

Black Life, Trans Study

On Black Nonbinary Method, European Trans Studies, and the Will to Institutionalization

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Abstract This essay thinks through some possibilities and implications for a trans studies formation in Europe and across the West that takes as some of its core concerns and ethical commitments black people, black life, and black capacities for insurgency, experimentation, and trans nonbinary method. Writing against the logics of displacement, disciplinarity, and depletion, what follows is a brief meditation on both the institutionalization of trans studies in Western academia and the material disregard of black people, trans people, migrants, and other oppressed and vulnerable people under the extractive regimes of cisheteropatriarchal white supremacy.

Keywords black nonbinary, trans studies, black studies, possibility, institutionalization

And so, the Black student enters the gates. Choice of entry is delusional. He must go inside, or perish through dependency. But he rejects the university as it panders to his potential for neither/nor anonymity, or for dysfunctional amnesia.

—June Jordan, “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person”

What are the seductions for a trans activism for [which] traumatized citizenship is more than merely an identitarian pitfall . . . and is rather a key condition to its own emergence? . . . What would a trans politics and theory look like that refuses such “murderous inclusion”?

—C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*

Transitioning Tipping Points

Three years ago, in their edited special issue of *TSQ*, “The Issue of Blackness,” black scholars Treva Ellison, Kai M. Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton (2017: 162) wrote that they were “interested in what happens to the category of transgender as it becomes routed through the logics and power lines

1 of institutionality and the metrics of administration.” They cowrote their intro-
2 duction in the aftermath of what was referred to as the “trans tipping point.” This
3 was a periodization articulated and exported by the US mainstream media circa
4 2014 and was encapsulated in a headline with that framing on the June 9 cover of
5 *Time*, featuring actress and activist Laverne Cox, and the ample think pieces and
6 commentary that followed (see Steinmetz 2014). We have continued to see the
7 cultural mainstreaming of trans aesthetics, international recognition and visibility
8 of trans cultural figures, and incremental legal rights victories for those closest to
9 the usual heteronorms at the expense of the usual disposable subjects, who con-
10 tinue to feel the weight and unmitigated violence of that same legal enterprise.

11 In Europe such legal force continues to be felt with stringent white
12 supremacist policies around asylum seekers and other violence enacted under the
13 guise of human rights, despite routinely denying material support to more vul-
14 nerable populations (i.e., turning away migrants and asylum seekers). Violence
15 and victory under the law have been disparate and bitterly fought. In June 2020,
16 the US Department of Health and Human Services finalized its systemic rollback
17 of antidiscrimination policies and federal health protections for trans people
18 during the same period in which we learned about the state-sanctioned murders
19 of Riah Milton, Dominique “Rem’mie” Fells, and Brian “Egypt” Powers. During
20 those same news cycles, the United States Supreme Court upheld workers’ rights
21 protections for only some trans people. The rulings in *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral*
22 *Homes Inc. v. EEOC*, *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia*, and *Altitude Express v.*
23 *Zarda* affirmed that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination
24 “because of sex,” which the Court decreed includes LGBTQ employees. These
25 victories remain significant but ultimately incremental, since valuing and cele-
26 brating the “right” to work is itself a capitulation to a capitalist society that tethers
27 one’s capacity for labor to the valuation of human life and purpose. The right to
28 work links work ability to survivability, not least by placing dollar amounts on
29 basic needs, to maintain life, and subsequently produces asymmetrical compen-
30 sation for some forms of labor while criminalizing other forms outright, such as sex
31 work, which is a labor economy that significantly features trans women and queer
32 people. With this legal boon claimed for the LGBTQ community, a subset of those
33 very people was granted certain work protections by the ruling on the one hand but
34 remain unprotected and globally exploited on the other. Aimee Stephens, a white
35 trans woman around whom one of the cases centered, died without adequate
36 health care owing to loss of workplace insurance. Her right to work has now been
37 enshrined in the highest court in the United States, but her right to life was always
38 already denied from the moment she came out to her employers as transgender.

