

preface

FOR SOME TIME NOW feminists have struggled with the challenges that transgender subjectivity brings to sexuality and gender binaries, especially in the understanding of the category “woman.” There have been several compilations that have touched on the subject, such as *Transgender History*, the *Transgender Studies Reader*, and *Transgender Rights*, as well as special issues of a range of social science and interdisciplinary journals. Queer historian, writer, and filmmaker Susan Stryker has been on the forefront of such efforts, deftly linking participants in exchanges over common questions and issues as the editor for her transgender anthology and transgender special issues for the interdisciplinary journals—the *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* and *Women’s Studies Quarterly*. In her introduction to the *Transgender Studies Reader*, Stryker draws our attention to the lack of contributions from people of color and the urgent need for a “transgender studies” that more adequately and carefully engaged the “complex interplay between race, ethnicity, and transgender phenomenon.”¹ Bobby Noble makes a similar point in the review essay, “‘My Own Set of Keys’: Meditations on Transgender, Scholarship, Belonging,” with which we begin this special issue. While providing an overview of some of the field-defining books that have been published over the past decade, he comments also on some of the limitations of a predominantly white referent for transgender subjectivity as currently represented in critical theory. Noble also points to a burgeoning set of material that is beginning to emerge from scholars of color on this topic grounded in a queer of color critique.

We see this special issue of *Feminist Studies* as in part responding to Stryker’s and Noble’s calls and also as offering a series of interdisciplinary interventions that engage the varied intersections and mutual constitutiveness of transgender and critical race theory. This Race and Transgender Studies special issue, then, asks that we think not only about the

impact of race on transgender theory but also challenges those of us who work within critical race theory to more fully consider how our studies of racialized communities would be different if we put transgender subjects at the center of our work, especially in how we define women of color. The issue opens up spaces for considering a variety of themes including racial and ethnic identification and cross-identification in gender performance, strategies of belonging and kinship, racial implications of media representations of transgender subjects, transgender politics of location, subjugated knowledges, and histories—to name a few.

Following Noble's review essay is Emily Skidmore's prize-winning article, "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press." In this article, selected as the 2008 *Feminist Studies* awardee for the best article by a graduate student, Skidmore deconstructs the whiteness of familiar transgender icons through her reassessment of the twentieth-century's most famous U.S. transsexual representative. Jorgensen created a media splash when in 1952 she traveled to Denmark for sex reassignment surgery (SRS). The story of an ex-GI turned beauty queen set off a media frenzy that established Jorgensen as an iconographic figure in U.S. transgender history, helping to create what Skidmore calls "the good transsexual" in the mainstream imagination. Skidmore contrasts Jorgensen's initial public acclaim with that greeting the lesser-known Delisa Newton, an African American transwoman who was featured on the April 1966 cover of *Sepia* magazine and whose autobiography was the subject of a two-part series featured in the magazine. Jorgensen's early 1950s' story was seized on by a white mainstream media as symbolic of the triumph of science—in this case enabling the emergence of a normative white "bombshell" from the form of a male army file clerk. Jorgensen was later vilified by this same press for not being a "real" woman, as the "limits" of her initial SRS became known. A decade later, Newton's story appeared in the African American press and print popular culture magazines and mainstream tabloid newspapers. Although Newton's SRS was far more complete than Jorgensen's initial treatment, the "real" woman Newton represented was African American and thus not deemed worthy of attention by mainstream white newsmagazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* or widely circu-

lated newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*. Skidmore argues that the different receptions of Jorgensen and Newton “highlight the significance of race within media representations of transsexuality” and suggest that “public narratives of transsexuality are not simply about gender but also about race, class, and sexuality.”

