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Volume 5

Structures of Feeling

Affectivity and the Study of Culture

Edited by

Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup

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Eliza Steinbock

Parsing Affective Economies of Race, Sexuality, and Gender: The Case of 'Nasty Love'

In this chapter, I wish to show how transgender studies and affect studies might mutually approach the subject as a matter of process. I outline an affirmative constructivist ontology of 'becoming more' to oppose the current trend in queer theory towards deconstruction and negation. Scholars in transgender and affect studies often share the methodology of departing from the middle, starting with describing the affective relation that generates a subject. For example, in "Happy Objects" Sara Ahmed writes that affect "is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (Ahmed 2010, 29). Ahmed suggests elsewhere that "emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies" namely through the circulation patterns they carve out between bodies and signs (Ahmed 2004, 117). Wherever affect streams, it produces an exchange economy. Focusing on the creation of boundaries, Ahmed also grants a creative and redistributive quality to affective economies – "emotions *do things*" (Ahmed 2004, 119). I argue that in a case of trans pornography the charged affective economy of relations between 'nasty' race, sexuality, and gender work to refunction damaging stereotypes; and to proliferate new aggregates of ideas, values, and objects stuck together by 'nasty love.'

1

My starting point is the film *Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papi and Wil* (2007) with its evocative term *entity* for the subjectivities of the docu-porn and the descriptor of *nasty* for the kind of love generated by these sexual subjects.¹ In modifying the concept of love, *nasty* evokes contentious, layered, stereotypes associated with Papi and Wil. They are both trans, kinky, polyamorous, people of color (POC), and hence, embody quadruple cultural stereotypes for excessive,

hypersexual, and thereby, *nasty*, ways of being.² Their embrace of being (and doing) *nasty*, however, critically exposes the whiteness and gender normativity that saturates the dominant affective tradition of sexuality, including pornography. Moreover, the film's cogent vision of *nasty love* captures an affective intensity that seems formative of alternative sexual subjectivities, trans entities.

In these ways and more *Trans Entities* suggests that mimetic modes of racial, sexual, and gender identification are inadequate, namely for neglecting the affective force and expanse of erotic relations. To take these relations into account, I firstly examine the impact of *nasty love* in terms of the genre of the film, a melding of pornography and documentary conventions. In studying the pornumentary genre, I explore how it re-models sexual stereotypes of black and brown bodies, to which the affect of *nasty* seems to stick and porn typically reinforces. I then secondly consider how sexuality for trans subjectivities incorporates a desire for transitioning, for "becoming more," as Eva Hayward describes it in "Spider City Sex" (2010). My argument in short is that with the assertion of *nastiness*, and refutation of feeling normatively masculine and white, the film offers a processual subjectivity in the affective form of feeling excessive layered in brown, kinky, and trans experiences. In other words, a sexual relation can generate a feeling of more, and thereby a becoming more.

Featuring real-life lovers, *Trans Entities* runs only fifty-five minutes, but has impressed American reviewers as well as wowed international audiences.³ It consists of four parts interview-driven discussions on sex and gender expression, three parts steamy, intimate, creative sex. Like the films of Tony Comstock in the *Real People*, *Real Life*, *Real Sex* series in which the motto is "Love, Uncensored," the inclusion of documentary-styled footage on the personal lives of the performers trespasses an expected barrier in watching anonymous porn. Unlike earlier queer

2 I follow the film's language in employing trans (and not trans* or transgender) as an umbrella term for gender variance, genderfuck, and transitioning genders, including transsexual-identified people. Kinky refers to those sexual proclivities, desires, and practices that are not "straight" but experienced with a "kink." It is a shorthand community term that also refers to the recently coined term BDSM. According to Weiss (2011), BDSM and SM refers to "a diverse community that includes aficionados of bondage, [d]omination/submission, pain or sensation play, power exchange, leathersex, role-playing and fetishes" (vii). Formally, it is an acronym for bondage/discipline, Dominance/submission, and sadomasochism. Polyamory is a term for "many loves" and widely used to refer to practices and theories of non-monogamy or non-exclusive partnering.

