

Decolonizing Transgender

A Roundtable Discussion

TOM BOELLSTORFF, MAURO CABRAL, MICHA CÁRDENAS,
 TRYSTAN COTTEN, ERIC A. STANLEY,
 KALANIOPUA YOUNG, and AREN Z. AIZURA

Abstract This roundtable discussion took place between August 2013 and January 2014 through e-mail. Eventually, two questions were posed, and participants individually e-mailed their responses in. The questions were posed in the hope of making space for a number of scholars, activists, and culture makers to take the pulse of transgender studies' political possibilities and limits and to talk practically about methods for creating change.

Keywords transgender; trans- people; gender; decolonization; knowledge production

This roundtable discussion took place between August 2013 and January 2014. We started off as a cc e-mail list; everyone introduced themselves, then sent responses to questions. When time constraints became pressing, two questions were posed, and participants individually e-mailed their responses in. The questions were posed in the hope of making space for a number of scholars, activists, and culture makers to take the pulse of transgender studies' political possibilities and limits and to talk practically about methods for creating change.

Aren Z. Aizura: *What does decolonizing mean to you: personally, politically, intellectually?*

Micha Cárdenas: For me, decolonization is a foundation and support structure for my political and theoretical work. I feel as a settler living in the Americas—a site of the murder of over one hundred million indigenous people in the founding of contemporary nation states—that a politics that accounts for decolonization is the only possible ethical stance today. I also firmly agree with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's article "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" (2012), which states that decolonization movements must be centered in actual struggles of indigenous

people, be they aesthetic, political, theoretical, or a mix of those categories, which are not so easily separable. Toward that end, I have worked in solidarity with the EZLN in Chiapas, Mexico, for many years, but my current practice focuses more on questioning Western systems of rationality and how they have limited our conceptions of political possibility by creating models of identity such as gender, race, and sexuality, which are individual and distinct as opposed to communal, connected, and networked ontologies of the Nahua people as described by Diana Taylor and Gloria Anzaldúa. I see my work for prison abolition and against gender oppression as part of a project to dismantle tools of colonization and build new postcolonial possibilities.

My work has taken place in a transnational and hemispheric frame, working toward connections in artistic and political practices across the Mexico/United States border with the “Transborder Immigrant Tool,” understanding transgender experience in global networks of virtual worlds in “Becoming Dragon,” and considering gender, race, and sexuality in transnational spaces such as airports, border checkpoints, and international art and academic spaces in “Becoming Transreal.” Currently, with “Autonets,” I am focused on creating networks of safety between trans women of color, two-spirit people, sex workers, and disabled people in Toronto, Detroit, Bogotá, and Los Angeles. Autonets works toward decolonization by learning from digital networks and then creating ways of replicating them in embodied methods that do not rely on digital technologies or the European binary logics they reproduce.

I met up with Aren [Z. Aizura] at the recent Critical Ethnic Studies Association Conference in Chicago, where there was a deep discussion of decolonization going on. Jin Haritaworn cited Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s article “Decolonization is not a Metaphor” (2012) to raise some incredible questions about the intersections of decolonization and transgender studies. They questioned the sudden popularity of interest in decolonization in academic journals whose study might not benefit from a decolonizing framework or whose work might not benefit decolonization struggles, going so far as to say that some people’s interest in decolonization may be a self-serving way to add more lines to their CVs, and pointed out how much activist-oriented scholarship treats oppressed people in an interchangeable way, where who is being oppressed is not as important as the appearance of doing work that is saving *someone*. They discussed recent struggles in Berlin in the transgender community that focused unquestioningly on white male trans people, leaving trans women of color and low-income people with less access to education out of the conversation. Haritaworn used this example to point to the problematic ways that queer and queer of color organizing attempt to encompass trans struggles in ways that work against decolonization struggles. Personally, I feel that decolonization has deep,

shared interests with transgender studies in resistance to pathologization by the medical-industrial complex and Western notions of gender and sexuality, which can be understood as systems of control and genocide.

Tom Boellstorff: In terms of decolonization and postcoloniality, my thoughts are above all shaped by my many years of work in Indonesia. That's taught me to attend to the specificities of colonialisms (Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, for instance, took on a very specific cast over three centuries) and also the way in which colonial legacies and resistances are so often about stances of complexity, imbrication, the forging of new possibilities not predicated on stances of purity or exclusion. It also leads me to attend to the relationships between when people use terms like *colonial* or *decolonization*, and so on, in a more metaphorical versus a more literal sense, and the advantages and dangers of those slippages.

Kalaniopua Young: For me, decolonization has been an important part of my daily life. Both in terms of what interests me as an o'iwi mahu (Native Hawaiian transgender woman), as a person, and as a trans/queer scholar-activist, the concept opens up (rather than forecloses) various ways of rethinking power and relationships. In my current work, I look at how my own positionality as an o'iwi mahu ethnographer articulates a decolonial space for rethinking ethnographic and anthropological research. This decolonial space is an important practice of defining autonomous futures in the intellectual merging of decoloniality and transgender studies.

Trystan Cotten: One of the things that continually comes up in my research is how to present some of the dismal data on trans experiences in Africa(n) Diaspora without reinforcing an idea of Western racism of the continent and black/brown peoples as backward, primitive, and uncivilized. At the same time, however, I still struggle with my positionality in my work, by which I mean both my own cultural and social class limitations of my questions and theoretical frameworks *and* the socioeconomic power imbalance between myself and my subjects. This latter issue resonates with me because it gets to a question I've been concerned about since the 1990s, when queer theory was starting to distinguish itself from LGBT studies: the question of who benefits from our knowledge production in the academy. Huge contradictions exist between the social class that we as researchers and intellectuals live and that of the trans subjects whose lives we rely on (and mine) for intellectual resources. For me, this is a question of de/colonizing trans knowledge production. Many institutions and entities profit from trans lives (universities, publishers, academics and intellectuals, the media, corporations, and so on).