39 Moving through the trans tipping point on a cultural level, perhaps we’ve
40 been simultaneously and continuously cast in relation to the term’s latent

1 meaning in the wake of that saturation and hypervisibility. In anglophone con-
2 texts like the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, misappropriated
3 terms like *gender-critical feminism* and *trans-exclusive radical feminism (TERF)*
4 give name to a vocal contingent of people—primarily cis-white women—who
5 center their ire and ideological thinking to flex the very power they disavow
6 having against trans women whom they view as the impediment to their fight to
7 preserve the sanctity of (their own, primarily white and middle-class or well above,
8 as in the case of billionaire J. K. Rowling) womanhood from “the patriarchy.”
9 Other European nations, like France with its history of *différence sexuelle* or “sexual
10 difference feminism,” have a long history of trans exclusion, too. In Italy, Hun-
11 gary, and Poland, the mobilization of trans-exclusive rhetoric in the name of
12 Catholicism, Christian family values, and patriotism has managed to authorize
13 the so-called *anti-gender* movements (the term left in English, and often italicized
14 in writing, even when articulated in other languages to signal it as a foreign
15 concept that is incommensurate with national norms and cisheteronormative
16 desires) with the vested power of the state and incentivized individual citizens to
17 consider trans people (along with migrants) as enemies and outside agitators.¹

18 Across the linguistic and geopolitical particularities, the persistent plat-
19 forming of those who enact routine epistemological violence is telling. This
20 violence is often against AFAB (assigned female at birth) nonbinary people and
21 trans men whom trans antagonists tend to nonconsensually include as “women”
22 in their restrictive definition of feminism and rote categories of binary gender.
23 These trans antagonists often issue calls for physical violence against trans women
24 implicitly or explicitly, even lusting after the chance to enact the violence
25 themselves. They routinely facilitate the dehumanization and annihilation of all
26 trans people. The attention and undue mainstreaming of these harmful ideas
27 perhaps indicates a tipping point of its own, one that would benefit from tran-
28 sitioning the terms of engagement and conditions of possibility from one of
29 oversaturation to something more meaningful. While the term *tipping point* was
30 popularized by Canadian writer Malcom Gladwell’s 2000 eponymous book of
31 pop social science, its fraught racial connotative history is useful to consider here.
32 More than generically referencing the point beyond which something might tip
33 over or descend into something else, it referenced something like the precursor to
34 “white flight,” a state-sanctioned phenomenon by which white families moved
35 themselves and their resources into suburban spaces once black and migrant
36 families moved into urban cityscapes. This is evidenced in many of the social
37 practices and intentional “urban decay” borne from segregationist policies in
38 1940s-to-1960s America, leading to the intentional underresourcing of so-called
39 inner cities. While the American case looms large in our social imaginary, as is
40 often the case, this global phenomenon has occurred in places like postwar
London, Stockholm, and Malmö; postapartheid South Africa; and postcolonial

1 Zimbabwe. This white migration pattern stretches into the contemporary
2 moment across various European and North American contexts and is enabled
3 and even reinforced by racist and classist practices around housing, policing, and
4 the distribution of municipal resources.

5 The notion of the tipping point then, carries a strong valence of racial
6 panic, historically being the perceived threshold by which white people could or
7 would “endure” black and migrant presence and proximity. This racial panic and
8 the behaviors it elicits, enshrined in historic and contemporary policy to an
9 alarming degree, continues to plague Europe in the manner of ideologically
10 driven white-supremacist identity crises that have manifested as “the migration
11 crisis” and “Brexit,” and further as exacerbated racialized and classist responses to
12 the 2019 novel coronavirus in places like the United States, the UK, and globally
13 across detention centers, prisons, and on ships in the Mediterranean that are still
14 being prohibited from docking in the European Union under the guise of public
15 health safety. To be clear, the latter argument is a sleight of hand that elides many
16 of the questions around just whose public and whose health are being privileged
17 and rendered safe. Those who seek to “protect” or, rather ahistorically, preserve
18 womanhood as exclusive of and under threat from trans women take up a similar
19 death-dealing logic of possession as the state. Indeed, they are willfully acting as,
20 in Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words, “non-sworn cops,” in this instance, of the
21 colonial gender binary.² We are on the verge of the racialized tipping point of
22 gender panic, creeping fascism, and the retrenched logics of colonialism and of
23 racial capitalism. It is on the grounds of those interrelated sites of struggle that
24 questions and the contours of the possible institutionalization of trans studies in
25 Europe must be meted out. Given the linguistic breadth, historical archives, and
26 spatiotemporal geopolitical attachments of the place differentially and mutably
27 hailed as “Europe,” those grounds require the type of “transversal methodology”
28 that Snorton (2017: 7) advances in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans*
29 *Identity*, one that “yields insights that surpass an additive logic” that may cultivate
30 “strategies for inhabiting unlivable worlds.”