3 Reviewers include Tristan Tacirino (2008) and Audacia Ray (2008). During the fifth Netherlands Transgender Film Festival (2009), I selected this film for our "Sex Positive" program and facilitated the post-screening discussion with director Morry Diamond and Judy Minx, a trans

1 I also write about this film in the article "On the Affective Force of 'Nasty Love'" that deals in more

to switch from one format to another as smoothly as possible. The viewer is thusly encouraged to see the continuities between how Papi and Wil experience their sexuality and reflect on it. The subtitle – “The Nasty Love of” – unabashedly points to the film’s preoccupation with ‘nasty’ elements placed into relation with a love connection. Besides a catchy title, it suggests that the affective force of the nasty aspects of trans sexuality – transness, brownness, kink and polyamory – enhances their loving practice of becoming trans entities.

The film shows a realistic depiction of sexual acts, including oral, genital, and anal intercourse, as well as less conventional kinky activities like spanking, bondage, and breath control. The inclusion of a range of more standard love-making to nasty sexual activities, however, is not the most unusual aspect of how this documentary presents sexuality. Tristan Taormino’s 2008 review of “The New Wave of Trans Porn” singles out a unique counter-logic in its pornographic principle. Whereas much mainstream pornography seems to reify the gendered norms of sexual behavior (see Williams, *Hard Core*), the deeper the viewer goes with the protagonists into these sexually explicit scenes, for Taormino, “their genders become malleable and less significant than their connection to one another” (n/p). By foregrounding the intensity of their relation, the mutability of gender is not trivialized, but becomes contiguous to it.

The trans-sexing of their shared transitions seems to be accomplished in part by their trans sex, by their so-called nasty love. The possible conflict between nastiness and love seems resolved by the affective intensity – their connection – during the event of sex: the sex may be nasty, but it is so in a loving way. Through interviews, the sex is known to be consensual. The use of safer sex methods is highlighted with shots of reaching for condoms, gloves, lube. And each scene is embedded in a communicative and honest relationship. The viewer comes to associate their love with consent, communication, and care. Hence, the nasty love juxtaposition that takes place within the event of physical sex intensifies their sexual, psychic and physical connection. The shifting of intensities between nastiness and lovingness, visualized in parallel through the seamless editing of interviews and sexual scenes, seems to work in *Trans Entities* as a looping that feeds back into the circuit of desires. The commingling and enhanced resonances of racial, gendered, polyamorous, and BDSM desires produce a specific change, which I will examine in terms of their overlapping affective economies.

2

The mapping of nasty components onto declarations of love, such as Papi emphatically saying, “I love the fuck out of you,” not only supports the flexibility of their

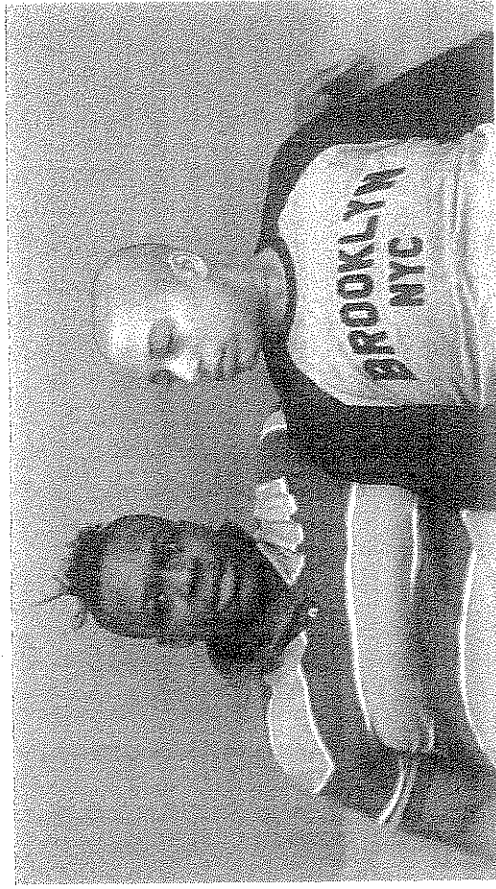


Fig. 1: Morty Diamond: Still from Interview

and trans sexual representation, this video is forthright about the taboo topics of African American and Puerto Rican trans identities as well as kinky desires.

