifton’s (2020) poem of the same name, speaks to Black trans life and ongoing violence of displacement. The film centers around Egyptt LaBejia, Black trans performer and witness to the AIDS epidemic, coinciding with the loss of cruising spaces of the piers and meatpacking district in NYC. The film opens from inside the Whitney Museum of American Art, where Egyptt looks out at the piers and says, “I literally lived on that pier that’s no longer there.” Egyptt says to Hope Dector, pointing to the remnant of one of the piers, “I’ve never seen it from this angle before.” Egyptt says, looking down from inside the museum at the horizon of the piers, “The times of the village, from Christopher Street to 14th Street. People should never forget where they came from.” The lens zooms out to the outline of the cityscape over the Hudson River, which drains into the Atlantic Ocean.

Tourmaline’s film centers Black trans life, experience, and theory and is a work of cinematic theorizing about AIDS, Black trans dispossession, and memory. Egyptt and Fatima Jamal’s casting is an important and powerful directorial

imperative because it situates Black trans women and femme and nonbinary artists as the protagonists—critiquing visibility but doing so within the radical imaginary of Black trans art. Lying outside the orbit of the film, Fatima Jamal’s own directorial and aesthetic interventions into queer/trans discourse with the film *No Fats, No Femmes* and Egyptt’s legacy of the House of LaBeija. The film refuses to be a spectacle for nontrans and/or non-Black consumption, which is so often how Black trans women and femmes both figure and are taken up in academia as in film: as always already dead. Hartman’s study of “fungibility” as an effect of enslavement is also illustrated by the hyper-consumption of Black trans women to produce scholarship, and institutionalization, and the operations of transgender studies itself (Hayward 2017). Tourmaline layers in archival documentary video of Egyptt’s performances, creating a temporal vibration from the historical to the present. There is hardly any dialogue in the film, except Egyptt’s opening invocation to remember, and this Black trans remembrance is facilitated through sound and music by Geo Wyeth. The audience is awash in sounded-light—synthetic effect—compelled by and saturated with what Tourmaline terms “movie magic” (Tourmaline and Wortzel 2018).

Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones bends the binary between “reality” and fantasy until it reaches its breaking point. Even more, the film goes further than blurring and trans-figuring the reality/fantasy binary—the film reveals how fantasy and libidinal sexuality are central to the production of “reality” itself. The film begins and ends with Egyptt at the Whitney Museum of American Art—a loop, traveling full circle—a Black trans radical beginning and ending. The film serves as a critique of the antiblack and antitrans violence of effacement—historical and lived—and also shows Black trans intimacy and “aesthetic sociality” that is forged through and beyond the purview of the archive (Harris 2018). As Tavia Nyong’o (2018) writes of the film: “*Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones* thus posits history through the angular entanglements of transgender subjects who are caught up in non-linear temporalities and non-sovereign subjectivities. Stolen and disposable life finds new dispositions for itself and others. Abandoned to liberty, extimate grounds forge creative kinship.”

Saidiya Hartman (2017) contends that “care is the antidote to violence.” The affective and aesthetic practices of care are present in the work of Kiyan Williams and Tourmaline, who reimagine the ends of the archive. The archive functions as a technology of veridiction and apparatus for the adjudication of historical truth claims. Troubling the ontology of the archive and the event, Hartman (2008: 11) writes, “I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.” This speculative

imagining of life otherwise is central to the work of Tourmaline and Williams. Williams's work explored the film archive of Marlon Riggs, to excavate and bring to the fore a political genealogy of Black trans experiences of the (ongoing) AIDS crisis by exploring the archive of Jesse Harris, interior to Riggs's archive.

"The afterlife of slavery," as Hartman says, "is not only a social and political problem but an aesthetic one as well" (Hartman 2018). Tourmaline's and Williams's work of Black trans un-archiving, speculation, and film show how Black trans art is a critical site and register for confronting the ongoing afterlife of slavery as an aesthetic problem, against the violence of representation and visibility as a "grammar of capture" (Spillers 2003: 14). Trans is reimagined in their work as artistry, as an erotics that takes seriously the libidinal dimensions of subjectivity. Gender is not abandoned—the violence that Black trans women and femmes experience is particular and not generalizable to all transgender positions—but pushed through on a wave of desire marked by aesthetics. Tourmaline's and Williams's work confront the afterlife of slavery as an aesthetic problem through a Black trans abolitionist frame. Williams and Tourmaline show how the violence of antiblackness, antiqueerness and antitransness function through the regulation of the aesthetic that aims to render Black trans captive. Against antiblack metaphysical violence (Wilderson and Douglass 2013; Warren 2018) and antiblack violence of the carceral, Williams and Tourmaline's work theorizes fugitivity (Mary Jones), deconstruction (unmaking of America) and forces viewers to consider Black trans as abolitionist struggle that is ongoing and "interminable" (Sexton 2014: 593).