While we mine their lives and suffering to produce important, critical knowledges, I don't see many trans people's lives improving. We researchers, most

of whom are not trans, profit from doing work on or addressing trans issues and people, while the majority of trans people (around the world) are disempowered, disorganized, and doing poorly. And this is a gap I want to both problematize and think of creative strategies to address. I want to be careful not to dismiss academic knowledge production. That's too simplistic and reactionary and doesn't shed any light on the problem. At the same time, I don't want to shy away from this question, because I think it's important to ask who is profiting from knowledge production and what roles we might play in decolonizing these relationships of production. I also want to situate this question within a larger discourse reexamining queer (and trans) production and consumption and how certain elements have been appropriated, co-opted, and converted into mainstream normative interests of global capitalism. I think the commodification of trans both follows the tendency analyzed in queer culture/politics and also contradicts it in unexpected, interesting ways.

I was especially struck by Micha's point about the sudden popularity of decolonization in queer and trans theory. I've thought about that too and discussed it with Jin as well. It came up recently in Berlin a few weeks ago among friends and family. In addition to the sudden interest in decolonization, we also felt that intersectionality and disability studies (crip theory) are two more areas that had become chic to explore in theory without really producing a substantive politics that benefits colonized, disabled, and migrants.

Mauro Cabral: I'm an intersex and trans* guy from a Latin American country (Argentina), academically trained as a historian and philosopher, who works full time codirecting an international trans* organization (GATE). From that position, decolonizing has different meanings to me. In the context of that conversation, I would like to focus on three of those meanings.

First of all, of course, I speak a colonial language: Spanish is my mother tongue. Nonetheless, and as do many other intersex people, I share the experience of *estrangement* from my "own" language produced by gendering violence—in the same sense in which Austerlitz, the character in W. G. Sebald's novel, was an (ethico-political) foreigner in its (his?) "own" mother tongue. Moreover, I am forced to speak and write in a different language, which has its own colonial relationship with the other languages in the continent that I inhabit. Even to be able to have this conversation with friends and colleagues who share the same commitment with decolonization, I must write in English just to be part of the interchange. In both cases—and actually, in *all* cases—decolonizing means the call to produce, or at least attempt to produce, short-circuits in language: the kind of *minor* language that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari read in Kafka, but also the interdictions, the "interruptions" (a beautiful word created by Valeria Flores) in the genericized ontology of the language.

The second meaning is associated with some particular affective economies of theory—and in particular, those of *resentimiento* (resentment) and *resistencia* (resistance)—every time decolonization is intertwined with my positionality as a trans and intersex reader: how to decolonize trans and intersex lives and deaths from the imperium of queer theory and other similar academic enterprises? How to counteract, for instance, the ways in which Judith Butler (2004) colonizes David Reimer's life and . . . suicide? Decolonizing is therefore intensely related with finding ethical, political, and theoretical tools to challenge the production of trans* and intersex people as “proper objects,” “privileged examples,” and, in general, valuable goods in the theoretical primitive accumulation of flesh?

The third meaning is more related with my own line of work at GATE: as someone deeply involved in the poetics and politics of depathologization. Decolonizing trans* and intersex experiences—of embodiment, identity, expression, sexuality, and so on—from biomedical regulations implies, today, to go beyond scientific classifications to reach their translation into the logics of international capitalism. We are told—and we frequently confirm for ourselves—that these are key times of reform: both DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*) and, in a few years, ICD-11 (*International Classification of Diseases*) will codify trans* issues in different and hopefully less pathologizing ways. In the same sense, different laws and regulations around the world seem to move toward a different organization of bodies and identities. Some countries, like Nepal and Australia, already allow people to use different nomenclatures than *M* or *F* in their passports. Other countries, such as mine, allow people to reinscribe themselves as *M* or *F* regardless of their bioanatomies: which is to say, rendering *M* or *F* mere nominalist inscriptions. The liberal appearances of these changes must be approached, however, from a critical perspective—as they exemplify the intense process of recolonization of personal identity through biometrical technologies.

Aren Z. Aizura: *What are some strategies to make transgender or trans studies-themed knowledge production serve the interests of trans and gender-nonconforming people who are most marginalized, both within the academy itself and within the world at large? Why are they important?*

Mauro Cabral: This is a key question—provided that it articulates a painful paradox: on one hand, and for a long time, many of us have desired, intensely, the emergence of a specific academic field focused on trans issues, and finally it exists. On the other hand, it is what it is: an academic field, whose emergence is related to its compliance with academic standards. It means that even when trans studies came to make justice to the relegated place of trans issues and knowledge within broader academic fields (including queer theory), it is at risk, all the time, of (re) producing injustice—starting with geopolitical injustice.

In the first place, and so far—after the publication of two *Transgender Studies Readers*—the very label of “trans studies” seems to be intrinsically associated not only with the academy but also with an academy that reads, writes, and speaks in English—and that colonizes the rest of the world in pursuit of “cases.” This geopolitical fact implies the need to translate the question, once again, geopolitically. How could trans studies serve the interest of those people who are most marginalized from the academic-industrial complex? Once again, the question is paradoxical: the “most marginalized” people are part of the economies of that complex—reified as objects of interest (and that’s why some of us entertain the possibility of calling a strike of objects to challenge academic appropriation of trans*-lived *surplus*). Reification has, however, a negative impact on those who enjoy the privileged position of subjects in the field—and they are forced, from time to time, to exhaust audiences in remote locations articulating theories lacking any connection with the local realities that they asseverate to interpret.

