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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Historicising trans pasts: An introduction

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ON CHUCKLES AND SCORN: WHY HISTORICISE 'TRANS' PASTS?

> To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether. A chuckle, after all, could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future.
>
> Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*[1]

In Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Ustad Kulsoom Bi frequently takes the new initiates of her hijra household to a Sound and Light show at the historic Red Fort in Old Delhi, India.[2] At one moment in the show, during a section covering the year 1739, the audience can clearly hear the 'deep, distinct, rasping, coquettish giggle of a court eunuch'.[3] For Kulsoom Bi, this laugh represents a direct line of connection between the court eunuchs of early modern India and today's hijras, and so is incontestable evidence of her place, and the place of her chosen family, in history – and thus in the present, and future, landscape of Delhi. Histories of non-normative genders, bodies and expressions are of course much more plural and diverse than implied by transhistorical lines; however, this does not diminish the power of the eunuch's chuckle: its echo allows past and present identities to touch.[4]

A common refrain in transgender activism beyond the academy is 'we have always been here', and indeed it is possible to find evidence of non-normative gender experiences in some of the earliest human societies. This can serve as a way of understanding responses to transness in our own societies, as well as imagining alternative responses to gender variance.[5] Trans history, then, as with so many historical projects, retains one foot firmly in the present, as it faces the future. As Hil Maltino writes in his 2020 book *Trans Care*, the search for 'trancestors' can be a way of escaping the current anti-trans climate and finding 'a roadmap for another way of being'.[6] Reading trans pasts, in all their diversity, allows us to read trans futures and (re)create trans possibilities. But there is a careful balance to be negotiated here, and we must be careful to see someone's roadmap in their wider context, without assuming each journey can and must be the same. We should ask, instead, how individuals have been

recognised by the societies in which they lived, positively and negatively, and how they have resisted the boxes that do not represent them.

Not everyone accepts that this can be done under the label of 'trans'. This term, and its affixed identities (such as transgender, transsexual and transvestite) only come to have meaning, and cultural intelligibility, in the Western world in the mid-twentieth century, and even in modern contexts its use has not been uncontroversial.[7] For one, Camila Sosa Villada begins *The Queens of Sarmiento Park*, her novel about a group of travesti sex workers in Córdoba, Argentina, with an author's note rejecting northern academia's attempts at overwriting and sanitising the travesti experience through what she sees as the unnuanced language of trans. 'I don't use the term trans woman', she writes,

> I don't use surgical vocabulary, cold as a scalpel, because the terminology doesn't reflect our experience as travestis in these regions, from indigenous times to this nonsense of a civilization. I reclaim the stonings and the spittings, I reclaim the scorn.[8]

Like Kulsoom Bi, Villada is in her own way engaging in making history. Rather than hearing chuckles, for her it is the scorn that draws a connection between how travestis past and present have responded to the negativity they receive on the grounds of their gender identity and presentation. The stakes of her community's claim in history (and, thus, the present and future landscapes of Argentina) are grounded in the specificity of travesti experience, and to overwrite that with a single essentialised idea of 'trans' risks losing the meaningfulness of that community. This is something that we cannot lose sight of and, if a framework of historised trans pasts is to be productive, it cannot and must not erase the vast variety of experiences or lump a range of lives together into a simple, singular narrative.

A different, though related, problem with using the label 'trans' comes up in Andrea Long Chu's now infamous dialogue with Emmett Harsin Drager, where she claims that 'trans studies is over. If it isn't, it should be'.[9] Chu highlights that, by using trans 'purely as an au courant garnish' in order to create broad and abstract theoretical approaches, we risk leaving behind the very people we are meant to be fighting for: trans people become merely 'a methodological stepping-stone for thinking more expansively about boundary crossings of all sorts'.[10]

With this in mind, we need to be clear on why we use 'trans' in our methodology of historicising trans pasts. When we look with this lens, and use this language, it means that we have the chance to ask questions about gender across time and space, to see differences, and sameness, from new angles, and consider the relationship(s) between identity, the body and community. Crucially, we are conscious of keeping the people – individuals and groups – at the centre of the narratives we explore. As such, a drive behind the articles in this Special Issue, though we did not impose the term 'trans' on our authors, has been to consider what the implications of using it would be for the people they were studying. We hope this opens up the opportunity to discover the shared pleasures as well as to consider the stonings, the spittings and the scorn, whilst ensuring that we do not remove the nuance of trans pasts or trans presents.

