

# Introduction

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AREN Z. AIZURA, TRYSTAN COTTEN, CARSTEN BALZER/CARLA LAGATA,  
MARCIA OCHOA, and SALVADOR VIDAL-ORTIZ

**A**longside the emergence of research on gender-nonconforming and gender-variant practices and as a field over the last decade, transgender studies has been challenged to interrogate its whiteness (Roen 2006; Haritaworn and Snorton 2013). However, less work has appeared that would challenge transgender studies to look closely at its geographic and historical location as the product of a largely North American settler culture. Commenting on the intersections of queer studies and Native studies, Daniel Heath Justice, Mark Rifkin, and Bethany Schneider observe that despite queer studies' efforts to interrogate its "presumptive whiteness" and histories of racialization, these efforts still tend to efface the politics of indigeneity and settlement (2010: 6). European colonial expansion deployed gender and sexuality as technologies to categorize colonized bodies into distinct kinds (Stoler 1995: 7), while sexual and gender diversity in non-European contexts was used as a rationale to support the removal, "re-education," or wholesale genocide of colonized others (Miranda 2013). The traces of those histories of removal and dispossession remain, as do their imbrication in global sexual and gender politics. If transgender studies is now a field, it is time to highlight the necessary work of tracing histories of colonialism, gender, and sexuality that accompany the formation of that field and to undo them. How can we accomplish this when the term *transgender* itself does not begin to encompass the radically different relationships that gender nonconforming populations across the world have to health care, basic rights, safety from criminalization or stigmatization, and legal protection or regulation of bodies, identity, and space? Decolonial work is central to grasping transgender studies' own institutionalization as a field with a dedicated journal, *TSQ*. Despite the recent flourishing of transgender studies scholarship, much of this work either issues from or is based in North America or Europe. Early discussions within the *TSQ* editorial board touched on the importance of making clear *TSQ*'s status as a US/North America-based journal

and yet one that questioned assumptions about what that meant. This special issue is intended to bridge the gap between decolonial and critical ethnic studies work happening within North America and transnational work that highlights the multiple legacies of the European colonial project globally as they apply to gender-nonconforming knowledge and life. In a similar fashion to gender studies and queer studies (sometimes moving within or alongside those disciplines and sometimes radically separate from them), transgender scholarship must grapple with the racial and geopolitical economies and forms of governmentality that instill whiteness as the given of the transgender subject. It must also resist the assumption that European settler states initiate political models or progressive historical change, with other locations following. Most importantly, transgender studies needs to engage with *decolonizing* as an epistemological method and as a political movement. Hence the title of this special issue: *Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary*.

The editors of *TSQ* asked five members of the editorial board to develop this issue, and we took on the task grounded in the work we've done across the diverse regions represented here. There are, of course, many obstacles to decolonizing English-language peer-reviewed academic writing. We offer these interventions as the beginning of a conversation intended to build decolonial approaches in transgender studies. Among the discussions the editorial group had, which confirmed our vision for this issue, was the challenge of rethinking academic writing and publishing outside the traditional, and sometimes colonial, enterprise. We hope that the articles included here reflect a form of resistance to these traditional ways of doing scholarship, particularly to social-scientific ways of knowing, even as some of the contributions engage with them. We thought it would be important to center our writing on the "I" (or the "eye"), to turn attention back toward the one writing or observing from a particular perspective, not in the manner of scientific authority (with its unvoiced I and unseen eye), not as social scientists who erase the other in the act of writing the Other, but rather to authorize knowledge of the marginalized and to promote the value of the I, and the eye, of those speaking from marginality (Clough 2000). We also considered the question of transnationality: how to solicit writing that engages with how gender-nonconforming and gender-variant subjectivities and practices are transforming across national and regional borders. However, at every moment in the production process, we had to remain aware that *TSQ* is a US-based journal. It is published in English and thus incorporates anglocentric elements from the beginning. It's our hope that as *TSQ* becomes a broader platform for transgender studies in multiple locations and through a diversity of written forms, we can pursue copublishing with other journals in the global South to provide greater access to and cross-pollination of trans inquiry. This work, published in such

