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Dear Trans Studies, Can You Do Love?

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Dear Trans Studies, Can You Do Love?

Dear Transgender Studies,

Remember when we first met? I was eager and intrigued. But then you promptly had me up all night reading Lyotard. With my brow furrowed, I tried to locate your roots in that text. I started to doubt that I had actually even caught a glimpse of you yet. I guess I kinda thought we'd have more in common. Remember me attempting to chart your genealogy, poring over pages of soul-numbing theory? In my mind, you'd have a throbbing heart, infused and churning with life blood: real transgender people living and bearing witness to real transgender lives had birthed, grown, and nurtured you. How is it that, according to these pages, your roots were more entangled with the dusty theories of white cis men than they were suffused with the embodied knowledges of QT2BIPOC gender-expansive folks like me?

It began to occur to me that perhaps we were not going to get along so well—that maybe it wasn't going to work out between me and you. Me, with all of my praxis and being and doing. You, with all your theories and, well, just philosophizing at length. Remember when I turned a page and whispered, "Oh, I get it. I don't belong here. This is not a place where I belong"? Remember when I began to grow resentful of the theories you claimed as your distinguished pedigree, the foundation to which you clung? Not because I was struggling to understand them, but mostly because I was struggling to understand why they mattered, how they could matter so much. Remember when that one classmate mistook my irritation for ignorance: "Yeah, you just have to work at it, Ian. It's like a muscle"?

Okay, I acknowledge that perhaps my perception of what *matters* when it comes to these topics is skewed. As you might recall, I'd rush in late to the evening seminar after spending the day alongside Black, brown, and Indigenous trans, nonbinary, and two-spirit young people in support groups; driving with them to their appointments for housing intakes or healthcare; shopping with them to pick up food at the grocery store or clothes at the thrift store; dropping them off at the queer youth center or the bus stop or wherever home was for the time being; working and advocating beside them. With these young

people on my mind, inevitably, I'd think, "Don't we, myself and my kindred, deserve to see ourselves, our lives, our stories reflected in these theories? Showing up in these pages? I don't recognize us in here. Don't we matter here?"

I was often reminded of Craig Womack's (2008: 369) questions: "What is the relationship between our theories and the people we are theorizing about? Do the subjects of our theorizing see themselves in the same way as we describe them in books, journal articles, classroom lectures, and so on? How do we bring their self-representations into our theorizing?" Ultimately, I would lay the matter to rest near Barbara Christian's (1988: 72) incisive observation of her own experience with the new "Philosophers" of literary criticism, that "I was supposed to know *them*, while they were not at all interested in knowing *me*."

Here's what I do know. Transgender studies, you are born and reborn of dynamic tumult, sustained by movements, debates, and transgressions that are transnational and anything but monochrome. You are born of Black, brown, Indigenous, immigrant, genderqueer, and nonbinary folks; of activists and artists and addicts, femmes and fairies, butches and banjee girls, leitis and fa'afatama, aggressives and studs, queers and queens, Two-Spirits and travestis, street kids and sex workers and, yes, scholars too. Many of us flock to and crowd under the umbrella of *transgender* or its equivalents. Many of us reject such designations out of hand. Our grit and glamour, our triumphs and traumas, our hyper-visibility, our invisibility. Our salt-water tears and a vast sea of lived experiences: these stormy waters are your birthplace every time.

So, transgender studies, how are you doing? No, I actually mean what are you *doing*? How are you doing what you're doing? And for whom are you doing it? What are you doing to honor and strengthen your relationship to your birthplace? How does an increasingly institutionalized academic field do love? Do healing? Do revolution? Can it?

