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Making Space at the Queer Intersections of Sex and Gender

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Abstract
This article provides an overview of trans historiography, whose dominant form is etiological, searching for origin of contemporary categories of trans gender. Performing my own etiology of this historiographic tendency, I show the ways that it mirrors historic treatments of trans subjects, in privileging categories of body and identity over the lived realities of people and their communities. This academic fixation only repeats the historic and contemporary erasure that characterises transgender people’s everyday, and reduces the conceptual possibilities for trans thought and life.
Keywords: trans history; etiology; erasure; historiography

Much of trans historiography is preoccupied with the question: “How did we get here?” It’s generally said that the present moment is one of an unprecedented “fascination with all things trans” (Stryker, 2013, p. 41). The persistent misinformation that accompanies this fascination means that “there is little understanding of how [trans] came about” (Reay, 2020, p. 1).’ Trans is treated as a fad, a modern invention of science or social justice movements, whose adherents are either deluded or wilfully troublesome. Against this backdrop, trans historiography tries to “pin the start of trans history” (Burns, 2019, p. 8) as a way to establish trans people’s cultural and political legitimacy.

Historian Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History*, one of the first attempts at a comprehensive study, clearly defines the object of trans historiography in its subtitle: “the roots of today’s revolution.” This arborescent metaphor epitomises the etiological approach that characterises much of trans historiography, with historians unearthing

the past in order to see how it produces the present. Historians have typically dug for this past in two sites. On the one hand, medical (and in particular, sexological) histories offer an explanation of how scientific innovations have produced new possibilities for the trans body. On the other hand, political histories have explored how social movements and the language surrounding them have produced trans as an increasingly visible and active identity.

Trans historiography can tell us about trans bodies and trans identities, but what about trans people? Describing how medical and political landmarks produced new forms of transness tells us little about how these forms were lived. Indeed, as sociologist Vivian Namaste has shown, "the voices, struggles, and joys of real transgendered people in the everyday social world are noticeably absent' from much scholarship" (Namaste, 2000, p. 15). This absence, and the etiological drive that produces it, contribute to an understanding of trans as a primarily theoretical object. In the field of history, this prevents us from any intimate, affective understanding of how our ancestors lived within and beyond the gender regimes of their time.

Namaste has argued that this scholarly focus on "the production of trans (whether through an examination of culture or the medical establishment) … [is] blind to the erasure" (Namaste, 2000, p. 51) that trans people face. Since the everydayness of erasure "constitutes the general social relation" (Namaste, 2000, p. 52) of trans people's life, this 'blindness' amounts to a fundamental failure of research. Whilst critique is directed at sociology, its analytic tools are helpful in interpreting trans historiography, particularly since this historiography regularly blurs disciplinary boundaries.

Adapting these tools means modifying any critique they produce, particularly in reference to the varying ontological nature of different disciplines. Building on Namaste's work, I will argue that much of trans historiography not only neglects trans erasure, but actively contributes to it. Namaste makes this more radical argument possible by remarking that scholarship's 'blindness' renders it "deeply complicit with the social world

it sets out to understand," (Namaste, 2000, 270) to the point that trans "as an embodied identity becomes literally unthinkable" (Namaste, 2000, 52). Pursuing these remarks, I will build an account of this complicity, describing how it functions and what effects it produces.

It's important to note that the historiographies I examine are by no means exhaustive of the field of trans history, nor its wide and varied methodologies. However, they do represent a significant tendency that is building hegemony within the field, whose interests centre white, wealthy, binary passing transness. This tendency, which I'll call 'trans etiology,' gains legitimacy thanks to the pre-existing credibility of medical and political histories, and general scholarship's commitment to "explain or justify the presence of trans people" (Namaste, 2000, p. 32) at all. Trans history is rapidly growing as a discipline and expanding its influence on trans discourse. Examining this tendency is crucial to ensuring we produce histories that respond to the ongoing erasure of trans people, instead of reproducing it.

Medical Histories of Trans

An early attempt at trans historiography appears in Transgender Nation by Gordene MacKenzie, a sociologist who worked closely with the trans communities set up by activist Virginia Prince. This book aims to help resist stigma by shifting trans from a "personal 'disorder' to a cultural 'disorder'" (MacKenzie, 1994, p. 6). The quotation marks around 'disorder' here indicate a strategic use of pathologizing language, working with existing discourse to produce a more socially tolerant one. Notably, this strategy leaves ambiguous whether it is trans gender itself that is the disorder, or whether it's the cultural treatments of trans that are disordered. MacKenzie instead traces the production of contemporary transness through its historic conceptualisations and treatments as a disorder.