In the current state of affairs—characterized by their chronic exclusion from education, employment, housing, and health, to begin with—I am seriously concerned about the concrete possibilities of the field in terms of trans* people’s meaningful involvement in most countries and academic systems in the world. A couple of examples from Argentina: (1) Some trans activists who fiercely struggled to dismantle institutional transphobia while studying—and, in many cases, while surviving, at the same time, familial and social rejection—are now considered to be *too old* to be able to continue their academic careers, as they are over thirty. The same institutions that they challenged and changed and that recognize their history of exclusion and their commitment to inclusion fail to recognize the specific temporality of their struggle. As Sara Ahmed (2012) puts it, those institutions really believe in the performative effect of their own pronunciation as trans* welcoming—and reject any further interpellation in terms of the material conditions for that welcoming. (2) For more than a decade, the field of legal studies was challenged by trans activists—most of them *travestis*, who were extremely poor sex workers with equally limited access to education. These activists not only challenged legal understandings on trans* issues, they also imagined a revolutionary gender identity law and got that law passed. However, when the first book on the law was published, it only included them as *voices*—which is to say, their testimonies. Analysis was provided by the same scholars who denied the very possibility of the law until it was passed. The reason? Trans* people can change the world—but we can’t change the rules of academic writing.

I’m absolutely confident about the theoretical and political imagination of trans* people—but I’m not confident at all about the capacity of the academy—including the trans* academy—to be challenged by them.

Eric A. Stanley: In prison abolitionist organizing, which has constituted the majority of my more legible political work for the last decade, we often use the term “most directly impacted” in an attempt to get at these same sets of questions. The problem is, of course, that identity is always relational and that under the sensibilities of neoliberal inclusion, at best we often end up with representational change and abandon our demand for structural transformation. I think, or I would at least like to hope, that we might be able to have both, as they necessarily prefigure one another.

We might be able to trace this representational-over-structural change in the current excitement over *Orange Is the New Black*, and in particular the casting of Laverne Cox as Sophia Burset, an incarcerated black trans woman on the show. Casting trans women of color as trans and non-trans characters is vital if we are to disrupt the structuring logics of antitrans and antiblack visual culture. However, left out of almost any discussions around the show itself is that there are not any formerly incarcerated people playing incarcerated people. This omission shows the ways in which some identities (as an example, formerly incarcerated trans women of color) cannot yet make it to a public discussion. This is not suggested as a read but as perhaps an invitation and a way of remembering that there is never a “perfect” representation that can apprehend the full complexities of lived experience. This is perhaps a long way of saying that understanding the category of “the most impacted” must always be a process in which we cannot understand our work to ever be done.

Returning to Antonio Gramsci’s conceptualization and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s radical rereading of the subaltern might also be helpful in thinking about the political immediacy of these questions. The category of the subaltern as that which necessarily resides outside the grasps of hegemony—or, put another way, as beyond the scope of incorporation—helps remind us that once those who previously inhabited that category are brought into representation, they no longer occupy the same relationship to the periphery. This is not to say that they have more access to the somewhat clunky term *privilege* but that, under the ordering of the political, there remains something and someone outside our view. What, then, might be a political, academic, representational project that works or at least attempts to work at bringing down the political order as such? That would be my dream of an insurgent trans study that refuses its own complicity in the brutality of exclusion. However, I fear my dream is rather quickly being lived as the unfolding nightmare of a trans studies invested in the proper objects of the colonial academy.

I do, however, see the work of an insurgent trans studies already being practiced in many spaces. One example is *The Spirit Was . . .*, the archive Reina Gossett (2014) has built that both gathers up histories as an activist project and

also attempts to foreground accountability to the communities it represents. Gossett's work, of course, still resides outside the more formalized confines of the academy. It is not that I believe her work should be smuggled in, but that we must allow it to radically transform, which is to say undo, the academy as such.

Micha Cárdenas: Year after year, statistics on violence against LGBT communities show that transgender women of color are the number one targets of violence (see Giovaniello 2013; Laver 2011). One strategy for serving the interests of trans and gender-nonconforming people is to focus scholarship on violence prevention. While the concept of the “most marginalized” is deeply problematic, it is clear to me that transgender women of color exist within a matrix of oppressions that allow us to be murdered on a very frequent basis. As such, I support the leadership and scholarship of transgender women of color within and outside the academy as a means to combat violence against us. These trends of violence are tied to different countries' histories of colonialism, and while black transgender women are commonly targeted for violence in the United States, indigenous women are more frequently murdered or missing in Canada. There are many of these intersections to be addressed, such as incarcerated, sex working, and HIV-positive trans women of color. Working for justice for trans women of color is a decolonizing effort, as it works against shared histories of colonial violence against black, latina, Asian, and mixed-race women, from slavery as a form of external colonialism, to settler colonialism in the Americas, to the neocolonialism of the drug war. To work for decolonization, these efforts for justice should center the leadership of two-spirit people and non-Western non-binary people such as the muxe of Mexico.

