

The Intersex Issue

An Introduction

MICHELLE WOLFF, DAVID A. RUBIN, and AMANDA LOCK SWARR

In the inaugural issue of *TSQ*, “Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies,” Iain Morland (2014) provides a nuanced genealogy of “intersex.” He notes that the term has a range of definitions, even in clinical contexts. Often popularly conflated with ambiguous genitalia—“external sexual anatomy that cannot be easily described as entirely female or male”—an intersex diagnosis can refer also to “attributes that are not apparent on the body’s surface, including XXY sex chromosomes or indifference to the hormones that produce the effects connotative of masculinity” (111). Morland perspicuously surmises that what such intersex diagnoses share is not a common genetic, biochemical, or physiological etiology. Rather, intersex diagnoses share a failure to classify the body as male or female. That doctors would medicalize this failure of classification—a failure, that is, to fit the body into a sexually dimorphic sociolinguistic schema—may seem, on its surface, shocking and absurd. As Morland puts it, “That such a failure would be problematic is not obvious, nor is its medicalization” (111). We use the term “medicalization” to refer to the treatment of people as problems that can only be solved by specialized biomedical observation, diagnosis, treatment, and management. In the case of intersexuality, medicalization has produced shame, secrecy, silence, and trauma—especially but not only for intersex people. *Intersex studies* offers intersex, trans*, nonbinary, and cisgender folks language and tactics for interrogating and rerouting medical regulatory technologies that typically presume binary gender and heteronormativity as ideal aims. As Morland argues, critical intersex study is a study of liberal humanism’s failures.

The title of this special issue, “The Intersex Issue,” plays on the issue making of intersexuality by medical providers, parents, academicians, and society that has harmful and sometimes deadly consequences. Over the last three decades a small

but growing body of interdisciplinary literature in critical intersex studies has emerged that analyzes and critiques the ways clinicians have failed intersex children, adolescents, and adults (Chase 1997; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Davis 2015; Malatino 2019). Metastudies and reviews have established that the overwhelming majority of intersex variations pose few to no health risks (Karkazis 2008; Fausto-Sterling 2012). Nonetheless, intersex people, especially those affected by multiple forms of marginalization, are vulnerable to medical mismanagement, discrimination, stigmatization, and potential malpractice. Alongside trans* and gender-nonconforming people, intersex people have been pathologized and encouraged to model white cisheteronormative models of being and knowing by Western medicine and its scattered transnational hegemonies. Whereas trans-affirmative clinicians, parents, and patient advocates have developed and disseminated various models of gender affirming care for trans* kids and adults over the last several decades, no comparable model of “intersex affirming care” has emerged. Clinicians continue to perform nonconsensual pediatric genital surgeries that violate patients’ bodily autonomy in metropolitan and some rural hospitals around the globe.

Some activists have sought to hold doctors accountable for the harm they have inflicted by demanding radical course correction. For instance, this special issue features an interview with two of the cofounders of one such group, Sean Saifa Wall and Pidgeon Pagonis of the Intersex Justice Project (IJP). IJP centers the leadership and needs of Black intersex people and intersex people of color in the United States. Adopting an intersectional and decolonial approach to intersex oppression, IJP has called for reparations and fundamental structural change in the clinic and beyond. In our interview, Wall and Pagonis describe the evolution of IJP’s philosophy and politic. They share their insights into the intersections between anti-Blackness, structural racism, transphobia, and interphobia under racial capitalism.

In contrast with groups like IJP, more mainstream medical reformers have advocated a move to “patient-centered care” and an interdisciplinary team approach to intersex treatment, while simultaneously promoting a shift in terminology from intersex to DSD (Disorders of Sex Development). This approach has largely failed to deliver substantial change, at least in part due to its complicity with neoliberal individualization and personal responsabilization. Moreover, patient-centered care and DSD advocacy threaten to repathologize people with anatomical sex variations (Grabham 2007; Davis 2015; Rubin 2017), leaving intersex folks in the lurch once more.