31 The capacious matter of black, migrant, and indigenous life and possi-
32 bility, the fact of coloniality and its iterative and aesthetic forms—which is to say
33 its ongoing presences and reverberations—must be syncretically considered in
34 any trans studies formation in Europe or elsewhere. And on the matter of insti-
35 tutionalization, we might turn to black studies, another field that has faced dis-
36 regard, depletion, and ongoing internal and external struggles to persist in an
37 insurrectionary, imaginative spirit as an agon of Western humanistic thought
38 from within the ivory tower and beyond it. As the formidable historian C. L. R.
39 James (1970: 43) noted in an interview with the *Black Scholar*, “There is an
40 opportunity to extend the field of intellectual inquiry which [white scholars
and people] have neglected up to now, a chance to penetrate more into the

1 fundamentals of Western civilization, which cannot be understood unless black
2 studies is involved.” Black studies here can be located, articulated, and held by
3 James as a site of rigorous possibility. With an experimental capacity to
4 remember, redirect, and revolutionize, black studies reflects our ability to find our
5 way out of the order of antiblackness and other foundational modes of violence
6 that coercively shape the modern world. Without it, the epistemologies that
7 structure the contemporary world order continue to run rampant in their
8 overdetermination of our realities. If we let it, the dynamic between black study
9 and trans study continues to be one of persistent and consistent relation and
10 mutable, nonhierarchical exchange. For black trans people, there is little value or
11 sense in rendering them wholly separable entities in thought or in deed. Further,
12 the distinction and excision of trans studies from black studies—which risks
13 whitening the former’s contributions and renders the latter heteronormative and
14 bound to national paradigms—generates a shadow of black study that lingers
15 over its commitment to critique all “fundamentals of Western civilization,”
16 including gender and the unthinkable of black trans survival. As much as black
17 studies emphasizes certain modes of possibility and sustained attention, the form
18 and function of trans studies in Europe can and should portend further exten-
19 sions of, expansions of, and otherwise reflections on what persisting life worlds
20 may yet undermine those fundamentals. The horizon ought to be that Western
21 civilization as we know it will itself transition into something radically more
22 inhabitable. This is some of what trans study in Europe might speak to.

23 Trans study, as I use it here, is incommensurate with European trans
24 studies in that it mobilizes insurgent solidarity in a manner that relishes difference
25 but does not regulate it, in a manner that does not predicate disciplinarity and
26 university affiliation, and foregrounds animate ideas and capacious beings. I
27 intend trans study as delinked from an investment in or concern with sexological
28 thinking (including its abiding critiques), as committed to anticolonial forma-
29 tions, as oriented toward the abolition of whiteness and the centrality of the white
30 trans body, and as that which holds an affinity for experimental and intensive
31 methods for analysis, modes of care, and engagement with thinkable and
32 unthinkable black life and black livingness.³ This trans study thrives in the self-
33 reflexive and collectively aware possibilities of the sort of ambivalence derived
34 from black nonbinary method. By this, I mean a transgression of the both/and
35 contextual mode that cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall described as a space
36 rather than fixed position.⁴ Instead, the black nonbinary method undergirding
37 the trans study I’m putting forth playfully—and with its own rigor—shifts into
38 a neither/nor divestment from any of the currently presented options in favor
39 of something else yet to be presented or embodied. Trans study, then, is about
40 eschewing the will to institutionality in favor of radical emergence that fore-
grounds the unthought and shields it from extraction and co-option.

