Introduction

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Abstract

The Introduction sets out the rationale for the collection, and the significance and scope of trans studies, in the Middle Ages and beyond. It includes concise coverage of key scholarship in the field, contextualizing the volume and its chapters accordingly. It concludes with a chapter-by-chapter snapshot of the collection as a whole, explaining the thematic structures underpinning the volume's analytical work.

Keywords: medieval studies, gender studies, gender theory, trans studies

In hir pioneering study, *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg writes: 'I couldn't find *myself* in history. No-one like me seemed to have ever existed'.[1] Working for transgender rights entails striving towards the visibility and acceptance of transgender lives. Yet something more than tolerance of trans people's physical existence in the present is required. That something is full ideological existence – the ability to imagine a transgender past, and a transgender future. In this volume, 'transgender' is employed as a broad umbrella, including genderqueer, genderfluid, and non-binary identities, and is also used as a rubric for discussing ways of being that disrupt normative notions of binary gender/sex.[2] We reference both transgender and genderqueer subjects in the title of the volume precisely to indicate

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1 Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation*, p. 11. See also Bychowski in this volume: pp. 245-65; 'Ze/Hir' in the Appendix (p. 325).
2 The syntax of phrases such as 'trans and non-binary identities' may suggest that 'non-binary' and 'trans' are parallel but mutually exclusive terms. Our usage, however, is intended to convey that non-binary identities *are* trans (that is, to avoid the assumption that trans identities must be binary), which may be the unintended impression when trans identities are discussed without the explicit mention of non-binary identities. See 'Trans(gender)' (pp. 316-17) and 'Non-Binary' (p. 306) in the Appendix.

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that both formations operate against – and through – the same normative socio-cultural structures. 'Transgender', as a category, is a subset of 'queer', understood as defiant and often explicitly political non-normativity. Queerness encompasses sexualities and gender identities deemed 'atypical' in their cultural setting, as well as a mode of being in the world that questions dominant norms. Trans theories and readings emerge from the framework of queer theory, and owe much to its innovations. Yet 'trans' cannot be fully contained within the borders of 'queer'. If queer was the call, trans is one of many responses. Trans scholarship brings its insights to bear through specific ways of feeling, knowing, and attending to sources that explore resonances between trans, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming lives across history. The term 'subjects' does double duty in the collection's title, referring to individuals *and* to topics, traces, and resonances which destabilize modern impositions of fixed binary gender on premodern culture(s).

Feinberg begins hir history with St Joan of Arc (d. 1431), whose claims of holy visions, and successful military leadership, resulted in a heresy trial that culminated in execution, based in considerable part on the charge of cross-dressing. Joan has served as a rallying point for trans identity, and exemplifies the ways that religion intersects with medieval trans and genderqueer lives.[3] Joan wore masculine clothing, and fulfilled a role socially understood as masculine, in response to (perceived) divine contact. The chapters in this volume demonstrate that non-normative gender expressions, identities, and embodiments were, in the medieval period, very often imbricated with religion. This could sometimes, as in the case of Joan, leave individuals in a double bind, caught between sanctity and heresy. Since medieval theorizations of gender often drew on religion to explain non-normativity, religion – broadly defined – is a logical starting point and a highly productive source. This material impels the response of modern researchers, both trans and cis, from the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (d. 1935), to Feinberg, to the contributors to this volume. Medieval artefacts call out to us for recognition just as we call out to them for representation.

M.W. Bychowski's work demonstrates that, whether or not Joan was transmasculine, Joan's life was constrained by socio-cultural norms that were not only gendered, but virulently transphobic.[4] Joan's death was the direct result of medieval transphobia. Joan is thus a productive figure for exploring the link between trans lives and sanctity. Yet in France, white supremacists,

3   Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation*, pp. 12-14; Bychowski, 'Patron Saint'.
4   'Patron Saint'.

whose racist ideology is intertwined with trans- and queerphobia, now claim the saint as their own.[5] Essentialized as the 'Maid of Orléans' and scrubbed of queerness, Joan has become a potent white nationalist symbol. Trans history is an ongoing project of reclamation; the hegemony will not easily loosen its grip. The continuing discussion around Joan's life and death indicates the complex intersections of identity-based oppressions. The far-right's Joan, emblematic of whiteness, cannot be queer; the queer Joan can never be a white supremacist icon. Dismantling cis-heteronormativity entails the dismantling of co-relative and compounding discriminatory structures, including white supremacy.[6]

'Transgender' is not just an identity, or a form of embodiment, but a way of disrupting normative and essentializing frameworks. Transphobia is the stigmatization of ways of being that do not conform (or are *perceived as not conforming*) to socio-culturally normate, binarized delineations of 'gender-appropriate' roles, appearances, affects, embodiments, and identities. Transphobia may target individuals who do not consider themselves to be transgender because it is a practice that functions to enforce normativity, and lacks nuanced understanding of the structures it seeks to eradicate, or the lives made possible by and within them. Examinations of culture that draw on transgender viewpoints, affects, and theorizations are not only valuable for trans individuals, who may encounter new ways of recognizing and understanding their own experiences, but also for cisgender individuals, for whom trans readings may catalyse the interrogation of previously unquestioned socio-cultural norms.