journals as *Iconos*, *Cadernas Pagu*, *Sexualidad, salud y sociedad*, *Nómadas*, *Revista de estudios sociales*, *Pambazuka News*, *Jindal Global Law Review*, *Indian Streams Research Journal*, *Working Papers in Gender/Sexuality Studies* (Taiwan), *Chinese Sex Rights Research*, and *CENTRO Journal*, can deeply inform the approaches developed in an anglophone context, which are often particularly insular due to the monolingualism of US academic training. Finally, we found it imperative to highlight writing that unsettled the hegemonic epistemological frames in which we find ourselves.

### **Decolonization in Context**

We wish to frame this introduction by drawing from five decades of activism and scholarship in women of color feminisms and Native and Indigenous studies that instructs us in how to trouble the relationship between colonizing, academic work, and activism and in how we might understand decolonizing itself. In particular, we draw on a relatively recent wave of work with authors such as Chela Sandoval, María Lugones, and Emma Pérez. They help us to consider different models for knowing, forms of connecting, or being with, that may result in positive coalitional politics and that resist the gender and sexuality normativities of colonialism itself. For Pérez, the decolonial imaginary “embodies the buried desires of the unconscious, living and breathing in between that which is colonialist and that which is colonized” (1999: 110). Lugones refers to resistance to the coloniality of gender as “a complex interaction of economic, racializing, and gendering systems in which every person at the colonial encounter can be found” (2012: 77). Decolonization means something rather different in an Indigenous studies context, where the history and power relationships of settler colonialism—including the anthropological gaze—tend to render Indigenous populations’ epistemological production of knowledge invisible. Drawing on Indigenous scholars Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, the editors of *Queer Indigenous Studies* understand decolonizing work as methodological both in the sense of a turn toward Indigenous knowledge making itself and in highlighting difference: “A methodological turn to Indigenous knowledges opens up accounts to the multiplicity, complexity, contestation, and change among knowledge claims by Indigenous people” (Driskill et al. 2011: 4). This includes discussions of the many differences in cultural and political understandings of gender and sexuality in Native and Indigenous contexts and the simultaneous undoing of the gendered and sexual violences of settler colonialism.

Finally, important work on Blackness, gender, and sexuality, such as that of M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), Sharon Holland (2000, 2012), Saidiya Hartman (1997) and Lindon Barrett (1999 and 2014), informs our understanding of colonization and enslavement as mutually constitutive processes of racialization,

particularly in the Americas. To think the decolonial requires an understanding of the centrality of enslavement to the colonial project, though the time-depth of coloniality and its forms of administration vary significantly in different regions. The production of Blackness through colonization and enslavement entails processes of valuation, subjection, and subjectivity that mark not only our epistemologies but also our forms of social legibility and embodiment. M. Jacqui Alexander sees the “twin companions” of colonialism and slavery refracted in the encounter between Caribbean and African American scholars, calling us to attend to the “unfinished project” of decolonization and move away from racial polarizations endemic in these debates (Alexander 2005, 271). Sharon Holland’s groundbreaking work on death and (Black) subjectivity, *Raising the Dead* shows contemporary manifestations of these processes, and argues for the formation of queerness and Blackness in the colonial “space of death” (2000, 70). In more recent work, Holland turns to the erotic, the space of desire, as a site for “the strange and often violent modes of racist practice” (2012, 9). Hartman’s study of American selfmaking through slavery in the 19th century argues that the “engendering of race” happens through economic and legal processes that render the field of sexuality visible only within the constraints of subjecthood framed by these processes. The structural, physical, and juridical violence of slavery, then, frames how we understand the meanings and possibilities of all bodies within systems founded on it. The late Lindon Barrett also explored the valuation of racialized bodies in the literary and US national imaginary beginning with *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (1999). His last manuscript, recently released posthumously, engages the development of racialized Blackness in the context of modernity and the development of mercantile capitalism.

