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The Trans Complaint: Contributions to the Disagreement About Desire

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The Trans Complaint:

Contributions to the Disagreement About Desire

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ABSTRACT

Trans studies has been argued to be at a defining crossroads. The discipline needs to reorient itself toward new theories of transness and subjectivity or face its own dissolution. This means contesting received dogmas of gender-determination, identity, history, and narrative convention. This essay examines how recently proposed uses of narratives, poetry, and satire can enable such contests in generative ways. It theorizes the trans complaint as an index for how popularly and academically mediated trans cultures, or intimate publics, might turn toward ordinary life theories in order to understand desire, fantasy, and their interlocking complexities of making a life.

Keywords: Transfeminism, Trans Studies, Affect Theory, Desire, Social Aesthetics

Introduction

I've had my reservations about Andrea Long Chu's recent declaration that "trans studies is over" and that it should be (see Chu & Drager, 2019, p. 103). But the concerns raised in that dialogue between Chu and historian Emmett Harsin Drager are not just compelling because they are new. Both scholars participate in what is already commonplace among theorists about moving away from inherited dogma and getting reacquainted with ordinary life. Although Sandy Stone (1991) pretty much patented the "postranssexual" vision, Chu and Drager point out that there has not been a strong *trans* theory since. As the authors point out, *trans* is now a sort of "becoming-object" of queer theorizing, of *trans-ing* states of matter and our perceptions of the world. (Chu is very animated about Karen Barad's inconsistency on the matter [see pp. 111-12]). Whatever the case, I do agree that trans studies is in a narrative closure. Instead of "the rich conversations" that queer studies used to have and those that still persist in Black studies, "we have warmed over pieties" (p. 103). I think Chu and Drager are right. We need new theories and open dialogues that challenge and engage with each other about transness (binary and nonbinary, transsexual and transgender) and all the complexities of relational identities as living points of departure for analysis. The authors provide at least three possible ways of making trans studies actually trans again: (1) paying attention to the vastness of an already available archive; (2) reorienting theories toward ordinary desire, affective life, and phenomenology; and (3) establishing a trans satirical genre.¹

The present essay is aimed at illustrating how all three of these can, and should, be put into practice. In the first section I engage with what I perceive to be the theories underscoring Chu's (2018b) "On Liking Women." These include psychoanalysis and actor-network theory (ANT). I argue that by paying attention to the norma-

tive conventionalities that animate the transsexual subject's lifeworld, Chu is illustrating what actually makes a durable relation to the world possible. In the second section, I take these insights and underscore my own close reading of a poem, "Agony of the Transsexual," taken from the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. In the third section, I examine another text from the Archives called "The Danish Training School." I argue that this text can represent a kind of trans satire that incites vivid aesthetic considerations of how womanhood and femininity are fantasized, normalized, and embodied. The fourth section of this essay contains eponymous speculations on what I am calling "the trans complaint," especially as it is captured through reactions to Chu's (2018a) op-ed "My New Vagina Won't Make Me Happy." I conclude that good theory multiplies controversies without an aim at merely resolving them.

Modelling the Trans Subject and Their Lifeworld

Chu published "On Liking Women" in the digital magazine *n+1* for more than a desire to generate political clout. She comments in an interview that a friend notified her about the magazine's interest in submissions about transsexuality and feminism (Chu & Berg, 2018). If by sheer happenstance or what some consider luck Chu offered readers a narrative of her relating the history of feminism and her desire to a piercing introspection of how the non-normative life can relate to projects that are not, in themselves, political. I argue in this section that she is following in the intellectual legacy of other theorists like Lauren Berlant and Bruno Latour. Chu's thought seems to have a close fidelity to Berlant's concepts of psychoanalysis expressed in *Desire/Love* (2012; henceforth *D/L*). Chu's connection to Latour (2007) is less straightforward. His text, *Reassembling the Social*, had been a singular, if somewhat sheepish, endorsement

of actor-network theory (ANT) sociology, or *slow*-ciology. The ANT model pursues controversy, context, and relationality amongst the multiplication of actors within the activities of world-building. My aim in this section is to offer a conceptual mapping of how *D/L* and ANT converge in “On Liking Women.” I argue that Chu’s theories, already situated within the ambit of critical method, cannot be dismissed out of hand (see Srinivasan 2018). They complicate the transsexual subject and lifeworld—desire and ordinary agencies are messy. This direction is, I believe, vital for a new trans studies.