The popularity of the video may also be due to the range of sexual scenes. It begins in the bedroom with an erotic game of Mercy, involving face and chest slapping, and later penetration sex with strap-ons. The next scene of Race Play includes a third partner, Chris, who is white, deaf and a submissive, and who joins Papi in being dominated by Wil. And finally, Papi and Wil role-play gangsters in an Interrogation scene, the footage of which also shows the couple negotiating beforehand and taking care of each other afterward.

During the interviews, viewers are introduced to Papi and Wil’s individual and collective thoughts on gender transitioning, polyamory, race politics, role-play, and spirituality. The first line of the film comes from Wil, who fully clothed and sitting comfortably with his partner Papi states, “I identify as a trans entity. I feel very much in touch with both my male and female side. I wish there was something very much in between. ... I just, you know, found a word for it.” He attests to having “always” been perceived as masculine due to his developed musculature and also feeling so, though not exclusively. Wil’s identification with becoming an entity suggests a situational identity in process and certainly in transition. Papi also self-names as a trans entity, though came to do so later, after identifying as femme, genderqueer, and on the masculine spectrum. For Papi especially, becoming a trans entity means radical “shifting” back and forth and “playing with” gender expression.

The film’s composition arranges the sexual scenes adjacent to personal inter-

gender, but also the ways in which they perform racial difference. While the term *nasty* pops up in the film as a synonym for 'sexy' with positive connotations, it also is attached to their practices of on-camera racial role-play. In the culturally-informed environment of pornography, film scholar Linda Williams points out in her "Skin Flicks on the Racial Border" (2004) that "the hypersexualization of the black body (male and female) in some ways parallels the 'hysterization' of the white woman's body; both are represented as excessively saturated with sexuality" (Williams 2004, 272). In U.S. race politics *nasty* became synonymous with obscene black heterosexuality in the wake of 2LiveCrew's controversial 1989 album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* (see Crenshaw). The taboos of black power and hyper-masculine sexuality is explicitly invoked in the three-way scene, the second sexual interlude in the film (Figure 2).

It stages an inverted relation of power demarked by skin color, in which "Sir Wil" dominates "nothing" (Chris) with the help of "Pet" (Papi).⁴ Though the Old South and Plantation culture is not an explicit element of the scene, the use of collars and disciplining instruments that reinforce the dominant-submissive dynamic recall shackles and whips used during slavery. Props and power distributed according to racial difference stimulates an erotic charge.

In her discussion of interracial lust in films, Williams is careful to note that the intensity of the taboo relates to knowing it, to being aware of the stereotyping, which is quite different from believing it (Williams 2004, 275). The tension of the forbidden, as explored in this three-way role-play organized by caste of color, comes from converting that which Wil says is his "animalistic" desire into a controlled (and clothed) Master who tortures by giving orgasms. Together with his (naked) lovers, he develops through iteration what Williams calls a "refunctioned stereotype" (285) of black and white sexuality in order to bring them all pleasure. Clearly *Trans Entities* does not deny interracial lust, or that "pornography acts as a racialized economy of desire" (Miller-Young 266). However, I offer that it mobilizes it "in historically new ways that are more erotic than phobic" (Williams 2004, 285) by harnessing awareness of the affect charge patterned on racial differences. In paying attention to racial difference – evidenced by affirming to each other that "I love your juicy lips," discussing openly that Papi and Wil rejected white lovers before to avoid exoticification, and only playing with a deaf person because s/he has a separate culture than being white – *Trans Entities* works against the contemporary goal of "color blindness" operant in U.S. culture (Williams 2004, 285).

4 For popular coverage of race play, see Daisy Hernandez, "Playing with Race" (Posted online



Fig. 2: Morty Diamond; Still from *three-way*

The affective charge of "nasty" can also be seen in terms of a racialized class, which suffuses the third scene between a backstabbing "criminal business partner" and "crime boss," who gets even through interrogation techniques that involve knives and rough sex.