As scholars working in both intersex studies and trans* studies, the coeditors of this special issue consider overlapping analytic and methodological tools and theoretical and political insights. What kinds of issues, analytics, and objects of study does intersex studies illuminate anew when placed in dialogue with trans*

studies and related interdisciplinary fields? Why has much—though not all, as this special issue attests—trans* scholarship failed to critically interrogate the implications of its analyses and arguments for intersex people? In what ways do both intersex studies and “the institutionalization of transgender studies as a discipline function as a scene of subjection” for “blackness—for Black people and places” and other marginalized groups (Ellison et al. 2017: 162)? While intersex studies and trans* studies may seem like “natural allies,” our effort in curating this special issue was to create a space to critically consider the differences and tensions as well as the commonalities and resonances between these fields.

The institutionalization of trans* studies and intersex studies has proceeded at radically different paces and scales. There has been significant demand in the job market for positions in trans* studies over the last decade. Comparable positions in intersex studies have not materialized. Neither trans* nor intersex studies have been welcomed into the academy into what some thought would be a natural institutional home—gender, women’s, and sexuality studies—as Susan Stryker’s account (2020) of founding trans* studies at the University of Arizona powerfully demonstrates. We share Ellison et al.’s “skepticism about the institutionalization of transgender studies [and intersex studies], having lived and felt the contradictions of expanding sites for intellectual inquiry that have done little to disrupt the violent machinations and accumulation imperatives of racial capitalism that position those considered surplus as killable or cageable” (2017: 163–64) and, we would add, as treatable and subject to capture by biomedical gender regulation.

In the face of ongoing state violence, environmental collapse, and the COVID-19 pandemic, with disparities that most intensely impact BIPOC and poor communities, how might critical intersex and trans* inquiries productively call one another into question? How might they team up to use their (super)powers to subvert and transform dominant institutions and relations of power and knowledge? How can we craft better strategic affinities and solidarities between trans* and intersex communities and studies to work toward more sustainable care webs that allow for modest witnessing of intersex and trans* freedom struggle, suffering, joy, and vulnerability?

The Editors

Interrogating Institutionalization

Nine days after the summer Olympics ended in 2021, the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* printed a “correction” of a study by Stéphane Bermon and Pierre Yves-Garnier first published in 2017. The study had been sponsored by World Athletics, the paramount stakeholder in global sport, and its authors were the current and former director of its Health and Sciences Department. The research had been highly contested when it was published, yet it was subsequently used to justify a

host of impactful decisions about the parameters of gender. Indeed, this scholarship had been the primary evidence at the Court of Arbitration for Sport, the highest court for international sporting decisions, in a decision that famously barred Caster Semenya and other athletes from competing at the Olympic games. But in August 2021, the authors suddenly acknowledged that their assertions that subjectively high testosterone levels confer a significant competitive advantage were merely “exploratory” and “could have been misleading” (Bermon and Yves-Garnier 2021: 1). They conceded that the findings could not be considered “evidence for a causal relationship” between testosterone and athletic performance (1). Four years after its publication—and only days after successfully preventing Semenya’s Olympic participation—the timing of the so-called correction could not have been more suspect. Semenya asserted that the study authors had waited for her to age out of competition before admitting their wrongs and stated, “I always knew that their study is flawed and there is nothing good about it because I questioned it before that, asking ‘If you say you have researched it, who approved it?’ . . . but we never received answers” (see Mphahlele 2021).

Flawed and manipulated scholarship focused on intersex proliferates in academia. It has immeasurable effects on understandings of gender and on individuals’ lives and begs for widespread confrontation. But while debates within trans studies in the past few years have considered whether the field is over or has not yet begun (Chu and Harsin Dragar 2019; Adair et al. 2020), intersex has remained largely absent from this temporal deliberation. As a self-defined trans studies gained attention over the past two decades, book-length inquiries into critical intersex studies have comprised less than twenty monographs published in as many years. While trans studies has developed collective ideas and solidarities through this journal, journal-based discussion of intersex has been limited to individual articles and a few special issues. In editing one of these issues, published in *GLQ* in 2009 and titled “Intersex and After,” Iain Morland suggested that history and critiques of intersex are “marked by a curiously disjointed temporality” and that “intersex treatment in the present should always be considered, paradoxically, in light of what may come after it” (2009: 191–92).