The narrative power of “On Liking Women” situates knots and flows over the course of Chu’s life into moments of encounter and self/world transformation. Texts and women, desires and wants, impinge on Chu’s sense of selfhood in such a way that, as if to mirror the theories she ramifies, they maintain relations of attachment. To argue that this is an expression of fantasy, or of a relation to what is fantasmatic, is not to suggest that such scene-setting or personal transformation is unreal. On the contrary, Chu’s practice of reading feminist history is one of repair and exhilaration illustrating how the subject persists *in reality*. (She recently updates these views in another *n+1* piece “The Pink” [Chu 2019]). Relations of attachment are those that form within those scenes where repetition and selfhood are manifest. Consider Chu’s deconstruction of Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto*. There, she reads Solanas’s iteration of transition in the form of an aesthetic, “as if transsexual women decided to transition, not to ‘confirm’ some kind of innate gender identity, but because being a man is stupid and boring” (2018b, p. 50). This was disidentification as emancipatory as well as polemical. Chu’s emphasis on Solanas is more than narrative personal memories, a purely subjective relation to a moment in time. It is hinting at the satirical that Chu relishes about rediscovering history. And this becomes a defining political thematic. Politics should not be confused with desire. Finding one’s way through an otherwise normatively saturat-

ed world is one thing. But Chu finds desire “chary of government” (p. 59). We must learn to make do with what fantasy ends up coordinating for us in the meantime. The alternative activity politicizes some cluster of desires at the risk of subjugating of voices. There is no version of desire in which wanting things makes sense. Or, in Berlant’s view “the object of desire, which has no proper name, but which in fantasy speaks passionately to you and frames your life, bobs and weaves and hits you more like a boxer than a duck when you reach out to possess it, only to discover that you can never duck in time...forcing you to scavenge for survival while remembering that there is a better beyond to it” (*D/L*, p. 13). This makes fantasy and normative life somewhat utopic. Living conventionally as a transwoman means coming to terms with normative pleasures under non-normative conditions. It is not that we are essentially comprised by the expressions of our desired objects. Rather, on this side of conventionality our lives often open onto a plot in which the fantasy of our sovereignty is, thankfully it seems, being written.

These are psychoanalytic principles: the subject is object-anchored and riven by desire’s internal ungovernability. Berlant’s work, especially in *D/L*, helps to illustrate some otherwise nuanced concepts in “On Liking Women.” Affective structures are our responses to desire’s ungovernability and fantasy’s overall presence. Although *D/L* is an overview of psychoanalytic theory and its historical shifts toward fantasy, I want to focus on Berlant’s treatment of the subject of fantasy for reasons of space. In particular, I want to emphasize how fantasy stabilizes and makes scenes in the world bearable. “The post-Freudian model of fantasy as the scene of desire provides another way of representing ambivalence without its internal tensions” (*D/L*, p. 77). The important distinction is that “rather than tracking conflicting aims among the various kinds of attachment the subject feels, the scenic form of fantasy enables the desiring subject to produce a series of interpretations that do not have to cohere as a narra-

tive, but nonetheless make up the scene” (p. 77). The subject is therefore saturated by wants in scenes where she must learn to make do, to survive in the face of fantasy. It is a theory of the subject that “repudiates completely the model of the subject whose desire is the truth of her identity and whose actions are the expressions of her desire” (p. 79). This is what is presupposed when Chu argues that “transition (i.e., action) expresses not the truth of an identity but the force (i.e., expression) of a desire” (2018b, p. 59). The basis of this action is grounded in the subject’s relation to a world and certain governing fantasies where “the subject becomes coherent” through repetitions at particular scenes where affective attachments produce a sense of self, a self to which the subject may return (*D/L*, p. 80). This is perhaps why I find unproblematic Chu’s insistence that “transness [is] a matter not of who one *is*, but of what one *wants*” (2018b, p. 59; italics in original). Wants enable their own kind of reproducibility, or re-encounter, that solidifies the lifeworld upon the promise of their fulfillment.

The lifeworld, for theorists of desire and ANT, is fragile. Actors simply do not have an identity that leads to predictable and self-regarding activities, full stop. In order to effectively trace connections that can be said to cohere as an identity, scholars must be aware of how these relations are situated across temporalized activities that reproduce themselves as scenes of living. Theorist Saidiya Hartman has argued that scenes can only be stabilized through improvisation, especially for black expressions of gender non-normativity (2019, pp. 227-228). The focus on ordinary desire is one important way of tracking such multiple knots of situated meaning. Although these connections can be thought in various iterations (ideology, power relations, the social), the idea is to avoid giving an *ideo-morphism*. I share in Eve Sedgwick’s (2002) anxieties, for example, who cautions against theories where “excitement, rage, even indifference are seen as more or less equivalent transformations of ‘desire.’ The nature or

quality of the affect itself, seeming, is not of much more consequence than the color of the airplane used to speed a person to a destination” (p. 18). But I don’t think Chu, or Berlant for that matter, engages in this kind of *desiro*-morphism. ANT likewise argues that there is no singular force within a subject’s account of agency. There is a displacement of multiple agencies lived as so many improvisations of a yet-to-be-created world. Objects, in fact, ensure that social activities are not merely “transient interactions” (Latour, 2007, p. 66). Sociality should be thought of more as instances of theoretical and everyday controversy. “For ANT... [social] doesn’t designate a domain of reality or some particular item, but rather is the name of a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrollment” (p. 64). Objects (such as texts) often engage as mediators. They transform content into new and surprising information about the complexities of lifeworlds.

