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4 DENATURING CISNESS, OR, TOWARD TRANS HISTORY AS METHOD

Say it with me, everyone: trans people have been here for a long time. Great. I'm so glad you agree. Now that we've gotten that out of the way, I would like to also say, with the utmost respect and gratitude to my colleagues who have laid the groundwork for me to make this claim, that *this is no longer a politically useful way to talk about the past*. We are spending too much time being defensive about the existence of trans people, playing nice with the disciplinary norms of hetero- and cis-normative historical practice, and being generally careful. Anti-trans violence doesn't care. It does not give half a shit about our carefully crafted arguments and delicate treatment of evidence. On the contrary, it is mobilizing the appearance of historicization to do more violence. It is literally deploying our work to do more violence.

The situation is this: the way that we're currently doing trans history is aligned with right-wing and trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) interests in framing transness as a new minority population in need of careful verification. Case in point is the dissent of noted antifeminist and amateur historian Samuel Alito in his *Bostock v. Clayton County* dissent (remember when a good thing happened at the Supreme Court? I barely do). "It defies belief," he wrote, "to suggest that the public meaning of discrimination

because of sex in 1964 encompassed discrimination on the basis of a concept that was essentially unknown to the public at that time."[1] The concept, of course, was transness. In *Bostock v. Clayton County,* which included a plaintiff who had been fired after informing her employer that she would begin presenting as a woman at work, the United States Supreme Court decided that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 offers protection from employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, trans status included.[2] While Alito admitted that "it is likely true that there have always been individuals who experience what is now termed 'gender dysphoria,'" transness, he claimed, had only begun to emerge as a concept in the 1960s. People who experienced dysphoria or moved to a gender other than the one they had been assigned at birth, Alito implied, would not have been understood as *trans* specifically before the 1960s, and thus the legislators who wrote Title VII could not possibly have meant to offer them legal protection.[3] In fact, he argued, "terms like ['transgender status' and 'gender identity'] would have left people at the time scratching their heads."[4] (This affinity for historical reasoning toward fascist ends also features in Alito's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, where he sagely reminds us that "the right to an abortion is not deeply rooted in the Nation's history and tradition."[5] My offense as a historian almost overwhelms my rage as a person invested in bodily autonomy.)

Historians also soberly claim that transness as a named identity is a post–World War II subject position. The consensus among historians is that, although people have been crossing gender lines at least since the Dionysian cults of antiquity routinely cross-dressed to worship their sex-transforming god, the category "trans" is a twentieth-century invention. Therefore we can't call people in the more distant past trans because that's not how people understood their own identity.[6] In fact, Alito cited Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed*, the book on trans history that defined the field, which argues that understandings of sex fundamentally shifted in the twentieth century, beginning in the century's early decades and culminating after World War II, to make imagining transness possible. Alito apparently did a rather poor job of reading Meyerowitz, who literally opens with an anecdote about the 1952 *New York Times* headline that announced Christine Jorgenson's transition to the American masses over a decade before the crafting of Title VII. The Supreme Court Justice's sloppy engagement with scholarship reveals, though, that his claim did not hinge on specific dates so much as an insistence that trans people were unthinkable in the past and remain so in the present, with

a vague gesture toward the expertise of history to back him up. Given that a Justice of the United States Supreme Court argued against protecting trans people on the basis that transness as a category is new, it appears that the close attention to accurately historicizing the emergence of trans identity is actively being used to undermine the rights and protections trans people are fighting for today. We may want to rethink our strategy here.

Here's why it matters: this isn't just about Alito's history fetish. Trans history is also being used against trans youth. The state of Texas is using Emily Bazelon's Transition Care Is Such a New Debate That We Should Be Super Careful About It hit-piece to argue that trans teens shouldn't be allowed to access puberty blockers or hormones.[7] Bazelon cited me (indeed, the only trans history or trans studies scholar cited in the piece) to give the article a whiff of trans expertise, a little historical framing of the World Professional Institute Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) *Standards of Care* as a treat. Never mind that the historical work I did makes it clear that conversations about transition care are *not* new; never mind that we had a long conversation about the 1950s construction of transness as highly uncertain through narratives of risk and regret. Did Bazelon use my article to enact precisely the thing I demonstrate, with a *plethora* of footnotes, has limited access to trans care? Sure did! So, forgive me for being salty, but the time for measured precision about who counts as trans in the past is over. Our good-faith historical methodologies are being used against us. It's time to go on the offensive. Say it again: trans people have been here a long time. You know who haven't? Cis people.

TRANS PASTS

Arguments like Alito's, which basically say that trans people are not protected by precedent-bound laws because we are literally unprecedented, are not new. To counter them, trans people and academic historians have worked to demonstrate that even if named categories have shifted over time, people who might be considered trans today have a long history that needs to be recovered. "I couldn't find *myself* in history. . . . No one like me seemed to have ever existed," Leslie Feinberg explained as hir reason to write *Transgender Warriors*, which highlights people who crossed the boundaries of gender norms from antiquity to the then-present of the 1990s and was one of the first books to insist that trans people had a history.[8] Feinberg's research showed that people like hir *had* existed for thousands of years.[9] This style of recovering the stories of

pre-1950s figures stands to solve one problem, by refuting a version of history in which trans people did not exist in the past. Yet there is a misapprehension of history that it can't address: namely, the idea that trans people have always existed as a small minority, few and far between, while most people's sex and gender just happen to coincide. I propose another, complementary approach to trans history: dismantling cisness as a natural, majority category, with trans history deployed as method, rather than as subject.