Against White Trans Studies: An Invocation

Let's set the administrative and logistical questions aside for a moment, though they are regrettably quite central to a field's institutional ratification in this neoliberal era. Whatever the administrative demands and desires of an institutionally bound trans studies portends in Europe, it must not be a white trans studies. This may seem obvious or even facetious to name. What even is "white trans studies" anyway, is there such a thing? The critique of a presumptive and insidious whiteness does not fall squarely on trans studies and its various objects of concern and care but, rather, speaks to the consistent and persistent modus operandi of the academic-industrial complex, which is to isolate, to extract, to incorporate, and to isolate again, this time only after priming the things (the studies and the people, as the case may be) for future extraction and ultimate discarding of the objects of study once they have become what Frantz Fanon (1967: 89) might refer to as objects among objects.⁵

Black studies is in part a critique of Western civilization because Western civilization has given us capital "H" History, which on a curricular level is tantamount to able-bodied white cisheteropatriarchal history. Sociology, psychology, anthropology, and so on omit the preceding shibboleth *white* because it permeates their very core and reifies the supremacy of the West by incorporating and eclipsing other cultures, possibilities, and configurations of knowledge under its own feckless shadow. Air and attention continue to be paid to white cis women who continue to reduce the category of woman/womanhood to a poorly understood facsimile of biological traits and culturally relative norms. Gender studies formations across the West face a choice to disidentify with critical race theory and trans thought. In this climate, trans study in Europe has to be about the business of thriving in community that exceeds all institutionality and antagonizes all borders/border regimes rather than ceding the epistemological and ideological grounds to the shifting goalposts of recognition. Trans study need not, as Sylvia Wynter (2006) would caution, mistake the map for the territory simply because a vocal few are guarding their TERF/turf and claiming to shout from the representative center of vigilantly held borders. As Hortense Spillers might say, they cling to the untenable belief that they cut those borders.⁶ As key genealogies for a trans studies that could be taught through current archives and modes of academic and artistic thought predominantly feature deracinated queer and trans histories, nationalized case studies, stagnant and colonized figurations of gender and so on, the whiteness of a more readily codifiable trans studies begins to emerge. In this iteration, a familiar dash of foremothers and "trancestors" like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera would be referenced for literal and historical color, with trans migrants and nonanglophone trans people getting honorable mentions in a module, if we're lucky.

1 While this may be a generalization or an ungracious reading for some, we
2 must be honest and acknowledge that there exists a tendency, an orientation
3 toward an anglophone whiteness that a transnational formation of trans studies
4 has yet to fully vanquish. We've been here before. A similar reckoning has been
5 and continues to be demanded of queer studies, gay and lesbian studies, feminist
6 studies, and gender and women's studies configurations. We know this materially,
7 each time the word *black* continues to be mobilized as a cudgel and an insurgent
8 amplifier through texts and multiple other cultural productions. What is required
9 for us are sites and spaces of possibility that crave neither solutions to our gender
10 troubles nor exhaustive accounts of our untold differences. *Black Queer Studies*.
11 *Black on Both Sides*. Black feminism. Black trans studies. "But some of us are
12 brave."⁷ Trans study in Europe, guided by its capacity for linguistic divergence and
13 enriched archival imaginaries, does not need to reiterate the epiphenomenal
14 logics of displacement of multiply marginalized people, their contributions,
15 demands, or digressions. These practices whiten the scope of possibility and
16 reify—through policy, services, spatiality—racial capitalist modes of produc-
17 tion, oppression, and extraction. This in turn perpetuates racial violence and
18 depletes any chance of trans study, favoring white supremacist knowledge pro-
19 duction and circulation that is known as "education" and what passes for studies
20 throughout the West.