In using the term 'trans' in this way, we do not try to claim historical figures by essentialising 'identity' to mean 'identical'. Instead, our historicisation of trans pasts can be aligned with Kit Heyam's conception of 'community'. They write that

> in real life, we don't *own* or *claim* the members of our communities; we certainly don't forbid them to be members of multiple communities at once. Instead, we make space for them: we support, validate and celebrate their presence in our community.[11]

To have someone as a presence in your community, too, means to listen to them. It means hearing their chuckle and acknowledging it in whatever way you can; it means acknowledging the stonings, the spittings and the scorn, and finding connection without assuming that one's experience is just like the next. It means sharing roadmaps, not as predestined routes but as ways of moving together.

Inherent to this type of community building is the understanding that no matter how narrow the community we choose to be part of, there will always be differences as well as similarities amongst its members. We might here consider as a case study the galli, who were devotees of the Phrygian Mother

of the Gods and part of the religious and social milieu of the Roman Republic and Empire.[12] Contemporary sources, written almost exclusively by elite citizen men who were outsiders to this cultic group, focus heavily on the fact that initiation, generally understood as only available to male-bodied candidates, required self-castration, after which the galli would typically present in feminine clothing, makeup and hairstyles.[13] This embodiment, consciously moving oneself away from a normative body, combined with stark presentation choices, was particularly incompatible with Roman expectations of (binary) gender expression, and as such, elite authors constantly denigrated and ridiculed what they saw as a failure of masculinity.

To take the galli simply as they are presented to us in the texts and records of those authors is to see a wholly negative image of incomprehensible otherness that could be considered to align with madness.[14] Recent studies, however, have sought to reinterpret the references we see of the galli through trans informed perspectives and consider what it might mean to actively call the galli 'third gender', 'neither man nor woman' or 'non-binary'.[15] To do this is not to trace a direct essentialist line to contemporary transgender and non-binary identity categories, but rather to create an alternative way of seeing the relationship that the galli had to the gender norms and expressions in the society around them. When we consider them through a methodology that historicises trans pasts, it becomes obvious that the galli, as a group, cannot simply be subsumed under masculinity (even a 'failed' one) and that attempts to explain away their non-normative actions in hetero-cis-normative ways are far from adequate. It also becomes obvious that each gallus does not need to present or even experience hir gender in the exact same way, in much the same way that every Roman matron did not present an identical expression to one another to be considered part of a social and gendered category.[16] Instead, through hir presentation and hir body (in the case of castration), each gallus as an individual transitioned away from normative expectations of binary gender, while in their plurality the galli created an alternative group identity that existed as part of the milieu of the Roman Empire.

This collective identity, if not the nuances of the individual experiences, was obvious to their Roman contemporaries. The elite men writing about the galli may castigate them for their failings and see them as outside normative Romanness, but the written depictions of them only make sense precisely because of identifiable reference points to their identity. Thus, in Apuleius' second-century picaresque novel, *The Golden Ass*, the author does not even need to use the word 'galli' for contemporary and modern readers to recognise the heavily scorned group of priests with whom the protagonist briefly travels with in books eight and nine.[17] They are referred to only by slurs and depicted as wholly negative, yet this lampooning only holds up because they took up a recognisable space in Roman society. Indeed, even within the fictional representation of the novel, these galli share with each other a language, a way of referring to their 'sisters', and even a few chuckles.

Calling this identity 'trans', alongside other historical communities such as travesti and hijra, is not to say that the scorn each is subjected to is indistinguishable or that their chuckles are about the same inside joke. We can, however, start to recognise each individual as taking part in their particular community, as well as sharing a point of connection with other groups who find themselves outside of the gender norms and expectations of their own wider society. To group the galli, the hijra, the travesti or any of those you will read about in this Special Issue under the umbrella of 'trans histories' is not to overwrite the cultural and social specificity of their identity. Quite the opposite: it in fact allows us to think through the relationships of diverse genders to the cultures and communities in which they themselves exist as well as to create a broader cross-chronological community. It is our hope, then, that this Special Issue emphasises the benefits of bringing together the study of trans history from the ancient to the modern world.