Refuting the notion that contemporary transness is unprecedented, and therefore illegitimate as a way of being, continues to be a central goal of recent work in trans history. This history aims to provide representation and to document both the oppression and ability to thrive that trans people experienced in the past. *True Sex* author Emily Skidmore pointed out in a 2018 interview that much contemporary animosity toward and anxiety about trans people are based in narratives that transness is totally novel. Because of that, Skidmore said, trans history "can have incredible power because it suggests that trans people are not new; they've been around for a long time."[10] Jules Gill-Peterson emphasized in *Histories of the Transgender Child* the way that ideas about transness being new cause harm. In particular, Gill-Peterson demonstrates that children continue to be denied the agency to define their gender for themselves in large part *because* of arguments that it's only the most recent generation of kids who express a desire to transition. Documenting over a century of trans children serves as one way to undercut that narrative.[11] Trans history, then, from one of its earliest instantiations to the most cutting edge of the field, is a political project, one that is fully aware of the ways that history translates to legitimacy in the present.

This kind of history has been crucial. As someone who realized they were trans because of a history of sexuality class, I fully appreciate that the kinds of work I've just described push back against the ways trans people have been rendered invisible and against the ways history often masquerades as an authority to be used against us. Clearly, if powerful people are trying to tell us that we were invented too recently for protective laws to have any bearing on our lives, except potentially to protect people *from* us in bathrooms, then it remains a necessary part of trans history to tell trans stories. It's also not enough and, on its own, wielded by anti-trans actors, has the capacity to do significant damage.

The model of uncovering the historical figures that today would be called trans hides the process by which people who *aren't* trans came to be understood as categorically natural—as having not been invented at all. At the same

time that historians have fruitfully told trans stories to activist ends, we have unintentionally reproduced a cis/trans binary that is imagined to persist on its own over time. Trans histories focused on illuminating a small minority of trans people and methods used to write about trans people before the category "trans" existed both make it seem like most people naturally fit quite neatly into the sex and gender categories they were assigned at birth. Most people, in the current trans history model, are cis. But, as this chapter will argue, the task of the historian is to notice that cisness is not a natural state—instead, the idea that most people fit into binary sex and gender categories took a tremendous amount of work to construct and takes a tremendous amount of work to maintain.

Trans history and historical work in trans studies offer a promise of another way: both have shown the multitudinous possibilities of gender that have existed throughout history and also expanded the very bounds of transness itself to encompass analyses of racial formation, the nonhuman, and opaque figures who resist easy sorting into a modern trans category.[12] The past is a very trans place. These insights regarding the pervasive existence of gendered lives and beings in the past lay the groundwork for a critique of the illogics of cisness. What is required next is another fundamental model of trans history, one that focuses on the systemic absurdity of static and binary gender and sex classification. Such an approach addresses the history of structures that have produced cisness and occluded trans life, thus producing transness as rare and individual exceptions to a general rule. This trans history is a methodology with an alternative logic of how sex and gender function, which complements but also exceeds trans history as an archive of particular, recognizable objects. This trans history refuses Alito's terms that trans people must be present in history and found using the same terms in order to expect protection from employment discrimination. Instead of responding to accusations of newness with assertions that we've always been here, this chapter offers the provocation that if you want to talk about newfangled subject positions, let's talk about cis people.

HISTORY OF SEXUALITY AND THE SEARCH FOR THE TRANS SUBJECT

A cis/trans binary emerged in trans history by way of Foucauldian disciplinary norms in its parent field, history of sexuality. Thanks in large part to Michel Foucault's assertion that the "homosexual" did not come to exist in

the minds of European doctors or sexual deviants until 1870 at the earliest, historians of sexuality are extremely careful about tightly historicizing sexual categories.[13] In the history of sexuality framework, it would be inaccurate to describe, for example, a seventeenth-century man who has sex with other men as "homosexual" because the category had not been invented yet, and that's not how people at the time would have conceptualized their own sexual behavior or desire—indeed, sexual behavior and desire wouldn't have been seen as constituting an individual sense of identity or subjectivity at all before the late nineteenth century. Historians have increasingly questioned aspects of this Foucauldian approach, since clearly people *did* recognize themselves and other members of their community as having and sometimes even sharing a distinctive sense of sexual self.[14] Even so, the rule about terminology remains firmly in place among academic historians: you may not use a term for people who lived before the invention of that particular identity category.

