

ONE

Trans*

What's in a Name?

Whatever is not normative is many.

Eileen Myles, quoted in Ariel Levy,
“Dolls and Feelings” (2015)

Over the course of my lifetime I have called myself or been called a variety of names: queer, lesbian, dyke, butch, transgender, stone, and transgender butch, just for starters. Indeed, one day when I was walking along the street with a butch friend, we were called faggots! If I had know the term “transgender” when I was a teenager in the 1970s, I’m sure I would have grabbed hold of it like a life jacket on rough seas, but there were no such words in my world. Changing sex for me and for many people my age was a fantasy, a dream, and because it had nothing to do with our realities, we had to work around this impossibility and create a home for ourselves in bodies that were not comfortable or right in terms of who we understood ourselves to be. The term “wrong body” was used often in the 1980s, even becoming the name of a BBC show about transsexuality, and offensive as the term might sound now, it at least harbored an explanation for how cross-

gendered people might experience embodiment: I, at least, felt as if I was in the wrong body, and there seemed to be no way out.

Today, young people who cross-identify are able to imagine themselves into other bodies, bodies that feel more true to who they are. And as times change, as medical technologies shift and develop, we also struggle to name the new “right-ish” bodies that emerge while continuing to work around the “wrong” bodies that remain. This chapter sifts through the changing protocols and rubrics for bodily identification over the past hundred years and asks, simply, what is in a name?



Many a great novel begins with a name or identification of some sort—“Call me Ishmael.”¹ Or, “My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip.”² But also, “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into an enormous insect.”³ And of course, “I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate—at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement.”⁴ Names establish character, lead into events, and create expectations. To be sure, there are also novels that begin in the absence of names: “I am an invisible man” and “Where now? Who now? When now?”⁵ These non-naming flourishes challenge the idea of character and raise questions about the ability of naming to capture all the nuances of human identification. Indeed, one of the most lovable children’s cartoons of all time, *Finding Nemo*, features a friendship between a clownfish, Nemo, whose name means “nobody” in Latin, and a blue fish, Dory, who can barely remem-

ber her own name from one moment to the next.⁶ The confusion that both Nemo and Dory sow leads not to a cozy lesson about who we “really” are but in fact makes the argument for learning to be part of a group, in part by challenging “proper” names. I offer these examples to make sense of the powerful nature of naming—claiming a name or refusing to and thus remaining unnameable. Indeed, this book uses the term “trans*,” which I will explain shortly, specifically because it holds open the meaning of the term “trans” and refuses to deliver certainty through the act of naming.⁷

In a contemporary context, it is hard to imagine what it may have felt like to lack a name for one’s sense of self. But only a few decades ago, transsexuals in Europe and the United States did not feel that there was a language to describe who they were or what they needed. Christine Jorgensen, heralded by historian Joanne Meyerowitz and others as “America’s first transgender celebrity,” wrote a letter to her parents in the 1950s telling them that in her “nature made a mistake.”⁸ And in Radclyffe Hall’s infamous novel about inversion, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), the female-born protagonist, who calls herself Stephen, anguishes about her identity. Her governess, also an invert, tells her in a magnificent speech,

You’re neither unnatural, nor abominable, nor mad; you’re as much a part of what people call nature as anyone else; only you’re unexplained as yet—you’ve not got your niche in creation. But some day that will come, and meanwhile don’t shrink from yourself, but face yourself calmly and bravely. Have courage; do the best you can with your burden. But above all be honourable. Cling to your honour for the sake of those others who share the same burden. For their sakes show the world that people like you and they can be quite as selfless and fine as the rest of mankind. Let your life go to prove this—it would be a really great life-work, Stephen.⁹

Hall used the term “misfit” for herself and called her hero, Stephen, an outlaw as well as an outcast and an invert, the word used in the early twentieth century in Europe and the United States to describe people in whom gender identity and sexual instincts have been turned around, such that a female-bodied person desiring another woman would be considered a male soul trapped in a female body and a male-bodied person harboring same-sex desires would be seen as a female soul trapped in a male body. The term “inversion” has a certain explanatory power in *The Well of Loneliness*, but only in that it names a disastrous betrayal of some putatively natural femininity. Until the middle of the last century, countless transgender men and women fell between the cracks of the classifications systems designed to explain their plight and found themselves stranded in unnameable realms of embodiment. Today we have an abundance of names for who we are and some people actively desire that space of the unnamable again. This book explains how we came to be trans* and why having a name for oneself can be as damaging as lacking one.