EVERY NOW AND THEN: MODERNITY, PERIODISATION AND HISTORICISING TRANS 'PASTS'

In her monograph titled *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker provides what she herself considers to be 'a subject both narrower and broader' than the title suggests: though 'trans' as a term broadens

the complexity of contemporary gender, it is, quite specifically, a history based mostly in the USA in the twentieth century.[18] She begins her narrative in the mid-nineteenth century, but the majority of the book focuses on the post-Second World War period, and thus the conception of 'trans history' becomes the story of when 'social conditions take shape that would foster a mass transgender movement for social change in the century that lay ahead'.[19]

Stryker's monograph is itself a crucial moment in trans historiography, and the story she is telling is of course an important one. Its narrowness, however, raises an important question about what counts as the (or a) trans past. Under this sharp periodisation, the history Stryker sets out to tell is that of the direct precursors to contemporary US trans lives, remaining very much within the modern and the Western world. Other experiences of diverse genders are implicitly relegated to the specific parameters of comparative history, as careful walls are built to differentiate and separate the members of this otherwise broad community.

Stryker has not been the only modern historian keen to focus on the social movements that led to the developments of contemporary Western trans lives. A striking example is Kadji Amin's discussion of Lili Elbe, one of the earliest recipients of sex reassignment surgery in 1930, who he claims to have been misrecognised as transsexual and should instead be placed within the 'prehistory of transsexuality'. Amin explains:

> I understand 'prehistory' not as the stable foundation of contemporary transsexuality or transgender identity but rather as the crystallization, in a different form, of a network whose nodes eventually shifted, were rejected, and fused with new elements to compose what we now know as 'transgender'.[20]

While the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the 'prehistory of transexuality' is surely an accurate reflection of the richness of transness in the past, their fusion into a stable composition of 'what we now know as "transgender"' appears rather strange and showcases one of the dangers of isolating the transgender present from the transgender past: the flattening of modern trans identities.[21] Writing in the same year, Jules Gill-Peterson argues that it is possible – and indeed important – to push trans histories, and especially those of trans children, further back into the past. She begins her study in the early twentieth century, 'the moment in which sex was redefined through the concept of plasticity by fields like endocrinology and urology'.[22] Importantly, unlike Amin, Gill-Peterson seeks 'to contest the historiography of the trans past monopolized by the parameters of transsexuality' and explains that although the children who populate her book

> may not look recognizably trans by today's dominant definition, this is precisely because the signature effect of medicalization over the past century has been to restrict trans life to a singular definition while simultaneously placing an etiological question mark upon trans people.[23]

Gill-Peterson identifies here one of the advantages of looking into the past even when it does not fit our preconceived ideas: it makes visible the forces that naturalise genders and their expressions and unravels the illusion of singular definitions. This, we believe, applies whether we extend our study to the early twentieth century or the ancient world.

Premodern histories have followed, in their own way, a similar tendency to silo. In their introduction to their broad-ranging edited collection, Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Kłosowska explicitly posit a distinction between a very recent modernity and the historically distant past as the basis for the volume. For them, premodern trans histories allow us to engage with the alterity of the past and to consider 'notions of the gendered subject [which] are surprisingly different from that which modern readers find familiar'.[24] In their epilogue, LaFleur goes as far as to state that they prefer to avoid modern terminology such as 'nonbinary', in favour of contemporary vocabularies, because it 'tends to circumscribe and even delimit what we are able to imagine, recognize, or identify as trans history'. Indeed, they argue that 'naming a figure as trans in our own moment often imports to the

[past] a series of twenty-first-century assumptions about what trans experience is or is not' and can lead to 'flattening' reading practices.[25] This line of argument also assumes a singular, or at least very narrow, definition of what it means to be trans in the present. Writing in the same year, Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall, in their edited collection *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, are also careful to clarify that they do not take 'transgender' as a term that is 'somehow an ahistorical or historically transcendent framework'.[26] Yet, they still take a more expansive approach, arguing that through the study of the Middle Ages, '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'.[27] Instead of focusing on whether we can call medieval subjects transgender, such an approach puts the emphasis on the reader's reaction to the text. This can come with its own points of contention, but Gutt and Spencer-Hall are again reconciliatory. Instead of disputing whether a figure is part of trans history or the history of sexuality, they take an 'additive' approach: 'The objective is not to replace feminist and queer readings, but rather to expand upon the possibilities that these readings offer'.[28] A natural extension of this thinking would see that medieval, as well as modern, ancient, early modern and other periodisations can be additive to each other in the historicisation of trans pasts and presents and the imagining of trans futures. Such an approach could provide readings from cross-temporal sources that can speak to each other, as well as to us in the here and now, creating trans-temporal communities.