Because trans history emerged as a subset of the history of sexuality, those studying transness in the past have largely followed the same norms regarding the use of contemporary categories to describe historical actors.[15] Roughly speaking, "transvestite" came into use in the 1910s, "transsexual" emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, and "transgender," while coined in the 1960s, only came into widespread use in the 1990s.[16] While there's certainly debate about the precise use of these terms, and even more debate about whether pre-1950s figures like the "invert," "fairy," and "passing woman" should be considered trans, the foundational idea that categories need to be narrowly historicized remains.[17] Hewing closely to this disciplinary norm is one way that trans history has legitimized itself. The academic subfield has had to struggle against the exclusion of transness from history in the abstract as well as from the field of History as it has been defined in institutions, and insist on both the recognition of its objects of analysis and its own existence as worth spending time and tenure lines on. This struggle is especially fraught for historians who are, as trans people themselves, navigating calcified, trans-exclusive, or at the very least trans-disinterested universities. In this context, there's a particular premium on performing disciplinary expertise by reassuring everyone that we can follow the rules, not to mention a high burden of proof when it comes to naming anyone as any kind of queer in the past.[18]

In the process of establishing legitimacy through acceptable sorting practices, though, trans history runs up against the problem of defining "who counts" as a subject of trans history, and it has faced the considerable challenge of identifying its subject. This is particularly an issue when writing

about people who lived before the invention of trans as a category. After all, you can't just run a keyword search for "transgender" in a nineteenth-century newspaper database.[19] Uncertainty in this regard manifests in the way that every single book of trans history that has been published thus far contains at least a paragraph, sometimes pages, explaining its use of terminology and how the author decided who to count, or not count, as trans. If you read through these paragraphs in quick succession, it becomes clear that although trans historians express anxiety about this issue, they are actually pretty much in agreement about who counts.

In the history of sexuality model, scholars often turn to familiar behavioral signals that make it into the historical record, like sodomy convictions when they want to do "gay history" when gay identity isn't quite present yet. Trans historians, building on this precedent, often look for something that looks behaviorally like what they know transness to be in order to find historical actors to write about. Processes of crossing and movement are key. The subject of trans history that emerges from this approach, especially in the pre-twentieth-century context, is someone who engages in "various forms and degrees of crossgender practices and identifications," or who persists in a gender presentation other than the one they were assigned at birth, one that is, again, "cross-gender."[20] In *True Sex,* for example, Skidmore has argued that her turn-of-the-twentieth-century subjects can rightfully be called "trans men," because they "transitioned from the gender assigned to them at birth to the one with which they identified."[21] In *Female Husbands,* Jen Manion proposes that the figure of the female husband was "effectively a trans position," citing Susan Stryker's definition of transgender as referring to "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth."[22]

The practices that constitute this movement also align across texts and are markers of transness that make sense within a contemporary understanding of what transness is. Trans history tends to be populated by people who were arrested for cross-dressing, who turn up in sensational accounts about "female husbands" or "women masquerading as men" or, in later periods, who sought to make inhabiting their bodies more comfortable with hormonal and surgical interventions.[23] These are often people who have changed their names and pronouns, work a job that matches the gender they transitioned to within strictly gender-segmented labor markets, and have what would probably be considered in a hetero/homo binary "heterosexual" romantic and sexual relationships (i.e., they were revealed to be "masquerading as a man" while being married to a woman).[24] Often they make it into the historical

record because they were somehow outed, frequently through some kind of interaction with carceral regimes and medical or psychiatric institutions, or while being prepared for burial after they died.[25]

The move to historicize transness is, by the current standards of the history of sexuality, good history. Yet the focus on searching for a type of person who engages in certain behaviors unexpected for their assigned sex requires the formulation of and adherence to a classification system for identifying transness. Foundational work in the study of classification by Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star argues that every classification system "valorizes some point of view and silences another."[26] That is, classification systems aren't just neutral ways of describing the world. They limit what it's possible to imagine and to do. They have far-reaching ethical implications, from the literal privileging of some groups over others (and whom those groups contain), to decisions that states make about populations, to questions of who receives medical treatment and how. Most importantly, classification systems are *made*, and they are made by people and institutions with their own interests and investments about the outcome of who counts as what. Classification systems rarely fit everyone. When people come into contact with classification systems, especially people who don't easily fit into the available categories, disjunctures between the system and the person generally result in harm as lives are twisted to fit categories that can never encompass the full range and complexity of existence. Classifying, then, is a high-stakes enterprise.

The classification practices of trans history do just what Bowker and Star warn against. The traits that scholars use to find trans people in archival documents work only because they're supposed to be distinctive. The implication is that people who are not trans fit reasonably well into their assigned gender norms, and if they do cross-dress or work unexpectedly gendered jobs, these are anomalies with little to no bearing on how sex as a system works. As a result, the reliance on the apparent distinction of the traits I mentioned above produces a view of the past in which some small number of people transgress gender to such a degree that they leave the category they were assigned at birth, but most people don't. Or to put it another way, as Stryker does in *Transgender History*, "Being transgendered is like being gay—some people are just 'that way,' though most people aren't."[27]

This is a specific point of view on how sex and gender operate, and it's a point of view that obscures the way that cis people had to be made into cis people just as trans people had to be made into trans people. It's a point of view that assumes a perpetual, normalized alignment between most sexed

bodies and their gender identities. In trying to work through the problem of who counts as trans, scholars have implicitly framed trans history as being concerned with a numerically minority population who can be identified by the extremity of their gender transgression, because most people simply aren't trans. Trans people become visible in archives because of behaviors that are supposed to be exceptional, and everyone else is presumed to be cis. If most people in the past are categorized as not-trans, and trans people are a numerically small minority that need to be carefully searched for, then it makes it look as though a cis/trans distinction has basically been around forever. It hides the way that cisness had to be constructed as a privileged way of being.