Ever hopeful,

Ian Khara

Transgender studies, as Susan Stryker (2006: 13) observes, intends to, “(de)subjugate knowledge,” by engaging “previously marginalized forms of knowledge” with “erudite scholarship” in order to “recapture, for use in the present, a historical knowledge of particular structurations of power.” These knowledges, those of lived experience and of embodied expertise, are akin to those Malea Powell (2002: 12) calls “ghost stories”: “those rooted in other knowledges, other ways of knowing, other ways of being and becoming that frequently go unheard and unsaid in much scholarly work;” including “the webs and wisps of narrative that are woven around, underneath, behind, inside, and against the dominant narratives of ‘scholarly discourse.’” Powell continues, “I think a lot about what ghost stories can teach us, how in telling them I might both honor the knowledge that isn’t honored in universities and do so in a way that interweaves these stories with more recognizable academic ‘theorizing ’as well” (12).

In fields like transgender studies, our “previously marginalized knowledges,” our “ghost stories,” are drawn into academic discourse and granted access to the podium, the publication, the pairing with theories of renowned scholars and, in the process, perhaps made less marginal. But is this how we “honor the knowledge”? By offering to it a type of legitimacy, validation by the academy? What about the QT2BIPOC people from whom these knowledges arise? Are they then less marginalized because their embodied knowledges reach a broader, more intellectual audience? Dora Silva Santana (2019: 210) asks us to consider how “the embodied theorizing and call for action of black and trans people transnationally” can be rendered visible via the processes of knowledge production and how such processes must be changed in order for this to take place. Perhaps we do a better job of honoring these

knowledges when we more intentionally honor the people and the labor of their lives as the sources of these knowledges.

L.H. Stallings (2015: 224) observes, “If transgender and transsexual history and culture depend upon what has been published, visible, legible, and authorized enough to be archived, then we might query what has been omitted as a result of the conditions of illiteracy, criminalization, or poverty.” In its aim to center and recontextualize such previously delegitimated knowledges, transgender studies intends to reconsider who and what is positioned as intellectual. This approach, ideally, invites transgender studies scholars and practitioners to weave new knowledge drawn in part from the wisdom of lived and living experience and “embodied theorizing” (Santana 2019: 210); to spend less of our energy “worshipping at the altar of the wisdom of the Theorist” (Powell 2002: 15). In considering the participation in such “alternative” approaches to discourses, Powell (2002: 15) asks “[W]hat discourse is the Other discourse alternative to?” As she reminds us, “Academic discourse, after all, isn’t at the center of the lives of most of the humans on the globe.” In other words, most people do not use the opaque language of academia to contemplate, create, and communicate knowledge. When these ways of knowing are interwoven, even foregrounded, within relevant strands of theory and into scholarly discourse, how are we then ensuring that this reconstituted knowledge is applicable, available, and accessible to those from whom it emerges? And how do accessibility and access look? In other words, how do we ensure that transgender studies does more than gesture toward reciprocity?

As it becomes increasingly institutionalized and tightens its grasp on recognition as a field of rigorous scholarship, transgender studies must be mindful to avoid replicating the same insurmountable barriers and insider/outsider dichotomies that exist throughout the academy. This is an institution designed to deny access, drawing its value primarily from its exclusivity. Instead of prizing the tools that fortify such walls, transgender studies can take up among its many tools of engagement an intentional “about us, for us, by us” orientation—“us” being those with experiential expertise in a myriad of ways of

“being trans” and certainly not just those of us who are academicians. Within such a facet of transgender studies—in which knowledges that are produced, configured, and assembled *about* us are written, created, or performed *by* us and *for* us as the primary intended audience—we are more likely to dispense with discourse and language that “mystifies rather than clarifies our condition” (Christian 1988: 71). In so doing, we dismantle some of the barriers that preclude many trans people from seeing themselves reflected and participating in transgender studies.

In this approach, we employ various and creative modes of theorizing and critical engagement elicited by our own experiences and those of our kindred. This is one way to attend to the necessity of relevance, reciprocity, and accessibility when scholars of transgender studies engage with otherwise disqualified ways of knowing, such as the range of embodied epistemologies of transgender and gender-expansive people. This approach invites richer, more authentic engagement with transgender studies by people who are living the types of experiences that the field transmutes into scholarship. If, as Powell (2002: 15) points out, “the only difference between a history, a theory, a poem, an essay, is the one that we have ourselves imposed,” then by taking such an expansive outlook on who and what is positioned as intellectual, we can ensure that transgender studies is *done* by a diversity of practitioners, not just by a small collection of scholars.