This special issue—“The Intersex Issue”—is not intended to argue for institutionalization of intersex studies nor to romanticize the production of fields of study. The institutionalization of trans studies has been roundly critiqued, as interlocutors have asked who can garner livelihoods from such a move and who gets excluded. For instance, Ellison et al. (2017) point out that power comes from living wages and publishing access, and they question how the politics of citation in trans studies has decentered trans women of color. Aligning trans studies with the exclusionary values of the neoliberal university, and a progress narrative of essays, scholars, anthologies, and hiring initiatives, does not mean

a field is successful (Adair et al. 2020). Indeed, some have argued that violence against trans women of color increased in concert with the institutionalization of trans studies and that institutionalization necessitates complicity with white supremacy and colonization (Aizura et al. 2014; Boellsdorf et al. 2014). With this in mind, an alternate reading of critical intersex genealogies, rather than being characterized by omission from the academy, could be read as a radical critique of institutionalization.

When *Time* declared the arrival of “The Transgender Tipping Point,” trans visibility and celebrity were heralded as a sign of progress (Steinmetz 2014). There has been no analogous declaration around intersex. Despite the liminality of most bodies, intersex has been characterized by intentional silencing and, when acknowledged at all, a sense of “intersex exceptionality” (Rubin 2017) dominates both academic and popular considerations. But mainstream recognition can never be equated with justice and social transformation. The media celebration of transness was not accompanied by substantive changes in most people’s lives and rested on value extraction and neoliberal politics. If visibility means being “somebodies,” as Tourmaline famously proposed in 2016, there is great strength in remaining “nobodies” under capitalism. Aren Aizura put it this way: “Being a somebody means visibility: becoming a population, becoming a demographic, becoming (part of) a class, becoming clockable. In all of these contexts, it means having to arm yourself with your brokenness” (2017: 609). If fraught conceptions of what visibility means and does motivated initial declarations of the “tipping point,” lack of intersex field making might be read as a sign of revolutionary potential.

Hil Malatino (2019) describes two key emphases of critical intersex interventions to date—documenting histories and reforming medicine—and argues that the field is moving beyond responsive engagements with medicalization. The critiques that propel intersex inquiry also confront dominant narratives. For centuries, European colonial expansion deployed gender binarism to categorize colonized bodies, while gender diversity was also used as a rationale to support colonial genocide. Gender plasticity and medical ideologies defining intersex and trans are often credited to US and European gender clinics of the 1950s but have deep roots, including in J. Marion Sims’s captive gynecologic surgical development on slave plantations and the eugenic development of urology (e.g., Gill-Peterson 2018; Snorton 2017; Judd 2014). From the 1970s to the present, scientists have explicitly experimented on Black and Brown people medicalized as intersex in Papua New Guinea, the Dominican Republic, and southern Africa in their explicit searches for conditions including “true hermaphroditism,” while well-known physicians at institutions like Johns Hopkins University operated on children with “corrective” goals to make it seem like white intersex didn’t exist (Eckert

2017; Gill-Peterson 2018). In short, intersex and trans medicalization cannot be considered apart from each other, nor from comparative anatomy, scientific racism, and what Saidiya Hartman (1997) calls the “afterlives” of slavery.

Biased scientific studies like those that underpin decisions about gender in sport challenged by Semenya endeavor to subjectify intersex people, especially those from the Global South, while trying to stake claims about what it means to be a man or a woman. But from early US-based films like *Hermaphrodites Speak!* (1997) that called out doctors directly to recent actions by the African Intersex Movement that refuse pathology and discrimination, intersex politics and writings have never been limited by the constraints of the academy or by agendas in the Global North. The contributions to this special issue call for the demedicalization of intersex at the same time that they critique medicine; they confront binarism by intervening into ongoing assumptions of intersex exceptionalism; and they challenge what María Lugones (2007) importantly referred to as the “coloniality of gender.”