Of course, no one is outright saying in those words that everyone else has always been cis. After all, cisness only became a named concept in the mid-1990s and only began to see broader circulation in the early 2000s.[28] So as with the category "trans," good historians do not call people in the past "cis." But that's rather the point: you don't even have to bother saying anyone *wasn't* trans. "Cis," as Finn Enke has succinctly put it, "never needs to prove itself."[29] The classification practices of trans history silence a more complex view of how sex and gender categories function because they create a version of the past in which most people just happen to fit the gender category they were assigned at birth. Herein lies the key to a central contention of a trans history against cisness. Most people *don't* just happen to fit the category they were assigned. There's a whole apparatus that has churned along in the background, willfully ignored, to make it *look* like they do. The power of cis normativity comes precisely from this hiding of its own invention, and it is there that trans history can intervene.

HISTORIANS AGAINST CISNESS, OR, ANOTHER WAY

A wide array of gender nonconformities *don't* cohere into a diagnostic or legal or otherwise identitarian figure adjacent to transness, and nor are they particularly recognizable in their cross-dressing, name-changing, or pronoun-switching. These figures could be the basis of another version of trans history that is a gadfly to cisness and attuned to the many ambiguous states that somehow become reclaimed and declawed as not-trans. Historians and trans studies scholars have already created a path toward this more expansive model. Take, for example, the celebrated Fall 2019 "Early Modern Trans Studies" special issue of the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, which made waves in the realm of historical trans scholarship precisely because it pointed to the

possibility of "interpretation that does not turn on identity."[30] Indeed, as the thirteen essays in the special issue so clearly demonstrate, the early modern period was filled with a cast of characters who cannot be easily categorized as trans or not but are certainly indicative of an extensive range of gender variance before the development of modern categories.[31] We know, then, that history is more trans than we have been led to believe. I offer a corollary: history is far less cis than one might anticipate. I propose a trans historical methodology that interrogates subjects who do not seem trans at all, that reveals the way that their genders and sexes required constant management to make it seem as though they simply fit.

A subset of scholars writing trans histories and historical works in trans studies is increasingly moving away from an outright distinction between trans and cis people in their analysis. Emma Heaney, for example, argues that modern womanhood itself is always constructed through and around trans femininity, suggesting that "woman" as a category cannot be neatly split into cis and trans types.[32] Scott Larson has emphasized the importance of "engaging in historical work from a transgender perspective," which "take[s] seriously the possibility of imagining gender outside binary categories."[33] Scholars taking this approach have begun to outline how putting trans analysis together with questions of race, species, and age all throw the notion of well-constructed cis/trans *and* male/female binaries into disarray. These orienting questions can be expanded in historical practice to produce a research agenda invested in deconstructing cisness, whether its archival subjects seem trans or not, which in turn sidesteps the illusion of a perpetual cisgender majority.

Paying attention to race in this context immediately shows the mental gymnastics required to get a cis/trans binary to seem even remotely plausible—indeed, it reveals the intractable whiteness of cisness itself.[34] As Kyla Schuller has argued, binary sexes emerged as specifically racial categories when nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientists claimed that true sexual dimorphism existed only at the pinnacle of evolutionary advancement (that is, among white humans). Everyone else, according to these scientists, exhibited far less distinction between men and women.[35] C. Riley Snorton likewise attends to histories of how the racial unsexing and degendering of Black people, especially Black women, helped pave the way for the invention of transness to begin with. These histories led Snorton to "eschew binaristic logic that might reify a distinction between transgender and cisgender" in his analysis.[36] Thus, while Snorton engages with historical actors legible as trans or trans adjacent in a contemporary sense (for example, Mary Jones,

who took on the identity Peter Sewally to escape slavery, and Lucy Hicks Anderson, whose transness was criminalized in nationally reported trials as "impersonating a woman" in the 1940s), he also attends to J. Marion Sims's gynecological experiments on Betsey, Anarcha, and Lucey—all enslaved women who demonstrated none of the traits of transness that trans history tends to gravitate around. By pairing legible trans-ish figures with those who would not be imagined as trans at all by most historians, Snorton demonstrates how the forced degendering of Blackness contributed to possibilities for imagining trans bodily mutability in the separation of the body from its social being. The sexed body could be uncategorized by race. Thinking with Schuller and Snorton, as well as the many other scholars who have interrogated the ways that racialization outside of whiteness interrupts full membership in male or female categories, a set of questions emerges for a renewed trans history: What does it mean for a history of cis/trans and male/female binaries if we take seriously the notion that one can be pushed out of a normative sex or gender category on the basis of race?[37] How did sex and gender come to be seen as nonracial categories, such that all of the people who in the nineteenth century were excluded from sexual normativity were folded, at least partially, back into it?

Another way forward: looking to how animals have been classified by sex further emphasizes that an extensive amount of sexual variation has been repeatedly plastered over in the service of either maintaining the idea that clear sexual distinctions are natural or positioning humanity itself as relying on having an obvious binary sex.[38] Kadji Amin's work on glandular science, for example, describes the high hopes of early twentieth-century medical men who grafted segments of nonhuman ovaries and testicles into human bodies—sometimes across sex lines, but usually for the purpose of restoring or "rejuvenating" normative masculinity and femininity.[39] As Amin convincingly argues, this hybridizing of human and animal at the site of gonadal tissue aided in materializing a racial logic in which whiteness and sexual dimorphism went hand in hand. The things we might recognize in the present as trans (e.g., physically reorganizing a body's sex characteristics by medical means) worked *against* expansive possibilities for gendered lives in the past. Other enactments of that process are sites for further trans history inquiry.