Decolonization never acts in the singular: it always already incorporates the language of the imperial gaze, or racial formation theorizing, or gendering practices. It also incorporates queries, assumptions, and impositions on the body and the sense of “realness” trans people are expected to accrue. In addition, Lugones’s concept of the “coloniality of gender” shows us how gender and sexual diversity are filtered through a colonizing, binary gaze into naturalized ideas of “sex” and “gender” to begin with. If we challenge the epistemology of binary gender, we can begin to “unthink” this double bind, which produces the terms of recognition for trans subjects within medical governmentality and modern forms of self-making and citizenship. For at least five decades, trans experience has been subjugated under the reductive sign of surgical genital reconstruction (“the operation”) or the exoticizing stereotype of the she-male; as Elijah Edelman (2012) notes in a transformative rereading of this history, trans figures are often articulated as sites of pleasure for others (as prostitute, spectacle, or comic absurdity) but rarely as a site of pleasure for oneself as trans. Decolonization of this

oppression also requires displacing the temporalities of representation of trans experience, particularly trans women of color experience, as ending inevitably in violence or death due to trans people's own recalcitrant engagement in what are incriminatingly named "risky behavior" (sex work, drug use, walking while Black or brown). This "necropolitical" regime (Haritaworn and Snorton 2013) in which trans people of color are blamed for their own deaths must be countered with the ways in which trans and gender-nonconforming people survive, thrive, and fight multiple systems of oppression every day.

### **Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary**

If we are to decolonize the current imaginary of what it means to be trans, we will have to take the interventions of decolonial and critical race scholars as well as trans communities of color to heart. Here we are focused on the field of transgender studies. What does it mean to decolonize transgender studies? It means, first, to interrogate what transgender studies is and to understand it as having multiple nodes of emergence. The transgender studies canon (there is already a canon) is usually understood to mean writing by a number of anglophone trans theorists who challenged the use of transgender people as objects within medicine and psychiatry, law, and feminism, beginning in the early 1990s with Sandy Stone's "A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1991). While this was and still is necessary work, it has been "course corrected" by commentary that interrogates the racial, colonial, and economic power structures that make some transgender lives more valuable and prone to gaining recognition and rights than others. This has resulted in something like a progress narrative for transgender studies, which some of us have subscribed to: that trans studies began with "the basics" and then evolved to incorporate an intersectional and critical lens. The insight we draw precisely from decolonial feminisms, Indigenous studies, and trans of color theory is to understand "theory" differently: not as knowledge that issues from within the academy or that aspires to academic recognition but that invents itself on the fly, in the midst of a campaign, in the telling of stories. Trans people have always done political and theoretical work that centers the dynamics of imperialism, colonialism, and the multiple histories of racialization (Retzliff 2007). This work has often been mistaken for first-person narrative, as if trans people are only qualified to "tell their stories" and require experts to interpret and theorize them.

In the United States, this theory-making project is currently taking place around the increased visibility of trans women of color in popular culture. Who could forget Laverne Cox's role as Sophia in the Netflix show *Orange Is the New Black*, the first time a trans woman actor has played a regularly-appearing transgender character in the history of US television? In her public appearances and in

her own writing, Cox has refused to be cast as the transparent transsexual victim whose story must be interpreted by others and has adroitly brought a critical and intersectional trans politics to bear on her own unfolding celebrity. Cox's new project is a documentary about Cece McDonald, a trans woman of color who was imprisoned for defending herself against violent attackers in 2011. And in theorizing trans of color existence in writing on her website, Cox connects materialist feminist politics to the history of Black struggles for self-determination: "It's important for black people to reclaim our bodies, historically sold, raped, lynched, generally devalued as not beautiful and savage even. But as we reclaim our bodies it's important not to buy into the racialized mythology about them. My transsexual body often sought only as a site of sexual conquest and objectification is an interesting potential site for the subversion of that racist history" (2012).