Accordingly, Mackenzie's historiography is firmly planted in both the history and logic of sexology. She describes the theoretical work of

Richard von Krafft-Ebing, its influence on Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfield, and how this supported Harry Benjamin's production of the category of transsexual. According to her, these sexologists' work progressively "cracked the door of public tolerance" (MacKenzie, 1994, p. 33) by pathologizing an otherwise criminalised trans population. Clearly inspired by this conceptual shift, her genealogy charts the development of contemporary categories of transness in order to enquire on their nature, origin, and impact. Her project is to establish a new epistemic foundation for transness, arguing that "it is impossible to think clearly about trans" (MacKenzie, 1994, p. 29) until we clarify the categorical confusions surrounding it.

More recent trans historiography has moved little beyond this point. Historian Barry Reay's TransAmerica takes virtually the same etiological path as MacKenzie, though he describes trans identity as produced in the slippages rather than consistencies between early sexological categories. Reay almost singularly ties the emergence of trans identity to medical developments, it being apparently "obvious, the medical model [of trans] … has determined the rules, the parameters, the gates to treatment, and even self-perception" (Reay, 2020, p. 7) of trans people. This exemplifies a conviction that trans history is a teleological progression where "all roads return to Hirschfield" (Reay, 2020, p. 7) and other sexologists – a conviction that obstructs any consideration of how trans people "are situated (or situate themselves) outside of institutions" (Namaste, 2000, p. 269) of sexology.

Where Reay does consider the role of ordinary trans people, he repeatedly places them in an epistemic hierarchy below the medical sciences. In his eyes, if the "stereotypical narratives" (Reay, 2020, p. 101) of trans patients' case histories offer any value to historians, it's because the "imprecision of the streets may have been more attuned" (Reay, 2020, p. 49) to gender variance than the scientific community. This serves to dismiss trans people and the social world in which they live, by characterising the everyday language of their self-understanding as ontologically inaccurate. Reay's fixation with the scientific "custodians of

trans realisation" (Reay, 2020, p. 77) thus prevents him from seeing who is being realised.

Though Reay considers his historiography "not at all flattering to US psychiatric and surgical practices" (Reay, 2020, p. 1), he never fully breaks from a medical ethic and logic of trans identity. So, although he subtitles it a "counter-history", it's not clear what Reay is countering. Presumably, like MacKenzie before him, he wants to correct the erasure of trans identity perpetrated by its exclusion from the history books. But in their earnest desire to do so, both he and MacKenzie carelessly enact their own erasures.

In her work on scholarly representations of transness, Namaste identifies three forms of erasure:

> i. The reduction of transness to a figural existence, rather than a person's 'embodied identity'
> ii. The exclusion of trans people, such that they are 'made invisible'
> iii. The nullification of transness, so that trans life is conceptually 'rendered impossible'
>
> (Namaste, 2000, p. 52)

These are mutually supportive, so that erasure becomes the defining condition and social reality in which trans people live. We can infer then that they bleed into each other, such that an extreme instantiation of one might constitute the milder case of another, or produce it as its effect. So, whilst MacKenzie and Reay might be writing against trans exclusion, they could in fact perpetuate it via another form of erasure.

Both historiographies are fixated with the ontology of transness and the terms of its production: they want to clarify today's categorical confusion, to trace its emergence by naming the events and people that produced them, and debate their significance for contemporary transness. All of this with little to no mention of the people that lived those categories, except in reference to their gender category. This reduces the

significance of their life to serving the etiological rooting of that category, an erasure which amounts to excluding them from their own history.

Jay Prosser's pursuit of this etiology is perhaps a more sympathetic engagement with the lives of trans people as told by themselves – unsurprising given his groundbreaking queer theoretical work on trans narrativity. Prosser treats the case studies of early sexologists as "precious and indispensable transsexual texts" (Prosser, 1998, p. 123), whose testimonies point to trans subjectivities before the production of transvestite and transsexual categories. Attending to the detail of these testimonies, Prosser argues for the literal "presence of the transsexual in sexology's categories of sexual inversion" (Prosser, 1998, p. 123).

Reay has criticised this as a "transsexual essentialism" (Reay, 2020, p. 21), disagreeing that there is any significant consistency between categories of trans and sexual inversion. But this debate amounts to not much more than deciding whether the "prehistory of transsexuality" (Reay, 2020, p. 33) can count as its start date. Their historiographies in fact share more similarities than difference in their etiological drive, and the sites and consequences of its realisation.