This volume employs a transgender lens to undertake a cross-temporal investigation of medieval literature, philosophy and religion: each chapter employs the insights of twentieth- and twenty-first-century trans theory to read medieval texts. With two exceptions – Felix Szabo discusses a Byzantine eunuch saint, and Lee Colwill analyses burials in Late Iron Age Scandinavia linked to the magico-religious practice of *seiðr* – the chapters focus on Catholicism, the dominant religion in medieval Western Europe. As the contributions to this volume amply demonstrate, the co-incidence of medieval representations of non-normative gender with representations of holiness is no coincidence. There is a deep structural connection between these categories of exceptional life, not only in medieval Catholicism. Further comparative study is warranted to tease out the imbrications of religiosity and gender variance. Hagiography as addressed by this volume

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5   Lichfield, 'Struggle'; News Wires, 'French Far-Right'.
6   young shaq realness, Twitter thread.

is interdisciplinary: not only textual, but visual, material, cultural. Not only saints are holy. Beyond its role in institutional canonization, hagiography is the broader practice of memorializing, and reanimating, spiritually significant lives. Audiences turn to these lost lives, seeking the emotional and haptic traces of existences that illuminate their own experiences.[7] Hagiographies are narratives of becoming, possibility, and immanence.[8] They are not how-to manuals for becoming a saint, examples for the reader to rigidly emulate, but guides to recognizing and honouring the sanctity within oneself, offering moments of communion. The isolated trans and/ or genderqueer reader finds that they are no longer alone; communities of readers assemble around saints, though separated by space and time. Modern trans memoirs function as autohagiography: these records of exceptional lives affirm the presence of trans individuals, serving as beacons whose light reveals the possibilities suppressed by normative culture.[9] From members of the trans community lost to violence or suicide, to iconic leaders and activists such as Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, modern-day trans saints abound.[10] Once again, their hagiographies are not instruction manuals, but texts that offer companionship as readers unravel what it means to live authentically, as themselves.[11] Transness is not merely compatible with holiness; transness itself is holy. Trans sanctity, as a mode of radical authenticity, creates a spiritual kinship that is not necessarily religious. For example, Feinberg, with whose words we began this Introduction, was a secular Jewish thinker. Similarly, the study of medieval hagiography, with its intrinsically Catholic worldview, owes much to the contributions of non-Christians.

We do not argue that 'transgender' is somehow an ahistorical or historically transcendent framework, but rather that the patterns of thought enabled by trans theory resonate with the content of the texts under consideration, animating the development of productive new readings. Medieval and modern conceptions of gender – what it is, how it is produced, why it matters – differ. Yet in both periods, there are gender norms, and transgressions thereof. By challenging assumptions that persist among modern scholars of the medieval period, this collection sheds revealing light on medieval understandings and experiences of gender. Simultaneously,

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7   On emotional and haptic engagement, see Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Saints,* pp. 107-45.
8   On becoming, see Light, 'Trans/Mystical', pp. 9-14. Also see the 'FTM' (pp. 294-95) and 'MTF' (pp. 303-04) in the Appendix.
9   On autohagiography, see: Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Saints*, pp. 147-92; 193-242.
10   Bychowski, 'Rest in Power'; Ellison and Hoffman, 'Afterward'.
11   See: Bornstein, *Danger*; Mock, *Redefining Realness*; Sullivan, *Laughed in Pleasure*.

these analyses challenge us to think more critically about 'common-sense' understandings of how gender works today.

The trans past is not a playground. It is unethical to cleave historical trans subjects from the lived realities of their modern descendants, mobilizing trans life as an abstract concept. It is inherently transphobic for cis scholars to instrumentalize trans history for the purposes of building an academic career without explicitly making the connection to, and advocating for, trans lives today.[12] Nor can contemporary trans studies fully comprehend the current situation without understanding and acknowledging the complex history/ies of trans existence. Trans lives have never been monolithic. Traces of non-normative gender in the past reveal productive, affirmative possibilities; medieval imbrications of transness and sanctity are a case in point.

Transgender identity is too often defined in the negative, becoming legible for the cis majority primarily through the pain and dysphoria often associated with the incongruence of an individual's identified gender with their assigned gender, and with the governing gender 'regime'. We therefore hold space in this volume for gender euphoria: for all the moments, short and long, subtle and transcendent, in which the realization and enactment of one's identified gender produces a powerful and specific joy.[13] Being trans is not only about what feels wrong; it is about what feels right. Transgender euphoria resonates with mystical ravishment – both entail, as Ellis Light writes, 'fully embodied comfort and joy in oneself and one's orientation towards creation'.[14] In this way, 'trans modes of reading allow us to connect with medieval mysticism on its own terms'.[15] As a critical tool, transgender readings are about feeling otherwise; to 'sense transgender', following Cáel M. Keegan, is to experience 'a desiring feeling for what might otherwise go unrealized'.[16] In this Introduction, we set the stage for the transgender readings that follow by briefly summarizing the current state of trans rights, and the current state of the fields in which this volume intervenes. We work back from the present to the medieval period, demonstrating the ways in which trans pasts are emerging through the current theoretical and activist landscape, and why these pasts are so significant in the present.

12   See: Bychowski and Kim, 'Introduction', pp. 33-34.
13   See Light, 'Trans/Mystical'.
14   Ibid., p. 32.
15   Ibid., p. 21.
16   Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, p. 6.

Trans lives and trans rights in 2020: A (very) brief overview

In May 2019, the World Health Organization officially de-pathologized trans identities, one of the most significant advances in recent decades in acknowledging the validity of trans and genderqueer existence.[17] Other legal landmarks include the availability of neutral (X) gender markers for non-binary people on identification documents in more than fifteen US states, as well as in countries including Australia, Canada, and Iceland. Similar recognition of non-binary or 'third gender' identities occurs in countries such as Argentina, India, Nepal, and Pakistan.[18] In 2017, Danica Roem became the first openly transgender candidate to be elected to the state legislature in Virginia (USA). In 2020, Pakistan's Aisha Mughal attended the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, becoming the first openly trans person to participate in the Convention's forty-year tenure.