Naming, needless to say, is a powerful activity and one that has been embedded in modern productions of expertise and knowledge production. I have selected the term “trans*” for this book precisely to open the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance. As we will see, the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations. As this book will show, trans* can be a

name for expansive forms of difference, haptic relations to knowing, uncertain modes of being, and the disaggregation of identity politics predicated upon the separating out of many kinds of experience that actually blend together, intersect, and mix. This terminology, *trans**, stands at odds with the history of gender variance, which has been collapsed into concise definitions, sure medical pronouncements, and fierce exclusions.

The mania for the godlike function of naming began, unsurprisingly, with colonial exploration. As anyone who has visited botanical or zoological gardens knows, the collection, classification, and analysis of the world's flora and fauna has gone hand in hand with various forms of colonial expansion and enterprise. The seemingly rational and scientific project of collecting plant specimens from around the world and replanting them at home masks conquest with taxonomy, invasion with progress, and occupation with cultivation. But naming drifted quickly in the nineteenth century from plant life to human life; as many historians of sexuality have detailed, the terms that we now use to describe and explain gender and sexual variation were introduced into the language between 1869 and the first decade of the twentieth century.

Many theorists and historians have noted the way that expertise became a major component of early-industrialized societies. As large, complex social groups emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, having moved from agrarian to urban settings and from farm work to factory work, the systems of knowledge that tried to keep up with massive social changes produced experts in every field. There were time management experts who studied how to extract labor from bodies and machines as efficiently as possible.¹⁰ Criminal anthropologists such as Cesare Lombroso measured heads and hands to argue that there were body types given over to crime and violence.¹¹ The

differences between men and women were codified and formalized in relation both to certain types of work for working-class women and to the household division into separate spheres for bourgeois women. Ideas of racial identity that had long been deployed within colonialism in order to justify brutal forms of rule now became a part of the logic of governance and racial difference, and racial categories, in turn, fed into the new understandings of gender and sexuality that were circulating courtesy of doctors, medical researchers, and the new discipline of psychoanalysis. Having language for certain modes of desire had an enormous impact on how people lived, loved, and hid or exposed themselves. All of these efforts to classify human behavior emerged out of and contributed to ongoing racial projects that held apart white populations from populations of color; these “scientific” distinctions between normal and abnormal bodies lent support to white supremacist projects that tried to collapse racial otherness into gender variance and sexual perversion.

When it came to gender and sexuality, few eras were as turbulent as the 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century. And while today Facebook famously offers you fifty-one ways of identifying yourself on their site, a hundred years ago those categories were under rapid construction using the raw materials of accelerated urbanization, diverse populations in small and dense areas, and intensification of the desire to classify, know, and define. So, rather than a great leap forward, our current profusion of classificatory options actually harks back to the early days of sexology, when doctors like Richard von Krafft-Ebing produced new, expert knowledge on human sexual and gendered behavior. In 1886, Krafft-Ebing circulated a huge compendium of what he called the “contrary sexual instinct,” and in the table of contents readers could find discussions on a multitude of erotic states, from

“Anthropophagy” to “Whipping of Boys,” “Necrophilia” to “Larvated Masochism.”¹² For Krafft-Ebing (writing before Freud had codified sexual instincts in relation to fixed orientations), the task was to document exhaustively the variety of forms within which the sexual instinct could be expressed. Of less interest to Krafft-Ebing was the articulation of a streamlined system opposing male to female and homo- to heterosexuality. Krafft-Ebing’s work on gender and sexuality emerged at a time when Europe was engaged in a large-scale imperial orientation toward classification, collection, and expertise. Our current investments in the naming of all specificities of bodily form, gender permutations, and desire emerge from this period.