Tourmaline's recent film *Salacia* reimagines the insurgency of Black trans sex worker Mary Jones in the 1800s, placing her in Seneca Village, on the run—a fugitive from and in defiance of antiblack, antitrans law and order and the protocols of proper citizenship. Tourmaline enacts a cinematic and speculative imaginary akin to what Hartman (2008: 11) terms "critical fabulation." Tourmaline anarchives Mary Jones and, through a historical imaginary of Jones, incorporates and absorbs the historical record—from the 1836 court transcript of Jones's defiance of gender's jurisdiction to dramatizing abolitionist tensions about racial respectability and sex work—to not only refract it but also to extend the imaginary of the historical beyond the coordinates of the archive, turning toward other affective modes of not forgetting presence (as opposed to remembering). In Tourmaline's film time is folded, and Jones swerves between the temporal zones of present and past using magic as a transport. The character of Jones ends the film by exclaiming "we can be anything we want to be"—a Black trans desire—and it is art as imaginary that facilitates this as both a call to history as well as the present.

In Kiyani Williams's *Meditation on the Making of America* (2019)—dirt/earth from a “Vessel/Womb/Abyss” is hurled onto a blank white canvas and launched as a projectile at Williams as well. The onlooking audience is witness to the violent materializing of America. To think with Spillers: America is a grammar of Black trans capture. What is the archive—moreover—the event of America? In this performance America is both made—physically and cognitively mapped out as ground—and radically unmade—its sovereign pretense and ontological authority undone. The Foucauldian archive that is the nation-state America is confronted with its own “anarchive,” its own disorder and disordering.

In *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018) Tourmaline and codirector Sasha Wortzel show the interplay between different versions of Marsha P. Johnson, subverting the aesthetic injunction of visibility, the historical record, and the linear conventions of trans narrative form. As Tourmaline and Wortzel (2018) said in an interview: “An impulse we’re both following is finding these absences and gaps in the historical record. We’re not so much interested in correcting and filling them, as we are in creating entirely new historical documents that are looking to the past in order to imagine what other possibilities could be.” Instead they propose and offer a kaleidoscopic and dynamic take on Johnson: “There’s a kind of inconsistency in having two different Marshas. We are offering that as a form of disabled beauty, an aesthetic of movie magic that pushes back against an idea that you have to keep it all together. Because we know that Marsha didn’t have it all together a lot of the time, and actually that was a part of her beauty” (Tourmaline and Wortzel 2018).

Marsha P. Johnson’s memory syncs up with Anohni’s art and music, as one of its conditions of possibility and an ancestral presence under whose sign Anohni’s work travels. “And the Johnsons” resonates, echoes, responds to, and reverberates with Marsha’s memory. In Anohni’s 2019 exhibit at The Kitchen, titled *Love*, Anohni thinks through the form of crisis as a “vanishing,” as Simon Wu (2019) contends in his review of exhibit in *Brooklyn Rail*, “a sense of time where past, present, and future collapse.” The past is enlivened (even lived) through an erotic of posterity (posterior time) enmeshed (hidden in plain sight, sublimated) in aesthetic work, in art making. This time is one that Anohni wants to acknowledge, and, in acknowledging it, Anohni’s exhibit entreats us to be in touch with—to sense through—a past-present as aesthetic. “I think about holding space for vanishing, of people, of communities, of biodiversity, in a way that opens into spectral time, leaking all points at once,” says Anohni (2019). In this spatial and temporal topology, time is figured not as a solid—moving along a fixed and isomorphic axis—but as liquid flow, “leaking all points at once.” Time overflows with the saturation of the historical present. The “spectral time” of AIDS is not past but past as sedimented presence. Says Anohni (2019), “So much

of this work is animist and dealing with ghosts, the living and the dead, with different presences ricocheting among the moments and objects, offering an opportunity to make more intuitive connections between histories, gestures, colors, cataclysms, and ideas.”

For this special issue on trans and AIDS, we propose that the artwork by Tourmaline and Williams differently historicize the erasure of Black trans women through the contemporization of AIDS as an effect of antiblackness, sexism, and homophobia. While AIDS was not at the center of transgender studies, it has been theorized, imagined, and problematized by artists for decades, and this provides an entry point into rethinking trans and AIDS. Moving with art and activism means inhabiting a different archive of AIDS and trans theory, aesthetics, and politics. Each of the artists, thinkers, and activists who contributed to this special issue challenge us to imagine and reimagine how we might think together—from representation to archive, from art making to public health practice, from theory to activism—trans and AIDS. For instance—pointing toward a theorization and entanglement of trans, AIDS, and disability—Ellis Martin and Zach Ozma work to publish and conceptualize Lou Sullivan’s moving diaries. Sullivan’s diaries are, in their words, “auto-archival”—written over the course of decades, and excerpts of them became *We Both Laughed in Pleasure*. The diaries are erotico-political, a record of encounters within a trans- and AIDS-activated network desire that is auto theoretical as well as auto archival. This archive of early trans AIDS activism and desire helps rethink the narration and historicity of AIDS and trans. What Sullivan’s diaries demonstrates—and also Williams’s and Tourmaline’s artwork, as well as our other contributors work—is that to begin to understand why AIDS has been so difficult to think—historically, representationally, politically, and theoretically—requires an irreverence to the discourse of pandemics so that we might ask better questions, become freshly curious about what we do not yet know. This special issue curates a collection of work that confronts the erasure of AIDS in transgender studies—surprisingly, no such curation has happened before this—but it does not resolve the erasure, nor offer “the final word” on AIDS and trans. Instead, we offer this special issue as an invitation for deepening and challenging the questions we offer here.

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