Elizabeth Bucar and Anne Enke’s “Unlikely Sex Change Capitals of the World: Trinidad, United States, and Tehran, Iran, as Twin Yardsticks of Homonormative Liberalism” takes up the question of normativities (homo- and hetero-) in their essay on the thriving SRS businesses in the “unlikely” cities of Tehran, Iran, and Trinidad, Colorado. Like Skidmore, Bucar and Enke focus on media representations of transgender and transsexual but this time in relation to locations not individuals. Trinidad is represented as “small-town America at its best . . . surviving hardship through creative uses of capitalism, and still able to claim normativity despite its tolerance of difference.” Tehran, in contrast, is marked as the conservative, “backward” foe of women, lesbians, gay men, and transgender people all at once, an “Islamic state” fundamentally invested in prohibition and restriction and that “not only pays for but—some claim—encourages SRS for those who exhibit homosexual or nonnormative gender inclinations.” In their comparison of how “a small town and a cosmopolitan city” became synonymous with SRS, Bucar and Enke reveal the ways that “media-generated stories spoke to larger national and transnational ethnosexual prejudices.” Echoing the call of scholar Afsaneh Najmabadi for a more substantive and less Western-centered analysis of the situations of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender Iranians, they make visible LGBT and dominant media complicity in spinning Tehran as a site of homophobic violence and coercion while representing Trinidad, Colorado, as the neoliberal dream town.² Their work demonstrates that “even ‘queer’ can slip into homonormativity when ethnicity and nationalism are involved.”

Rebecca Rossen, in “Hasidic Drag: Jewishness and Transvestism in the Modern Dances of Pauline Koner and Hadassah,” highlights the undertheorized histories of race, ethnicity, and nationalisms in gender performance in her article. Gender theory has a strong foundation in acknowledging the role of gender performance in providing a context through which

cultural gender norms are subverted, interrogated, and reified. Rossen examines the history of Jewish women performing male drag in the 1930s and 1940s. Focusing on the 1932 show *Chassidic Song and Dance* performed by Pauline Kroner and on Hadassah Spira's 1947 *Shuvi Nafshi (Return Oh My Soul)*, Rossen holds that "drag performances" as "stagings of Jewishness" became "entangled with performances of gender and choreographies of nation, resulting in ethnically ambiguous and androgynous figures who simultaneously bolstered and evaded the frameworks that defined them." Rossen argues that by performing in drag these women "challenged essentialist notions of gender and ethnicity and, in Hadassah's case, dramatically undermined the androcentrism of traditional Judaism."

Marlon M. Bailey, in "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture," similarly addresses the performance of gender. Focusing on the ballroom scene made famous through Jenny Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning*, Bailey demonstrates the epistemological creativity of poor Black queer communities in Detroit, Michigan.³ He argues that "Black queer members of the ballroom community use performance to unmark themselves as gender and sexual nonconforming subjects" and that such "unmarking" or "passing" is a "necessary strategy by which to avoid discrimination and violence in the urban space." Ballroom is the practice of kinship—young queer youth often displaced from their birth families make alternative families through gender performance networks. They also have their own elaborate and dynamic gender/sexuality system that consists of butch queens, femme queens, women, butches, and men, which allows for more of a flexibility of identity/anatomy and desire than they encounter in the dominant society—an environment richly populated with transwomen and transmen.

In "Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans)gender," Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley seeks to uncover the epistemologies created in/by trans/queer communities. Focusing on the 2002 Haitian documentary, *Of Men and Gods*, directed by Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire, she engages with "ways of knowing gender, sexuality, and personhood enunciated in the epistemologies" of the Afro-Caribbean religion of vodou. She centers her epistemological framework on Ezili—the multidimensional female deity, or *lwa*, "that channels sex, desire, womanness," fluidity and

creativity, “as a theoretical principle for thinking Caribbean gender complexity.” Tinsley notes that the structure of vodou allows for a decoupling of anatomy and gender identity through the process of being a devotee of a given deity. The anatomically male followers of Ezili, exemplified in the film, use their devotional participation as a practice of feminine gender making. Tinsley sees their imaginative work as an essential part of black feminist praxis “to explicate, develop, and dwell in realities other than the secular Western empiricisms that deny black women’s importance in knowing, making, and transforming the world.”