In *Invisible Lives* (2000), Viviane Namaste describes in detail ways that scholarship can be “reflexive”—that is, ways that scholarship can be accountable to transgender communities instead of merely talking about us without improving our lives. Namaste describes many ways that trans people are made invisible, erased, in queer theory, activism, administration, and culture, saying, “Queer theory is limited theoretically insofar as it only offers an application of post-structuralist thought, in addition to its restricted conception of text. The field's neglect of the social and economic conditions in which transgendered people live makes it of questionable political import” (39). Namaste proposes the concept of reflexive sociology, a sociology that studies society but also looks to the research populations' opinions of the findings in order to make them more accurate, saying, “Many scholars limit their studies to the medical and psychiatric production of transsexuals, neglecting other important features of everyday life. Significantly, this inquiry advocates a type of sociological theory and practice that is created primarily for academics, not for members of the research population, not even for legislators, jurists, social policy experts, or the administrative

personnel of community based organizations that work with the individuals under investigation” (37). She looks at specific case studies to show how TS/TG people are erased by the administrative workings of health care providers, gender identity clinics, and HIV treatment programs. Namaste describes many ways that trans people are made invisible, erased, in theory, activism, administration, and culture. Namaste’s book *Invisible Lives* is based on the goals of producing scholarship that can have meaning for trans people, that can address the lived realities of trans people, and that can create concrete social change. Recent transgender studies books like *Normal Life* by Dean Spade continue Namaste’s work, while updating it with a discussion of how databases are being used as new forms of violent administration of trans people’s lives. While the situation for trans people today is very different than at the time of her writing, her work provides an important model for transgender studies that can act in transgender people’s interests.

Kalaniopua Young: I am excited for trans studies–themed knowledge production and the potential for this emerging field of study to serve the interests of gender-nonnormative people who are themselves marginalized by structural violence. Part of my excitement stems from the possibility of mobilizing this field toward a more revolutionary standpoint, one that can better avoid the trappings of identity politics by rooting activist scholarship to community-based social-justice efforts that operate from the bottom up. Activist scholarship in this way serves as a critical tool for grounding intellectual pursuits in the academy to grass-roots movements that are seeking, demanding, and creating change for front-line communities who are most marginalized. One such movement, or shall I say event, particularly relevant to this discussion is the annual international Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR).

According to a recent article commemorating the fourteenth anniversary of the international TDOR, 265 people from around the world were reported killed in 2012 due to antitrans violence. Sadly, this number reflects a rising trend in the number of antitrans murders. In 2011, for example, the number of antitrans murders was recorded at 221 and at 211 the year before that. While jarring, quantitative figures alone do not reflect the actual number of deaths, due to inadequate reporting capabilities and other failures in data collection, nor do they capture the ubiquitous senselessness with which governmental forms of systemic violence dispose of many more trans and nontrans folk alike through various kinds of slow death: cuts to welfare and education, the criminal-industrial complex, gentrification, environmental racism, and land dispossession, for example, facilitate perhaps an even more insidious and targeted form of inequality among all gendered subjects that while more general are no less cruel.

TDOR is a memorial event for transgender, two-spirit, and gender-nonconforming people killed by antitrans violence. But it is also so much more.

Its growing transnational popularity around the world suggests that there is something significant happening here that transcends the social and cultural lines of gender liminal identity. The proliferation of the event is particularly empowering. Typically, these events are organized by random, devoted volunteer groups and are hosted at common public sites: legislative buildings, city parks, college campuses, city halls, churches, and community centers. As such, TDOR events provide a great opportunity for bridging the academy and the community by collectively addressing antitrans violence through a collaborative and reflective effort to affirm trans life as lives that matter.

As a veteran co-organizer for a number of TDOR events in several US cities including Olympia, Austin, Portland, and Seattle, for me TDOR has come to symbolize an increasingly important site for public resistance and a potentially strategic site for mobilizing an activist-based transgender studies education that can better organize and account for an intersectional analysis of antitrans violence. For example, it can assist in articulating, analyzing, and accounting for the intersections of race, class, and gender within the context of antitrans violence. This is an important endeavor, for while trans women of color suffer the highest number of casualties due to antitrans violence, a cogent analysis of their disposition at the dangerous nexus of race, gender, and class receives little if any attention at TDOR events. Further, volunteer organizers for TDOR events tend to generalize antitrans oppression and thus fail to account for the complexities that tacitly institute such violence in the first place. As Kortney Ryan Zeigler (2012) points out, “the goal of eradicating gender oppression as a necessary step in the transgender movement is one that is failing to keep trans people of color alive.”

Thus while TDOR creates a space for resisting gender violence, there is oftentimes little attention paid to how such violence disproportionately affects trans women of color. This discrepancy presents an important opportunity for trans studies scholars who can collaborate with TDOR organizers on and off campus to create a more robust resistive stance in politicizing antitrans death as part of larger systems of injustice and systems of gender violence that is both classed and racialized. Without a cogent analysis of how systems of race, historical trauma, and social, environmental, and economic disparities play into antitrans violence, the experiences of transgender women of color in particular remain unaccounted for while we become a quantifiable body count for a largely white, middle-class trans movement.

As many of us involved in the planning and facilitation of such events are aware, antitransgender violence is anti-men and anti-women, and as such, the recognition that state violence obscures our subjective connections should remain paramount to any effort seeking to shift the TDOR function from one of mourning to one of activist-based action. The structural violence of gender oppression

affects everyone, whether self-identified as men, women, asexual, and/or gender or sexual liminal.

Still, even with a nuanced recognition of gender-violence operations among diverse communities that traverse identity categories, it is interesting to note that trans women of color still remain differentially and disproportionately pipelined into bare life, premature death, and antitrans violence. In this sense and in line with Judith Butler, I suggest that we must all work to vehemently oppose state violence and facilitate a horizontal politics recognizing the undue distribution of precarity as but one important site of opposition against systemic inequality and disenfranchisement. As she points out, “Precarity cuts across identity categories as well as multicultural maps, thus forming the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence and its capacity to produce, exploit and distribute precarity for the purposes of profit and territorial defense” (Butler 2009: 32). Similarly, Devon Peña, in discussing Mesoamerican diasporic subjectivities, suggests, “There has never been a louder giant sucking sound than the screech violently heralded by the shift of wealth that has led us to the current class composition of the USA in which 371 families have as much wealth as 150 million of the rest of us. We are Basement America. And it is time to dig out” (2012).