This project of exhaustive classification, a nineteenth-century practice that, as I have said, extended from botany to early anthropology to sexology, gave way in the twentieth century to the framing of the sexual and gendered body in relation to orientation, norms, and identity. Freud pushed back on nineteenth-century notions of an external frame that makes explicit the internal secrets of the body (this was at least one of the themes of criminal anthropology expressed by Lombroso and others) and argued for attention to the irrational, the unconscious, and the orientation of desire. Michael Foucault, in turn, refused the notion of an empirically verifiable set of orientations and argued that psychoanalysis produced the very concepts of bodily identity that it claimed to discover; and, he added, the production of the gendered and sexual body was co-orchestrated by the subject, who regulated himself in relation to social norms. The fiction of a gendered and sexual identity, Foucault proposed, took hold and became the reigning narrative of being in late twentieth-century life.¹³

Our current vocabularies combine an assortment of medical and vernacular terms—the medical terminology was produced

in the last century and the vernacular terms have evolved alongside it as corrections, modifications, and, often, outright refusals. And so, we still occasionally use the medical word “homosexual” for same-sex desire, but more often we say “gay” or “lesbian”; we do use the term “transsexual” more often than “homosexual,” but that is because transsexuals still are tethered in some way to medical technologies and services because they/we desire surgeries and hormones. And the term “transgender” has emerged in recent years as a way of collecting the many lived forms of transsexuality that include no-op transsexuals, no-hormones transsexuals, and others. The power of naming that has fallen to doctors and psychologists, social workers and academics, commands the authority of scientific inquiry and joins it to a system of knowledge that invests heavily in the idea that experts describe rather than invent. However, as we know from watching the slow implosion of seemingly “natural” systems from one hundred years ago, naming fixes bodies in time and space and in relation to favored social narratives of difference.

The terms homosexual/heterosexual and transsexual as well as other markers like man/woman, masculine/feminine, whiteness/blackness/brownness, are all historically variable terms, untethered in fixed or for that matter natural or inevitable ways to bodies and populations. While homosexuality tells at the same time the history of heterosexuality, and while women’s histories are all too often absorbed by men’s histories, transhistory is a story waiting to be told. In an amusing commentary on this lost history, transgender artist Chris Vargas has created a Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art (MOTHA: www.chrisevargas.com/motha/). This imaginary institution has the goal of “bringing a cohesive visual history of transgender culture into existence,” using a framework that is deliberately

perpetually “under construction.” In this way, Vargas asks what it would mean to build a set of interlocking histories around people who regularly and sometimes deliberately fall out of the historical record.

“Words change depending upon who speaks them; there is no cure,” writes Maggie Nelson in a more poetic intervention into this current confusion over gender-variant language. “The answer is not just to introduce new words (*boi*, *cis-gendered*, *andro-fag*) and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly.”¹⁴ Seeing language in this way, as a shifting ecosystem within which words might fly, fall, or fail to convey their message, but also one within which words might hover over the multiplicity to which they point, relieves us of the mundane task of simply getting the name right.

We would do well to heed this lyrical warning against looking to stabilize fluctuations in meaning. If we seek to find in language an exhaustive catalogue of all human forms, we might stray into the kind of artificial production of multiplicity that informs the fifty-one ways to be a body offered us by Facebook. What do these terminologies represent in terms of the creation and collapse of contemporary systems of sex/gender definition? One of the first terms mentioned on Facebook is a relatively new one that signifies a person’s exclusion from or rejection of gender categories: “agendered.” An agendered person might be androgynous, gender fluid, gender neutral. The concept of being without a gender, however, is whimsical at best, since there are few ways to interact with other human beings without being identified with some kind of gendered embodiment. The concept of “agender,” then, names a wish to be outside of gender norms, rather

than the real experience of being so. Indeed, while liberal democracies cleave to the idea of gender neutrality or race blindness, it is very clear in these societies that historically situated differences are extremely important to name, study, recognize, and account for, if only because they provide histories of legally sustained hate and antipathy.