Transgender people are increasingly visible in Western anglophone (primarily American) culture. Notable figures include actress Laverne Cox, writer and activist Janet Mock, and former Olympic athlete Caitlyn Jenner. In 2014, Cox was the first openly trans person to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine, in the June 'Transgender Tipping Point' issue.[19] The same year, she became the first openly trans person to be nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award in an acting category, for her role as trans woman Sophia Burset in the Netflix show *Orange is the New Black*. Cox once more made Emmy history in 2015, winning a Daytime Creative Arts Emmy Award in the Outstanding Special Class as executive producer for the documentary *Laverne Cox Presents: The T Word*.

This increase in visibility, however, does not generally extend to trans men or non-binary people. Trans women bear the brunt of the public gaze: they are rendered emblematic of what it is to be trans, and are thus disproportionately vulnerable to transphobic abuse, up to and including murderous violence, with trans women of colour doubly marginalized.[20] Trans men are often rendered invisible – deliberately so, in the case of certain anti-trans campaigners, who depict trans women as conniving, perverted, and potentially violent men, while infantilizing trans men as vulnerable

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17   World Health Organization, 'Gender Incongruence'; Transgender Europe, 'World Health Organisation'.

18   Movement Advancement Project, 'Identity Document'; Wikipedia, 'Legal Recognition'.

19   Steinmetz, 'Tipping Point'.

20   GLAAD, 'Transgender Day of Remembrance'.

young lesbians suffering the effects of internalized misogyny, who have been confused or tricked into 'abandoning' their womanhood. In this way, transphobic rhetoric seeks to present transmasculine and transfeminine identities as fundamentally different phenomena. Non-binary identities are typically least understood, often derided as fabricated or attention-seeking.

In June 2019 – Pride month – the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education published a pamphlet denying the validity of LGBTQ+ identities. According to this text, queer identities are 'founded on nothing more than a confused concept of freedom in the realm of feelings and wants, [...] as opposed to anything based on the truths of existence'.[21] Gender theories which affirm LBGTQ+ identities are declared to 'annihilate the concept of "nature"', and threaten the 'anthropological fact' of the nuclear family.[22] Whilst exposure to religion is typically protective against suicide for cis-heterosexual individuals, a recent study concluded that it was 'positively associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviours' for LGB individuals.[23] On the evidence of this study, as well as the Vatican's overtly transphobic pamphlet, the same is likely to be true of trans and genderqueer individuals. However, religion can also be a powerfully affirming facet of a trans person's life.[24] In the medieval period, trans and gender non-conforming identities were often understood as indicating proximity to, rather than distance from, the divine. This volume is part of the ongoing work to affirm holiness as entirely compatible with trans identities, and to offer historically grounded refutation of theological transphobia. Jonah Coman offered a fulsome rebuttal of the Vatican's pamphlet on Twitter, demonstrating that the text's assertions contradict the Catholic tradition and history it claims to protect.[25]

In 2018, the British government opened a public consultation on proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) (2004), aimed at simplifying the process of obtaining legal recognition of one's identified gender. The initial report noted that the GRA 'perpetuate[d] the outdated and false assumption that being trans is a mental illness', whilst being 'overly intrusive, humiliating and administratively burdensome'.[26] However, the consultation unleashed a so-called 'debate' on the validity of trans existence. Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) have gained prominence in

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21   Congregation for Catholic Education, 'Towards a Path', p. 11.

22   Ibid., p. 14; pp. 20-21 (p. 20).

23   Lytle et al, 'Association of Religiosity'.

24   See, for example, Pulitano, 'Ceremonies'.

25   Coman, Twitter. Coman revisits themes of transness and sanctity in the cover image he created for the present volume.

26   Minister for Women and Equalities, *Reform*, p. 21.

the UK, spreading transmisogynistic rhetoric popularized by academics including Janice Raymond in the 1970s and 1980s, and gathering momentum through support from well-known figures such as J.K. Rowling.[27] Reportedly, submitted responses to the consultation were overwhelmingly in favour of reform.[28] And yet, in June 2020, newspapers announced that the Conservative Government does not intend to implement any changes.[29] Alarmingly, there were indications instead that long-established trans rights may be rolled back. At the time of writing (July 2020), the trans community is redoubling their fight, whilst preparing for the worst.

In the USA, the Trump administration has enacted legislative changes ranging from removing requirements for agencies receiving government funding to treat trans people equally, to banning transgender individuals from serving in the military.[30] In 2018, a memo revealed that the administration was considering implementing a legal definition of 'sex' as 'either male or female, unchangeable, and determined by the genitals that a person is born with'.[31] This attempt to define trans people out of existence would also, of course, be devastating for intersex people. Trans people responded on social media with the hashtag #WontBeErased. In spite of all the hostility, in spite of its very material, very deadly effect on trans lives, trans life continues to flourish. The internet allows trans people to talk, rather than merely being talked about. The open structures of the web challenge hierarchical distributions of power. Therefore, we cite Twitter and Wikipedia proudly: these are communal tools that allow disenfranchised populations to document their experiences. More than ever, trans voices are being heard. In June 2020, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964) offers protection from workplace discrimination to LGBT+ employees.[32] This is a landmark victory – but the struggle continues. In May 2020, for instance, the Hungarian parliament ended recognition for trans and intersex people, 'replac[ing] the category of "sex" on the civil registry with [...] "sex assigned at birth"'.[33]

27   Raymond, *Empire*; Lewis, 'British Feminism'. Although the term 'TERF' was coined as a descriptor, it is now claimed to be a slur by many anti-trans feminists. Trans-exclusionary voices now describe themselves as 'gender-critical'. See 'TERF' and 'Gender-Critical' in the Appendix: p. 314 and p. 297 respectively. On Rowling, see: Montgomerie, 'Addressing'.
28   Stonewall, 'Statement'.
29   Cowburn, 'Groups'.
30   National Center for Transgender Equality, 'Administration'.
31   Green, Benner, and Pear, 'Defined Out of Existence'.
32   Supreme Court of the United States, Bostock v. Clayton County.
33   ILGA-Europe, 'Hungary Rolls Back Legal Protections'.