TDOR, in collaboration with trans studies scholar-activists, I argue, has the potential to offer this kind of counterhegemonic collective space to do just that—to dig us out. Through grassroots efforts of public mourning, for example, we begin to affirm the sacredness of life and our continuing responsibilities to stewardship in terms of our relationships to one another as humans as well as to more than humans (land, animals, and so on). Common spaces of mourning offer us an opportunity to more effectively honor our people and commit to politicizing the social, environmental, and economic injustices that leave the most disenfranchised to endure disproportionately the burden of antitrans hate and violence.

One notable observation from this year’s TDOR list of people killed in antitrans violence that struck me especially is the fact that the majority of those killed this year as well as last are trans women of color. This is important to note because while we are all inoculated within a generalized state of precariousness, the realities of precarity afforded to trans women of color highlight an especially egregious form of hateful state violence that renders us subject to a mortifying reality of bare life.

In the courts, for instance, a man can kill a trans woman of color, claim ignorance about her gender identity, and receive a reduced sentence. Then, when a trans woman of color like Cece McDonald defends against a violent attacker, she is criminalized and imprisoned. That the systems of so-called blind justice in this country imprison trans women of color for fighting to defend their lives only

further oppresses all of society, because we are all tied to a shared legal commons. While it may be that trans women of color are particularly slated for legal injustice because we do not ascribe to white gender norms, the fact that the system of law criminalizes us for who we are and not what we do means that as transgender women of color we bear more than our fair share of a systemic failure that belongs to all of us. As trans revolutionary Leslie Feinberg reminds us, “CeCe McDonald is sent to prison. . . . [Meanwhile] the Emancipation Proclamation specifically spelled out the right of Black people to self-defend against racist violence” (quoted in Rivas 2012).

In the 1960s, trans women of color including Marsha “Pay it no Mind” Johnson and Sylvia Rivera stood at the forefront of the Stonewall Riots. They resisted arrest by brutal, corrupt police officers then targeting gender-nonconforming folks in Greenwich Village. The two street trans icons, along with other trans and queer folk, helped to kick-start what is now known as the gay rights movement. Around this same time, mahu activists in Hawaii struggled alongside their brothers and sisters at the forefront of an indigenous land dispute in cities like Waianae and Waimanalo, Oahu, as the state of Hawaii began evicting dozens of Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) families from their ancestral homelands.

The resilience of trans women of color has much to teach the world. Today, trans women of color are at the forefront of various human rights struggles. Hinalai Moana Wong, a mahuwahine activist, for instance, the cultural director for Halau Lokahi, a charter school in Honolulu, leads children in understanding *kuleana* (responsibility), TEK (traditional ecological knowledge), hula, and Olelo Hawaii (Hawaiian language), contributing to broader collaborative efforts for environmental, economic, and social justice. Janet Mock, an African American raised in Hawaii, has developed an important critical media literacy campaign to address the rampant mistreatment of trans folk in media representations. Her successful Twitter campaign aptly named “girls like us,” for example, addresses unbalanced media coverage of trans people and critically undermines the ways in which mainstream media programs represent and portray trans folk, especially trans women of color. In 2009, Sass Sasot, a Pinay trans activist and poet, testified before the United Nations Human Rights Commission and spoke out against the increasing mistreatment of trans people around the world, calling upon global leaders to end antitrans violence by enacting protective policies.

In order for trans studies-themed knowledge production to be effective, it must serve the interests of the most marginalized within our communities; it must be connected to community-based grassroots movements while working to create opportunities for the most marginalized among us to feel like their lives, their well-being, and their ideas matter. As trans studies activist scholars, we must work rigorously to ensure that we are doing everything in our capacity to bring

these lives, these ideas, and these stories to the forefront of our pedagogical and intellectual engagements in the academy and in the world at large.

Trystan Cotten: My data call for a *transectional* framework: a framework that looks at the multiple transitions (or movements) they're engaged in as *intersecting* realities that shape my informants' lives—and not just what *kind* of life they may have but how long they live and whether they get to live at all. Let me explain by referring to my research.

In the oral histories I've collected of black and brown bodies in Africa (and the diaspora), gender and gender transitioning form only *one* dimension of people's lives. And it's not always the most salient thing in their daily struggle to feed and house themselves, but that also doesn't mean it's irrelevant, either. In fact, gender—whether it's a matter of gender presentation, the longing for relief from sex/gender incongruence, or something else—is very important in my subject's daily struggle, especially when it combines with their poverty, citizenship woes, geographic displacement, and ethnic warfare. But they don't single out this struggle as the most salient because of their problems with ethnic cleansing, racial profiling, sweatshop exploitation, and poverty. What is more, they tend to explain violence against trans people within the context of these other problems. Most of my informants in Zambia, for example, cite the colonial religions, Islam and Christianity, as the primary discourse informing state persecution of LGBT people and neocolonialist exploitation (through International Monetary Fund structural adjustment policies) as hardening their disempowerment. My informants in Nigeria also see the historical battle for control over oil production as a factor that fuels—pardon the pun—ethnic tensions, misogyny, and LGBT phobia.