Prosser's work is rooted in case histories that have been "underread in comparison with the sexologists' theoretical passages" (Prosser, 1998, p. 117). He hopes to resist the claim that "the term 'transsexual' and the availability of the medical technologies … conjoined to create transsexuality" (Prosser, 1998, p. 128), by reading trans subjectivity in cases that predate the trans category. For him, "reading sexual inversion for transsexual subjects is a diagnostic exercise" (Prosser, 1998, p. 123) that restores subjects' self-understanding to the same epistemic value as the medical theorising they prompt.

But Prosser's 'diagnostic exercise' barely innovates on that of the early sexologists. Rather than reading case studies for details that might flesh out their patients' subjectivities, he simply layers contemporary definitions of transness onto them. Thus, they are again reduced to their bodily configurations, the "blatant dysphoria" (Prosser, 1998, p.125) they

experience, and the trajectories they desire for their body. Prosser doesn't tell us about their lives, just that they would pass today's diagnostic tests.

As such, if he challenges "the popular derogation of transsexuals as literally constructed" (Prosser, 1998, p. 128), it's only by pre-dating that construction and providing an ontological basis for it, by showing that sexology "successfully isolated trans desire" (Prosser, 1998, p. 120) (even if unknowingly or inaccurately). Just like MacKenzie and Reay, Prosser's argument ignores how this 'isolation' of transness strips trans life of nuance, reducing people to a mere referent of the category they belong in. Indeed, he actively perpetuates this erasure by uncritically repeating a contemporary diagnostic process that trans activists widely recognise as dehumanising and invalidating of their subjectivity.

It's clear from the way he enlists well known trans ancestors that Prosser's erasure of trans subjectivity is a methodological hallmark rather than an outcome of sparse archives. He casually compares one of Krafft-Ebing's patients to Brandon Teena, in an example of what queer theorist Jack Halberstam describes as the "commodification of memory" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 47) around Teena – an act whereby trans individuals (particularly when configured as victims) become sites of significance beyond themself, accruing meaning in ways that erase the complex cultural background in which they exist, such that "the transgender [person] is lost to history" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 48).

Prosser's more extended consideration of Michael Dillon similarly reduces the man's long and varied life. Dillon is remarkable for Prosser mainly for having "achieved the first transsexual transition" (Prosser, 1998, p. 125) before the term was coined by Benjamin, whose work Dillion pre-empts in his own brief contribution to sexology. The editors of Dillon's autobiography have described his life as one of "numerous complexities and nuances" (Lau and Partridge, 2017, p. 19), which here finds itself collapsed into the etiological story of trans categories.

What Namaste has said of sociology easily stands in to describe the above historiographies:

> Scholarship which limits itself to locating transsexuals within medicine brings with it theoretical, methodological, and political dangers: notably the virtual reduction of transsexuals to medical & psychiatric discourses.
>
> (Namaste, 2000, p. 265)

Indeed, within a historiographic context this scholarly reduction does more than 'bring danger' but actively poses a threat to trans people. Their reduction is a mode of erasure which, in its severity, amounts to an exclusion of trans people from their own history. And the totality of these two serve to nullify trans identity in the past and the present.

Namaste says very little about this third form of erasure, except that "within this site, [trans people] cannot exist at all" (Namaste, 2000, p. 52). This refers to a categorical existence, nullified through exclusion, which acts on a person's ability to navigate their social world. Within history, nullification works to deny the life of historic individuals by defining it out of existence. Given that "what we know about a particular issue informs how we approach it and act upon it" (Namaste, 2000, p. 67), this denial impacts on the possibility of trans today, negating it as a real, viable, embodied identity.

This might seem an extreme claim of scholarship that just wants to provide "historical explanations and justifications for transgenderism" (MacKenzie, 1994, p. 26). But it's precisely this desire to justify, to etiologically chase the production of a category that leaves actual people erased in favour of theories about them. Namaste favourably describes history as "encouraging reflection on contemporary definitions of trans" (Namaste, 2000, p. 27). But far from inducing a culture of empathy and solidarity towards trans people, this 'reflection' has continued to produce us primarily as objects of theoretical enquiry. And this is the case even when etiological reflection looks elsewhere than medical histories.

Political Histories of Trans

Susan Stryker's Transgender History begins with a forty-four-page glossary describing the basic "concepts, contexts, and terms" (Stryker, 2013, p. 1) of trans identity. This aims to prepare the book's non-academic

audience by producing trans as a list of definable terms. Not until page sixty-four do we actually meet a trans person considered in any depth.