Visibility and history

The greater visibility of trans identities in contemporary culture has led some to turn to a faulty version of history in order to justify transphobia. Were there transgender people in the Middle Ages? The question itself is, as M.W. Bychowski points out, 'a bit absurd'.[34] For one, it is rooted in the conceptualization of trans identity as an aberrant product of twenty-first century culture. How quaint, that 2000-something predilection for transgender lives! That is how future historians – how we – will remember trans identities, so the transphobic logic goes. And yet, history does not remember faithfully, nor are historians necessarily the most efficient messengers of past insights. Marginalized identities are often written out of the historical record by those with the privilege of formulating 'historical truth'. The Middle Ages is frequently viewed as a time 'where men were men, women were women, everyone was the same race and practiced the same faith, and no one was corrupted by technology, sexuality or democracy'.[35] This is not how any medievalist worth their salt would put it.

Disingenuous interrogation of the presence of trans people in history is rarely about the factual specifics of the past alone. If talking about medieval trans lives is 'anachronistic', then 'trans-ness [is] not an inextricable part of humanity or gender diversity'.[36] The transphobes' dream is an imaginary medieval past in which everyone knows their (gendered) place. Similar themes emerge in the usage of the Middle Ages by the alt-right and beyond: those who fantasize a past in which everyone who mattered was straight, cisgender, white, and Christian.[37] White supremacists and fascists weaponize the Middle Ages to justify their hatred; as a discipline, medieval studies itself is the product and progenitor of structural racism and intersectional oppressions.[38]

'If the medieval past (globally) is being weaponized for the aims of extreme, violent supremacist groups, what are you doing, medievalists, in your classrooms?', asked Dorothy Kim in 2017.[39] The question remains as urgent as ever. We must uplift the voices of medievalists of colour, of queer medievalists, of trans medievalists, of disabled medievalists, of women

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34   Bychowski, 'Transgender People?'.
35   Amy Kaufman, interviewed in Porterfield, 'Medieval Mindset'.
36   Bychowski, 'Transgender People?'.
37   Kim, 'Charlottesville', 'Teaching'; Rambaran-Olm, 'Misnaming'.
38   Medievalists of Color, 'On Race'; Medievalists of Color, 'Race in the Profession'; Miyashiro, 'Decolonizing'; Rambaran-Olm, 'Misnaming'; 'White Supremacy'.
39   Kim, 'Teaching'.

medievalists, of non-Christian medievalists: of the modern representatives of all the groups that some seek to erase by weaponizing the Middle Ages. We must affirm the value of avowedly situated and embodied scholarship, because all scholarship is situated and embodied. Hegemonic, unmarked situations and bodies have for too long been allowed to masquerade as 'normality' and 'neutrality'. Hundreds of years separate us from medieval subjects, but time can be queered.[40] The past can be felt, and is often closer than we think.

State of the field (1): Academic trans studies

Trans studies is too broad, too deep, and too well-established to be summarized efficiently in the space available here – this in itself is a wonderful thing.[41] The field's major theoretical propositions can be traced from its inception to the present along the following trajectory. Sandy Stone's 'The Empire Strikes Back' and Susan Stryker's 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein' are foundational 1990s texts that position trans studies as a vibrant – and very necessary – opposition to gender essentialism, giving trans people a voice within academic discourse. Stryker and Paisley Currah revisited the fundamentals of trans theory in 'Postposttranssexual', the inaugural keywords edition of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2014).[42] Trans theory has been situated as the ungrateful evil twin of queer theory; a contention that can be variously dismissive and productive, as demonstrated by Stryker and V. Varun Chaudhry.[43] Writing in 2019, Andrea Long Chu is more fatalistic: 'Trans studies is the twin that queer studies ate in the womb.' 'Trans studies is over', she proclaims, and '[i]f it isn't, it should be.'[44] We disagree, though the provocation is welcome. There is much work left to do.

   Academic trans studies is disproportionately white, for which it is undoubtedly the poorer. White-centric frameworks from the global North are not the only ways to think and understand trans identities and bodies. The insistent focus on trans-ness and/as whiteness erases trans people of

40   On queer temporalities see: Edelman, *No Future*; Love, *Feeling Backward*; Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; *How Soon?*. On trans time(s), see: DeVun and Tortorici, 'Trans*historicities'; Mills, *Seeing Sodomy*, pp. 81-132.

41   Stryker and Aizura, *Reader 2*; Stryker and Whittle, *Reader*.

42   Whittington's entry for 'Medieval' demonstrates the significance of medieval contexts for trans identities.

43   Stryker, 'Evil Twin'; Chaudhry, 'Centering'.

44   Chu and Drager, 'After Trans Studies', p. 103.

colour and their experiences, reproducing racialized normativity within the trans community itself.[45] To avoid reinscribing the violence of colonial and white-supremacist regimes of gender, it is essential to foreground intersectionality, especially the role of racialization, bringing the lived histories of multiply marginalized individuals centre stage. The term 'transgender' itself can erase or overwrite indigenous frameworks of gender.[46] In the past few years, long-standing efforts to decolonize trans studies have begun to gain (more) traction within academic publications. In 2014, a special issue of *TSQ*, edited by Aren Z. Aizura et al., was devoted to 'decolonizing the transgender imaginary'. C. Riley Snorton's book, *Black on Both Sides* (2017), was a landmark in Black trans studies, analysing the parallel structures subtending the production of gender and race, and the ways that chattel slavery (re)shaped paradigms of gender.[47] Snorton's book is, to date, the most visible example of the ascendency of Black trans studies.[48] Much of the most cutting-edge work in trans studies is online only, often written in non-academic jargon and from outside the academic community. Gatekeeping of what counts as theorization, who gets to speak about trans identities, and which forms of discourse are valid, is an obstacle both to the production and dissemination of work by marginalized scholars, and to the progress of the entire field.