Trans and intersex activism in the US and globally have interrogated pathologization and created community alliances. Refusing medically originating separations between trans and intersex may be a way to resist divisiveness that exemplifies medicine. And, given the emptiness of institutionalization and neoliberal pressures to compete for academic recognition, both unrecognizability and solidarity could be useful coalitional political strategies. Collaborative possibilities are evident throughout this special issue, ranging from challenges to legislation and medicine affecting children to coalitional political strategies, from historical and pedagogical reconceptualizations to art initiatives. Such collaborations are not a panacea, but taken together, the interventions detailed here help craft new ways of thinking about trans and intersex in ways that refuse decades of forced opposition.

Amanda Lock Swarr

*Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies
University of Washington, Seattle*

Tensions and Antagonisms

One goal of this special issue is to open up a space to consider the antagonisms that shape the relationship between various intersex and trans* communities. Here we offer a critical reflection on a recent event that reflects some of these tensions and analyze its implications for forging stronger affinities and solidarities between trans* and intersex modes of study.

On June 12, 2020, American pornographic film actor, producer, sex educator, and motivational speaker Buck Angel (whose Twitter handle at the time was @TRANSEXUAL MAN; his handle is now @BuckAngel) Tweeted: “I am getting a

chromosome test! What if it shows I am intersex? What argument will come from that? That I am not a man or a woman?”

Earlier that year, on January 7, 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to spread around the globe, Angel posted to his popular Instagram account a German medical illustration (no date provided; it looks to be late nineteenth century, likely from a comparative anatomy textbook) displaying a spectrum of genital variation, alongside the following quote:

Intersex. Hermaphrodite. Genitals have always played a big part of my identity. This is a hard post for me to write but I feel the need. Why? Because growing up my genitals were always called weird. I would hear “it does not look normal” as I grew up and started seeing other girls genitals, mine did not look like “normal” or what I was told is normal. . . . Am I inter-sexed? Or am I Trans? Does it Matter? Questions I am sure many ask themselves. Today is so different and we can have these conversations. But when I was growing up I just got shamed for not looking normal. . . . This man who used to have abnormal genitals is now a man with everything. Today if you are feeling disconnected from the body you live in know that you can complete the circle by learning that you are a unique beautiful Soul. That you belong and that you are here today to be apart of not separate from. Love, Tranpa

A small but significant debate ensued following Angel’s tweet. Sean Saifa Wall, cofounder of the Intersex Justice Project (IJP), tweeted in response, “Man and woman are gender categories. Chromosome tests are not the only indicator of someone being intersex as it can also be hormonal or gonadal. Biological sex is just as fluid as gender and maybe when we realize that we can [stop] harming intersex kids.”

Wall’s critique highlights five problematic aspects of Angel’s tweet: first, Angel reduces intersex to a singular biological phenomenon, which it most assuredly is not (Rubin 2017). Second, Angel posits intersex as a resource for explaining trans* experience in a way that is potentially appropriative. Third, Angel’s tweet figures intersex status as the hypothetical biological correlate or cause of trans* identification. Although this sentiment is frequently aired on trans* discussion forums, there is little scientific evidence to support this ideologically suspect claim (Richardson 2013). Further, using science to “explain” transness reinforces the hegemony of Western bioessentialism. Fourth, when he asks, “What if [the chromosome test] shows I am intersex? What argument will come from that? That I am not a man or a woman?” Angel at once trivializes intersex experiences and reproduces the troubling belief that intersex people are a priori excluded from manhood and womanhood. But many intersex people occupy the world plainly

as men and women (whatever those categories mean!), even as many do not. Fifth and finally, although Angel's tweet and Instagram post seem to challenge strict ideas about sex and gender, they end up reinforcing the unquestioned status of cisheteronormativity. That is, Angel does not challenge cisgender and nonintersex people to question the processes by which cis and nonintersex bodyminds and identifications are produced. The point is not that it is categorically wrong to wonder if one is intersex. Rather, the point is that we need to challenge the stigma surrounding intersex. Trans* discourses like Angel's that posit intersex as exceptional reify the notion that intersex genitals and/or chromosomes can reveal spectacular inner truths, solve autobiographical mysteries, and issue revolutionary decrees. As Wall asks on the *Finding Our Way* podcast, "Why are people *afraid* of [or, alternatively, titillated by] questioning whether they're intersex or not?"