While much of the scholarship at the nexus of transness and the nonhuman so far has been organized around the concept of plasticity in specific bodies, there is also much to be explored where taxonomies themselves

must either flex or collapse under their own weight.[40] In my own work, I have looked to the nonhuman as a space where scientists consistently grapple with and disagree about what counts as maleness or femaleness and even what constitutes sex itself. Nineteenth-century debates over what sex classifications and pronouns to use for worker bees (Third neuter sex? Nonreproductive females? Anatomically female but socially a third sex?) indicate a whirlwind of possibility that had to be tamed over decades into an insistence that worker bees were really female. Early twentieth-century studies of reproduction in fungi posited wildly different criteria for sex designation than those scientists' colleagues were using down the campus lane to conduct sex research in pigeons.[41] Though I persistently joke about bees as trans icons, this turn to the nonhuman highlights the benefit of pursuing in the archive life forms that are not remotely trans. They enable one to track how multiplicitous possibilities of sex became ensnared in a system that demanded only two and then pretended that there had been only two sexes all along that science had merely gotten better at identifying.

Age also provides a possible means of exploring how an experience that applies to everyone, not only trans people, has the capacity to torque sex and gender classifications that are then realigned with the normative. While not a trans studies text as such, Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child* opens with a provocation of far-reaching implications: "If you scratch a child, you will find a queer."[42] That is to say, there is something about the malleability of childhood itself that requires careful molding of strangely oriented children into normative adult women and men. Jules Gill-Peterson further illuminates the intricacies of the problems that childhood itself caused for sex and gender in the twentieth century: as medical discourse and practice increasingly coalesced around a model of childhood plasticity where children's sex could be reassigned as doctors deemed necessary, a binary model of sex began to fray around the edges.[43] And what of old age? While childhood has so far been the primary point of departure for studies of age and sex, the power of the latter stages of the life course to unsettle sex and gender categories is increasingly apparent. Amin's attention to glandular medicine in the service of rejuvenation, for example, suggests the threat senescence poses toward full masculinity and femininity. There is, I think, exceptional promise here for ongoing investigation.

Trans history, in these lines of thought and many others, has the potential to make it abundantly clear that "non-trans" people's sex and gender are just as constructed as trans people's. Scholars are rapidly pushing trans history

in new directions, and the various components necessary to dismantle a cis-normative historical imaginary are there. At the same time, these histories continue to focus primarily on people recognizable to a present eye as trans or trans adjacent. So, for example, Larson's analysis of the transcendence of gender categories by the "Publick Universal Friend" of eighteenth-century Rhode Island is a fantastic example of the possibilities for using trans history as a method of analysis for people for whom the modern category "transgender" would not apply. But the Publick Universal Friend was, in Larson's description, someone who performed many different signifiers of gender, sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine, actively disavowing the stability of the gender categories of the period in question—someone, that is, who clearly shows signs of some kind of gender deviance. The essays in Simone Chess, Colby Gordon, and Will Fisher's "Early Modern Trans Studies" special issue take a similar focus. Or, from another angle, Joanne Meyerowitz and Gill-Peterson both make compelling arguments about how sex and gender functioned in the twentieth century, but they do so *through* the clearly legible trans subject. Trans people, or people who behave very similarly to trans people, remain the exemplar for exceeding the bounds of gender categories assigned at birth.

I want us to tell more stories about trans and trans-adjacent people, yes, but I also want trans history to make bold claims about how trans people are not the only ones who crack open sex and gender categories. People who don't experience themselves as gender nonconforming, who know themselves, as soon as the category emerges, as cis, break the rules just as much as we do, but they are often forgiven for it and are either welcomed or forcefully yanked back into neat binary categories. Trans history already has the tools to ask why this is and to demand a reckoning around cis normativity's successful masking of its own invention. In the 1980s and early 1990s, scholars argued that by looking at the history of transness, we can see how binary gender classification systems are made and how they kind of unravel under scrutiny. In 1987, for example, Sandy Stone articulated this framing as she rebutted Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, which had argued that transsexualism reinforced patriarchal gender stereotypes. Stone's retort, "The *Empire* Strikes Back," argued that it was doctors who insisted that trans people fit stereotypical definitions of gender, with the incitement to "pass" being something forced *onto* trans people. But this was not merely about trans people. "The origin of gender dysphoria clinics," Stone said of the institutionalization of requirements that trans people do gender "correctly" in order to access hormones and surgery, "is a microcosmic look at the construction of criteria

for gender."[44] Historicizing how trans women, especially, were assessed for femininity makes clear the borders of normative gender, and that's about everyone, not just trans people.