Trans studies features on more curricula than ever. The rise of trans studies – and recognition of trans identities – in the Academy has, however, provoked considerable backlash. In 2018, *The Guardian* published an open letter from a network of academics employed in the UK, first signed by Kathleen Stock, a prominent anti-trans philosopher.[49] The network contends that trans-inclusive policies stifle 'academic freedom'. Yet debating the validity of trans lives is no mere academic exercise; it has real-world impact within and beyond the classroom. Numerous junior scholars have testified to the ways in which transphobic – and 'gender-critical' – discourse excludes and harms.[50] The *Confronting Trans Antagonism* digital toolkit, first made available online in 2018, is an invaluable resource for trans-affirming

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45   Aizura et al., 'Transgender Imaginary'; Bey, 'Trans*-ness of Blackness'; binoahan, *decolonizing*; Camminga, 'Umbrella?'; Dutta and Roy, 'Decolonizing'; Ellison et al, 'Issue of Blackness'; Paramo, 'Transphobia'; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.
46   binoahan, *decolonizing*, pp. 25-36.
47   Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.
48   See also: Bey, 'Trans*-ness of Blackness'; Ellison et al., 'Issue of Blackness'.
49   Stock (and signatories), 'Academics'.
50   See: Spicer, 'Stuck in Between'; t philosopher, 'Leaving'.

pedagogy.[51] That such a toolkit is even necessary testifies to the routine nature of transphobia in the classroom. Transphobia must be addressed not only in pedagogy, but also in the profession of academia.

State of the field (2): medieval trans studies

Trans medievalism, as a field, has flourished in recent years. Arguably the most prominent and innovative scholar is M.W. Bychowski, whose website, *Transliterature: Things Transform* is a crucial resource for researchers. Bychowski is a pioneer in medieval trans studies, establishing the discipline through her extensive publications and her commitment to increasing the visibility of medieval trans scholars and scholarship at international conferences.[52] In 2019, Bychowski co-edited and co-wrote the Introduction for a special edition of *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 'Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism', with Dorothy Kim.[53] This Introduction charts the scholarly work accomplished and the changing political landscape since 2016. The piece is an outstanding primer on the stakes and trajectory of premodern trans studies. Bychowski and Kim map the intersections of medieval feminist studies and medieval trans studies, and discuss the experience of being a trans woman scholar in the Academy. As we write, there is only one out trans scholar of medieval studies in a permanent academic position, worldwide. Cis scholars working in trans studies must centre the voices of their trans colleagues.

Whilst trans scholars remain, by and large, in precarious academic positions, work in medieval trans studies is increasingly visible, and increasingly embraced by the institutional 'mainstream'. Robert Mills' monograph, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages*, which offers numerous transgender readings of medieval French and English literature and art, was awarded the Society for French Studies' R. Gapper Book Prize in 2015.[54] Jessica A. Boon won the Society for Medievalist Feminist Scholarship's 2019 'Best Article' award, for her essay on trans saint Juana de la Cruz.[55] If the floodgates are not exactly opening, there is a noticeable efflorescence of premodern trans scholarship receiving the imprimatur of 'respectable' academic presses – including

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51   Buchanan et al., *Toolkit*. See also Coman, 'Ally'.
52   Bychowski, *Transliterature: Things Transform*; 'Isle'; 'Reconstructing'; 'Trans Textuality'.
53   Bychowski and Kim, 'Visions'; 'Introduction'.
54   See also Mills, 'Visibly Trans?'
55   On Juana, see also Elphick in this volume: pp. 87-107.

the present volume. The 2019 special issue of the *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* on Early Modern trans studies, edited by Simone Chess, Colby Gordon, and Will Fisher is another landmark, soon to be joined by the collection *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern*, edited by Masha Raskolnikov, Greta LaFleur, and Anna Kłosowska (forthcoming, Cornell University Press). Such scholarship has been largely anglocentric thus far, at least in terms of works reaching wider academic audiences. Nevertheless, things are changing on this front too, with medieval trans studies gaining currency beyond anglophone contexts. Here, we think particularly of Clovis Maillet's 2020 French-language study, *Les genres fluides : de Jeanne d'Arc aux saintes trans* (*Fluid Genders: From Joan of Arc to Trans Saints*).

The vibrancy of premodern trans studies is further evidenced by the urgent, revelatory work being done by doctoral candidates. Blake Gutt's 2018 article 'Transgender Genealogy in *Tristan de Nanteuil*', written during his PhD, included a manifesto for future work in the field, insisting upon the validity and value of trans theory in and for medieval studies. In 2020, Ellis Light was awarded Fordham University's Department of English Graduate Essay Prize for their chapter 'Trans/Mystical: The Euphoria of Blood, Milk, and Sweat in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation*'. This work was explicitly inspired by Bychowski and Kim's special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum*; clearly medieval trans scholarship is responding to a keenly felt need.[56]

Some of the most important work in medieval trans studies is being done by the most precariously situated scholars: graduate students, early career researchers, those without permanent positions.[57] Securely employed scholars – who are almost always cis – must use their status to support marginalized trans colleagues, practically and intellectually. Cis privilege also means that trans studies is more readily accepted as valuable when it is undertaken by non-trans researchers. Medieval trans studies undoubtedly benefits from the sensitive and thoughtful engagement of cis scholars. Indeed, the field owes a significant debt to the queer and feminist work that paved the way for the emergence of the discipline, as outlined below. However, cis scholars should be mindful not to let their presence crowd out trans voices, and should actively create space for their trans colleagues to flourish. The current volume uplifts the work of early career trans and genderqueer scholars, and offers a model of ethical and engaged cis-authored scholarship.