In a similar way, in "Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts'iyóye smestíyexw slhá:li," Saylesh Wesley (Stó:lō) combines Indigenous studies methodology and storywork—considering personal experience in relation to elder knowledge—to relate the invention of new language to making a place for twin-spirit people within Stó:lō culture and tradition. Wesley's essay is engaged in the important project of recovering teachings and stories about twin-spirited or gender-variant people lost due to the epistemological and material violence of the Americas' colonization. Giancarlo Cornejo's essay "For a Queer Pedagogy of Friendship" recounts stories told to him by Italo, a Peruvian trans activist, about her childhood in Lima in the 1950s and 1960s. A sociologist, Cornejo attempts to disrupt the colonial ethnographer-informant divide by making visible the many ways in which solidarity and friendship are necessary for theory, politics, and survival. Cornejo's essay also highlights how violence toward trans and gender-nonconforming children not only issues from "strangers" but takes place most devastatingly in the spaces ostensibly intended to protect children: the school, the family, and law enforcement.

Decolonizing transgender is not a project that sits easily with transgender (or any category) as a stable or self-evident identity or with transgender theory as something based on the study of transgender subjects only. Rather than take transgender individuals as the subjects of research, there is currently a strong movement in trans studies to critique "transgender" itself as a biopolitical category that regulates and organizes bodies in a particular recognition framework or particular vectors of risk, value, and potentiality. Some of this work investigates objects (or relies on techniques) that are seemingly far removed from the work of decolonizing yet that nevertheless disrupt the operative logics of transgender biopolitics. Julian Gill-Peterson's work in this issue, for example, uses the animacy (Chen 2013) of the testosterone molecule both to follow the commodity chain and the ecology of synthetic hormones and to reimagine a technicity of transgender

and the racialized body. Gill-Peterson aims to break down the biopolitical utility of the body figured as trans in a molar sense (a whole, integrated body with one identity), in the name of a molecular politics that has both analytical utility and resistant and transformative political potentials. This approach enables a constructive and productive rearticulation of race and trans in such a way that one is not derivative of or subordinated to the other; trans and race are each autonomous yet intra-active vectors of becoming.

Decolonizing transgender studies also needs to incorporate a transnational scope and methodology. By “transnational,” we do not only mean work that focuses on regions outside Europe and North America but work that addresses the asymmetries of globalization (Grewal and Kaplan 2001: 664) and that interrogates the six-hundred-year history of European colonial expansion. This work must contend with how social understandings of gender and sexuality are very different outside a global North framework. Thus categories of gender-nonconforming practices or embodiments need to be understood in their geographic and cultural specificity and not simply as a local instance of a falsely universalized “transgender.”

Tracing the transnational mobility of trans subjectivities and practices also means interrogating the logic of smooth circulation that mobility denotes in progress narratives of globalization. This issue’s engagements with transnational trans theory highlight moments of mistranslation, cross purposes, collisions, and roadblocks in the global circulation of trans politics and culture more than they recount an enabling mobility. Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy, for example, look at the transnational expansion of the term *transgender* in the aid and development sector in India. Tracing the process of defining transgender in South Asian development discourse reveals a scalar hierarchy in which transgender stands in for the universal, the cosmopolitan, and the aspirational while terms like *kothi*, *hijra*, and *dhurani* are contrasted as mere local or vernacular terms. The consequences of doing so include the elision of the so-called local categories, away from development discourse in favor of transgender or MSM, thereby dividing communities who must identify their constituent populations *either* as men who have sex with men *or* as transgender. Dutta and Roy conclude not by advocating for a divestment from transgender but rather by critiquing the structural conditions within which transgender functions transnationally. In “Toms and Zees: Locating FTM Identity in Thailand,” Jai Arun Ravine reflects on making the film *Tom/Trans/Thai* and on their broader project of attempting to locate female-to-male trans identity in Thailand, included within and sometimes entirely distinct from *tom*, the Thai term for a butch lesbian. In the film and in the essay that appears here, Ravine triangulates between the Thai understanding of *tom*, Western categories of transgender masculinity, and his own status as a mixed-race Thai American gender-nonconforming person. Ravine’s essay highlights the role of desire for



lineage and connection that attends diasporic queer and trans identity; it comments, too, on the failures of language to produce a desired recognition as well as on language's capacity to produce serendipitous connection across continents.

