

We Got Issues

Toward a Black Trans/Studies*

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We are in a time labeled the “transgender tipping point,” a period characterized by the scaling up of legal protections, visibility, rights, and politics centered on transgender people. The contemporary visual landscape is populated with the bodies of Black women. How does the language and discourse of the tipping point elide the presence of a saturation of Black bodies? In academia this elision has taken the shape of the expansion and institutionalization of transgender studies as a discipline. We are interested in what happens to the category of transgender as it becomes routed through the logics and power lines of institutionality and the metrics of administration. This special issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* is the product and process of our attempt to think through how the institutionalization of transgender studies as a discipline functions as a scene of subjection for blackness—for Black people and places.

We have engaged multiple fields in this issue, and these various intellectual quandaries all signal the simultaneous institutionalization of transgender studies alongside the heightened visibility of transgender people in our current popular and political landscapes. We are interested in the ways that these two simultaneous occurrences affect one another. Black transwomen and transwomen of color have sparked the interests of many because of popular figures like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock; at the same time, there has also been a lot more awareness around Black transwomen’s relationship to premature death. Though the popular representation of fabulousness and the crises of the trans subject are represented primarily by Black transwomen and transwomen of color, the field of transgender studies, like other fields, seems to use this Black subject as a springboard to move toward other things, presumably white things.

In 2000, the emergent field of Black queer studies brought together scholars from multiple fields asking questions about the relationship between blackness and queerness. The culmination of this meeting led to the groundbreaking *Black Queer Studies* anthology (Johnson and Henderson 2005). As we write this, the second volume of the Black queer studies anthology has just been published: *No Tea, No Shade* (Johnson 2016). How has the field of Black queer studies changed? What possibilities did the quasi-institutionalization of Black queer studies open up and/or foreclose? What are the blind spots that couldn't be named in 2000 that have become apparent in 2016?

If we ask what is new about Black queer studies, the answer is “trans.” There is an attempt not simply to grapple with the presence of noncis subjects but also, again, to return to this question: what will become the commonsense intellectual and political genealogies of transgender studies? If we also ask what is old and still relevant about Black queer studies, the answer is still “trans,” in that it attempts to organize itself around what we might call “a Trans* method [that] further names the work of charting the present absences in multiple sites of intersection by demanding a moment of critical presence” (Green 2016: 80). We might then pose the question: will the canonization of transgender studies proceed via the abstraction of race as a modern global signifier? Or, more accurately: in what ways does transgender studies always already depend on an abstraction of the racialization of space as foundational to the production of gender and sexuality?

The conceptualization of this special issue is tethered to the aforementioned provocations. This is also our attempt to bring and ring the alarm (as in, “We been through this too long”) to what we observe as a trend in scholarship to deconstruct the human and its attendant spatial narratives, like the Anthropocene, while neglecting to reckon with the contributions of Black feminism and Black queer studies to this line of thought. The frameworks of the posthuman, Afro-pessimism, and Afro-optimism/Black ops each attempt to think through the problematic of “the human” and humanism; each often makes its theoretical gambits by eliding and/or instrumentalizing those not-quite humans and sometimes humans whose violability forms the abstracted imaginative surface (to borrow from Saidiya Hartman [1997]) upon which the human and its metrics are conjured.

In “Black Feminism and the Future of Our Worlds,” Grace Hong (2008) expresses her skepticism about the institutionalization of Black feminist studies, arguing that it has proceeded as the vampiric theft of Black women's labor, life force, and reproductive capacity: Black feminist studies without Black women. We hold the same skepticism about the institutionalization of transgender studies, having lived and felt the contradictions of expanding sites for intellectual inquiry that have done little to disrupt the violent machinations and accumulation

imperatives of racial capitalism that position those considered surplus as killable and cageable. Several authors in this special issue take up the question of the human directly: Calvin Warren writes from the position of blackness as nonbeing to articulate the potential of Black trans studies as a mode of thought that reveals the category of gender to be simply another humanist fantasy. Marquis Bey argues for the “trans*-ness of blackness” and the “blackness of trans*-ness” as a way of thinking through the meeting of Black and trans as an encounter that indexes those paraontological forces that make up the “demonic grounds” of subjectivity and ontology. Eva S. Hayward, following “[Frank] Wilderson’s critique of ‘the human’ as white beingness,” asks, “Is beingness the problem, rather than the solution, for addressing antitrans violence?” And might “trans negativity help expose how the order of the subject, and the matter of ontology, are what make black trans women, in particular, vulnerable to violence?”

The principal logic of a special issue is to set forth a conversation that is ostensibly new in some way. The editors have thus staged an encounter between multiple voices and multiple fields that bear upon an emergent line of inquiry. This presumption of novelty that sensitizes the reception of a special issue is thrown into stark relief in “The Issue of Blackness.” Rather than presenting the works in this issue as “new,” we begin with a series of questions about repressed genealogies that might come into view through a more sustained engagement with blackness, as an “issue” that is both overseen and unknown. As noted in our call for papers, “Blackness is overseen in the sense that the literal and figurative capture of Blackness is a source of value for social and political subjectification and a mechanism of valorization for institutions and institutionalized knowledge.” The matter of blackness as overseen produces one way of viewing how transversality expresses the links between trans thought, trans life and death, Black thought, and Black life and death.