Stryker built on this in a 1994 performance-piece-turned-academic-article, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix." Like Stone, Stryker took aim against medico-scientific efforts to subsume trans experience back into normativity: American medical science of the mid- to late twentieth century had deigned to allow transition if and only if trans people hid their own experience and performed and identified as normal men and women, declawing in the process the threats to the gender and sexual order that movement away from one's assigned sex and gender could otherwise pose. Calling on Frankenstein's monster for inspiration, Stryker spoke back to her medical "creators" in the piece, cautioning that she had become much more than her doctors' attempts to produce normative womanhood through scientific expertise had anticipated. Indeed, when unmasked and embraced, and when rejecting incitements to normativity, transness can show that *all* sex and gender is created. "I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie," Stryker wrote, referring to the supposed "unnaturalness" of trans bodies. "Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me. . . . Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself."[45] *You are as constructed as me. The seams and sutures in yourself.* This is the promise of trans history: to trouble the line between "natural" cisness and "unnatural" transness and to use trans experience to inform critical academic work. I want to reengage this scholarly tradition, which has, since the early 1990s, often been overshadowed by a drive for political legibility that favors a minoritizing trans history model.

Contrary to the model of trans history that defines transness through movement away from an initial gender assignment, gender categories aren't merely out there, waiting to be crossed or not. There's not a specific point at which someone becomes trans. In fact, people who have tried to come up with diagnostic tools for assessing whether or not people are trans generally fail to develop any metric that does anything other than restrict trans people's access to transition-related medical care.[46] In the 1960s, as the category "transsexual" was becoming increasingly institutionalized within American medicine and psychiatry, Harry Benjamin developed a classification system for differing degrees by which someone's gender matched or didn't match their sexed body.[47]

But decisions regarding who could access surgery and hormones often took years for Benjamin and allied doctors to make because even with this system, they didn't actually have a way to determine who was "really trans"—because it turns out it's not actually that simple.[48] As clinicians further developed what came to be known as the *Standards of Care* for assessing who qualified for surgery, the rigorous gatekeeping built into those standards based on ensuring people "prove" they were "really" trans so they wouldn't regret their transition only made accessing care extremely difficult.[49] Who, then, is "really" cis?

Shifting the gaze of trans history away from the recognizable trans or trans-adjacent subject will, I propose, help show that most people only remain in the category they were assigned at birth because the ways that those categories don't actually match up with the bodies or behaviors of those contained within them have been rendered invisible. Trans historians need to find the seams and sutures, to use Stryker's language, in cisness. Focusing on a minoritized trans subject forces us to make classificatory choices, but a trans history that assumes all sex and gender, *especially* the cis kinds, to be constructed and constantly managed rather than inherent allows us to ask different questions. How did we end up with a gender system that foists its category troubles off onto a handful of "exceptions," while ignoring the countless inconsistencies within its normative categories? How do the deviances of those who supposedly stay put in contrast to the motion of the trans subject get reclaimed as normal rather than casting doubt on the system they provide evidence against? What happens if we assume that the distinction between trans and not has very little to do with inherent classifiability of identities or bodies and instead has everything to do with the power to classify?

Let me be clear that this is not an either/or proposition—I don't want to replace histories of recognizable trans or trans-adjacent people, which have tremendous political utility in emphasizing that trans people are not some newfangled invention and in telling stories that have been overwhelmingly left out of most historical narratives. But we can both argue for the importance of writing histories of trans people *and* refuse a cis/trans binary model. As Eve Sedgwick put it, we need a "multi-pronged movement . . . whose minority-model and universalist model strategies proceed in parallel without any high premium placed on ideological rationalization between them."[50] Sedgwick discussed this coexistence of minoritizing and universalizing models of sexuality in terms of a fixed, distinct minority of homosexual individuals, on one hand, and a much more expansive model, on the other, in which bits and pieces of queerness attach themselves to a wider and more nebulous

range of people of all kinds of identities. But the same dynamic applies to simultaneously being able to talk about both trans people and a broad systemic sorting of sex and gender that applies to everyone. A universalizing position that maintains a healthy degree of skepticism about the idea that most people are cis shows how one of the primary ways that gendered power operates is by sorting most people into normative categories even though they don't remotely fit that norm and then pretending that sorting hasn't happened.

If being a good historian of sexuality requires carefully bounding one's subject categories, let us extend the same analysis to all forms of sex and gender. As Afsaneh Najmabadi wrote in an article titled "Beyond the Americas: Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Historical Analysis?," we need to ask not only whether there were, for example, any lesbians in medieval Europe, but also whether there were any women. "That we ask the first question [about lesbians] with comfort," Najmabadi continues, "and presume the ease of the answer to the second (well, of course there were women, but defined differently) works on the presumption of naturalness of woman; that there have always been women."[51] The approach to trans history has been much the same: of course, there were trans people but defined differently. Of course, there were cis people but defined differently. What could it mean if there had not always been cis people? Scholars writing on the expansive range of sexed and gendered experiences in the past have already begun to chip away at the notion that splitting people into groups of trans and not-trans is an easy or useful thing to do. Just imagine if trans historians were as suspicious of the existence of cis people in the past as everyone else seems to be about the existence of trans people in the past. Trans history could be a method, an entire framework for thinking about gender. Instead of being featured in a single week on a syllabus or as the object of a still-marginalized subfield, transness would become a critical site of engagement in all histories of gender and sex. I want to reframe the conversation such that it's not only "there are more trans people in the past than we thought," but also "there are fewer cis people than we thought, and perhaps none at all."