In this Special Issue, we unapologetically stand with Karma Lochrie, believing that 'the whole defense against the charge of anachronism arising out of the use of modern categories such as "transgender" to understand the past is no longer necessary'.[29] We bring into conversation historians of a wide range of periodisations and geographies, in order to theorise trans pasts in their pluralities. The use of these categories in periodisations alongside one another now becomes an opportunity for all of us: it emphasises that trans subjects defy homogeneity and uniformity, not only because of the many different groups under which they continue to appear, but also because of the intersectional nature of identity more broadly, which defies clear-cut categories and simple truths. To accept 'trans' as a term for the present but deny it for the past is to assume too much uniformity in the present and to put too great a burden of proof on premodern and non-Western sources/histories. Instead, we hope to extend Shiv Datt Sharma's call, made in the context of decolonising trans studies: to use the term 'trans' for all of history in 'rigorous, imaginative, playful' ways, which do not simply recognise and affirm past histories 'as a matter of the diversity of "other" identities', but expose that all trans identities hide within them both similarities and differences.[30] With Sharma, we also hope that the past includes perspectives that 'can expand and transform the discourse on trans identity' in the present-day West.[31]

Starting from the assumption that trans people existed in the past, we encouraged our authors to consider what it meant to be trans in their period and socio-cultural context or to look more broadly at the social forces that shaped trans lives. The results present a multiplicity of opinions that stay far from the flattened historical analysis feared by LaFleur and challenge the singularity of any one trans narrative. To end this introduction, we demonstrate some of the themes that have come out between and across the articles of this Special Issue.

Many of our contributors, premodern and modern historians, address directly the relationship between past, present and future, highlighting diverse reasons for more integrated cross-chronological understandings. For Ky Merkley and Noah Lubinsky reaching into the past for trans people and trans narratives is an act that can make life more livable for trans people today.

Merkley uses examples from ancient Roman literature to underline our ethical imperative to 'write histories that provide space for our readers, students, and colleagues to see themselves in the past' and which 'vocally resist and defend against' attempts to produce a single universalising narrative of trans lives. By viewing gender as a hyperobject, we are able to glimpse the multiplicity of views about what transgender is that can be expressed within a single text by a variety of characters during *moments* when normative understandings are made, unmade and repaired. Through close readings of two texts, Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* and Statius' *Achilleid*, Merkley opens up ways

of looking past our own assumptions of gender, to consider the ways it envelopes the characters and their developments. Moreover, this approach allows them to bypass two central problems of writing (trans)gender history: the tension between essentialising and constructionist narratives and the incomprehensibility of the gender system as a whole.

Lubinsky develops a methodology of reaching which involves both historical transmasculine people who reach towards testosterone and historians who desire to reach for these transmasculine people. More specifically, he follows the life of synthetic testosterone, through the issues of the *South African Medical Journal* published between the 1920s and the 1960s, as well as through Estian Smit's testimony in front of the South African parliament in 2003. In doing so, he examines testosterone's reachability as it changes based on medical advancements, legal procedures, as well as the material relations of its production. Despite this focus on structures that permit or incapacitate an identification as trans, the people themselves are never too far away. As a final part of his methodology, Lubinsky explores how to write trans history through the object with an eye on the human, by engaging with critical fabulation. Bringing to life the people who would have used the testosterone allows Lubinsky to make space for the unknowable as well as to create imagined communities across time.

Jamey Jesperson and Onni Gust also emphasise the relationship between trans pasts and presents as one that is rooted in the historian's ethical responsibilities.

Jesperson delves into the Spanish colonial archive to recover trans feminine lives which had previously been studied solely within the context of the history of homosexuality. Her examination of the sodomy trials of colonial México (1604–1771) lays bare a history of racialised trans misogyny: violence and death directed towards trans feminine people who were primarily Black, Indigenous or of mixed race. Similarly, her study of the Catholic missions of Alta California (1769–1821) unveils the religious moral panic that accompanied the continuous existence of Indigenous people whom missionaries had failed to harass, physically and verbally, into a gender binary. Amidst this violence, Jesperson finds trans feminine people who managed to lead rich and vibrant lives, full of the joys of community and sisterhood. In fleshing out their lives and their deaths, she reminds us that their stories are part of a long trans feminine history, one that lives on in the present. To show this, Jesperson adopts Saylesh Wesley's methodology of re-membering: the act of reclaiming and piecing back together histories of trans femininity 'deleted' by colonialism in a way that centres decolonial efforts in the present. This allows her to create a bridge across time to remind us that today's crisis of trans misogyny in the Americas is far from a new phenomenon and neither is the ongoing trans feminine survival in its face.