There should always be mediators in one’s study. Life is filled with continual transformation of scenes: into montages, into narratives and plots, and thus into traceable memories. So much of “On Liking Women,” for instance, focuses on remapping radical feminism’s history with trans exclusionary practices along similar lines of stress (lesbianism, political identity, and the messiness of solidarity). But each text along the way amounts to significant points of individuated departure. Theories are thus lines of stress all their own, or in Chu’s words “occasions to adjust the pitch of a desire or up a *fantasy’s* thread count, to make overtures to a *new way to feel* or renew their vows with an old one” (2018b, p. 53; my italics). People turn to objects for the purposes of creating or maintaining a life’s project and the world’s durability. The crucial fact is that people *know* what they are doing.² They are not overcome by any singular force, but must live within an assemblage of forces with which they contend in the everyday. This amounts to tremendously dynamic

transactions. And care should be taken in describing the processes by which these scenes are lived. Social theory must then see itself as an act of “*recording not filtering out, describing not disciplining...*” (Latour, 2007, p. 55). Since the multiplication of controversies makes things a bit messy, it might seem less paradoxical that Chu *takes great care* to illustrate this messiness in transsexual histories and subjectivity.

The enduring consensus view of fantasy in the present is that heteronormativity has been a vital actant in stabilizing conventionalities of womanhood, sexuality, and various institutions that govern ordinary life in the U.S. This cultural form has cordoned off scenes of acceptable expressions of desire, exposing normative and non-normative actors to different risks. But for the non-normative, risks are greater and less certain. Berlant argues that even the term non-normative suggests risk because “in most thesauruses, there are no eloquent value-neutral terms for the non-normative” (*D/L*, p. 20). Non-normative life engages with a fantasy that stages scenes in unpredictable (and anxiety-inducing) ways. Some choose conventionality and its promise of utopianism. This is an important theme for Chu. There is nothing wrong with making a life within conventional forms. Even Agnes, the now canonized transsexual woman brought to fame by sociologist Harold Garfinkel, is to this day ignored for “*what she actually wanted: a cunt, a man, a house, a normal fucking life*” (Chu & Drager 2019, p. 107; italics in original). It is no wonder, then, that Chu has equally conventional reasons for her transition. It deserves to be quoted at length.

I transitioned for gossip and compliments, lipstick and mascara, for crying at the movies, for being someone’s girlfriend, for letting her pay the check or carry my bags, for the benevolent chauvinism of bank tellers and cable guys,

for the telephonic intimacy of long-distance female friendship, for fixing my makeup in the bathroom flanked like Christ by a sinner of each side, for sex toys, for feeling hot, for getting hit on by butches, for that secret knowledge of which dykes to watch out for, for Daisy Dukes, bikini tops, and all the dresses, and, my god, *for the breasts* (2018b, p. 60; italics in original).

These are expressions of attachments to the utopia of conventionality, the powerful appeal of having a life. Tracking (or tracing) these fantasies closely attends to how clusters of desires are shaped within scenes of life-making for trans subjects. That approach alone should make understanding Chu's argument that "transsexual women want bottom surgery because *most women have vaginas*" all the more uncontroversial (p. 61; italics in original). Chu is not reproducing cisnormativity here. The more generative controversy, as I will explore in the next section, is that this statement is a nuanced revision of the affirmation that *trans women are women*.

Poetics and the Life of Fantasy

One way to consider the arguments made so far is to say that fantasy convokes affective attachments of all kinds to sustain life. These attachments become scenes of self-fashioning, styles of practice that enable someone to exist in the world. In theory these scenes of life-making can be mobilized because attachments ensure a reproducible encounter. So, if wanting a man, a family, a home—in other words, a life—gets commingled in complex ways, it is because these wants form attachments that make life's scenic montage into something reproducible. Although fantasy sustains, it rarely does so absolutely. It can just as easily ratify *Otherness* and establish disappointment. Women in the heteronormative conventionality of ro-

mantic love also lose as they bargain within that fantasy, adapting as their clusters of desires in life are altered by disavowals and heartache. In short, fantasy makes no promises. This is the reason Chu (2018a) argued in her *New York Times* op-ed that her new vagina will not make her happy. In truth, no object of desire (properly speaking) can.