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56   Light, 'Trans/Mystical', p. 1.
57   Medievalists of Color, 'Youngest'.

Terms of engagement (1)

Queer and feminist scholars have been instrumental in highlighting the ways in which hagiography routinely confounds essentialist, binaristic expectations of sex and gender. We must acknowledge, however, that these fields have largely excluded academics of colour, and continue to do so to this day. Feminism in medieval studies has almost always meant white feminism, with very little engagement with global or transnational feminism, womanism, or, more recently, critical race studies. Similarly, queer medieval studies has centred whiteness, ignoring theoretical strands such as queer of colour critique. Since the 1980s, (white) feminist medievalists have worked to redress the stark gender imbalance in the canon. Women, let alone female saints, were largely absent. Through the publication of paradigm-exploding criticism, scholars including Caroline Walker Bynum and Barbara Newman have made the lives of female saints both accessible and relevant.[58] Central to the feminist recovery of neglected sources is close attention to the particularities of female saints' lives, as a distinct corpus and in terms of individual women. Whilst traditional(ist) scholarship held that holy women were passive and submissive, feminist criticism foregrounds the gender dynamics at play. Saints negotiate with patriarchal-ecclesiastical authorities to claim power for themselves. They collaborate with male confessors and hagiographers to co-create their textual identities and to formulate new kinds of theology, directly inspired by their gendered subject position. Feminist criticism thus interrogates how sanctity alters the rules of the gender 'game'.

Bynum's hugely influential *Jesus as Mother*, for instance, demonstrates that Jesus was routinely portrayed as a maternal figure in the Middle Ages. Born of the Virgin Mary alone, his body is fundamentally female. As such, women are not simply sinners, but fully capable of divinity. Bynum re-conceptualizes 'extreme' female asceticism as an affirmative act for holy women.[59] Saints mortify their flesh not to destroy or to negate their bodies to reach God, but instead to find transcendence by inhabiting their bodies as fully, as intensely, as possible. To embrace the (female) body is to embrace divinity. Jesus' gender fluidity is an archetype of a broader pattern in medieval spiritual texts. Whereas monks might position themselves as brides of Christ, following the example of the erotically charged Song of

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58   Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*; *Holy Feast*; *Fragmentation*; B. Newman, *Virile Woman*; *Sister of Wisdom*. On feminist hagiographical studies see, for a start, Hollywood, *Soul*; Lochrie, *Translations*.
59   *Holy Feast*; *Fragmentation*.

Songs, pious women were often considered to become more virile.[60] Whilst underscoring that transgression of gender boundaries was commonplace in medieval religion, 'pre-trans studies' feminist analyses tended to emphasise a limited fluidity, a movement between fixed male and female polarities, subverting but not surpassing the binary itself. A more recent strand of critique conceptualizes saints as transcending the gender binary entirely, inhabiting a 'third' gender.[61]

Queer and feminist scholarship highlights the sexualization of saints: the ways that holy women and men become subject to the consuming gaze of desiring worshippers, alongside their own highly eroticized mystical encounters with Christ. Worship can be an intimate act between queer subjects. Gender is not necessarily the operative factor, what matters is the transcendent trajectory of pious desire: worshipper to saint, saint to God. Depictions of saintly nudity and vulnerability during torture closely resemble modern pornography, as noted by scholars including Robert Mills, Bill Burgwinkle, and Cary Howie.[62] Critics' juxtaposition of queerness and sanctity articulates the evident, yet heretofore unspeakable, truth: not only did queer medieval people exist, but medieval religion was fundamentally queer.[63] The religious gaze was never (merely) heterosexual. The uncritical assumption that 'heterosexuality' was the norm – or even existed as such – in the Middle Ages radically limits comprehension of sources from the period.[64]

Trans studies is additive, not derivative. The objective is not to replace feminist and queer readings, but rather to expand upon the possibilities that these readings offer. At the same time, trans studies indicates where such readings have overwritten or erased trans potentialities, while continuing to insist on the paramount importance of the availability and co-existence of multiple interpretations. While productively nuancing other readings, medieval trans studies must also be receptive to critique, and must collaborate with related fields. For example, there exists a large corpus of work on medieval 'hermaphrodites', much of it flawed by the simplistic equation of mythical hermaphrodites with historical intersex bodies and

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60   For an example, see Elphick in this volume, pp. 90-94.
61   McDaniel, *Third Gender*; Murray, 'One Flesh'; Spencer-Hall, *Medieval Saints*, pp. 55-59.
62   Mills, *Suspended Animation*, pp. 106-44 (p. 109); Burgwinkle and Howie, *Sanctity and Pornography*.
63   See also: Burrus, *Sex Lives*; Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions*, pp. 108-61; *Christianity*; Campbell, *Gift*; 'Translating'; Gaunt, 'Straight Minds'; Mills, 'Delight'; Hollywood, 'Queering'; *Sensible Ecstasy*; Lees and Watt, 'Age and Desire'; Lochrie, 'Mystical Acts'.
64   Schultz, 'Heterosexuality'.

lives. Recent scholarship in medieval intersex studies has reassessed and revised these harmful assumptions.[65] Karl Whittington, for instance, asks whether individuals identified as trans in medievalist work would better be understood as intersex at times.[66]

Terms of engagement (2)

A commitment to rigorous attention to historical sources is a hallmark of trans medievalist work. In order to counter transphobic, misogynist, and/or queerphobic arguments that rely on interpretations of the Bible, biblical paratexts, and Christian traditions, we return to these sources to see what the texts actually say.[67] This allows us to challenge marginalizing biblical interpretation by contextualizing it within a fluid tradition of Christian inquiry into the nature of being human.[68] Another essential tool is commitment to a non-teleological, non-linear historicism, capable of exploring how the past offers new ways of being in the present and future. The past is present in the now; seeing trans lives in medieval sources is affirming in meaningful ways, including politically.[69] Anti-theoretical approaches contend that objectivity about the past is not only possible, but the benchmark for the work of professional historians. This is an untenable position, which reinscribes the hegemonic status of the very subject positions that currently pass for objective. Ways of seeing, thinking and being that are produced by marginalization are not simply of 'special interest' to those directly impacted by oppressions; they are essential, challenging the notion of any 'singular', 'objective' history, and revealing the seeds of resistance that were always already there.