The legacy of European and American sexology's collection and categorization of "Native" sexual practices and gender embodiments grounds Seth Palmer's essay "Asexual Inverts and Sexual Perverts: Locating the *Sarimbavy* of Madagascar within Fin-de-Siècle Sexological Theories." Palmer reads perplexed French, British, and American interpretations of *sarimbavy* in part to make sense of the colonizing urge to understand and thereby manage the "diversity" of Madagascar's population but also to engage in criminological and sexological debates that support theories of inversion that have been directed at regulating gender-variant bodies everywhere. Palmer draws on queer historical methodologies that do not seek to recover or reclaim a queer or trans historical object but rather acknowledge the ways in which queer and trans historical objects haunt the colonial discourses we use to understand gender and sexual difference today.

Finally, the roundtable, "Decolonizing Transgender," brings together six scholars, activists, and culture makers (including some who are all three) who were asked in summer 2013 to participate in an email discussion about decolonizing work and transgender studies. The broader context of this conversation, as many of the responses point out, is a perceived link between the recent rapid rise in reported violence against trans people—usually trans women of color—and the simultaneous sudden increase of scholarship that concerns itself with transgender practices of life and the conditions of transgender health or well-being. How might these twin trends of increased visibility of, attention to, and seeming care for trans people be related? How might this increase serve those who are conferring the recognition better than those who are ostensibly being recognized? Our roundtable discussion reflects a prevailing wariness in many activist contexts that the institutionalization of transgender studies now underway can only result in the field's becoming divorced from the material conditions of trans existence. To voice the deepest criticism in the most direct terms: is not trans studies now taking up the topic of decolonization precisely so that those with the greatest access to institutional privilege profit, at the expense of the colonized, from the academic and political capital that this political issue confers? While not all of the roundtable participants agree with this prognosis, the discussion creates a useful space for interrogating the complicity of transgender studies in the very oppressions it claims to oppose and for asking at the same time how the field might better engage materially with dismantling white supremacy and colonization in all their forms.

As editors of this issue, we are conscious of the challenges this broader debate poses to *TSQ*'s own conditions of academic and cultural production as well



as its institutional status. An instructive anecdote: in November 2013, at the joint annual meetings of the Association for Queer Anthropology (AQA) and the American Anthropological Association, Duke University Press first distributed promotional items as part of the “soft launch” of the *TSQ* marketing campaign. In addition to the journal’s logo, these items bore a slogan that had been proposed by a fundraising consultant but that the general editors of the journal had rejected several months previously in favor of another slogan. Due to miscommunication between the general editors and the marketing department, the promotional items distributed at the AQA mistakenly said “Changing the way the world thinks about gender” instead of “We’re changing gender.” Whereas the latter is meant to convey an activist sensibility and to call attention to the intellectual and political labor involved in making gender systems more hospitable to gender-variant and gender-nonconforming lives, the former clearly (if inadvertently) reproduces the US and anglophone biases and colonizing frameworks that the journal avowedly seeks to resist. As the implied subject of the first slogan, *TSQ* is grammatically positioned as an agent that imagines itself as having the ability to transform the conditions of the object it acts upon; from context, with a US-speaking subject targeting the world, it is impossible for this slogan not to connote a colonial rather than decolonial imaginary. “Changing the way the world thinks” situates *TSQ* in an exceptionalist narrative in which the journal becomes a US flagship for exporting transgender studies to the “rest” of the world—a narrative that accommodates all too easily to a common, condescending attitude that more ignorant and less enlightened others elsewhere need whatever the United States is peddling. Given that the United States uses its questionable status as a bastion of LGBT freedom to shore up imperial projects and military intervention in the Middle East and elsewhere (Puar 2007; Mikdashi 2011), *TSQ* must resist the tendency to frame transgender politics in the United States as being the most highly evolved. The world knows plenty about transgender issues already. At its best, *TSQ* can help to illuminate that knowledge—and simultaneously, it can interrogate the economies of knowledge production that frame Euro-America as the center of official discourse about gender and sexual diversity.