Other newish terms included in Facebook's "generous" range include "cis-gender," a relatively recent term now in widespread usage for people who have genders compatible with their genital forms. "Gender nonconforming," "gender questioning," and "neutrois"—people who fall outside of or who oppose the binary gender system—are more vernacular terms naming not only bodily identity but also the process of learning to live in a body (gender questioning). All of these terms have emerged within communities seeking for ways to name and explain their multiplicity: in other words, they are not medical terms or psychiatric terms produced in institutional contexts either to name disorders or to delimit a field of classification; rather, they are terms that emerge from trial and error, everyday usage, and political expediency. This might give us cause for optimism about the breakdown in classificatory regulations. And yet in fact, the older systems of classification have given way to vernacular systems without necessarily shifting the central and dominant binaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Rumors of the demise of hegemonic sex/gender systems, in other words, have been greatly exaggerated.

That said, one of the biggest innovations of the past two decades in relation to gendered expression indeed has been the production, circulation, and usage of just such a vernacular language for non-normative gender and sexual expression. This emergence of new language signals the end of a period of medical/psychiatric control of the discourse and the beginning of a new paradigm within

which people collaborate to name their understandings of contrary embodiment. This new period, as I will document in what follows, has produced rich and compelling narratives and accounts of the complex field of gendered and sexual expression. Perhaps nothing encapsulates these changes more succinctly than the increasingly common use of the term “they” for individuals who refuse to place themselves within a gender binary. Some people find this term to be ungainly given that it is a grammatical stretch because it maps a plural pronoun onto an individual body. Indeed, in a *New Yorker* article on Jill Soloway, the creator of the enormously successful TV comedy *Transparent*, Ariel Levy responds to Jill’s challenge to “say ‘they’ and ‘them’ for all genders” by pointing out to her that “strict grammar forbids using a plural pronoun for a single person; it would sound crazy, for instance, to describe Soloway by saying, ‘They are my favorite director.’”¹⁵ Soloway pushes back, though, saying, “The language is evolving daily—even gender reassignment, people are now calling it gender confirmation!” Levy’s skepticism wanes by the end of the article, when she asks Soloway’s muse, queer poet Eileen Myles, whether, “as a poet, she struggled to refer to an individual person as ‘they.’ She said, ‘It’s not intuitive at all. But I’m obsessed with that part in the Bible when Jesus is given the opportunity to cure a person possessed by demons, and Jesus says, ‘What is your name?’ And the person replies, ‘My name is legion.’ Whatever is not normative is many.’ She liked the idea of a person containing more than one self, more than one gender.”¹⁶

And the poet wins the day. What struck Levy, the journalist, as inelegant and ungrammatical strikes Myles as nonnormative and full of possibility. The use of the plural for the singular, the referencing of the many over the individual, contains within it, Myles implies, a small step toward utopia, a conjuring of collectivity in

the place of individualism and recognition. We might add that genders only emerge in relation to other bodies and within multiply oriented and complex populations.

As the explosion of these terminologies suggests, the categories we use to understand the dynamic relations between and among pleasure, identification, social recognition, reproduction, and libidinal urges, not to mention parenthood, ability, national identity, age, and privacy, shift and change relatively quickly, and they do so under pressure from new forms of activism that pay careful attention to what we call ourselves, how we label others, and what falls into the domain of self-naming or slips into the dangerous territory of hate speech.

As this short book will show, however, vernacular forms of expression and definition are not necessarily less regulatory or less committed to norms than other modes of classification. While some strands of transgender activism have committed to the abolition of state regulation of the body (see, e.g., work by Dean Spade on administrative law, for example, or by Eric Stanley on prisons),¹⁷ others have committed to a politics of recognition and participated in local and often futile and counter-productive quarrels over naming, language, and speech norms.

We can find one example of this last set of tensions between naming and being named in a local skirmish in San Francisco in the summer of 2014 when trans activists asked the owner of a queer bar called Trannyshack to change its name. The term “tranny,” as the owner of Trannyshack, San Francisco-based drag queen Heklina (a.k.a. Stefan Grygelko), tried to explain in posts on Facebook and elsewhere, was not always understood as a hateful slur. The club began in 1996, and at that time “tranny” had the ring of a term of endearment—it was a diminutive, after all, like *kitten*, rather than a degrading pornographic term like *she-male*. Trannyshack