Gust explores discourses on mermaids and hermaphrodites in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain and empire to propose a trans history that goes against and beyond the centring of Man. Both figures occupied a fascination as 'monsters' and provoked voyeuristic interest because of their sexual ambiguity. Both were placed outside the 'natural order' and brought with them racialised and ableist ideas about what it meant to be human. As Gust shows, thinking with the 'mermaid' and the 'hermaphrodite' allows historians of transness to expose the violent processes of Western knowledge-formation as well as to refuse them, by adhering to genealogies that reject and supersede the 'human'. Such an alignment with the monster could enable trans historians to ally themselves with a vision of the future that goes beyond anthropocentrism, something particularly urgent given our current environmental challenges.

Ilya Maude's and Claire Becker's articles explore the impact that contemporary ideas about transness, and gender transgression more broadly, have on writing about the past.

Maude focuses on Byzantine historiography to examine how three key historians have brought into their research modern cis perspectives which do violence to trans lives. Two of the historians studied by Maude, Ringrose and Tougher, did not use the word 'trans' to describe their subject, eunuchs. Yet Maude identifies a streak of transmisogyny in Tougher's work and a confusion of trans and intersex that influences Ringrose's approach to what she calls a 'third gender'. Maude's other case study, Betancourt, who does use the term 'trans', also imports modern assumptions, and specifically the sexologist's gaze, into their understanding of monastic trans men. The difference between the three

historians is that Betancourt has received much more criticism for their anachronisms; for Ringrose and Tougher, their anachronistic imports remain much more invisible. Their use of supposedly neutral contemporary terms exempt them from the high standards of scrutiny imposed upon those who use modern vocabulary. Maude's article shows that whether or not we use the term trans to describe gender-variant people, we cannot divorce the study of the past from that of the present.

Becker's article similarly shows that writers who look back to earlier narratives, either from their position in the twenty-first century or the seventeenth, bring their own lens which often overwrites and occludes transness. Becker focuses on rewritings of the life of the medieval visionary Juana de la Cruz. While Juana's original *Life*, composed in the first half of the sixteenth century, included a miraculous transformation from male to female in the womb, seventeenth-century hagiographical retellings lost the most salient parts of Juana's transness, including the mention of her Adam's apple. Becker argues that this textual loss reflects religious and political changes brought about by the Reformation, the Council of Trent and the Spanish Inquisition. Most notable amongst them was the increase in power of clerical authorities to whose benefit it was to re-inscribe transmisogynistic trends that Juana's first *Life* had subverted.

Many of the modern-focussed articles included in this Special Issue allow us to see the complexity of trans lives. They reveal a messiness that is often approached differently by modern and premodern, trans and cis, historians, raising questions not only about the material itself but also about our own reluctance to talk about transness when our expectations are challenged. Notably, Zavier Nunn and Ezgi Saritaş discover slippages of identity, as their topics intermingle transness, queerness, theatricality and references to intersex identities.

Nunn's article focuses on Vienna during and after the annexation of Austria into the Third Reich, to discuss the life of P., whom he describes as 'trans and queer, feminine yet wily enough to claim manhood'. P. was treated as sexually deviant by police and court authorities; she both denied and eventually self-declared her womanhood; and was later in life officially diagnosed with hermaphroditism. These identities intersected at the creation of P.'s subjectivity, but were also strategically employed, emphasised or concealed, at different points and different settings of her life. Nunn's goal in this article is to tell P.'s life without resorting to narratives of tragedy and victimisation. To do so he adopts a camp reading that beautifully brings out the contradictions, the irony, and the playfulness inherent in P.'s identity and presentation.

Saritaş' article examines the life of Kenan Çinili, a Turkish trans man whose adventures were sensationalised in the second half of the 1930s in newspaper accounts and a series of photos. The autobiographical parts of Kenan's life, as found in their serialised memoir, troubled Saritaş, who, having initially questioned the validity of the source, was careful 'to take seriously the cautionary criticism of trans studies scholars not to read trans self-narratives against themselves in order to expose the gaps and inconsistencies in them'. In doing so, Saritaş discovered Kenan had little concern with coherency, instead revelling in a messiness similar to that of many other trans stories in this volume. For Saritaş, these doubts became a starting point to discuss how to do trans history as a cis historian. In this, the choice of the term 'trans' played an important role: it heightens the historian's attention towards her own positionality. To deal with a category of the past that we consider to be utterly out of reach for everyone can wrongly embolden one to challenge, doubt and silence. But to name a subject as trans evokes for the cis historian an extra level of responsibility, and thus hopefully rigour.