21 As Derrais Carter (2018: 39) wrote in the essay "Black Study," "We would
22 also do well to think about whose concerns we prioritise in our attempts to get free
23 and how." The ontological and epistemological binds to which trans people are
24 subjected are themselves constitutive of a familiar bedrock of antiblackness that
25 must never be ignored and cannot be overstated. All academic disciplines are
26 made manifest through race thinking.⁸ Thus, if trans study in Europe means to
27 resist those logics even as it succumbs to institutional desires, particularly for
28 increased programming and departmentalization, then we must be vigilant,
29 envision otherwise, and maintain a trenchant critique that articulates the gen-
30 erative stance of neither/nor. The latter is a key component of black nonbinary
31 method, which accepts none of the presently available options. For instance,
32 current concerns of Europe as a supranational polity include the question of
33 citizenship and/as otherwise belonging. This incidentally rearticulates and reifies
34 colonial framing with a trusted tool of white supremacy: the border. Here, the
35 border is specifically between citizen and (im)migrant or "alien" other. A liberal
36 framing may focus language on the fact of recent arrivant and hail "the new-
37 comer." This temporalizes the presence of the other into the dismissible and
38 contemporary compared to the static belonging of the normatively rendered
39 citizen. And what of the never citizen, the incommensurate citizen, the nomad,
40 the never-to-be newcomer eternally at sea, the always already there and unac-
knowledgeed noncitizen who gives the figure of the citizen its power? The

1 provincialization of trans studies into grammars legible across difference may
2 yield a calculated response with a clear sense of priorities toward our collective
3 liberation and renders citizenship as a salient category totally defunct.

4 Trans people's unruly bodies have been scrutinized, coercively medica-
5 lized, exploited, ahistorically relegated to the contemporary, and otherwise vio-
6 lated by the same imperial and colonial logics that brought us disciplinarity and
7 discipline. Thus we must reckon with the fact that discipline is insufficient to
8 black/trans study and to other study of the oppressed. Trans study and black
9 nonbinary method—like trans livingness—can offer much-needed play and
10 experimentation. They offer up questions and shirk answers, are animated by a
11 divestment from whiteness and the white gaze, which grinds disciplinary ten-
12 dencies to a halt, and, above all, they acknowledge that another world is possible
13 and imminent. In a letter of demands for the support of Black Studies and the
14 City University of New York in the 1960s, June Jordan (1995: 50) offered a clear
15 provocation: "What is the university, until we arrive? . . . It is where the people
16 become usable parts of the whole machine: Machine is not community." Unless
17 we are speaking of the cyborg or similar trans figures, trans study must neither
18 be the machine nor overly invest in the category of the human. Both positions
19 advance their own modes of conditional citizenship and capitulation to Western
20 epistemic categories and ontology.

21 Understanding that the structure of racial capitalism invests and seeks to
22 coerce us to be invested in the logics of displacement, discipline, and depletion,
23 trans studies in Europe might also take this moment—the intersection of mul-
24 tiple tipping points, the resurgence of familiar modes of ongoing violence—to
25 undertake meaningful and transformative solidarity. For instance, there is a
26 woeful lack of institutionalization of black or any ethnic studies programming
27 across Europe. The first black studies degree anywhere on the entire continent was
28 launched in the UK in September 2017. Scholars like Michelle Wright, Paul Gilroy,
29 Katherine McKittrick, Gloria Wekker, Philomena Essed, and many others have
30 commented on the situatedness of black people in Europe and contexts other
31 than the United States of America being ignored, erased, undermined, and
32 marginalized. There is also the problem of privilege and the grids through which
33 it is differentially intelligible. For the black European who is deeply aware of the
34 difficulty articulating their own blackness and exploring their culture without
35 experiencing their knowledge as subjugated and overdetermined by American
36 cultural imperialism, but who also has a divergent experience to the state com-
37 pared to a black migrant or asylum seeker to Europe, the relational aspect of these
38 dynamics is crucial.