was also a space often shared by gay men and transwomen and may have provided a meeting place for gay men who had, at some point in their lives, been marked by the term “sissy” and transwomen for whom gay club spaces were experimental and flexible. By 2014, two decades later, the term rang a false note and sounded to trans activists in the city like an insult. After heated debates on Facebook and elsewhere that involved public trans entertainers such as Vivian Bond and RuPaul (who defended the use of the term “tranny”), Heklina, fearing that she might be on the wrong side of history, changed the club’s name to T-Shack. In a statement, Heklina wrote: “I am in the business of (hopefully) entertaining people. . . . Also, on a purely business level, I don’t want to be viewed as archaic, out of step with the times, like an ostrich with my head in the sand.”¹⁸ Heklina cites both business and pleasure in her justification for the name change. But she also acknowledges that certain modes of naming gender-transitive bodies might be “archaic” as we enter a new era of sex/gender norms.

These kinds of conflicts over naming and slang are situated differently, however, by LaMonda Horton Stallings, a Black cultural studies scholar who argues that we might see a different side to this debate if we situate “uses of ‘tranny’ by transgender individuals within a history of blackness and language rather than a history of gender.”¹⁹ Turning to the use of the term “tranny” in the TV show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and referencing RuPaul’s own defense of the term, Stallings proposes that when RuPaul claims the term “tranny,” s/he does so in relation not to white transgender histories but within Black histories of gender variance that remain distinct from mainstream narratives of transgender emergence.²⁰ Indeed, Stallings proposes, the term tranny “is specifically linked within a history and culture of sex work that transgender erases” and that it has meaning as a “monetary term” for

sex workers who use it transactionally in the context of selling a specific kind of sex.²¹ Stallings makes clear that mainstream narratives of transgenderism mostly presume white bodies and white histories of sex and gender and she proposes that we pay careful attention to the very different ways that sex and gender signify for trans people of color.

As this quarrel indicates, the answer to the question “What’s in a name?” is “Everything!” But when we argue over terminology, are we ignoring structures? In other words, is the contestation over naming a distraction from much bigger problems that are not linguistic but systemic or institutional? Then again, is the linguistic actually already a symptom of these large systems that both fix us and allow us to imagine ourselves as free? While the case of the T-Shack provides a real-world example of a fight over names and language that reveals much about shifting gender norms, I now want to take a long detour through a humorous cinematic example of a contestation over words that may open on to more complicated understandings of naming, claiming, speech, silence, and protest.

The wacky archive of Monty Python gives us lots of ammunition to consider the stakes in new wars about words. Their feature film *The Life of Brian*, for example, tells the wonderfully absurd story about a mistaken messiah, the eponymous Brian, who was born next door to Jesus Christ and who stumbles into a political action by the People’s Front of Judea and ends up on the wrong end of Roman law.²² The film, a satire as well as a goofy critique of religion and orthodoxies in general, provides lots of fodder for thinking about how we continue to cast about for political direction in the middle of global meltdown. It also offers much in the way of jokes in Latin, men in skirts, and women in beards. The film, in fact, presents its audience (when

it came out in 1979 as well as now) with a perfect analysis of what can go wrong in political struggles (infighting, unimaginative activist group names, too much talking, hopeless actions against the occupying forces), what can go right (not much), and what battles over language are worth fighting.

In one priceless scene, Brian (played by Graham Chapman), having been sent by the People's Front of Judea to participate in his first anti-imperialist graffiti action, begins to paint "Romanes Eunt Domus"—Romans Go Home in Latin—on a wall.²³ He is just finishing up when a centurion (John Cleese) stops him. Sure that he is done for, Brian trembles in the shadow of the Roman soldier. But what follows is a Latin lesson in which Brian is reminded that the plural of Romans is *Romani*; he is then forced to conjugate the Latin verb for "to go" and to find the imperative form of the third person plural, *ite*. Finally, Cleese, the perfect Latin teacher, makes Brian rewrite *Domus* in the locative, as *Domum*. Corrected version: "Romani Ite Domum"! As punishment for his bad Latin, he is told to write the phrase 100 times on the walls of the Roman city.