The insistence on trans people always having been here is an ironic one, given that the whole point of transness is that your past doesn't have to dictate your future. Legitimacy doesn't come from having always been one thing. If transness is movement, as Stryker first articulated, then trans history needs a way to account for change and a way to privilege self-determination when articulating contemporary uses of trans history.[52] The politics of trans history cannot stop at claiming that we were always here even if we were called

something else. The politics of trans history needs to include leaving the past behind and starting over, a subject that isn't legible, a challenge to the idea that any category is coherent. Stability isn't the thing that makes trans lives worth protecting, just as much as stability isn't the thing that makes cisness somehow better than transness. Samuel Alito wants trans people out of public life because he wants trans people out of public life, not because the word "transsexual" wasn't yet coined in 1789. Which is to say, sure, "trans" is a historically contingent, invented category—but so what? The relevant corollary point is: so is cis. Every sex and gender is a historically contingent, invented category. It's time to start treating them *all* that way.

NOTES

1 *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* 590 U.S. ___ (2020) (Alito dissenting opinion), 34, https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/19pdf/17–1618_hfci.pdf. To illustrate the relative novelty of the concept of transness, Alito used as his examples Robert Stoller's 1964 article "A Contribution to the Study of Gender Identity," which was one of the first scholarly efforts to separate gender from sex and a key text in midcentury trans medicine, and the addition of transsexualism to the *DSM-III* at the comparatively late date of 1980.

2 *Bostock v. Clayton County*'s decision covered three cases all decided under the heading of the *Bostock* name. The case regarding trans protections specifically was *R. G. & G. R. Harris Funeral Homes Inc. v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*.

3 *Bostock*, 35.

4 *Bostock*, 34.

5 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, No. 19-1392, 597 U.S. ___ (2022).

6 See especially Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*; and Stryker, *Transgender History*. While recent work has emphasized the existence of pre- to mid-twentieth-century people who crossed gender lines to live as something other than the sex they were assigned at birth, authors like Emily Skidmore in *True Sex* and Jen Manion in *Female Husbands* are careful to distinguish between *trans* as a contemporary descriptor that historians can use to show a linkage between experience in past and present, and *transgender* or *transsexual* as actors' categories. Indeed, Stryker, Meyerowitz, Skidmore, Manion, Gill-Peterson, Boag, and Sears all include notes regarding trans terminology and its specific twentieth-century origins. See Skidmore, *True Sex*; Manion, *Female Husbands*; Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*; Boag, *Re-dressing America's Frontier Past*; and Sears, *Arresting Dress*. On transness in antiquity, see Campanile, Carlà-Uhink, and Facella, *TransAntiquity*. These authors are certainly not the first to point to antiquity for evidence of the long history of gender-crossing: an appendix to Harry Benjamin's

Transsexual Phenomenon, one of the texts that popularized the category of the transsexual in the 1960s, cites several examples of "sex change" in Greek and Roman myth to illustrate transsexualism's deep historical origins.

7 O'Connell, "There Is No Legitimate 'Debate.'"

8 Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, 11.

9 Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, xii–xiii.

10 Agarwal, "What Is Trans History?"

11 Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*.

12 I distinguish between trans history and historical work in trans studies to draw attention to somewhat divergent methods and especially divergent levels of institutional support. While the past few years have seen the publication of several new monographs on trans history, more trans history and trans studies courses, and a small handful of job ads for history and gender studies positions that mention trans history and/or studies as a preferred specialty for applicants, it should be noted that there is far greater enthusiasm for trans studies *outside* of history departments than within them. I suspect also that nonhistorians writing trans histories are perhaps less beholden to historical disciplinary norms of demonstrating expertise via evidentiary standards that implicitly reject expansive uses of contemporary sexual categories. See, for example, several of the most recent works on the history of transness published by scholars working outside of history departments: Snorton, *Black on Both Sides* (now English, previously Africana Studies); Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (English, when the book was published); Heaney, *The New Woman* (English); and Chess, Gordon, and Fisher, introduction to "Early Modern Trans Studies" (all English). This is not to say there is *no* trans history coming out of history departments in recent years. There certainly is: Emily Skidmore, Jen Manion, and Howard Chiang are all publishing on trans history from history departments. Gill-Peterson and I traded places, maintaining the numbers despite my ascension to the tenure track: she is now based in a history department, while I initially wrote this piece from a history department and have since landed in a stand-alone History and Sociology of Science department. Regardless of the details, it is striking to see how many of the most influential voices in trans history right now are working external to disciplinary history, and it is perhaps worth future study how this path of field formation has influenced what kinds of trans histories are being written. For a brief discussion of trans approaches being pushed out of disciplinary history, see Stryker, "Transgender History," 153–55.

13 Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One*. On the invention of homosexuality, see also Halperin, "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality"; Terry, *American Obsession*; D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; and Chauncey, *Gay New York*, among many others. While not all these scholars agree with Foucault wholesale—D'Emilio and Chauncey, for example, put far more stock in communities' understandings of themselves than in medical discourse as the driving force of the development of modern sexual categories—they all nonetheless take

as axiomatic the idea that sexual categories at the end of the nineteenth century are fundamentally different from earlier understandings of sexual behavior and its relationship to identity.

14 See, for example, Chauncey, *Gay New York*, as well as Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*; and Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia*, among others.