Likewise, the diversity in terminology as well as in the lived experience of trans people in the modern world emphasise that if we wish to create any sort of community, we need to give up on ideas of homogeneity. Present differences are as hard to reconcile as past ones, as Emily Cousens, stef m. shuster and Will Hansen demonstrate.

Cousens sets out to bring to the fore the unacknowledged contributions of trans women to second-wave feminism. As they argue, by telling a story that equates the second wave with trans-exclusionary feminism, we 'ontologise, naturalise and ahistoricise a separation between cis women and trans people' in the present. Instead, Cousens focuses on the issues of a North American-based newsletter, the *Journal of Male Feminism*, published between 1977 and 1979, to show that their trans contributors,

who called themselves 'male women', 'were crafting their identities as "feminists"' and 'producing some of the period's most valuable knowledge on sex and gender'. shuster takes on medical discourses, examining letters exchanged between transgender people and medical professionals from the 1950s to the 1970s in the USA to show the influence of old and new eugenics on the development of US trans medicine and on the framing of 'real' transgender people by their doctors. The ideology that shuster unveils produced the 'socially fit' trans person who was allowed access to surgical and/or hormonal interventions because they complied with the professional's expectations of gender normativity, heterosexual desire, mental health and productivity. As shuster shows, these medical ideas, which shaped the futures of many trans people, represent a continuation of previous eugenics programs which aimed to eliminate bodily and mental 'degeneracy' as well as moral impurity.

Cousens and shuster both deal with North American trans people in the 1970s, yet the terms used for them, their presentation and the framing of their sexuality differ, sometimes in striking ways. For one, the subjects of shuster's study were faced with an ideal of asexuality, set by the medical establishment. If they were married, they were not expected to enjoy sex with their wives, but to admire them for their gender expression. In this case, heterosexual desire was to be understood as between a man and a trans woman after transition. On the other hand, Cousens' 'male women', 'an umbrella term for those on the transfeminine spectrum who identified in the language of the day as cross-dressers, femmiphiles (FPs), transvestites (TVs), transsexuals (TSs), transgenderists (TGs)', were ideally presented by their wives as 'the best guy you have ever slept with'. For these people, the wife was central to the normalising mission of the heterosexual, professional transfeminine husband.

Similarly striking differences in what we would undeniably describe as trans can be found in Hansen's analysis of interviews conducted with two trans women – one a Maori sex worker; the other white and middle-class, both of whom were trans activists in Aotearoa between 1974 and 1987. Hansen emphasises the different support networks that were available to the two women, from coffee lounges and trans households to membership only exclusive clubs. In doing so, he demonstrates the vital importance of trans solidarity, while also revealing the internal tensions caused by race and class. Hansen's interviews of Hati and CJ show two very different types of transness contained within parallel trans networks, one that appealed to the hegemonic values of heterosexuality and whiteness, and another that stood for their opposite.

Finally, across all of these articles, and across studies that historicise trans pasts more broadly, a central consideration remains embodiment. As we have noted above, developments in medical technologies such as surgery or hormone therapy have been used as turning points in recent trans history. Bringing studies of trans embodiment from different contexts together, however, allows us to move away from modern Western medicine determining narrow trans identity and instead explore how transness (and cisness) have existed as forces that act upon the body. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the articles of Alexis A. Ferguson, Aixia Huang and Jess Hinchy.

Ferguson's article expands our understanding of cisness as a force that acts on the body. They focus on the mid-nineteenth century to argue that scientific theorists, such as Herbert Spencer and George Henry Lewes, developed physiological theories that, while appealing to the authority of biological function, also rely upon social behaviour to enable and maintain that function. These theories, when applied to sex, form what Ferguson names a 'preliminary cisness', a Victorian iteration of the kind of 'coherency of assigned sex and social gender markers' that we associate with early twentieth-century sexology. But this kind of thinking did not go unchallenged. Ferguson highlights the existence of counter-discourses through George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, 'a literary space in which social character may take precedence over the signs of sex on the body'. In this novel, they find a two-way relationship between the body and the social: the 'organisation' of the body acts as the basis of 'character', but 'character' can also re-organise the body, allowing for an escape from compulsory cisness. Understanding the operation of cisness is a useful methodological tool for doing trans history, highlighting the discursive work required to construct cisness itself.

Taking us to China in the Ming and Qing dynasties, Huang demonstrates the materiality of transfemininity through three types of object: foot-binding cloth, the embroidery needle and concealing

underwear. By focusing on objects Huang does not have to decide which individual gets to be named trans and who does not. Instead, her focus is on the ways in which 'trans-' embodiments were 'actualised through certain objects', whether they were for people who would have lived most of their life as women as well as those who may have used such objects only occasionally and without completely concealing their male identities. Huang's argument is a powerful reminder of the ways in which objects are imbued with social power themselves, as well as having the power to imbue social categorisation on the bodies that use them. Through their use, objects become an extension of identity and even of embodiment, changing how the body looks, acts or is perceived by the actor's community.

