

Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies 2017, Vol. 20, No. 4

[www.tijdschriftvoorgenderstudies.nl](http://www.tijdschriftvoorgenderstudies.nl)

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## Editorial

*Trans\* : Approaches, methods, and concepts*

Looi van Kessel, Liesbeth Minnaard and Eliza Steinbock

TVGN 20 (4): 335–339

DOI: 10.5117/TVGN2017.4.KESS

This special issue continues an inquiry initiated during the same-named conference held at Leiden University in the summer of 2016. An important aim of this conference was to engage with new directions in transgender studies, and in particular to consider the interventions made possible by theorising trans with an asterisk (\*) in comparison to its hyphenated use (-). While all versions of prefixial 'trans' should remain grounded in gender expression and experiences, the asterisk also encompasses a wide range of disciplinary and theoretical moves that challenge academic disciplines in new and promising ways. This issue explores the ways in which the asterisk in trans\* signals the opening up of colonial and masculinist ways of knowing by shifting to decolonial and non-binary perspectives on disciplinary knowledge production anchored in different geopolitical spheres. The three disciplinary interventions at the heart of this issue are framed by two theoretical essays addressing how to conceptualise and further trans\* perspectives. The first essay develops trans\* vis-à-vis indigenous Mayan thinking about gender, which shares a relational philosophy of becoming, in order to query broader mechanisms of exclusion. The final essay analyses interviews with American transmasculine college students in which the concept of trans\* fosters reflection on the reconfigurations of masculinity in Western gender constructs. These theoretically driven essays open out onto three more disciplinary-focused interventions in which trans\* appears in relation to investigations of South-African refugee law, Dutch media representation, and canonical French literature. These articles not only present possible approaches in which trans\* facilitates an intervention, but also a sharpening of its particular conceptual and methodological use in different cultural and geographical contexts.

In this assembly of articles, we consider the asterisk in trans\* to be a

wildcard for the many possibilities of affixing trans to other terms. Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein liken the typographical symbol to 'a starfish's limby reach [that] follows *trans* and attaches to it, attaches it to something else' (2015, p. 198). For them, the asterisk connects, but also breaks open, emphasises, and includes all noncisgender identities. In this sense, the asterisk is meant to 'break open the category of transgender, transwoman, or transman' (p. 198) by considering the ways in which trans\* is 'less about fixity and normativity and more about prefixial movements' (p. 199). The asterisk thus symbolises *connectivity* by emphasising the many meanings that can be produced through the multiple attachments of the prefix. Trans\* then not only denotes transgender practices of transformation, but also ties itself to a multitude of active interventions that transform discourse and knowledge, be it as translation, transnational, or transcultural research. Hence, we heed Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah's call to ask 'what the transgenic, transnational, or translational [...] might have to do with transgender, as well as what heuristic or analytical insights rooted in transgender experience might contribute to such transdisciplinary inquiries' (2015, p. 190). Furthermore, this issue critically reflects on which assumptions and presuppositions are glossed over by the uses of *trans* in the professional jargon and analytical languages of the many disciplines that engage with gender and sexuality research. We find that trans\* creates leverage for scholars in discussions that seem closed, specifically by espousing a critical attitude towards what Anne Fausto-Sterling calls the 'incorrigible proposition' within dominant disciplinary assumptions (2000, p. 19).

In short, trans\* has the potential to innovate any discipline with which it comes into contact. As an approach, trans\* destabilises binary assumptions about gender and sexuality in ways that can alert a scholar to question their conventional expectations of the material they are analysing. Looking at interviews, literature, television, and other types of media from a trans\* perspective reveals issues and raises questions that would be neglected by traditionally binary frameworks for men and women, and even can be applied to the study of trans men and trans women. The queer paradigm can also muddy the analytical distinction between gender and sexuality, such as author B Camminga shows in the context of African gender refugees who seek to 'shift' their gender after having been shifted into the less-than-human borderlands of existence. Working with interview and media sources, Camminga's article 'Shifting borderlands. (Trans) 'Gender refugees' moving to and through an imagined South Africa' illuminates how the conflation of gender identity/expression with sexual prefer-

ences and/or practices all too often proves to be violent and oppressive for trans and non-binary identified people. However, Camminga's participants, who came to South Africa as gender refugees, did not uniformly face discrimination at home, or even from police, which diversifies the picture of how gender interpellation works in various African countries. Nevertheless, South Africa's unique status as the only African country to include gender identity in Constitutional protections makes it a beacon for these migrants, who seek a greater sense of belonging as a trans person. Centring trans\* as a perspective for analysing how gender shifts in conjunction to other axes of difference, as our authors accomplish in this issue, reveals the cisgender mechanisms underwriting and limiting topics of study as diverse as forced migration, gay literature, and news reporting.