In addition to decentering “gender/transition,” I've also learned to shift my conceptual framework from trans *identity* to trans *migrations and movements*, because, again, that's what the data call for. A lot of my subjects are migrants. They're very poor and displaced from home due to any number of factors, including state violence against LGBT, ethnic cleansing, neocolonialism, religious persecution, and homelessness. Because they're constantly on the move in terms of their gender, geography, social class, and even their race, ethnicity, and nationality, I've moved away from relying on discursive analysis alone to understand how their identities are constituted differently from trans in our Western cultural contexts. In fact, this focus isn't even important in my research anymore, because it's not important to my subjects, and I'm keenly sensitive to Vivian Namaste's critique of how much academics are out of touch with the everyday struggles of trans people and what's important to them rather than the industry. When I write about my informants, I want to produce work that's true for them and that's really about *them* rather than about what *I* think is interesting to explore about them. It doesn't work for me to explore questions about whether

gender is socially constructed or performative with my informants. Rather, they're concerned about getting enough food, shelter, and clothing and avoiding racial/ethnic profiling. When they flee persecution, it's not only because of their gender and/or sexuality but also because of their ethnicity, nationality, and religion. So I've taken a different approach, one that integrates global political economic analysis into a transectional framework that treats multiple movements intersecting, contextualizing, and mutually constituting one another.

Only after musing on this question have I come to realize that what academics in Western contexts think is important regarding trans identities and issues doesn't translate very well to other contexts, especially for Africans of trans experience. And I've learned to revise my methods, objects of analysis, and interpretive frameworks in order to write about my subjects' lives with some accuracy and integrity.

Tom Boellstorff: While still woefully underrepresented, the increasing centrality of trans studies-themed knowledge production is incredibly exciting; it benefits everyone through its enrichment of theoretical and empirical conversations. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this: the insights of trans studies occur in research communities shaped by a dizzying range of disciplines, and they will continue to be of great value to a whole range of topics. This broad relevance serves the interest of supporting marginalized trans and gender-nonconforming persons.

Trans studies-themed knowledge is being produced by both transgender- and cisgender-identified persons, in a manner that can potentially transform the fraught, medicalizing, and disempowering historical pattern wherein trans people were solely objects of knowledge. Just as straight-identified persons can produce excellent queer theory, and male-identified persons can produce excellent gender theory, rejecting the model by which trans and gender-nonconforming people are treated as pathologized objects of knowledge need not entail a model by which only such people are considered legitimate producers of transgender or trans studies-themed knowledge. Shifting between these two models would remain within an essentialist horizon and thereby reproduce a self/other binarism for knowledge production. It would reverse polarity without destabilizing the polarity itself.

This speaks to a set of beliefs regarding binarisms in general (not just the self/other binarism) that I see as one of the greatest contemporary barriers to conceptual innovation in both trans and queer studies. These include the idea that binarisms are inherently oppressive, limiting, and distorting; the idea that forms of fluidity, blurring, hybridity, and multiplicity are inherently less oppressive, limiting, and distorting; the idea that binarisms are inherently produced by

systems of dominating power; and the idea that moving away from binarisms is inherently a form of resistance or liberation.

One thing we can gain from greater attention to trans and gender-nonconforming people who are most marginalized is a more contextual and polyvalent understanding of binarisms. For instance, the self/other binarism has multiple genealogies but originates above all in the colonial encounter. As many scholars of colonialism have noted, decolonization involves not just replacing the figure of the colonizer with the figure of the indigenous but recognizing messy entanglements of colonizer and colonized in emergent assemblages of embodiment, culture, and politics. For the language of constitutive authenticity is itself a legacy of colonial thinking.

I would suggest that for trans studies as for any other research community, work should be evaluated on its own terms, even as we keep in mind its conditions of production and circulation. By using the phrase “on its own terms,” I imply neither elitism nor navel gazing, for the terms of research always have a politics and serve a range of interests, acknowledged or not. Rather, I question assuming that interests are self-evident and thus that serving those interests should be a condition for knowledge production—or that serving such interests always equates with an oppositional stance. There needs to be a space for research whose applicability and significance is not known at the outset. Emergent forms of knowledge production are vital for addressing emergent forms of culture and power. For instance, how are we to theorize persons who change gender and now wish to be identified as cisgendered men or women? Do they suffer from false consciousness; are they insufficiently or incorrectly political? Such dilemmas of course recall debates in other communities and scholarly conversations, from critical race theory and feminism to disability studies, and the possibilities for productive conversation are truly immense.

Here we return to messy imbrications, complicities, intimacies. A central tenet associated with the neoliberalization of the academy has been the growing demand that knowledge serve practical interests. (Many of these same forces also require interdisciplinarity as a condition of funding.) So the goal of serving the interests of trans and gender-nonconforming people who are most marginalized emphatically does not necessarily represent a move away from neoliberalism. It is more entangled than that. Serving the interests of any marginalized community is a laudable goal, but what these interests are may not be clear, even to community members. There are competing interests in any community. And interests can be theoretical. I have seen from experiences in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment the negative consequences of the idea that people are dying, we need to act now and don't have time for theory. Because while it is true that people are dying, are suffering, and we need to act, the assumption that such action cannot be

theoretical has led to a range of exclusions and retrenchments that have worked against goals of social justice.