39 We must be vigilant against the retrenchment of a white trans studies in
40 Europe and everywhere, and reckon with the absenting of the black trans body

1 and the spectacularization of the trans migrant, much as American black studies
2 has had to reckon with its centripetal force in the study of Africa and its diaspora
3 and the critique of Western civilization via the patriarchal advantaging of black
4 cisheterosexual men's theories, experiences, and histories—and even then, often
5 only those who serve a national or otherwise woefully incomplete agenda. A black
6 nonbinary approach to trans study would then be useful to consider eschewing
7 either position, and the parochialism that they differentially engender. There are
8 many queer and trans collectives of black people and people of color currently
9 and continuously shouldering the work of both/and intersectional identitarian
10 thinking and the neither/nor ambivalence by orienting in solidarity to an eman-
11 cipatory or abolitionist tense that seeks to dismantle the institutionalization of
12 resources and the state itself. For example: Bent Bars, a letter-writing project for
13 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, gender-variant, intersex, and
14 queer prisoners in the UK that is not explicitly all black but supports a black
15 abolitionist vision and shares an anti-carceral position; Sisters Uncut, a trans-
16 inclusive abolitionist, anti-carceral feminist organization taking direct action
17 against domestic violence, sexual assault, and femicide; Azione Trans, a Rome-
18 based trans rights group led by black Italian Richard Thunder Bourelly; Black &
19 Queer Trans Resistance, a direct action and community group countering racism,
20 transphobia, and homophobia through marches and intergenerational meetups
21 based in the Netherlands; cutieBIPOC Collective, an autonomous network
22 invested in occupying shared space during collaboratively organized annual festi-
23 vals and cultivating mutual aid, skill share, and community awareness and support
24 for queer, trans, and intersex black people and people of color across Europe; and
25 many more.⁹ These groups and communities of people struggle across difference to
26 opt into forged spaces of emancipatory disrupting of the stronghold of cishetero-
27 opatriarchal white supremacy and racial capitalism with their actions and visions.
28 I think it might be important to mention that these exist informally as well as
29 formally, in thought and unthought ways—through mutual aid as survival—and
30 also in a multitude of individually insufficient overlapping attempts.

31 We must know and name the separation of race from gender as a white
32 supremacist project, as we name the epiphenomenalization of race from class,
33 ethnicity, history, time, labor, and politics as a white supremacist project. These
34 maneuvers are undergirded by the logics of racial capitalism, which perpetuates
35 the logics of displacement and disregard foundational to the very idea of Europe.
36 Trans studies taken up in any European context must always acknowledge this
37 and move toward the malleable, the maladaptive, and maladjusted because to do
38 so is to resist the status quo toward insurgent nonlinear productions of knowl-
39 edge, presences, and sites of otherwise possibility.
40

Neither/Nor: A Black Nonbinary Approach to Trans Study

Many scholars continue to work within, despite, and beyond the academic-industrial complex to share and develop knowledge that seeks to dismantle the violent and oppressive ideologies that shape our lives, which are themselves acts that mitigate harm. These writers and artists produce scholarship that names systemic problems, provides a litany of examples of the violence endemic to these systems, and circulates critiques in the hopes that the power of these systems can be named and lessened in that naming. Trans study that is carefully organized around and in ethical relationship to black life and black livingness offers one such powerful means of naming these systems and categories so that we can challenge the violence of modernity. The black nonbinary as otherwise embodiment, method of assessment, and mode of analysis enables us to fully realize the fault lines of care that populate academic life. The resulting friction that comes with the incommensurability of thriving in academic environments has underscored the need for disrupting and dismantling the status quo. We know that the academic-disciplinary goal (the learning expectation and the proposed learning outcome) is, of course, to refuse and prevent and destroy collaborative rebellion against empire. We needn't let it succeed outright.

In "Black Study," Carter (2018: 39) again asks, "When we are professionalized to think, act and create against the possibility of our own potential, what is the cost?" What we might consider in the face of the will to institutionalization, the will to discipline, and detain, is a renewed insistence on generous, generative, and transgenerational reading practices when it comes to resisting oppressive norms (fascism, ethnonationalism, gender-critical feminism, etc.) and engaging in collaboration toward imagining what Ashon T. Crawley (2016: 241) has frequently referred to as "otherwise worlds of possibility." Through this, black nonbinary method can animate trans study in Europe.