This is a hilarious scene that draws its humor, and its allegorical force, from the impression that many schoolchildren of a certain generation (ahem ... my generation) received about Latin: namely, that it was a "dead" language mostly used to instruct youngsters in the rules of grammar and, by implication, all kinds of other useless rules that, along with their irrational "exceptions," had to be followed. For students of Latin in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, content was subordinate to form—even in a book like Caesar's *Gallic Wars* ("All of Gaul is divided into three parts ...," etc.), a text brimming with information about imperialism, domination, cunning leadership, political corruptions, territorial gains, protonationalism, and so forth. In my

youth we read for pure translation, never discussing the actual content of the text.

Cleese's centurion in *The Life of Brian* takes this joke to an extreme by catching an anti-imperialist activist in the act of defacing Roman property and using the opportunity to instruct him in the rules of the imperial language. With a sneaky nod to Fanon, the Pythons are able to remind us that imperial and colonial domination occurs through language and that although the war of words might seem to be happening at the level of content and meaning, actually it is conducted by means of form or grammar. Getting the grammar right, in *The Life of Brian* as elsewhere, means linking sense to the arbitrary rules of the oppressor class. But the allegory of domination and resistance does not end there. In his fervor to protect the rightness of Roman rule, Cleese not only instructs the reluctant revolutionary in how to address Rome; he also gives him an opportunity, disguised as a punishment—he tells him to write the offensive phrase 100 times. By the time he has finished, Brian has covered every square inch of the Roman walls with the words *Romans Go Home!* Or, in perfect Latin: *Romani Ite Domum!*

This episode reminds us that sometimes we really cannot see the forest for the trees, the Roman Empire for the cheery centurions, or the site of linguistic domination for the miscellaneous slurs directed at marginal subjects. In queer communities today, while we fight about words like “tranny,” worry about being triggered, and “call each other out” for our supposed micro-crimes of omission/inclusion/slang, we are, like the People's Front of Judea, trying to fight power by battling over the relations between signifiers and signifieds while leaving the structures of signification itself intact. But the episode also makes clear that punishment can lead to protest: Brian's punishment

allows him to complete the activist mission that he was sent to carry out in the first place.

No doubt, this whole book could draw wisdom from antic episodes in Monty Python, but before we succumb to such a tempting idea, let's circle back around to the topic at hand. What has happened in the last few decades to prompt such an extensive overhaul of our understanding of and language for gendered embodiment? And how have people responded to new definitions of sex and the gendered body? In this book, I will try to narrate various experiences of transitive gender as they range across the human life span. Recognizing that, in this era of increased longevity, the experience and meaning of gendered embodiment and of sex and pleasure can change radically over time, *Trans** separates out gender ambiguity in the child from adolescent crises over embodiment and from trans* issues related to parenting, having children, growing old, and even dying.

In the last decade, public discussions of transgenderism have increased exponentially. What was once regarded as an unusual or even unfortunate disorder has become an accepted articulation of gendered embodiment as well as a new site for political activism. How did a stigmatized identity become so central to U.S. and European articulations of self and other? What fuels the continued fascination with transgender embodiment, and how has the recognition of its legitimacy changed current gender protocols in the United States? What is the history of gender and how does it sit alongside histories of sexuality, race, ability, and health?

Whether it comes in the form of Preferred Gender Pronouns (PGP) or even new classifications of gender identity (agerender, androgynous, cis-gender), the visibility of transgender must be seen as part of a larger shift in habits and customs around

classification, naming, and inhabiting of the human body. While new gender protocols as expressed on Facebook and in other forms of social media seem to register advancement, flexibility, and even a decentering of normative gendering, increased flexibility with regard to gender may function as a part of new regulatory regimes. *Trans** pays attention to the ebb and flow of regulation and innovation, governance, and experimentation.

In addition to placing shifts and changes in trans identities firmly within a matrix of gender and sexuality identities and practices, *Trans** will argue that new visibility for any given community has advantages and disadvantages, liabilities and potentialities. With recognition comes acceptance, with acceptance comes power, with power comes regulation. New articulations of the experience of gender ambiguity, in other words, will make lots of people's lives easier (transgender adults, but also their parents or their children, their friends, their lovers), but it could also have unforeseen consequences in terms of exposing people who were passing in one gender or another to new forms of scrutiny and speculation.