Édouard Glissant’s work on the interconnectedness of the Caribbean is instructive here, as he notes how transversality (rather than transcendence) explains the subterranean convergences, or what he calls the “submarine roots” that are “floating free, not fixed in one position . . . but extending in all directions . . . [in a] shared process of cultural mutation . . . that frees us from uniformity” (1989: 66–67). Glissant’s theorization points to the meaning of transversality as a collateral genealogy, or an encounter with the past that also contains an ethical confrontation with the collateral damages involved in blackness as overseen and unknown. Blackness as “unknown,” the consequence of hegemonic imaginaries that position Black people and Black life as “ungeographic” and untimely, promotes a way of viewing blackness as a belated arrival or addendum to trans studies. Thus, what we coeditors have sought to do is describe the

logics of the issuance of blackness as a problem, and to present an invitation to think about how the transversality of blackness and transness might come into view.

We have attended to a diverse array of entry points: through memory, social movements, visual and popular culture, and, perhaps most importantly, Black feminism. To draw on the language of Hortense Spillers (1987), Black/womanist/Africana feminist thought provides “grammars” for articulating gender that exceed the rubrics of biology/biocentrism or social artifice. Careful attention to the debates in the field opens up ways for reading transness as always and already theorized and theorizable from the literature on “racialized gender.” Contributor Elías Cosenza Krell uses Black feminist and Black queer studies theory to deconstruct constructions of transmisogyny coming from popular culture and queer studies. Krell questions to what extent transmisogyny instrumentalizes Black transwomen while universalizing whiteness, and sketches out trans-of-color feminisms from within and without the academy that complicate transmisogyny as a conceptual framework. Syrus Ware’s essay on queer and trans-of-color archives in Toronto insists on the transversality of Black queer and trans practices of remembrance, as they work through and exceed institutionalized archival spaces and structures. This transversality, Ware argues, reveals how LGBT archives and archival power more broadly configure the trans-of-color subject as the always belated arrival to the (white) archive. Jennifer DeClue pushes on the boundaries of popular understandings of Black feminism to place Black trans* and genderqueer embodiments in the ways that Black womanhood is epistemologically undertaken in cultural representation. Karen Jaime’s essay regarding popular representation takes us to the work of Ellison Renee Glenn, aka Black Cracker, to complicate our understanding of Black trans futurities. Glenn’s work as a hip-hop performer leaves more questions than it answers, as he contemplates what it means to “chase rainbows” of Black representation on a transnational scale.

In a piece about Black transwomen and transnational relationships, Erin Durban-Albrecht theorizes the “persistent self-fashioning and erotic transnational intimacies” that are crucial to the survival of Black transwomen in Haiti. Dora Silva Santana’s essay, which considers Black transwomen in Brazil, is an offering and instantiation of *escrevivência* as an Afro-diasporic practice of life writing that brings critical attention to the narrative convergences of gender and space that occur by way of the transatlantic. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley provides an introduction to a collection of letters written by activist CeCe McDonald during her imprisonment at the Minnesota Correctional Facility–St. Cloud. In “Go beyond Our Natural Selves,” McDonald theorizes violence, love, gender, and the politics necessary to undo a teleology that precipitates and predicts Black and trans death.

On Black Trans*/Studies

Black is a modifier that changes everything. The power of blackness to change all that comes after is part of its close relationship to death. To be preceded by death is to pull meaning into “dense and full space” (Hammonds 1994: 138). This issue is a meditation on the development of a distinct field of study that is in conversations with, but stands on its own in relation to, Black studies as broadly configured. The reader may find this issue particularly focused on ontology and nonbeing. It is our position that Black people have a significant stake in thinking about and theorizing the body in relation to self-definition, state regulation, and physical and social death among other phenomena. In this issue, we see Black feminist theory as essential to Black trans theory and to transgender studies. Black feminist thought, labor, and commitment have been essential to the de/construction of gender and sexuality. We acknowledge Black feminist theory’s contributions to thinking gender and the opportunity it provides for feminist dialogue across fields on gender’s fractious and fractured meanings.

We ruminate on the politics of citation that keeps scholars, including those in this issue, from recognizing the work of Black women by ignoring their contributions to the field. An appreciation for Black feminist theory is but one step. Another is integrating Black feminist analysis of the field, beginning with being attentive to the fact that all four of us are masculine identified, and while all four of us write about Black transwomen, it is past time for Black transwomen to occupy a similar position of power as we do in being able curate this conversation through an institutionalized medium, with living-wage employment. The persistent premature death of Black transwomen and all Black women and their exploitation in the political economy of academia and beyond means we did not receive many submissions from Black transwomen. In this issue there are two pieces by Black transwomen: CeCe McDonald’s prison writing and an essay by Dora Silva Santana. This is, of course, only a gesture toward a Black future wherein Black transwomen’s ideas and scholarship run at the front and center of Black academic thought.

There are, as always with any attempt at flight elsewhere, fugitive questions that do not get addressed in this issue. We return to genealogy and encounter to question how and why Black feminism continues to not be engaged as theory. And we caution the field to think about the Black feminists whom we evoke and deem worthy to take up as theorists. When we say “Black feminism,” what names do we call upon? Whom do we not turn to? How does transgender studies instrumentalize Black feminism and disavow it simultaneously? There are multiple and contradictory flows of Black feminist theory that do not agree with each other in relationship to gender and embodiment. These disjunctures in Black feminism reappear in this issue. Is Black feminism an interrogation of gender or

an attachment to the category of “Black woman”? We leave our readers with a nonexhaustive bibliography to move toward in partial answer to these questions, even if it does not land you safely in the status of arrival.

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