The racial stereotype of Black people as a criminal underclass challenges what Mireille Miller-Young discusses in "Putting Hypersexuality to Work" (2010) as the "politics of respectability" in which Black women and men seek to gain racial respect by forming heteronormative, domestic, and bourgeois family relationships (Miller-Young 2010, 222–223). In addition to acting out non-normative sexualities of queer, contractual, public sexuality (see Miller-Young 2010, 223), then, this scene adds a nasty class component to the racial profile of their roles.

3

Throughout *Trans Entities* Papi and Wil together with Chris explore the terrain of Ahmed's "affect alien" with regard to race, sexuality, gender and class. Ahmed argues in "Happy Objects" that an affect alien does not (by refusal or accident) reproduce the line of what a community has determined is a "happy object," such as the nuclear family (Ahmed 2010, 30). Paying attention to feeling alienated from happiness means realizing that the affective atmosphere is always already angled, "[w]hat we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival" in so far as "it is always-felt from a specific point" an embodied point-of-view (27). By holding the

personal with the sexual, blurring into a public intimacy. *Trans Entities* invites viewers to feel with them from a specific, contiguous angle. From the vantage point of *Trans Entities*, nastiness brings love. The film elicits viewers to become neighboring affect aliens, who, like them, are out of line with the dominant affective community and thus alienated in the sense of being unable to feel pleasure from normative happy objects. Though love, like happiness, might be one of the most normatively moral affects, their means to seek it takes them far from the orientation towards bourgeois family relations and further into 'bad' and morally suspect practices (genderfuck, BDSM, non-monogamy).

Yet the world of alienated feelings is heavily populated, so suggests José Esteban Muñoz in "Feeling Brown" (2000). He analyzes the world-making of a theatre play that presents a reality structured by the affective overload of Latina/o *latinidad*, drug use, trans embodiments, and queer sex. Like this play, *Trans Entities* eschews the cultural logic of heteronormative White respectability for the pleasures of its own affective performances of excess. As Muñoz stresses, the failure of Latinos/as (or other POC) to perform a moral affective citizenship is in relation to the "hegemonic protocols of North American affective comportment" from which they feel alienated (Muñoz 2000, 70). However, from the point of view of the Latina/o, "the affective performance of normative whiteness is minimalist to the point of emotional impoverishment" (70); it appears underdeveloped, if not a lack, in relation to *latinidad* fullness. Given the angle of the U.S. racial atmosphere, Muñoz argues that seizing the stereotype of excess shows the myriad ways in which the presence of POC affective excess puts a great deal of pressure on the affective baseline of whiteness. Hence, redirecting the stereotype vents fumes from a toxic characterization, creates an erotic charge, and resists feeling properly. In the same way, the experience of excesses in *Trans Entities* runs along numerous community lines and against multiple cultural mandates. The publicity of these unhappy effects of interracial lust, whether in a play or a film, is ultimately affirmative. According to Ahmed, following the affect alien "gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life" (Ahmed 2010, 50). The film's presentation of affect aliens thereby sets different historically situated terms for what loving looks like; their nasty love circulates and sticks together new configurations of objects, values, and ideas.

studies assumes the "mutability and specificity of human lives and loves" (Stryker 2004, 215) by starting from the notion of transition. The film attends to the gender mutability, or malleability (Taormino), and its specific rendering in sexually and racially marked trans entities. In this way it examines what falls outside, or moves beyond the static frameworks of gender or racial identity. I propose that the film seeks to account for what Brian Massumi has described as the movements between the "grid system of identity" (Massumi 2002, 1–4). The singular "relation of movement and rest" conveyed by sensation and affect, claims Massumi, "is another way of saying transition" (15). Such relations of movement form the basis of gender transitions, which are usually only thought of in terms of the take-off and landing points of the crossing, as in [male] becoming [woman].