15 While outside the scope of this chapter, this does raise the question of whether homosexuality and transness can be seen as historically comparable categories. On one hand, it seems suspect that they should be conflated and thus require the same methodology. On the other hand, the *splitting* of transness and homosexuality into separate categories of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" masks their shared origins and the ways that trans people and other queer people who violate gender norms have historically been thrown under the bus to make gender-normative queer people seem more respectable. See Stryker, *Transgender History*, 151–52, as well as Stryker, "Transgender History"; and Valentine, *Imagining Transgender.*

16 Stryker, *Transgender History*, 16, 18, 123.

17 This means that books like *Transgender Warriors* are not considered rigorous history.

18 So much so that there are Instagram memes and a subreddit mocking the propensity among historians to label as "friends" people who lived and shared a bed with, expressed sexual desire for, and are shown in photos kissing ostensibly same-gender people.

19 Authors writing about the twentieth century seem less concerned with bounding the category "trans." Jules Gill-Peterson, for example, says merely that "trans is invoked throughout in an expansive sense" and that she favors the precision of words like "transsexual" and "sexual inversion" when talking specifically about those constructions in historical context (*Histories of the Transgender Child*, 8–9). I suspect also that nonhistorians writing trans histories are perhaps less beholden to disciplinary norms of demonstrating expertise via precise historicization of categories.

20 Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 5; Boag, *Re-dressing America's Frontier Past*, 52; Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 9.

21 Skidmore, *True Sex*, 10.

22 Manion, *Female Husbands*, 10. Stryker's definition comes from *Transgender History*, 1.

23 For cross-dressing, see Boag, *Re-dressing America's Frontier Past*; and Sears, *Arresting Dress*. For female husbands, see Manion, *Female Husbands*. For passing or masquerading, see LaFleur, "Precipitous Sensations." For hormones and surgery, see Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*; and Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*.

24 These are patterns in the literature, not explicitly stated criteria for classification as trans. In a representative example, in the opening of *True Sex,* Skidmore recounts the stories of Harry Gorman and Frank Dubois, two trans men who both

changed their names, married women, frequented saloons, and earned respect for their hard work as men (1–3). While it is the movement from one gender to another that constitutes transness, these other traits are illustrative evidence that movement has taken place.

25 See, for example, the story of Joseph Lobdell's encounters with state institutions in Manion, "The Queer History of Passing"; or the mysteriously named Mrs. Nash's outing when a friend changed the deceased Mrs. Nash's clothing for her burial in Boag, *Re-dressing America's Frontier Past*, 130–38. On the ways that a heterosexual/homosexual binary relies on stable sex and gender categories, see Stryker, "Transgender History."

26 Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, 5.

27 Stryker, *Transgender History*, 4. This is, however, Stryker writing for an audience needing Trans 101, and her other work, as in "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," takes aim on the idea that transness is the unnatural move away from natural cisness. Nonetheless, this turn of phrase captures the minoritizing tendency of contemporary mainstream understandings of transness.

28 Enke, "The Education of Little Cis," 60.

29 Enke, "The Education of Little Cis," 76. Enke critiques the entire category of "cisgender" for ascribing a fixity to gender categories that ultimately goes against queer and feminist efforts to trouble stability, even though it was intended to refuse the othering tendencies of the prefix *trans* (i.e., the construction of trans man versus just plain old normative man without any markers). While I am not willing to throw the proverbial cis baby out with the bathwater—there *is* certainly something to be said for the way that people who aren't identified as trans experience the world differently from those who are—I do think it's necessary to remember that a differential cis or trans experience comes from the existence of a state, medical, and social attachment to coherently sexed and gendered subjects, not a fundamental difference in types of person.

30 Chess, Gordon, and Fisher, introduction to "Early Modern Trans Studies," 6. Other recent examples of this expansive framing include many of the essays in LaFleur, Raskolnikov, and Kłosowska, *Trans Historical*. I suspect the pre- and early modernists with literary inclinations are on to something!

31 Chess, Gordon, and Fisher, introduction to "Early Modern Trans Studies," 11.

32 Heaney, *The New Woman*.

33 Larson, "'Indescribable Being,'" 582.

34 For reflections on the inadequacy of cisness to account for black (de)gendering in a contemporary frame, see Bey, *Cistem Failure*.

35 Schuller, *Biopolitics of Feeling*.

36 Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 7.

37 This line of thought follows a robust collection of scholarship, which is itself indebted to Black feminist thought. See, for but a few wide-ranging examples, Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*; Somerville, "Scientific Racism"; and Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom*.

38 See Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance*; and Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow*, for an extensive range of examples of sexual variety across species. On the relationship between humanity and binary sex, see Luciano and Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?," 182–207; and Hayward and Weinstein, "Tranimalities."
39 Amin, "Trans* Plasticity."
40 On plasticity, see Schuller and Gill-Peterson, "Biopolitics of Plasticity."
41 Velocci, "Binary Logic."
42 Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 1.
43 Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, especially chapter 3.
44 Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back," 227.
45 Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," 240–41.
46 See, for example, shuster, "Uncertain Expertise."
47 Benjamin, *Transsexual Phenomenon*.
48 Indeed, in the early days of trans medicine, clinicians did not even bother that much with such ontological designations and instead focused on which patients they thought would be least likely to regret their transitions and sue. Velocci, "Standards of Care."
49 Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, "Standards of Care." For the contemporary standards from the same organization with an updated name, see World Professional Association for Transgender Health, *Standards of Care*.
50 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 13.
51 Najmabadi, "Beyond the Americas," 18.
52 On transness as movement, see Stryker, *Transgender History*, 1.

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