As far as statistics go, and for some of us that is not very far, some estimates reckon that there are currently 1.4 million transgender people in the United States.²⁴ Many transgender people report having been the victims of harassment and bullying, with transwomen in general and transwomen of color in particular being the most likely targets of violence and exclusion. In addition, HIV rates for transwomen are very high.²⁵ Many transgender people, reports suggest, have attempted suicide.²⁶ While reported physical abuse of transgender people is high, we have to factor gender, race, and class into these analyses. Poverty, sex work, and race remain significant variables in determining which transgender individuals are regularly subject to violence on

account of their gender expression. This book will try to grapple with some hard questions about violence, vulnerability, gender presentation, and the psychological impact of transphobia.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that in May 2013 the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)* removed the category of transgender from its list of bodily disorders, replacing it with the term “gender dysphoria.”²⁷ The movement of transgender identification from pathology to preference, from a problematic fixation to a reasonable expression of self, follows the route from problem to social identity that has described the history of homosexuality in the twentieth century. As with LGB identities, trans identities now qualify as both new sites for the expression of liberal acceptance and new platforms for demands for recognition. Whether gender transitivity can also offer a critique of contemporary modes of power and empowerment remains to be seen.

Monty Python certainly thought that trans identities offered a platform for more ostentatious forms of critique. In another chapter from *The Life of Brian*, the liberation fighters who are opposing the Romans discuss both their right to organize in the face of imperialist brutality and the importance of representing the broadest possible constituency.²⁸ Reg (Cleese) and Francis (Michael Palin) are making the case for their right as men to oppose the ruling order. “Or women,” interjects Stan (Eric Idle). “Or women,” the others concede. As another round of activist statements and pronouncements begins, Stan continues to interject “or women . . . or sisters” whenever men or brothers are mentioned. Finally Reg, irritated by these annoying add-ons to what he considers to be the main agenda, turns on Stan and asks him why he is so obsessed suddenly with the rights of women. Stan plays the Pythonesque role of “interrupter,” where the interruption, rather than forestalling the discussion, takes it off somewhere else entirely—“and now

for something completely different.” In this case, the different place is the transgender desire harbored by a male-bodied person, Stan, to become female-bodied Loretta and to bear children. Loretta claims that it is her right as a man to have babies and that Reg is “oppressing” her by denying her this right. While the defensive response to this text might be to claim that it makes light of the experience of transgender women, a trans* reading could open the sequence up to a new rendering of transgenderism as a desire for forms of embodiment that are necessarily impossible and yet deeply desired, all at once. Even though Loretta’s sex reassignment will never allow her to have babies, the People’s Front of Judea affirms her right to fight for the right to have babies because this demand for the impossible “symbolizes” the anti-imperial struggle to which they have committed. Loretta’s trans desire, indeed, represents both the impossibility and possibilities of all forms of embodiment.

Returning to LaMonda Horton Stallings’s book *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, Stallings uses the term “trans” as a verb and, building on Susan Stryker’s idea of “trans-ing,” claims: “I trans black literary studies and sexuality studies to demonstrate how black communities’ deployment of funk provides alternative knowledge about imagination and sexuality.”²⁹ Funk, according to this system of meaning making, does not observe binaries proper to white humanism like the sacred and the profane, the erotic and the pornographic, work and pleasure; instead, Stallings deploys a mechanism of sex/power/profanity that she names “funky erotixxx” to refuse and depart from the sexual morality invested in neat distinctions, in order to pursue a transaesthetics that is not invested in a singular reality.

*Trans** will survey current representations of transgender people alongside new laws designed to recognize transgenderism as

a protected category. It will provide potted histories alongside social analysis, and it will speculate about the future of (trans) gender even while it describes how transgenderism has long been situated as a site of futurity and utopian/dystopian potential. A popular T-shirt from the queer crafts collective Otherwild proposes that “The Future is Female.” Is it? Or is the future genderless, gender variable, gender optional, gender hacked—or none of the above?³⁰ We may not know what gender or transgender will become in the next few decades, but we can certainly account for its past, its present, and its potentiality.