   Before trans studies, medieval studies was already home to a considerable body of work on 'transvestite' saints.[70] Disguise is a recurrent motif, casting gender expressions that might also be read as trans identities as forms of deception. This pernicious trope – often a product of the critic rather than the

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65   Notable work on medieval intersex identities includes the 2018 special edition of *postmedieval* edited by Ruth Evans, comprising an Introduction (Evans, 'Gender') that summarizes the latest scholarship.
66   'Medieval Intersex', p. 240.
67   Bychowski, 'On Genesis'; DeVun, 'Heavenly Hermaphrodites'.
68   Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza, 'Trans*/Religion'.
69   Gutt, 'Anamorphosis'; Evans, 'Gender', pp. 120-22.
70   For bibliography, see: Whittington, 'Medieval Intersex', p. 240 n.11.

text itself – forecloses the affirmative interpretation of trans identities.[71] This is not to say that characters in medieval texts do not cross-dress. Rather, the reflexive assumption that non-normative gender expressions can *only* ever indicate cross-dressing is reductive. Trans studies offers multiple, nuanced ways of reading and interpreting texts. Historical sources come with their own problems. They are imperfect or unavailable; we don't have access to medieval trans lives described by medieval trans individuals. However, we do have evidence that medieval individuals thought about gender in complex ways. Hagiography is not biography, but these texts showcase what medieval people were told to believe, the ways that gender was being considered and discussed, and the questions that were being asked that these texts tried to answer: trans lives could be envisioned and, therefore, trans lives could be lived.

Research is not just about flipping binaries but also about reading, discovering, different *kinds* of gender. Christ, for example, may be read as genderqueer, trans, or beyond gender.[72] Kathryn M. Ringrose proposes that medieval eunuchs inhabited a third gender, a proposition equally forwarded by several scholars of hagiography, in response to the ways that saints' lives negotiate, and at times explode, simplistic gender binaries.[73] Leah DeVun draws from medical, alchemical, and theological texts to reveal 'Christ him/herself as a hermaphrodite, the perfect combination of contraries – masculine and feminine, human and divine – in one body'.[74] Gutt's study of St Fanuel foregrounds the ways in which, in some hagiographic contexts at least, gender transgressions do not foreclose secure gendered identities.[75]

The fact that senior scholars see value in revisiting their own past interpretations clearly indicates the significance of transgender as an optic.[76] In the present volume, Martha G. Newman transports us into her own scholarly history, revisiting arguments from her 2003 article about a monk named Joseph, and re-visioning the monastic not as 'a woman in disguise', but as a trans man.[77] Newman offers a blueprint for ethical scholarship: the

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71   Davis, 'Crossed Texts'; Anson, 'Female Transvestite'; Grayson, 'Disruptive Disguises'. In this volume, see also Wright (pp. 155-76) and Bychowski (pp. 245-65); 'Transvestite' in the Appendix: p. 322.

72   DeVun, 'Heavenly Hermaphrodites', pp. 137-39.

73   Ringrose, 'Shadows'. On eunuchs, see also: Ringrose, *Perfect Servant*; Tougher, *Eunuch*; 'Holy Eunuchs!'; Szabo in this volume: pp. 109-29.

74   'The Jesus Hermaphrodite', p. 195.

75   'Anamorphosis'.

76   See, e.g.: Karras and Linkinen, 'Revisited', revising arguments in Karras and Boyd, 'Interrogation' and '"Ut cum muliere"'.

77   M.G. Newman, 'Real Men'.

ways that scholars, particularly cis-heterosexual scholars, can and should return to earlier work rooted in trans-exclusionary (or trans-minimizing) paradigms. Such reassessment is also necessary on the macro-level, as disciplinary norms, standard methodologies, and default assumptions are revisited, and thereby improved. The necessity – and fruitfulness – of this work is demonstrated in Colwill's chapter in this volume, which shows what is to gain when the gendered biases that permeate archaeology as a field are challenged.[78] The assumption of gender binarism skews findings, in archaeology as elsewhere.

The scope of the present volume is relatively narrow; we focus on a subset of cultural artefacts, using a particular theoretical approach. We therefore recognize that there are significant intersections of identity that are not substantively addressed in this collection. These include queer sexualities; racial and geographic diversity (almost all of the sources addressed are western European, and all assume whiteness as default); disability; and class. Colwill and Szabo's chapters examine Late Iron Age Scandinavia and the Byzantine Empire respectively, while Gutt's chapter considers the intersection of trans and crip embodiments. Regarding the question of class, the subjects discussed in this collection are all extraordinary in some way, belonging to an elite class of holiness.