Starting in the middle with the bracketed experience of becoming, Eva Hayward asks whether it might be that "a transsexual woman becomes a woman for reasons other than simply being read as woman?" (Hayward 2010, 234). She answers by giving aesthetic and affective reasons: "a transsexual lives out the responsive potential of the flesh; through sensuous reaches, intensification of corporeal boundaries and energetic states, the body becomes simply more" (235). Whereas transsexuality is typically limited to transgressions of binary gender/sex categories, Hayward suggests the trans-becomings speak to making use of one's flesh as a resource for experiencing the profuse potential of bodily change (227). The *more* of trans-becomings might be achieved through hormone replacement therapy or hair removal, but Hayward's notion of "transpositions" (237) contends that limiting trans-becomings to certain ways of trans-sexing would form exclusions and circumscribe the spatial and temporal forces with which a transsexual (or any subject) enacts a morphing of embodiment. The very particular, situated act of changing something into another form 'oriented' by forces (or Ahmed's "angles") cannot be predicted in advance, nor categorically defined: "Transposes can as well be perversions or deviations, misdirections that decompose order and arrangement" (Hayward 2010, 238). From the perspective of trans-becomings as *more*, sexuality theory might swerve from queer theory's stress on deconstructing the hierarchal relationship of object-subject, sex-gender, hetero- and homo-sexuality to constructing trans sexualities' felt sense of more. This is to stress the excess and fullness of subjectivity experienced as affect.

Papi's closing affirmation of what they feel is the strength of their relationship is explained as Wil's capacity to understand the openness of the future: "who I am as a sexual being, intellectual being ... [who] can just flow with me." Similarly, Wil affirms that with Papi he loves the way that they "grow together," suggesting an intrinsic relationship between the flowing and growing into a constantly evolving future of actualizing trans entities. The event of becoming hurtles towards the dimension of Gilles Deleuze's virtuality, what Alfred North White-

head terms potential in contrast to the actual of the entity. The virtual in either case, according to Shaviro's study of the two philosophers, is like "a field of energies that have not yet been expended, or a reservoir of potentialities"; it names the unknown, that which cannot be predicted, or determined in advance, but serves as a condition for generating the actual (Shaviro 2009, 34).

Shaviro investigates this "impelling force" (34) that forges new relations among bodies more generally, but specifically in aesthetic encounters. For Hayward, transitioning genders perform this impelling force. The virtual tapped into with a trans-sexing transposition accesses the body's potential for growth. She pronounces in "More Lessons from a Starfish" that "the [surgical] cut is not so much an opening of the body, but a generative effort to *pull the body back through itself* in order to feel mending, to feel the growth of new margins" (Hayward 2008, 72). More than a concrete action, the surgical cut accesses the virtual realm of the body's on-going materialization, the matrix of sensations and emergence.⁵ Though Hayward theorizes "the cut" as one possibility for transpositions, *Trans Entities* weights the affective force of sex – nasty love – with a similar capacity for accessing the virtual, and for generating transpositionings. Hence, I offer that the cut into the future can be rendered through aesthetic as well as sexual techniques, which mend and grow an emergent subject.

To conclude, *Trans Entities* insists time and again on aligning with the angle of love, which could seem sentimental or naive. However, the expression, practice, and embodiment of 'nasty love' prevaricates from the romantic, white-washed, heteronormative, vanilla connotations that most often plays in the mainstream media. Their love connection forms a feedback loop into experiences of becoming more and growing as trans entities. It suggests a perverting, differentiating affective force closer to that described by Lauren Berlant: "I often talk about love as one of the few places where people actually admit they want to become different. [...] It's change without guarantees, without knowing what the other side of it is, because it's entering into relationality" (Berlant 2012, 8). The potential grasped by "entering into relationality," such as this chapter attempts, is one that opens up the expanse of new risky relations to ideas, values, and objects. One might even find a kind of methodological love in the interdisciplinary encounter between affect and transgender studies as they stick together bodies and signs anew.

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⁵ For an expanded argument on the therapeutic, generative quality of the surgical cut see Eliza Steinbock, "The Violence of the Cut: Transgender Homeopathy and Cinematic Aesthetics" in *Violence and Agency: Queer and Feminist Perspectives*. Eds. Gender Initiativekolleg Wien (Frankfurt