Stryker describes Virginia Prince as establishing "the first modern trans organisations" (Stryker, 2013, p. 74) in the shape of various transvestite support groups. She frames these as advocating outside of the legitimating medical discourse of transsexuality, which is itself simply "another identity category from which to distinguish themselves" (Stryker, 2013, p. 65). Although the mid-century legal and cultural paranoia around gender fluidity is named, there is very little description of the effect it had on the daily lives of transvestites and their fledgling community.

Instead, Prince's personal legal battles form a lens through which to view "structural problems within the logic of modern societies" (Stryker, 2013, p.70). But this figural role tells us little about how they affected Prince herself. Stryker is keen to establish Prince's influence on "the identity labels and border skirmishes between identity-based [trans] communities' that still inform transgender activism today" (Stryker, 2013, p. 68). And this grand narrative prevents us from any intimate understanding of the person, let alone less influential people like her.

American Studies scholar Robert Hill has explored these 'border skirmishes' in more detail, particularly through Prince's editorship of the magazine *Transvestia*. This magazine published testimonials, self-portraits, and editorials from and about a constellation of MTF cross-dressing identities. According to Hill, *Transvestia* was first and foremost a place "where 'trans' identities, practices, and modes of personhood were created and contested" (Hill, 2013, p. 365). He contextualises this within a "taxonomic revolution" that constitutes the "formative era of transgender history," when "ontological distinctions among the categories" of trans identity were produced (Hill, 2013, p. 366).

Hill describes Prince's "struggle to tame the multiplicity" (Hill, 2013, p. 367) of trans categories and the hierarchies of respectability she produced among them. Since this hierarchy was never explicitly laid out, Hill reconstructs it by interpreting Prince's editorials (Hill, 2013, p. 370).

Testimonials are used to evidence and illustrate his interpretation, particularly by reading them along the axes of sexual desire and shame that informed Prince's categories (Hill, 2013, p. 371). Hill studies *Transvestia* in order to understand "the ideology, practices, and aesthetics" of trans identity which Prince helped to produce.

Prince's work is widely understood as "driving wedges between [LGBT] communities" (Stryker, 2013, p. 77), some which persist today. By uncritically developing Prince's taxonomical hierarchy, Hill repeats the erasure which it originally acted out. This erasure functions primarily by excluding certain people from trans respectability and the socio-political legitimacy it confers. The Prince/Hill hierarchy achieves this by nominally including certain 'kinds' of transness in its lowest category (a kind of 'exclusion by inclusion'), denying them any value. It goes without saying that this necessitates a reduction of people to categories that then act as strawmen examples of them. When repeated, this process has the effect of "circumscribing our knowledge of who these people are and how they live" (Namaste, 2000, p. 265), effectively nullifying their otherwise complex lives.

Contemporary analogues of this debate continue today in the "truscum vs. transtrenders" debates (see Wynn 2020). Thus, rather than simply reproducing archaic distinctions, Hill's historiography perpetuates a logic of erasure that continues to fracture trans communities. He elaborates on Prince's hierarchy himself by interpreting and placing *Transvestia's* submissions within it – such as 'Phyllis from Michigan' and what he calls her 'gradual progression' through the categories. Hill thus actively reduces the intimate testimonies of historic subjects to cases and illustrations for his model of "the identity formation and contestation that took place within *Transvestia"* (Hill, 2013, p. 366).

In this way his methodology is similar to Prosser's. Both interpret social archives through contemporary logics that prioritise trans categories over the people who live(d) them. And both investigate the history of these categories not in terms of how they were lived but how they were produced. Their historiographies produce a genealogy of trans

categories, using individuals' narratives to connect historic terminology to contemporary equivalents. Since "this narrow focus distorts the complexity of trans lives" (Namaste, 2000, p. 35), the effect of these historiographies is to erase trans people from their own history.

This continuity between medical and political histories of trans identity points to a hegemonic bloc within the developing field of trans history. This bloc is not explicitly or even necessarily unified through anything other than its methodology, which "ultimately seeks to explain or justify the presence of transgendered people" (Namaste, 2000, p. 32) today by tracing their emergence yesterday. Namaste describes this as "defining the research agenda on non-[trans] terms" (Namaste, 2000, p. 30), not because it excludes trans researchers, but because "the questions posed with respect to transgendered people do not reflect our daily life or how we see ourselves" (Namaste, 2000, p. 32). Scholars, irrespective of their gender and good intentions, are erasing trans people simply in virtue of their etiological method.