This special issue is enhanced with the creative work of photographer Zanele Muholi and poets Trish Salah, Matt Richardson, and Vanessa Huang, each of whom explores the possibilities and limitations of place and community: of small town and metropole, of national and transnational sites of meaning transfigured. Engaging with this theme, Gabeba Baderoon examines the work of internationally acclaimed black South African photographer, Zanele Muholi. Baderoon’s essay offers significant theorizing about South African genders in their own right as well as a startling analysis of the photographs from Muholi’s *Faces and Phases* series. The essay addresses, among other things, the circulation of terms such as transgender transnationally both as part of global circuits of power and as a dialogic movement of diasporic meanings across and within borders. Trish Salah, in a series of poems, asks that we travel with her narrators through moments of self-discovery and dangerous disclosure, from a roadside encounter where a man simply “knew,” to musings on a body that was “near” and “near wrong,” to Beirut where an “uncle” becomes the voice of “caution,” to the narrator—“newly made” and “Beautiful”—who amidst the violence does not recognize the city or the body that were once home. Matt Richardson’s poems similarly query frameworks that do not “fit” in their “place,” by making visible the elision of African American transmen from lesbian communities and African American neighborhoods as the multivoiced question, “what are you?” lingers to mark the boundaries for inclusion. Richardson then suggests an alternative mode of salvation in response to a televangelist’s “Why?” He also marks the often overlooked presence of transmen in bisexual and gay male communities. Vanessa Huang suggests the continuities and connections between representation

and action during the 1960s—with the refrain “Where the boys are” as a chorus to moments of protest and disruption framed by war, injustice, and righteous anger.

Race and Transgender Studies: A Special Issue concludes with Sharon Doetsch-Kidder’s “‘My Story Is Really Not Mine’: An Interview with Latina Trans Activist Ruby Bracamonte,” which offers a case study of the ways in which transgender people are already part of the histories of feminist, queer, and racial movements. The interview is part of Doetsch-Kidder’s larger project collecting oral histories of activists who work at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and nation. Already involved in the Latina/o health movement, Bracamonte became a key advocate for Latina transwomen after the murder of a friend. Noting that Latina transwomen are always at risk of assault, rape, and murder and for further brutality from law enforcement, Bracamonte explains: “I know what it’s like to be ignored for not speaking English or for having an accent I know what it’s like to be perceived as not having status. . . . To me, violence is not just someone having come and hit me. Violence is someone watching me walk down the street and verbally saying things to me. Because I should be able to walk wherever I want to go and have people mind their own business and let me mind my own business. To me it’s important because I am a human being. That’s the way I look at it. I am a human being, and I deserve a place. And I’m a little greedy. I don’t want a place in the back of the bus. I want a place where everybody is.”

This special issue explores how race and gender identity are co-formative functions of experience and identity, producing and informing each other. The approach of the authors and editors is to acknowledge that transgender histories are also shaped by colonial regimes of racialization and begin from a position that transgender bodies are raced bodies functioning within a sociohistorical context and actively creating their own cultural and epistemological frameworks.

Matt Richardson and Leisa Meyer,
for the editorial collective

Notes

1. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008); Susan Stryker and Stephen White, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter, eds., *Transgender Rights* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); as well as special issues in journals; Susan Stryker, ed., "The Transgender Issue," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998); and Paisley Currah, Lisa Jean Moore, and Susan Stryker, eds., "Trans-," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36 (Fall/Winter 2008). See Susan Stryker, "(De) Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *Transgender Studies Reader*, 15.
2. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Truth of Sex," *Iranian.com*, 12 Jan. 2005, www.iranian.com/Najmabadi/2005/January/Sex/index.html.
3. *Paris Is Burning*, directed by Jenny Livingston, 1991.