The decolonization of trans studies is imperative.[79] From the Indian subcontinent to North America, European colonization is responsible for the stigmatization and eradication of indigenous gender identities that colonizers viewed as 'unnatural'.[80] The link between transphobia and white supremacy is well attested.[81] The racial(ized) histories of trans identities is a critical area of research, and far-reaching analyses of the connection between racialization and trans embodiment(s) have been published in the last few years.[82] Such projects are especially urgent since trans women of colour are the focus of the most deadly form of transphobia: transmisogynoir.[83] In terms of this collection, productive future work might examine Western Christian notions of trans identity, exceptionality and sanctity alongside non-Western models of 'exceptional' and/or holy trans identities, for example

78   Pp. 177-97, especially 179-82, 186-87, 191-93.
79   Aizura et al, 'Transgender Imaginary'; binaohan, *decolonizing*.
80   Picq, 'Decolonizing'.
81   Paramo, 'Transphobia'; also 'White Supremacy' in the Appendix, pp. 324-25.
82   Bey, 'Trans*-ness of Blackness'; Camminga, 'Umbrella?'; Dutta and Roy, 'Decolonizing'; Ellison et al, 'Issue of Blackness'; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.
83   See 'Transmisogynoir' in the Appendix: p. 320.

the hijras of the Indian subcontinent, and indigenous North American Two-Spirit individuals.[84]

Overview of the collection

The first section of the volume focuses on the traces of queer medieval lives, and reinscribing trans and genderqueer realities by critiquing assumptions that reproduce the status quo. Martha G. Newman's chapter examines an equivocal narrative told about a twelfth-century German monk named Joseph, offering its readers by turns an essentialist portrayal of gendered disguise and a portrait of a self-actualized trans man. Caitlyn McLoughlin analyses John Capgrave's fifteenth-century *Life of St Katherine* within a queer genealogical framework, whilst addressing the saint's relative privilege through the lens of homonormativity. Kevin C.A. Elphick's examination of gender fluidity and liminality in the *Life* and sermons of Juana de la Cruz demonstrates that her use of imagery that transcends gender is contiguous, and compatible, with earlier hagiographic sources and with her Franciscan heritage. Through the case study of Patriarch Ignatios, Felix Szabo explores the sacred masculinity available to eunuch saints: were eunuchs really capable of saintly behaviour?

The second section of the collection addresses objects, images and identities – and trans and genderqueer ways of looking at them. Sophie Sexon examines imagery of Christ's wounds in Books of Hours and prayer rolls, reading this sacred body as non-binary. Vanessa Wright explores corporeal, sartorial, and gestural signifiers of gender and identity in illuminations of the *Vie de sainte Eufrosine* in three fourteenth-century Parisian manuscripts. Lee Colwill's chapter investigates four remarkable burials in Late Iron Age Scandinavia, exploring the evidence for connecting the magico-religious practice of *seiðr* with transgressive gender performances.

The final section considers imbrications of gender and genre. Reflecting on the Old French *Vie de sainte Eufrosine*, Amy V. Ogden considers the role of gender transgression in the poet's pedagogical techniques. Blake Gutt combines trans and crip theory to read the character of Blanchandin·e in a fourteenth-century French text, *Tristan de Nanteuil*, in which impairment, cure, and gender transformation function as tools of a hagiographic narrative. Analysing an extract from Magnus Hirschfeld's *Transvestites* on St Marinos,

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84 See 'Hijra' (p. 301) and 'Two-Spirit' (p. 324) in the Appendix.

M.W. Bychowski repurposes Hirschfeld's theories to read medieval trans saints through the frame of authenticity.

In her Epilogue, Mathilde van Dijk situates the essays in this collection as descendants of a feminist tradition which insists upon the complexity of gender identity. Van Dijk maintains that medieval texts are particularly useful in the fight for trans and genderqueer rights today: they testify to the inherent instability of the gender binary, whilst proffering different models of conceptualizing gender.

The chapters are presented in thematic units; however, many other fruitful combinations are possible. For example, St Eufrosine unites Ogden and Wright's chapters, and each can be productively juxtaposed with Bychowski's chapter on St Marinos, and Newman's chapter on brother Joseph, two other AFAB monks. The authenticity of the trans soul, foregrounded by Bychowski, resonates with Sexon's assessment of a genderqueer Christ who offers potent representation of genders beyond the binary, and Elphick's study of Mother Juana's divine prenatal regendering. Sexon's analyses demonstrate that the perfect divinity of Christ's body depends upon its 'imperfection' – his wounds. Gutt's chapter centres a disabled body, and examines the structures that bind sacred, physically impaired, and transgender embodiment(s) together. This exploration complements Colwill's discussion of skeletal remains, which lays bare the complex physical means by which trans embodiments are constituted, interpreted, or denied. Queer lineages and non-normative genealogies link Ogden, McLoughlin and Gutt's contributions. Szabo's treatment of the Byzantine eunuch saint Patriarch Ignatios adds context to St Eufrosine's self-presentation as a eunuch, explored by Ogden and Wright.

The chapters in this collection represent the cutting-edge of medieval(ist) trans studies and theoretically inflected hagiographical scholarship. This volume is a call to arms. On the one hand, this is a corpus of contextually rigorous, politically engaged scholarship which offers a model for similar progressive research. On the other hand, the collection levies a challenge to scholars across disciplines: how might we reflect upon the past, rethink the past and our role, as academics, in producing it? How can we do justice to our sources, and ourselves? How might we support those with skin in the nominally historical game, professionally and personally? In this spirit, we offer the Appendix to the volume, the 'Trans and Genderqueer Studies Terminology, Language, and Usage Guide'. Historical representation matters, linguistic representation too. Chapters in this volume demonstrate the productivity – the necessity – of trans and genderqueer historical scholarship.

As a complement, the Guide offers practical support for doing such work without perpetuating historical anti-trans and anti-queer injustices.

'History hurts, but not only,' observes Lauren Berlant.[85] No matter how traumatic, history has the potential to inspire 'optimism in response to the oppressive presence of what dominates or is taken for granted. Political emotions are responses to prospects for change: fidelity to those responses is optimistic, even if the affects are dark.'[86] This collection sits at that very crossroad, of joyful optimism constituted by the realization that things must change, that history must do more, must do better, than the status quo of trans-exclusionary work.

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85   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 121.
86   Ibid.

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