Neither can we afford to ignore the conditions of the academic world into which this new journal emerges. *TSQ* is subscription based rather than open access at a time when, globally, academic publishers have increased subscription prices, meaning that libraries must reduce their journal holdings. The idea of the university itself has transformed from a putative “ivory tower” in which intellectuals could quietly write, protected from the demands of the market, toward a corporate neoliberal model in which value must be extracted from all research and teaching, with those projects that do not prove economically profitable being cut. In this new scholarly marketplace, diversity itself has been incorporated into

the academy in order to manage and contain dissent (Ahmed 2012: 13) and to capitalize on racial and cultural difference. Transgender studies' new cachet must be understood as indicative of that tendency. Nonetheless, academic appointments designed for teaching and researching transgender topics remain scarce. Because of that scarcity, it is sometimes difficult to imagine that transgender studies has a secure future, particularly amid the disappearance of tenure-track jobs and the casualization of the academy. Meanwhile, the few positions dedicated to transgender studies that appear—mainly in the United States at this point—tend to initiate a huge response. It is clear that not enough jobs in transgender studies exist to employ all those who identify as transgender studies scholars.

Given this situation, it is worth pointing out that most of the contributors to this issue are junior scholars and, in some cases, independent scholars. This reflects the reality that even with the new institutional capitalization on diversity in all forms, the academy is both institutionally and informally structured to exclude people who are non-gender normative, and it is structured even more forcefully to exclude people of color and those for whom decolonial work is a primary concern. This is also a reflection of where much of the most exciting work is taking place: on the outskirts of academia and in the cracks between institutional structures. If trans studies can contribute to political change in any lasting way, it cannot merely become the preserve of white academics; it must ground itself in multiracial, transnational, grassroots organizing for political and economic transformation. However, we are also aware that for scholars and activists who are engaged in decolonizing and anti-imperialist work, “transgender studies” itself may not prove to be a capacious enough a moniker for doing that work—indeed, often the most useful political acts are those that are unrecognizable and uncategorizable. Thus we welcome future intellectual, affective, and political contributions to decolonial practice in whatever forms they take.

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**Aren Aizura** is an assistant professor in gender, women, and sexuality studies at the University of Minnesota. He is the editor of *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (2013). His work has appeared in *Medical Anthropology*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, and *Asian Studies Review* as well as in the books *Queer Bangkok*, *Transgender Migrations*, and *Trans Feminist Perspectives*.

**Trystan Cotten** is associate professor of gender studies at California State University, Stanislaus. His areas of research are transgender surgery and medicine and gender, sexuality, race, and migration in Africa and the African diaspora. His latest book is *Hung Jury: Testimonies of Genital Surgery by Transsexual Men* (2012).

**Carsten Balzer/Carla LaGata** is the senior researcher of Transgender Europe and lead researcher of the Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide project. S/he is coauthor of *Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide—A Comparative Review of the Human-Rights Situation of Gender-Variant/Trans People* (2012).

**Marcia Ochoa** is an associate professor of feminist studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and advises El/La Para TransLatinas, an HIV prevention and human rights program for transgender Latinas in the Mission District of San Francisco. Her research focuses on transgender citizenship, modernity, and femininity in contemporary Venezuela and among Latin American immigrants to the United States. Her book, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela* (2014), is a queer diasporic ethnography of media, gender, and modernity in Venezuela.

**Salvador Vidal-Ortiz** is an associate professor of sociology at American University in Washington, DC. He coedited *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men* (2009).

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