Finally, Hinchy's article provides a keen reminder of how (trans)gender intersects with other bodily identity markers, such as one's age. Hinchy examines the thwarted attempts of British colonial forces in nineteenth-century India to demarcate and categorise bodies based on Western standards which relied on numerical ages as well as a clearly differentiated sex binary. As she shows, the hijra community had its own ways of understanding ageing which 'resisted or eluded colonial epistemologies'. Many hijras did not know their exact age and used unreliable numbers or the life stages of 'old'/'very old' to describe an unruly kind of ageing: 'in the span of eight calendar years, some people had aged well over a decade, while others had aged only a few years, and some had not aged at all'. Furthermore, as Hinchy demonstrates, there was no easy correlation between ageing and sexuality. Pairing colonial assertions that old eunuchs had lost both sexual capacity and sexual appeal with evidence from interdisciplinary hijra studies alerts us to different configurations of old age, desire and desirability, which resist Western narratives of bodily decline.

Taken together, the articles in this Special Issue adopt a range of interesting methodological approaches which can be applied and contrasted across time, and as such defy modern/premodern divides, from Nunn's camp reading to Merkley's hyperobject. Alongside the groupings we have made above, there are other links that stretch between these articles: for one, Maude and Ferguson offer critical analyses of cisness; for another, Lubinsky and Huang persuasively argue for the centring of objects in trans history. As you read across them, you will find that each author takes a different approach to deploying 'trans' in 'historicising trans pasts', if they explicitly use it at all. As we have shown here, however, these methodologies and approaches are able to speak to each other precisely through their differences, and ultimately we suggest that there is no single answer. Variation breeds new ideas and an expanded community.

ENDNOTES

[1] Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 51.

[2] The hijra are a group that exist within South Asian culture and history, often understood as being neither male nor female. For an introduction to hijra identity in the past, present and indeed future, see Aniruddha Dutta, 'An Epistemology of Collusion: Hijras, Kothis and the Historical (dis)Continuity of Gender/Sexual Identities in Eastern India', *Gender & History* 24 (2012), pp. 825–49. See also Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Gayatri Reddy, 'Paradigms of Thirdness: Analyzing the Past, Present, and Potential Futures of Gender and Sexual Meaning in India', *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 5 (2018), pp. 48–60; Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra c.1850–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[3] Roy, *The Ministry*, p. 51.

[4] For 'touching the past' as a way to engage with historical texts and events on a more intimate level, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[5] For example, Shon Faye traces a 'prehistory' of trans, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, as a way of understanding the current 'crisis in healthcare for trans people in Britain': Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), pp. 76–84, quotation from p. 84. See also Damian A. Gonzalez-Salzberg and Maroula Perisanidi, 'Belonging Beyond the Binary: From Byzantine Eunuchs and Indian Hijras to Gender-Fluid and Non-Binary Identities', *Journal of Law and Society* 48 (2021), pp. 669–89, for the uses and limits of history in informing contemporary legal discourse.

[6] Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), p. 51.

[7] For an outline of the development of the concept of transgender in the twentieth century, and particularly in America, see David Valentine, *Imagine Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, Rev. ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2017).

[8] Camila Sosa Villada, *The Queens of Sarmiento Park*, tr. Kit Maude (London: Virago, 2022), p. xi. For an introduction to the complicated positionality of *travesti* in trans studies, and the use of '*travesti* as an identification, a critical analytic, and an embodied mode of politics', see Cole Rizki, 'Latin/x American Trans Studies: Toward a *Travesti*-Trans Analytic', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6 (2019), pp. 145–55, quotation from p. 148.

[9] Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, 'After Trans Studies', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6 (2019), pp. 103–116, here p. 103.

[10] Chu and Harsin Drager, 'After Trans Studies', p. 105. See also Marta Vicente, who has warned that using just 'trans' or transgender' has the potential to 'impose modern values onto historical subjects' and eclipse other terms, such as transvestite or transsexual, even within these narrow contexts: Marta V. Vicente, 'Transgender: A Useful Category? Or, How the Historical Study of "Transsexual" and "Transvestite" Can Help us Rethink "Transgender" as a Category', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8 (2021), pp. 426–42, here p. 428.