What follows is a reflection of these themes, condensed into a close reading of a poem I collected during archival research in 2015. I had the privilege of visiting the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. “The Agony of the Transsexual,” is a type-faced print-out on a white sheet of paper. To my mind it remains unpublished. What provides a richness to its reading is that it has no “author.” The question concerning how one might begin to address race and class in the poem remain open. The folder and box in which I found it would date the piece to the late 1970s, early 1980s. Nancy, the narrator, is a transsexual woman whose desires imply a dissociation.³ They are complex and relational, saturated by fantasies of love and its promises of recognition. (Consider, too, the Greek root of “agony,” *agōnía*, means struggle, or intensity.) In this sense, readers should avoid defaulting to a reading that privileges dysphoria (see American Psychiatric Association, 2013, F64.0). Nancy’s world is a composite of people and things, of intensities that trace together a number of patriarchal relationships without necessarily challenging them. Imagine, then, that Nancy might also write, as Chu does, that “the richness of [trans] want” that can “[make] coming out can feel like crushing, why a first dress can feel like a first kiss, why dysphoria can feel like heartbreak,” (2018b, p. 62). “Agony” is Nancy’s transition narrative that, as a cultural text, is a window into how she manages love’s affects while risking failure for the sake of recognition and love. Here is the poem in its entirety:

If I told the world my one desire
Their laughter could not quench the fire
That burns this man's soul, torn apart
For in it beats a woman's heart

I don't know why, I can't explain
How this great sickness to me came
Effeminate magic cast its spell
And normal wishes did dispel

I am a new person, I'm in a new world
I've left my past for the life of a girl
I am no masculine
I have become so feminine

To be a girl has been my goal
A transsexual down in my soul
To be a woman has been my quest
In ecstasy I wear a dress

I wear a skirt bordered with flowers
In make-up I spend happy hours
The mind of a girl, my sex has changed
To others what I want seems strange

I want the body of a woman that's real
For all her emotions to feel
A lady who loves lace and clothes so fancy
From this day on my name is Nancy

And when I bathe with joy I've found
My skin is soft, my breasts are round
A bra holds my firm bust in place
While I stare at my pretty face

Church disapproves but still I wear
Jewelry, nylons, and long hair
My Catholic faith calls it a sin
For me to dress like Carolyn

I feel ashamed, I feel the scorn
An outcast I am so forlorn
Pious men can't understand
Why I'm a woman and not a man

Is there anyone willing to give
Hope to me so I can live
I search for help, someone that's kind
But sympathy I never find

I am a man of intelligence
Dressed like a lady of elegance
The desires of a woman are my weakness
Possessing me like a drunkenness

Deliver me from my sadness (Agony, n.d.)

Nancy's sense of the world is filled with an imaginary and material tableau of feminine objects onto which heteronormative fantasy

is projected. But she is in an ambivalent relationship to any one of these objects. “If I told the world” is conditional; the “I” is contingent on relations specific to that world. She knows that such a world might shame her for the wants she conveys. And yet hers are “desires of a woman” that constitute “weakness/ possessing [her] like a drunkenness.” These weaknesses are, in fact, her strengths. They enable her to shift the balances and intensities of her ordinary. Intoxication, after all, *does* alter one’s relations to the world; being drunk grants an affective distance, blurring socially enforced lines of (gendered, sexual, moral) expectation. This is Nancy’s “magical” thinking because her desires align fantasmatically, making futures possible even if they make no immediate rational sense to her. This recalls Berlant’s notion that desire is “a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it” (*D/L*, p. 6). The fact that we experience our objects as part of an external stimulus suggests that “desire visits you as an impact from the outside, and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you; this means that your objects are not objective, but things and scenes that you have converted into propping of your world...” (p. 6). For Nancy might someday be in love and perhaps even the object of someone else’s desire, inhabiting a body that is recognized (down to her soul) as unambiguously female. But she has to situate those kinds of wants within an everyday life of churches, bars, shopping malls, and family that impose their own impediments. Womanhood, heteronormative as it may be, is nevertheless a constellation of enchantments *and* disappointments. Nancy’s everyday relation to these constellations is adaptable and makes life bearable.

What agonizes Nancy is waiting for that scene of love’s promise: recognition and reciprocity. She is optimistic, returning to these scenes despite the evidence that the promise may never occur. So

she must decide what is bearable and what to hold near her. Or perhaps more to the point: what to hold at a distance. Nancy is telling readers that what is agonizing is really *being in the world*, full stop. Nancy's transition is an already happening occurrence, so to speak. It is happening in the most ordinary moments. Consider Chu's arguments that transition "takes place in the waiting rooms of wanting things," because transsexual women like Nancy must "admit that [her] breasts may never come in, [her] voice may never pass, [her] parents may never call back" (2018b, p. 61). In other words, Nancy has to make do. And this style of *doing* is present as so many ways of mastering the art of normativity, finding patterns that make sense, and making a self in light of the potential violence in conventionality. The poem slightly disturbs the "woman" in the piety that *trans women are women*. She is a woman who must also live the contradiction of wanting to be a woman.