As many scholars have noted before, the concept of trans\* refers to the capacity to transform, transgress, and transcend. While grounded in questions of embodiment, trans does not simply denote a body that transitions, but also connotes a movement across disciplinary and epistemological boundaries. Both movements are discussed in Ainslie Templeton's 'Trans smuggling in Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*' in which they consider smuggling, an illegitimate movement along borders, as a critical framework for exploring concealed and unexpected pathways of knowledge in relation to the work of Jean Genet. Focussing on trans elements and possibilities in and of *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Templeton demonstrates the overlooked transness of one of the novel's central characters, Divine, but also critically reassesses the limited and reductive canonisation of Genet's person and writing as gay. In this literary reading, trans\* initiates movement on various levels of analysis, consequently (re)centring (embodied) knowledges at the margins or outside of Western society and academia. Moving from the inside out, Mariecke van den Berg and Mir Marinus focus on mainstream knowledge production about trans lives by analysing their appearance in major Dutch newspapers and in recent television programmes. In the context of an ever-increasing number of items about transgender people, they extract six dominant transgender scripts by which 'the transgender' has become a distinguished public persona. The cultural scenarios in which certain plots are laid out as life courses reflect mainly a cisgender perspective on trans people as spectacle, but alternative scripts propagated by trans participants and allies on television shows are gaining cultural traction and accord more respectability for trans lives. The article, 'Trans scripts: The representation of transgender people in the media in The Netherlands (1991-2016)' thus signals shifts over the last 25

years influenced by knowledge production within social movements for transgender rights both nationally and globally.

The opening essay to this special issue, *'In Lak' ech: you are my other me: Re-imagining interdisciplinarity as a trans-disciplinary becoming'*, hones in on our desire to conceptualise trans\* as this force that destabilises Western hegemonic thinking by facilitating trans-disciplinary research. Aurora Perego and Christine Quinan employ the feminist framework of intersectionality together with insights from transgender studies in order to bring into view marginalised populations and subjugated knowledges. By unveiling the interdependence of animate and inanimate beings on Earth, the Mayan principle *In Lak' ech* (you are my other me) has the potential to disrupt not only the notion of a 'proper object' that belongs to specific disciplines, but also that of the 'proper subject' (i.e. disciplinary hierarchies per se). Through this principle, they bring together decolonial disruptions of Western academic disciplinary models with transgender studies methods for questioning and transforming academic exclusions. As T.J. Jourian argues in the closing essay of the issue, trans\* is also a methodological move – trans\*ing – that casts interdisciplinary research as a process that 'forces us to consider the relational and fluid natures of identity, as well as of methodological practices, particularly with minoritised populations' (this issue). In 'Trans\*ing constructs: Towards a critical trans\* methodology,' Jourian examines interviews with several transmasculine college students and contends that trans\*ing as an analytical method foregrounds taken-for-granted constructions of gender expression. Trans\*ing brings to light that the transness of the interviewees is achieved by the ways in which they continuously negotiate their own embodiment of masculinity (or lack thereof) with preconceived conceptions of masculinity that are often imposed on them by society.

'Trans\*: Approaches, methods, and concepts' aims to highlight the many scholarly possibilities that looking through a trans\* lens elicits. The essays in this issue showcase disciplinary, analytical, and geographic diversity as well as different methodological engagements with the uses of trans\*. Moreover, they bring a broad range of objects under scrutiny. The articles collected in this issue suggest some of the many possible threads to follow in the ever-expansive field of transgender studies. The prefix of trans, and especially the connectivity signalled in the trans\* iteration, continues to prove vital to making interventions within different academic disciplines. These examples of trans\* interventions are by no means exhaustive, but rather show how the potential of trans\* is spread widely across disciplines, cultural contexts, and geographical locations. We offer

this special issue to you, dear reader, with the hope that it will encourage all to further trans\* movements and trans\* connectivity.

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*Somatechnics* presents thoroughly multi-disciplinary scholarship on the body, providing a space for research that critically engages with the ethico-political implications of a wide range of practices and techniques. The term 'somatechnics' indicates an approach to corporeality which considers it as always already bound up with a variety of technologies, techniques and technics, thus enabling an examination of the lived experiences engendered within a given context, and the effects that technologies, technics and techniques have on embodiment, subjectivity and sociality.

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ISSN: 2044-0138 eISSN: 2044-0146

Published by Edinburgh University Press, The Tun – Holyrood Road, 12(2f) Jackson's Entry, Edinburgh EH8 8PJ.

Email: [journals@eup.ed.ac.uk](mailto:journals@eup.ed.ac.uk)

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# Somatechnics

Volume 8 Number 1 2018

Edited by

Sheila L. Cavanagh, Holly Randell-Moon,  
Iris van der Tuin and Malena Gustavson

Special Issue: Cinematic Bodies

Guest Editors: Cael M. Keegan, Laura Horak  
and Eliza Steinbock

Edinburgh University Press

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