Etiology and the Erasure of Trans People

My own project is in some sense etiological. Trans people today find ourselves the site of intense public debate, treated as theoretical objects rather than people with complex, nuanced histories. In general, discourse around trans people is fixated on "asking what or why questions, [rather than] learning more about how trans people live" (Namaste, 2000, p. 56). This is truly what the "fascination with all things trans" (Stryker, 2013, p. 1) amounts to, what the 'tipping point' of trans representation has produced: more scrutiny and less understanding.

By asking "How did we get here?", my title aims to both represent trans history's etiological drive and turn it back on itself. It destabilises the assumption of trans's abnormality, instead treating that very assumption as unusual. Describing trans historiography's discursive responsibility in producing this assumption is an act that centres transness as it is lived: erased on all sides by discourses that claim to

represent it. An etiology of this poisonous discourse, much like the discursive genealogies of Nietzsche and Foucault, doesn't run the same risk of erasure since it doesn't pretend to take people as its object. Indeed, it properly returns to the origin of etiology: studying the cause of a disease.

Let me be clear: erasure is the disease trans people face and etiology directly contributes to it. Namaste has shown that, "by focussing exclusively on the production of trans (whether through an examination of culture or the medical establishment), queer theory and mainstream sociology are blind to the erasure of trans" (Namaste, 2000, p. 51) that is perpetrated through or alongside its production. Within trans historiography, this 'blindness' leads scholars to actively perpetrate that erasure, through an etiological method that privileges historical causes and conditions over people.

There is some ontological reasoning to this difference. The subjects of queer and sociological theory are in many ways still living, so they resist scholarly erasure by continuing to live their life. The historical subject is deprived of this means of resistance. The separation between their reality and its scholarly representation is less clear, blurred by the very historiographies that extend their (after)life.

The historiographer therefore has a great responsibility in determining the shape of this (after)life. Much of trans historiography treats its subjects as seeds, or junctures, or whole root stems in the history of something bigger than them. As philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have shown, "tree logics is a logic of tracing and reproduction … its goal is to describe a de facto state, to maintain balance in intersubjective relations" (2005, p. 12). Trans etiology follows this logic by understanding subjects through a hierarchy of etiological significance.

The de facto state for trans people is of erasure, which "constitutes the general social relation" (Namaste, 2000, p. 52) we live under. Historiography that doesn't "reflect upon or intervene in" (Namaste, 2000, p. 271) this state not only repeats but legitimises it. All trans people are affected by an erasure that reduces, excludes, or nullifies

their life altogether. Both Stryker and Hill's work describes the struggles that minority groups undergo to resist this erasure. Stryker even acknowledges that this struggle is usually led by more privileged sections of that group, who in struggle "tend to reproduce that very privilege" (Stryker, 2013, p. 77). Since she and the other historiographers I've covered don't distance themselves from this reproduction of privilege, they legitimise and contribute to it. This has real consequences for those trans people at whose cost the privilege is bought.

Because although erasure affects us all, it does so in degrees. As I have shown, erasure is entirely compatible with inclusion, and degrees or shapes of inclusion will determine degrees or kinds of erasure. So far, etiology has relatively privileged those who also find themselves privileged by the structures it observes. A history that focusses on trans visibility within medical and political structures will only be able to represent those trans people engaging in those structures. After all, the "exclusive focus on the visibility of TS/TG [transsexual/transgender] individuals takes for granted the ability to represent oneself within social institutions" (Namaste, 2000, p. 268), glazing over those without this ability.

Even through erasure, representation still means something in a minority's struggle for social and political legitimacy. Trans people who fall outside of this realm/etiological gaze find themselves deprived of any history at all. This is what Namaste implies by the nullifying effect of erasure: it produces a monolithic image of trans people such that others become "literally unthinkable" (Namaste, 2000, p. 52). In this way, trans etiology reproduces the general or de facto state of erasure among trans people.

Conceptually speaking, this etiology produces trans in individualist, identitarian terms. This nullifies other ways of thinking about trans, such as "a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds" (Halberstam). But more pressingly, it forecloses the lives

of those who fall outside of its scope, who already find themselves the cost at which trans privilege is bought.

Where are the sex working trans people in this story? Where are people who fall foul of trans discourse's insistence on white, wealthy, binary passing gender? Where are the "'street queens,' 'transvestite fetishists,' 'simple transvestites,' 'drag queens,' 'whole girl fetishists,' 'transsexuals,' 'female impersonators,' 'true transvestites,' 'femmepersonators,' 'male-women,' and 'transgenderists'" (Prosser, 1998, p. 377)? How did they live? Trans etiology is fixated with production of trans categories. So much so that it has no people to populate them with.

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