Womanhood is mobile, restless, desirous, and improvisational. (So is it ever really trans or ever really cis?) It pushes against being static. "Effeminate magic cast its spell," Nancy explains. The spell here is desire's elusive effects and Nancy's need to name it, to make sense. These sensibilities can do her harm. But the reasons why we desire objects that might do us harm in the long run is rarely intelligible. Nancy has placed her desire within an economy of female objects, saturated as it is with social meaning. Nancy envisions herself within the emptied ideal female. "I wear a skirt bordered with flowers/ In make-up I spend happy hours/ The mind of a girl, my sex has changed/ To others what I want seems strange." This the essential power of all magic, faith, and belief: that in the midst of the uncanny and strange all of it will come together and have meaning. It's no wonder so many scenes of social interaction are marked by ambivalence here. Nancy's social practices are laden with contradiction (of pious men and church authorities finding her sinful). And yet effeminate spells hold together a cluster of

promises that enable her to endure as her body is misrecognized by others. Attachments ensure that Nancy “bathes in joy.” Attachments ensure such a futurity where her skin is smooth and her breasts are full and firm. The reader can imagine her appearance glowing, enchanted; her fingers adorned with jewelry. In this sense she has managed to collapse what is patriarchal in her object-relations as an ordinary, not revolutionary, strategy. In the end, Nancy is the woman having drinks during happy hour. She is the woman waiting for the banality of a pickup line. And that suggests a romantic fantasy coordinating her ordinary. But that is her sense of living on. Love brings Nancy back to the bar (romance), the store (clothes), the church (god). Nancy’s request to be saved is a request for a lover’s embrace. Recognition is a gift withheld, a promissory note. And Nancy is willing to wait it out until that note is fulfilled. Transition is a promise of newness. It only illustrated new possibilities at the horizon of ordinary life. These occur within the same old social cartography that made Nancy’s womanhood, and thus love, possible in the first place.

Feminine Discipline and Trans Satire

This section presents the fictional story of a woman with an identity crisis. Or, rather, she’s trying to identify anything that makes sense in a crisis of absurd circumstances. I located “The Danish Training School” (Training school, n.d.) during the same archival research in which I found “Agony.” It is a typed manuscript replete with on-page revisions that, too, remains unpublished. I sensed that it was part of something else, a fragment of some larger project.⁴ Leslie, the narrator, has been abducted abroad and taken to what is revealed to be a women-only boarding school. Leslie describes episodes of traumatizing femininity, a kind of coerced womanhood and perverse sexuality. My aim in this section is to describe how these

episodes variously explore that satirical power of wanting to be a woman while already being a woman. The affective attachments in “Training School” push against the willingness to patrol self-truths and desire. Such policing is the absurd in forms of anachronistic torture. I also want to emphasize how transition narratives, even satirical ones, can be lessons in social aesthetics. I track how Leslie’s encounters alter not only hers but our perception of feminine relationality—how transition offers new sensoria, and how this tale allegorizes the extremes of identity-in-waiting. Womanhood has cruel meanings and is illustrated in “Training School” through irreverent allegory.

Leslie’s encounters occur while on vacation in Denmark. She awakens and discovers she had been kidnapped from her hotel in Copenhagen. She opens her eyes to realize that she was now “a prisoner in an elegantly furnished room, which did not possess a window and the door was locked.” (Training School, n.d., p. 1). This is her first sense of anxiety with being “found out.” In a mad rush, she searches the room but only manages to locate a mirror where she finds that her “makeup and hair were still perfect” but that after a pause, “something suddenly dawned on [her]” (p.1). The scene is saturated with dismay. She remarks that

I had been tampered with. My real sex had been discovered. I had been in the habit of wearing a silky suspensory and then an elastic strap to conceal my person. This had been taken away. I could feel it as my sense came back to me. My person was free. I shuddered [text crossed out] turned up my skirt and petticoat and examined myself. Yes, it it had been taken away, but that was not all. My organ had been painted from end to end with a scarlet fluid which dried hard upon it” (Training School, n.d., p. 1; my italics).

Throughout her vacation she had artfully concealed what she calls her “true sex.” Leslie’s habit of concealment might say more about ambivalence than self-hatred. Concealment allowed Leslie to move through the world and encounter it on her own terms. But she is now stripped of the very garments that provided this affective space. In this sense she is truly imprisoned.