[11] Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (London: Basic Books, 2022), p. 27.

[12] For a comparison of the Phrygian, Greek and Roman sources on the galli, see Lynne E. Roller, 'The Ideology of the Eunuch Priest', *Gender & History* 9 (1997), pp. 542–59; for a diachronic summary of the negative treatment of the galli by Roman sources, see Jacob Latham, '"Fabulous Clap-Trap": Roman Masculinity, the Cult of Magna Mater, and Literary Constructions of the Galli at Rome from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity', *Journal of Religion* 92 (2012), pp. 84–122.

[13] For a discussion of the clothing and presentation choices of the galli, see Chris Mowat, 'Don't be a Drag, Just be a Priest: The Clothing and Identity of the Galli of Cybele in the Roman Republic and Empire', *Gender & History* 33 (2021), pp. 296–313.

[14] Themes of madness run through a number of ancient depictions of the galli, such as in Catullus' 'Attis' poem, and Varro's *Eumenides*. For a discussion of the themes of this latter text, alongside a reading of it that positions the galli as a trans group, see Chris Mowat, 'Mad About the "Boys"? Desire, Revulsion and (Mis)Recognition in Varro's *Eumenides*', *Narrative* 32 (forthcoming 2024).

[15] These terms can be found, for example, in Anja Klöckner, '*Tertium Genus*? Representation of Religious Practitioners in the Cult of Magna Mater', in Richard L. Gordon, Georgia Petridou and Jörg Rüpke (eds), *Beyond Priesthood: Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovators in the Roman Empire* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 343–84; Françoise Van Haeperen, *Étrangère et ancestrale: la mère des dieux dans le monde romain* (Paris: Les Éditions de Cerf, 2019), esp. pp. 17–54; Mowat, 'Don't be a Drag'.

[16] In recognising the galli as neither men nor women, we represent them in the English language through the pronouns 'ze, hir': for further discussion, see Mowat, 'Don't be a Drag', p. 300.

[17] For the representation of this group in Apuleius' novel, see H. Christian Blood, '*Sed illae puellae*: Transgender Studies and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*', *Helios* 46 (2019). pp. 163–88; Evelyn Adkins, 'The Politics of Transgender representation in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* and *Loukios, or the Ass*', in Allison Surtees and Jennifer Dyer (eds), *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 157–68.

[18] Stryker, *Transgender History*, p. ix.

[19] Stryker, *Transgender History*, p. 46.

[20] Kadji Amin, 'Glands, Eugenics, and Rejuvenation in Man into Woman: A Biopolitical Genealogy of Transsexuality', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5 (2018), pp. 589–605, here p. 593.

[21] Amin takes a similarly modern-focused approach in more recent articles, see for example his 'Whither Trans Studies?: A Field at a Crossroads', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 10 (2023), pp. 54–8.

[22] Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2018), p. 11.

[23] Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, p. 11.

[24] Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Kłosowska, 'Introduction: The Benefits of Being Transhistorical', in Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Kłosowska (eds), *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), pp. 1–23, here p. 3.

[25] Greta LaFleur, 'Epilogue: Against Consensus', in Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Kłosowska (eds), *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), pp. 366–78, here p. 371.

[26] Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall, 'Introduction', in Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall (eds), *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 11–40, here p. 14. Note also the pioneering work of Gabrielle Bychowski whose research has repeatedly highlighted the importance of using the word 'trans' to describe the Middle Ages as well as centring trans people in the past and present. See Dorothy Kim and M. W. Bychowski, 'Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism: An Introduction', *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 55 (2019), pp. 6–41; M. W. Bychowski, 'The Necropolitics of Narcissus: Confessions of Transgender Suicide in the Middle Ages', *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 55 (2019), pp. 207–48.

[27] Gutt and Spencer-Hall, 'Introduction', p. 14.

[28] Gutt and Spencer-Hall, 'Introduction', p. 25.

[29] Karma Lochrie, 'Nonbinary and Trans Premodernities', *Exemplaria* 34 (2022), pp. 363–71, here p. 365.

[30] Shiv Datt Sharma, 'Provincializing Trans Studies', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 10 (2023), pp. 10–15, here p. 11.

[31] Sharma, 'Provincializing Trans Studies', p. 11. We do this, however, whilst also recognising the limitations: though we follow the call to decolonise our studies, we also need to acknowledge that the majority of our contributors, though they may have complex heritages, are white and/or writing from institutions in the Global North (however precariously placed). As such, this hegemonic force, and its potential for overwriting with Villada's 'surgical vocabulary', is not eliminated.

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