Anthropology has something to offer here. It is unfortunate that anthropology is read far less in the humanities than the other way around. It is even more unfortunate that when discussed in the humanities, anthropology is often reduced to the methodological and representational practices associated with “ethnography” or critiqued for its links to colonialism. But all disciplines (from literature to statistics) are shaped by colonial discourse, and anthropology is more than ethnography. With regard to this discussion, it bears noting that anthropology has a long tradition of questioning Eurocentrism. Of course individual anthropologists can be Eurocentric, but, from a disciplinary standpoint, universalizing claims about gender, the family, economics, aging, or any other aspect of the human are suspect if based on data gathered only in the United States, only in English, and so on. In addition, anthropologists have long critiqued the self/other divide as a condition of knowledge production. Ethnographic methods are predicated on the insight that one can learn other ways of being. That does not mean one has total knowledge (not least because no culture is monolithic in the first place) but that one can step outside the cultural contexts with which one is familiar. Learning another language, even to fluency, is not the same thing as speaking that language as a mother tongue. Yet in learning another language—or more broadly, learning another culture, always partially—one has gained something, can potentially communicate across difference and rework the grid of similitude and difference itself.

If my ruminations on these fascinating questions reveal anything, it is that we are on the threshold of an exciting new period of scholarly and activist innovation in trans studies, one that is profoundly interdisciplinary and deeply informed by a long history of excellent prior work. *TSQ* is poised to make an important contribution to this new period of innovation, and I look forward to enjoying the scholarly conversations it will foster.

Aren Z. Aizura: *How is transgender circulating transnationally? What are the implications of this for future trans and gender-nonconforming research and political projects?*

Micha Cárdenas: The transnational circulation of the idea of transgender is a colonial operation, spreading Western ontologies and logics such as Western medicine; the idea of the individual, unchanging self; and the binary gender system. In contrast, one can look to non-Western conceptions of gender nonconformity such as two-spirit people and shamans who can change form. While the term *two spirit* has many different local meanings, in some contexts it refers to people who have multiple genders, either simultaneously or over time. The example of Gloria

Anzaldúa is instructive here: in *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2012), she writes about being “mita’ y mita’,” half male and half female. Further, she sees her transformations in a decolonial framework. When she says things such as, “I know things older than Freud, older than gender,” she points out the limited Western epistemologies of self on which concepts such as gender depend (48). In contrast, she describes nonhuman transformations such as becoming serpent, which are inseparable from her crossings of gender, race, language, and nationality. Anzaldúa’s ability to enact these multiple transformations defies secular colonial conceptions of bodies that can be categorized by a binary gender system, as can be understood when she writes, “In the etho-poetics and performance of the Shamans, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life” (88).

Recently, I have begun co-coordinating an effort to create an international network of trans women of color, focusing on a gathering of this network in Detroit, Michigan, in June 2014 at the Allied Media Conference. My co-coordinators are Lexi Adsit, b. binaohan, Askari González, and Sam Maria Andazola. Here is an excerpt from our collective statement about this gathering, which the Allied Media Conference organizers have told us they believe is a historic gathering:

We know that trans women of color are magical, powerful, skilled, and wise, yet there is still no international network joining us together to address the struggles we face. This network gathering seeks to change that. . . .

This network gathering will seek to connect diverse and dispersed trans women of colour so that we can begin to build the bridges, networks, and resources necessary to transform our communities using media and technology. Our network gathering will focus on sharing wisdom and skills between the Trans Women of Colour already living/working/existing on the front lines through a combination of workshops, skill shares, and networking activities. We hope that all of the people involved will walk away with not only the knowledge and connections needed to make change in their own communities, but with an international network of Trans Women of Colour that will aid us all in creating real and lasting change. Trans Women of Colour exist at an intersection of oppression that has resulted in our high levels of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, death (Black and/or Latina trans women make the majority of names on the global Trans Day of Remembrance list), among other serious problems too numerous to name. While we have intentionally chosen to use “Trans Women of Colour” this Network Gathering is inclusive of non-binary trans feminine people of colour as well, which includes, but isn’t limited to, people of colour who identify as bakla, hijra, fa’afafine, third gender, genderqueer, provided that they/we understand that this gathering will focus on and centre the most vulnerable in our community—Black, Indi-

genous, and/or Latina trans women, binary or not, sex workers, incarcerated people, disabled people, immigrants. If you or your organization can provide support for this effort and would like to be added to our list of supporters, please contact us at twoc.amc@gmail.com. (International Trans Women of Color Network 2014)

Mauro Cabral: Again, and acknowledging how narrow this approach could be, I would like to center my answer in three very specific topics related to the broader issue of the transnational circulation of transgender and its implications.

I am deeply concerned by the circulation of transgender as a new commodity in both the theory and practice of human rights. That circulation seems to heavily depend on a “necropolitical” reduction of trans* people to potential or real victims—with a concrete and negative impact in trans* people’s ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes affecting us. We are never supposed to be in the room—except as corpses, or bodies in danger of extension, exhibited for progressive consumerism, frequently oriented toward funding. And even when trans* issues—often codified, in a reductive way, as “gender identity issues”—occupy a growing portion in international LGTBI activism, that expansion is not translated into the circulation of critical knowledge produced by trans* people.

A second issue related with your question that seems very important to me is, precisely, the need to analyze the transnational circulation of transgender as a *corpus*, as a certain number of texts and theories, names and definitions, statistics, analysis, and interpretations. That circulation is heavily determined by geopolitics in a crude imperial capitalist landscape—and we, down *here* or far away *there*, circulate across the transnational routes of the industrial-academic complex, reified as the objects of colonial knowledge. Many denominations circulate currently as examples of a geographically neutral category—transgender, or trans*—and terms such as *travesti*, *hijra*, *fa’afafine*, and *meti* or *katoey* become doubly local, localized in their own culture and in relation to the international scope of transgender as a culturally nonspecific umbrella term.