She describes her next encounter, in which she meets her captor and tormentor, Madame Haakon.⁵ Leslie describes Madame as the perfect embodiment of the female and all its/her cruelty: her waist is thin; her bust is large; her silken gowns are flowing. Even her embellished jewelry hang together as so many parts of an object (the female) Leslie both fears and desires. This is because Leslie desperately wants these objects, that identity/desire. But Madame continuously denies Leslie’s accessing them through deprivation and the public humiliation from other female students (whom Madame calls her disciples). Through coordinated acts of torture (and one wonders does Leslie really reject these acts altogether), Madame intends to prove a point. If “Mr. Leslie” wants to be a woman then “Mr. Leslie” will be forced to *become* a woman according to Madame’s ideals. Madame insists on a dialectics of vision, between her own body and Leslie’s: “You think because I have an elegant slender waist and wear the most delicate of bottines, that I am weak. Well you are going to see, just for your benefit I will call no assistance, but will deal with you myself” (Training School, n.d., p. 2). And so Leslie’s disciplinary regimen varies between physical and psychic distress. But they are conducted in such odd anachronisms. She is put on the medieval rack in order to be stretched and altered to conform to the sizes of bustiers, leggings, slips, and gowns. All the while, Madame insists: “I mean you no harm [Leslie]. There is no blackmail attached to it. You need a severe course, my lad, and you are going to get it” (Training School, n.d., p. 2). These routines alter the body’s form and imply a method to Madame’s madness.

Although it is only after several scenes on that rack that Madame finally addresses Leslie as “Miss,” Madame still insists that Leslie reflect on her hubris for believing that she could gain the desirous affections of a young Danish man. Madame prods Leslie: “You, a fool of an Englishman dressed up to kill, can bewitch a young Danish boy who happens to be a friend of mine? You have been playing with fire” (Training School, n.d., p. 4). In one sense, this is how women under the fantasy of heteronormativity are constructed: as objects of masculine attraction whose desire is being a good woman, conforming being the passive object of a man’s sexuality (Spivak, 1988, p. 299). If Leslie is to be a good woman she must want to be desired by heterosexual men. She cannot break this economy of pleasure and pursue it the other way around. Leslie is feminized as an object-fetish under duress in order to meet Madame’s satisfaction. Only then is Leslie reintroduced to the young man who then chastises and taunts her. And yet he plans to wine and dine her later that very evening. Beautiful now because she is the object of *his* desires and pleasures, he remarks on Leslie’s beauty: her gown, her perfect makeup, her figure. The dinner ends up being a spectacle in turn. He escorts Leslie to a room with a table populated with other women, all of whom are manacled and docile.

The satirical is that Madame is the embodiment of Leslie’s desire, of wanting to be what she already is. This overdetermines Madame as an ideal. Madame is a projected relation, a series of tropes that stands in for what is both terrifying and attractive about wanting something that may never actually arrive. And so Leslie authorizes Madame to do what Leslie would otherwise want to do. Leslie’s character is, in this sense, the realization that womanhood can be cruel and unforgiving as much as it is exciting, sexual, and full of vital energy. The final scene of the dinner party, where on all sides Leslie is surrounded by other supplicants to Madame’s pedagogy,

Leslie gives in. She eats her food and drinks her coffee. The plush room is a disciplinary locus. Her kidnapping has been a kind of satirical metaphor of how desire takes hold and never lets go. Or as Chu would say, “you have found an object that will give you what you want. [...] One day, you tell yourself, it will give you what you want. Then, one day, it doesn’t” (2018b, p. 61). Following the feminine object can feel like being put on the rack. If femininity is Leslie’s implied relationship to transition, it means that both are terrifying and beautiful. And so Leslie gets something out of what she wanted. She is also disappointed by the sheer ordinariness awaiting her at the end of what amounts to the absurdity of transition, social expectation, and being a woman.

Remarks on “The Trans Complaint”

These foregoing arguments have been concerned with establishing a genre within which to think about mass-mediated trans culture critically. The impulse has been to practice some of the suggestions Chu and Drager made about re-invigorating trans studies. So I offer some sketches of what I am calling the “trans complaint” as a renewable critique on its own. Admittedly, the trans complaint, as a phrase, is a play on Berlant’s “the female complaint.” She argues that “everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking” (2008, p. 1). She bases this notion on the growth of protest sentimentality in popular female culture within the last century. Intimate publics of women, carved out of mass-mediated female culture, shared a “bitter vigilance of [being] intimately disappointed” within heteronormative patriarchy, fusing “feminine rage and feminist rage...hailing the wounded to testify, to judge, to yearn, and to think beyond the norms of sexual difference, a little” (p. 1). In most of Berlant’s work

on this subject love and recognition are situated within the romance fantasy of heteronormativity. My argument runs along similar lines. *Everyone knows what the trans complaint is: trans people live for recognition and recognition is the gift that keeps on taking.* The trans complaint is, in part, a bourgeois complaint. It is white and often circulates as a colorless sense of injustice. It is a collection of feelings and contested claims based on attachments whose discursive structures are rooted in cisnormative (and liberal, and heteronormative) notions of recognition. The trans complaint implies the existence of an intimate public of trans people whose searing vigilance is marked by a return to scenes of recognition despite the frequency of disappointment associated with misrecognition. The return is renewed by the optics of recognition itself. “We” are a consensus of like-minded members. And “I” desire treatment implicit within and unique to that we-community. I will paraphrase Berlant for a better sense of sentential structure:

[The trans complaint]...is shot through with anxieties about audience that in part derive from the absence of a theatrical space in which [trans people] might see, experience, live, and rebel against their oppression *en masse*, freed from the oppressors' forbidding or disapproving gaze (Berlant, 1988, p. 238).