Transgender studies has long aspired to do more than observe, study, and interpret transgender phenomena. To this end, the field has embraced a shift away from identitarian methodologies (i.e., knowledge production based in the being, doing, and social positioning of transness, such as trans ethnography and autoethnography) toward more critical engagements with the hierarchies and structures of power and the conditions within which gender is both normed and destabilized. Despite the necessity of this type of critical theory to the development of a scholarly field, transgender studies’ identitarian cornerstone is yet vital, particularly as it privileges the field’s access to intimate knowledge of trans lives and experiences. Such close familiarity should inspire practitioners of transgender studies

to shape theories and methodologies of tenderness, empathy, and love regarding our kindred and ourselves.

Dora Silva Santana (2019: 220), a “black Brazilian trans woman warrior, scholar, activist, artist and story teller of experiences embodied in language and flesh,” asks “What are the strategies of resistance and care for ourselves and our communities in the face of the haunting and material presence of death?” (210). In response, she undertakes a methodology she calls *papo-de-mana*, or “sista talk”: conversing with and facilitating conversations between black women. This practice contributes to a “multisited archive” of the knowledge and experiences of black trans women in Brazil. This archive constitutes a body of work that, as Santana explains, “is accessed and activated then by our embodied knowledge and . . . can mean, but is not limited to, the ways we care for ourselves and for our communities, our relation to our landscapes, the discourses we create, the artistic work we produce in different media, and the imaginaries and emotions that are precariously disembodied into language” (211). With access to this “multisited archive” of embodied knowledge, Santana theorizes *mais viva*: “It means ‘being-alive-savvy,’ it is not just being alive but more alive; it is transitioning in the world by transcending, trans-ing life” (216). Santana’s project—and similarly, her investments in the practice of *escrevivência*, “the woven tissue of unsubordinated writing of our living, writing as our living, writing-living,” in which she insists on her right to write herself and her kindred into the stories she chooses to tell (2017: 182)—demonstrate how transgender studies can do tenderness and healing in the service of both knowledge production and resistance.

Outlining a praxis of epistemic redress, healing, and resistance, Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison (2014: 224) call for transgender studies to more thoroughly engage its many shared investments with black feminisms. They encourage using the shared tools of black feminisms and transgender studies to form strategies of transformation “to move beyond mere theorizing.” As Green and Ellison explain, “Tranifesting enacts a resistance to the political and epistemic operations that would encapsulate, and

capitalize for others, the fruits of our labor. It is a form of radical political and intellectual production that takes place at the crossroads of trauma, injury, and the potential for material transformation and healing” (223). Transfesting, as outlined by Green and Ellison, calls for expansive ways of knowing and creating new knowledges. It also spurs transgender studies to engage its under-acknowledged shared lineage with Black feminisms and thereby enrich who and what is represented in the genealogy of the field.

As transgender studies is increasingly institutionalized, it may seem that it will inevitably find itself entrenched among the tarnished fixtures of academe. We must be mindful not to allow transgender studies to be anchored to a heritage that shuns the origins of this promising field; a heritage that is exclusionary by design, that would refuse to know *us* while requiring us to thoroughly know *it*. If we are to claim this institutional heritage, let us do so as the illegitimate stepchild crashing the stuffy family dinner: deliberately and brazenly nonconformist, elbows on the table, and defiantly critiquing each flavorless forkful. Then let us selectively but shamelessly pack up copious amounts of these bland offerings into Tupperware. Let us take them home to the kitchen in the heart of our home where we will deconstruct, reconfigure, supplement, infuse, and season it, preparing nourishing meals for our kindred and ourselves. With care-full practice and intention, perhaps transgender studies is an academic field that can indeed do healing and love.

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