Undoubtedly, transnational circulation has a particular meaning for trans* people: that of legal or illegal migration or even exile. Many trans* workers from Latin America survive—and die—in North America and Europe, carrying with them not only experiences that reject medical and legal colonization in their own countries. Many other trans* people travel internationally looking for transitional health care that is not available or affordable in their own countries. And, of course, many of us migrate in pursuit of academic opportunities that, again, are neither available nor affordable in our own countries. I would love to see these three lines, these three circuits begin to intersect, to struggle, to collide, to talk.

Tom Boellstorff: Historically, it was primarily cisgendered heterosexuality that circulated transnationally. Transgender and homosexuality circulated as abject deviancies that played a constitutive role in shoring up forms of normality but that were not themes of circulation in their own right, so to speak.

Obviously, not all things assigned the Latin-derived prefix *trans-* are reducible to each other. Yet we now find multiple, intersecting ways that transgender circulates transnationally, all with novel dimensions but also deep histories that shape present contexts. Three are of particular note. First, there are forms of migration of trans and gender-nonconforming people. Such migration can take the form of elite jet-setting, but more often it is economic migration seeking an escape from poverty or political migration seeking an escape from persecution. It is not always “transnational” (for instance, Indonesian *waria* frequently migrate between islands of the archipelago in search of employment), and when transnational, it can be within regions (say, neighboring countries in Latin America or from Indonesia to Malaysia) or across the globe. Second, there are forms of mass-mediated circulation of ideas, images, experiences, practices, and so on. This has been a long-standing focus of my own work, and it is fascinating to note the impact of online technologies in this regard. Third, there is the circulation of trans studies itself as a set of research and activist communities. While raising questions of inequality (for instance, the domination of Euro-American academics or English-language scholarship), such transnational scholarly and activist connection has also fostered productive forms of coalition building, collaboration, and learning.

With regard to the transnational circulation of transgender, two other general issues loom large from my perspective. First is the importance of accounting for spatial scales other than the transnational. How is transgender localized? Urbanized? How does it articulate not just with nationality but with regionality? (I have considered this question, for instance, with regard to the relationship between transgender and Southeast Asia as well as Indonesia.) What about archipelagic, networked, and atmospheric geographies that trouble the framework of nested spatial scales altogether? Second is the importance of accounting for spatial scaling itself as a social process. Most often this has been linked to capitalism, but that is clearly only part of the story. In particular, how is trans productive of spatial scales?

Tom Boellstorff is professor of anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. His publications include *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (2005), *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia* (2007), *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (2008), and (with Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor) *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2012).

Mauro Cabral is the codirector of GATE (Global Action for Trans* Equality), based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is the editor of *Interdicciones: Escrituras de la intersexualidad en castellano* (2009), the second volume of which is forthcoming.

Micha Cárdenas is a Provost Fellow and PhD student in Media Arts and Practice at the University of Southern California and a member of the Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0. She works at the intersection of movement, technology, and politics. Her coauthored publications include *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities* (2012) and *Trans Desire/Affective Cyborgs* (2010).

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).

Eric A. Stanley is a President's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Departments of Communication and Critical Gender Studies at the University of California, San Diego, and an editor of *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (2011). Eric's other writing has been published in the journals *Social Text*, *Women and Performance*, and *American Quarterly*.

Kalaniopua Young is a radical Native Hawaiian transgender woman scholar-activist of color, a more-than-survivor of cis-sexist racial violence, and a community organizer with United Territories of Pacific Islanders Alliance in Seattle. As a doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Washington, her forthcoming dissertation, "Re-thinking the Passage Home," is a critical ethnography that examines the daily lived experiences of frontline Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) houseless and home-free communities in Waianae, Oahu, a critical site for observing ongoing US settler colonialism, indigenous resistance, and survivance in the nation's largest outdoor homeless encampment.

Aren Z. 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*.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2012. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Boston: Aunt Lute.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality." In *Undoing Gender*, 57–74. New York: Routledge.
- . 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso.
- Giovaniello, Sarah. 2013. "NCAVP [National Coalition of Anti-violence Programs] Report: 2012 Hate Violence Disproportionately Targets Transgender Women of Color." *GLAAD Blog*,

- June 4. www.glaad.org/blog/ncavp-report-2012-hate-violence-disproportionately-target-transgender-women-color.
- Gossett, Reina. 2014. *The Spirit Was . . .* thespiritwas.tumblr.com (accessed April 15, 2014).
- International Trans Women of Color Network. 2014. "International Trans Women of Color Network Gathering at AMC2014." www.indiegogo.com/projects/international-trans-women-of-color-network-gathering-at-amc2014 (accessed April 15, 2014).
- Lavers, Michael. 2011. "Seventy Percent of Anti-LGBT Murder Victims Are People of Color." *Colorlines: News for Action*, July 18. colorlines.com/archives/2011/07/70_percent_of_anti-lgbt_murder_victims_are_people_of_color.html.
- Namaste, Viviane. 2000. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: University of Chicago press.
- Peña, Devon. 2011. "The Shifting Balance of Class War." *Environmental and Food Justice* (blog), March 23. ejfood.blogspot.com/2011/03/shifting-balance-of-class-war.html.
- Rivas, Jorge. 2012. "'Free CeCe' Graffiti Left on County Jail Building CeCe McDonald Was Held In." *Colorlines*, June 6. colorlines.com/archives/2012/06/free_cece_graffiti_left_on_county_jail_building_cece_mcdonald_was_held_in.html.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1: 1–40.
- Ziegler, Kortney Ryan. 2012. "Why Centering Race in Transgender Advocacy is Key to Equality for All." *Huffington Post: Gay Voices*, November 19. www.huffingtonpost.com/kortney-ryan-ziegler-phd/why-centering-race-in-transgender-advocacy-is-key-to-equality-for-all_b_2156775.html.