The problem *seems* to be all politics. But it has as much to do with desiring something better (the political) as it is saturated with actionable policies itself. I use this structure in an attempt to understand reactions to Chu's (2018a) *New York Times* op-ed. There, Chu made several important criticisms about the connection of SRS and mental health within medical gatekeeping discourses and institutions. The op-ed is significant. It made the claim that happiness should not be a defining metric of whether

one is “fit” for SRS. But it was a massively available text that, taken together with “On Liking Women,” appealed to a non-academic audience. Furthermore, and like most contributions to popular newspapers and magazines, it did not have the lengthy wait-times of journal articles. Both popular and academic reactions have been “shot through with anxieties.” Consider the following sentiment, regarding “On Liking Women,” Amia Srinivasan (2018) expressed in *The London Review of Books*: “[Chu’s] argument cuts both ways. If all desire must be immune from political critique, then so must the desires that exclude and marginalise trans women: not just erotic desires for certain kinds of body, but the desire not to share womanhood itself with the ‘wrong’ kinds of woman.” Chu isn’t making the claim that all desire should be immune from critique. Nor would her argument simply allow the uncritical growth of transphobic sentiment. Rather, desire should be immune from policing so as to avoid how certain kinds would come to reflect what is “really” political for, or what are the “true feelings” of, trans people.⁶

Audiences were apprehensive, if conveniently true to the form the Berlantian complaint takes, about the message *and* the forum. Given that there was no clear theatrical space in which trans women could respond and react against the disapproving (cisnormative) gaze, Chu’s statements would seem to have been fodder for such anxieties.

I like to say that being trans is the second-worst thing that ever happened to me. (The worst was being born a boy.) Dysphoria is notoriously difficult to describe to those who haven’t experienced it, like a flavor. Its official definition – the distress some transgender people feel at the incongruence between the gender they express and the gender they’ve been socially assigned – does little justice to the feeling.

As beautiful as these observations are, they were still hers. The crux of so many hostilities against Chu's testimony were probably in how she described, in this singular voice, the living of transition.

I feel demonstrably worse since I started on hormones. One reason is that, absent the levees of the closet, years of repressed longing for the girlhood I never had have flooded my consciousness. I am a marshland of regret. Another reason is that I take estrogen – effectively, delayed-release sadness, a little aquamarine pill that more or less guarantees a good weep within six to eight hours.

It is here that readers might encounter what seems to be universalizing affects associated with SRS and hormonal replacement: sadness, depression, anxiety. Indeed, communities were aghast that Chu invited readers from all walks of life to a first-hand account of the intimacies of otherwise bad emotional experiences within a narrative of wanting SRS. The possibility of misrecognition/misreading was astoundingly high. Responding *en masse* on mostly blogs and Twitter, trans activists and scholars feared Chu had pandered to an audience already geared to muck up the complexities of transness in an epoch already mired in identity politics. I think this was, and still is, a wrong-headed sense of what the piece is doing. What she was, in fact, pointing toward was the kind of “aptitude of the [trans woman’s] body to represent, among other things, the fears, furies, appetites, and losses of the people around it,” (Sedgwick, 1987, p. 126). Chu is pointing toward a practice that overdetermines the transsexual (female) as *the* body of discipline.

In other words, Chu was shattering an image slowly and painstakingly cultivated throughout trans studies as an academic discourse. She was revealing sides of what it looks like when life gets overwhelming without all the self-referential theories that make writing a trans life difficult to imagine (even for a trans person) *in*

theory. I want to pause here to point out how easy it is to forget that op-ed pieces had been used for decades by numerous trans people across the U.S. as a means of opening lines of communication locally and nationally. Ariadne Kane, an often missed if not problematic figure in trans histories, had once written to *Penthouse Magazine* to expand the possibilities of transvestite subcultures as “all persons engaged in cross-dressing [from] transgenderists [*sic*], female impersonators, to pre-operative transsexuals” (Kane, 1974). Kane directed editors and readers to literatures that both specialist and non-specialist alike could utilize to understand trans subcultures. Many other ordinary people during the '60s and '70s had vented their frustrations with transness through similar forums. These ranged from experiences with jobs and employment, stories of making do as trans women who had a family, to wanting confirmation surgeries (Aultman, Forthcoming). And so Chu employed a tactic rather common in trans histories. She was, in fact, rehabilitating that theatrical space for transness utilized for decades in popular forums. But in doing so she triggered anxieties that had only been worked through in the relatively non-porous walls of academia. I want to be clear: Transphobia and trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) are not and should not be confused with the productive powers from within trans communities themselves. If anything, TERFs are precisely those who are named within the “oppressive gaze.”