Black nonbinary method is antagonizes racial capitalism at its core in that it craves slow time and requires deep reading—which is also to say sitting in sustained epistemological relation (even a conflicted one)—across languages, histories, and cosmologies, to learn and to understand what is possible or what might work, rather than to ready a new defense. While transnationally and transversally inclined, it also acknowledges a particular situatedness, questioning the circulation of names in Britain like Sandra Bland while Sarah Reed and Naomi Hirsi remain relatively unknown. Rather than seeking closure or an end to the conversation, with a carefully considered engagement with the black nonbinary, honoring negative preferences (i.e., "neither X nor Y, but something yet to come") can be a platform into possibility. It takes in information from the marginalized, steals resources (including knowledge) from hegemonic spaces to posit a calculated disruption that irrefutably asserts the capacity for black life to flourish against the antiblackness that structures and is the very bedrock of modernity.

1 Black nonbinary identification as one possible iteration of trans life
2 vitalizes the capacity for life, for survival, while naming itself in opposition.
3 Nonbinary is hurtling toward a tipping point of its own in the West—*Merriam-*
4 *Webster's Dictionary* announced *they*, a popular pronoun for many nonbinary
5 people, as the 2019 word of the year, naming white English musician Sam Smith as
6 contributing to its “recent” popularization and again erasing centuries of black
7 feminist, black trans, and black queer thought and people. Thus, it is nearing the
8 risk of being relegated to the “third space” of gender. Gender boxes increasingly
9 read M, F, and X—the third option representing nonbinary gender, a hard-won
10 struggle for recognition in places like the United States, which is currently serving
11 (again) as a model on the supranational scale for organizations like the Inter-
12 national Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association of Europe and
13 Central Asia, which have signification influence on human rights policy with the
14 Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and the Council of Europe
15 (see Holzer 2018). However, the Western regulatory optics galvanizing this fram-
16 ing overlook the disruptive capacity of the black nonbinary to opt out of binary
17 modes of thought, in which both *black*—in the reductive racial order predicated
18 on the need for blackness to be unhuman, unthought, un-possible—and *non-*
19 *binary*, in the sense of being not or un-binary, have separately been made to
20 engender and en flesh. Together, the black nonbinary acknowledges the ability of
21 the incommensurate, impossible, and insurgent to capacitate itself entirely.
22 Together, both terms represent an opting into their own otherwise, a leaping into
23 an imaginative freedomscape where the textured negation of the black nonbinary
24 approach affirms its own bounty and partakes in its own emancipation and the
25 tilling of a new terrain.

26 Configuring black nonbinary reading and other praxes as a part of trans
27 study in relation to the latter's institutionalization is to view the academy as
28 Anyanwu's plantation, which is to say as a maroonish mirage of unplantation
29 when all that surrounds us are white-led, blood-soaked fields.¹⁰ In Octavia But-
30 ler's *Wild Seed*, the fourth book in her Patternist series, the immortal shapeshifter
31 Anyanwu is enslaved by fellow immortal Doro, who uses her as an incubator for
32 his seed and that of his son Isaac and other men, with the intention of breeding
33 a superhuman race. Upon Isaac's death, Anyanwu repeatedly shapeshifts across
34 a series of multisited and transtemporal escapes, during which she becomes
35 undetectable: first she becomes an eagle and flies to the Atlantic coast. Then she
36 transforms into a dolphin and swims back to the continent. She eventually returns
37 to the States in the shapeshifted form of a wealthy white male Louisiana plan-
38 tation owner. And here, time and space are once again shifted, as what appears to
39 the passerby as taking up the logics of plantation is actually a maroon commune.
40 Anyanwu—as the white male landowner—purchased enslaved people and

1 provided them sanctuary in plain sight in the heart of the violent machinations of
2 slavery and extraction. Their work, minds, and bodies are irrevocably their own.