Conclusion

I have been saying in some form that everyday social aesthetics offers trans studies a source of renewed theoretical power without disciplining the complex desires and identities of the trans people. The aesthetics of trans experiences and narratives *should not* be subject to the kind of hyperbole that followed Chu's *n+1* article and op-ed. Transness is rooted in practices that weave together complex as-

sociations of desire and fantasy. Transness is a living texture enabling the durability of a subject's world. Conventionalities are cultural products that alter over time (or can stagnate and die off). For many who make a life within those seemingly perennial ones (e.g., womanhood) conventionalities might seem utopic. Emerging in conventional possibilities, narratives of making do translate what seemed to be incommensurable imaginaries. This is transness as a complex text that needs careful reading. And all this relies upon the power of conversation, grounding ourselves in the fact that history is an affective experience of that text. History is what hurts (Jameson, 1981, p. 102). And it is a history shot through with racial animus, erasure, and dislocation—themes I could not, regrettably, address with any adequacy.

The trans complaint suggests that trans people are always learning to be inconvenienced by a person who wields a theory of transness different from our own. To that end, trans activism should embrace rather than reject “a policy of [trans] *disidentification* at the level of essence,” (Berlant, 1988, p. 253; my italics). This does not mean jettisoning the mobilizing powers of identity. This policy embraces the complexity of transness and its living expressions. The texts I have explored in this essay are doing precisely that. Each elaborates a style of disimplicating identity from truth, truth from desire, and the policing that might converge on sites of self-making. No good comes from sealing off the proliferation of narratives and stories from within our communities, regardless of how complicated the picture can get; no matter the fallouts they create; no matter the possibility of misreadings and misrecognition. We do not want narrative closure, which is a condition already affecting the field of trans studies. We have to avoid the condition for the possibility that *trans* becomes something other than lived experiences (e.g., “trans*materiality” comes to mind). *Trans* is an expression of affectivity and practical interaction in normative culture. *Trans* is an en-

agement with structures of feeling that are binary and non-binary. Writing and enacting these expressions can enable non-normativity to bear upon social worlds meaningfully. As Hortense Spillers has argued, ordinary life for the marginally positioned is a skill with which one must wield words and master expressivity (2003, p. 426).

I am not advocating that trans communities stop complaining with one another—or to other communities, for that matter. *We should, instead, embrace the fact that we might be let down by each other's narratives as much as we might be lifted up by them.* The possibility of disappointment is the risk we take in making a life that is, by its nature, shared under the material conditions of a neoliberal economy. In the end, the fantasy constituting the trans complaint is the *promise* of recognition. Being seen for who we are is not a guarantee and bears out an important affective paradox. The promise of recognition is founded upon the possibility of its own non-existence. Its irresistible appeal is what Sedgwick (2002) might have called its performativity, its relation to what empowers it. Transness, too, is tied to a certain proximity of the yet-to-be-lived bloom of tomorrow—a scene replete with its own possibilities, its own promises of love and recognition.

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(ENDNOTES)

- ¹I am using "trans" to include binary and nonbinary transgender, transsexual, and gender nonnormative expressions of sex/gender subjectivity. Further, there is no crisply defined convention in writing whether the space between "trans woman" or "trans man" is more representative than no space in "transwoman" or "transman." In this essay I will deploy the space.
- ²This is an epistemology that parallels Sedgwick's that "everybody who survives at all has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of *nonce taxonomy* for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human social landscape" (2008, pp. 22-23; my italics). I have avoided using too much jargon by leaving this powerful phrase (*nonce taxonomy*) as a note. I give it greater critical elaboration in a forthcoming project on transness and race.

³A more recent and phenomenological repurposing of this notion can be found in what Berlant (2013) calls the dissociative poetic, or “an affective style of holding and processing and making room...” (p. 29). I deploy this poetic throughout the essay as a space of ambivalence or abeyance in which one might experience the full emotional tableau of vulnerability.

⁴Although I cannot reprint its entirety here, I have remained loyal to reproduce the author’s idiosyncratic words about sex/gender in quotations wherever possible.

⁵“Haakon” is a variation of the Danish word meaning “high son,” which contributes to my sense that the author of this poem (as a trans woman) is playing on the relation of Leslie and Madame being one and the same in a cluster of affective relations to sex/gender and transition.

⁶A great deal of Chu’s theoretical energy, to me, is that of experimental narrative. She writes as if in an ongoing improvisation to the weird temporizing effects of making life. Sedgwick (1987) introduced this thematic in “A Poem is Being Written,” and made an invitation for others to commit to the experiment. It was a challenge to temporality and discipline and inviting others to “write accounts ‘like’ this one (whatever that means) of their own, and share those” (p. 137). Consider the parallel passive voice in Chu’s title (“On Liking Women”) to Sedgwick’s. This leads me to disavow criticisms that Chu is being solipsistic. Such criticisms miss the conversation the piece is offering readers.

RESUME

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