3 In addition to recognizing what the ongoing institutionalization of trans
4 study and trans aesthetics in Europe will mean for actual trans people, especially
5 black, migrant, poor, and dispossessed trans people, we must think about the
6 nature of institutionalization writ large. The very word indicates a hegemon that
7 ought to be resisted and subverted at every turn, while we similarly acknowledge
8 or decide to reject a monologics through which our liberation—and, more
9 flaccidly, our recognition—might be viewed. Many activists, workers, writers,
10 artists, and doers have already shown us that trans/*-ness contains multitudes.
11 They are messy, contradictory, antagonistic, affirmational, and beyond. Trans
12 studies in Europe must continue in a vein that recognizes the liberatory potential
13 in divergent narratives and wayward people without reducing that waywardness
14 to a genre and then yielding that genre into a codifiable sense of difference.

15 Trans studies in the European context is primed not to be a container for,
16 but an active interlocutor and agitator for black trans freedom dreams. This
17 means the freedom to ease, freedom to struggle, freedom to pleasure and play and
18 delight, as well as the freedom from harm, erasure, and other forms of violence.
19 The freedom to enact care-filled relations toward an otherwise academy, even as it
20 necessitates the academy's end, and the freedom to neither/nor, to both/and, and
21 to elsewhere imagine what it is we have yet to imagine while we've been inundated
22 by the violent and tokenizing machinations of racial capitalism, of cisheteropa-
23 triarchy, of neoliberal extraction, and more besides. We know that the Sylvia
24 Rivera or Lili Elbe Professorship in Trans Studies will not save us. Instead, let us
25 persist and stir up a disruptive trans studies formation that menaces university
26 standards, heteronorms, and especially the splintering of resources among min-
27 oritarian fields; that is, let us foment dissent and solidarity. And what a powerful
28 orientation that will be. What's left to do but stare down the administrative verdict
29 of impossible and inhabit even more fully the desire to see a more livable world.
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34 Los Angeles.

35 36 37 **Acknowledgments**

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Notes

1. For some additional context on the relationship between anti-gender ideology, TERF rhetoric, and the state (in Europe, in these cases), see, for example, Gennero 2017; Keil 2020; Korolczuk 2020; and Peto 2016. In addition to *TERF*, I will be using phrases like *trans antagonist* and *transphobic*, which for my purposes are not coterminous and often more precise.
2. See Gilmore's 2020 keynote lecture for the webinar "Abolition on Stolen Land" where she discusses the propensity for people in positions of relative power to take on the role of non-sworn cops and thus internalize and exert similar pressures of policing instead of dismantling carceral systems. In particular, she cautions black faculty against adopting that position and urges us to be accomplices with students and other collectives and organizations working together in the struggle toward the shared horizon of abolition.
3. In her most recent book, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021), Katherine McKittrick considers black life and black livingness to be disruptive and perhaps even anticolonial methodologies. It's this anti-institutional/uncapturable spirit of relation and possibility outside normative systems and narratives that inspires some of my thinking about black nonbinary method and solidarity.
4. For more on Hall's intellectual and cultural contribution of *both/and*, see Grossberg 2007.
5. Fanon described his lived experience as a black man in France in part as being subjected to experiencing his being and regarding himself on behalf of the white other, thus processing the transformation (perceptual or psychologically concerted) of black people into soulless objects of service, props in the white man's psychodrama. He observes, "I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among objects" (89).
6. This is a reference to an essay by Hortense Spillers (2003) called "Who Cuts the Border? Some Readings on America," which in part regards ethnoracial identities, ontological and epistemological borders, United Statesian nationalism, and immigration.
7. See, in order, Henderson and Johnson 2007; Snorton 2017; and Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1982.
8. McKittrick, Wynter, and many others have made this point over the years.
9. See the websites or forums for these collectives: Bent Bars (bentbarsproject.org), Sisters Uncut (sistersuncut.org), Azione Trans (azionetrans.org), Black & Queer Trans Resistance ([instagram.com/blackqueertransresistance/](https://www.instagram.com/blackqueertransresistance/)), and cutieBIPOC Collective (cutiebpcfestblog.wordpress.com/).
10. With gratitude to Joshua Chambers-Letson, whose encouraging conversations about academic fugitivity also invoked Anyanwu's plantation, converging with my recent rereading of Butler's *Patternist* series and the production of this essay during summer 2020.

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