Angel was surely not the first trans* person to look for the origin or etiology of their "feeling different" in intersexuality. Nor was he the first to wonder if that etiology might be biological in nature, located specifically in the biology of intersexuality. As Thelma Wang's article in this special issue suggests, both scientists and lay people have argued that trans* people have so-called intersex brains, despite the fact that the MRI evidence for this claim is incoherent and inconclusive at best. Further, the intersex brain hypothesis reiterates the major mistakes of Brain Organization Theory (Fausto-Sterling 2012) and figures neurology as the ultimate biomedical arbiter of who is or isn't trans* or intersex. When we give biomedicine this kind of power, how does this reproduce eugenic and sexological presuppositions about the racial and sexual order of things? What alternative modes of life and flourishing do we thereby lose out on imagining and creatively materializing?

The controversy over Angel's posts thus brings to the fore a key tension between intersex and trans* communities. Broadly speaking, intersex and trans* people have different relationships to medicalization and medical technologies. As Noah Ben-Asher (2006) argues in key but undercited article, whereas trans* people have historically sought access to technologies of transition that have been medically gate-kept and often denied to them, intersex people have struggled for freedom from the nonconsensual imposition of such technologies. As Jules Gill-Peterson argues, treatments for trans* patients were developed through medical experimentation on intersex infants in the early twentieth century (2018). Trans studies has yet to fully reckon with this historical legacy, a legacy inseparable from the afterlives of chattel slavery and settler colonialism (Hartman 1997; Lugones 2007). While a key goal of much contemporary intersex activism is demedicalization, trans* communities hold diverse and complicated views on demedicalization. This doesn't mean that intersex and trans* freedom struggles are necessarily

at odds, but it does suggest that we need to carefully consider the nuances of how these different movements variously advocate for self-determination and bodily autonomy.

Unfortunately, the transitive yet simultaneously accumulative logic of Twitter and Instagram works against fostering deeper, more nuanced, and expansive considerations of the relationships between intersex and trans* experiences, politics, and knowledges. This raises the question: what kinds of trans* and intersex knowledge production does social media foster and foreclose? Although social media allows for the rapid dissemination of information, that information is often incomplete and it is always already ideologically nontransparent. Moreover, in an era where the lines between influencers and activism and clickbait and theory have been blurred by the corporate interests that control social media algorithms, the politics of digital representation require sustained and careful—dare we say, old-school—methods of close reading and critical interrogation. How can we craft intersex and trans* publics whose digital labor is grounded in more robust forms of critical cultural, scientific, and social justice literacy?

At its broadest, the Angel example suggests the continued need to move beyond a politics of inclusion and to shift toward a politics of transformation (Cohen 1997). Just as many lesbian and gay nonprofits all too frequently simply tack on the T without making substantial efforts to improve the life chances and well-being of trans* people, so too does the inclusion of the I in LGBTQI challenge us to hold queer and trans* politics and organizing accountable for expanding the life chances and well-being of intersex people.

Of course, we do not want to create a binary between intersex and trans* communities and/or studies. To do so would be to filter out and obscure the crucial issues that transverse and intertwine these expansive and dynamic multiplicities. Critical attention to antagonisms like those discussed above is vital for manifesting stronger relations of affinity, solidarity, and mutual aid between intersex and trans* freedom struggles.

On June 1, 2021 (the start of Pride Month), IJP posted to its Instagram account a graphic that reads “Intersex Liberation Is Trans Liberation,” which accompanied the following statement: “Now more than ever, our solidarity with each other is crucial because anti-trans legislation will always reinforce harmful medical interventions on intersex children.” The recent wave antitrans* legislation was written not only with explicit antitrans* bias but also with implicit anti-intersex animus. Indeed, it is bitterly ironic that any legislation that mandates genital inspection for kids extends the biopolitical medicalization and regulation of intersex and trans* bodyminds to cis youth populations as well. As we work to oppose these abhorrent antitrans* legislative initiatives, we hope that growing numbers of allies will realize the importance of simultaneously organizing to end

nonconsensual, medically unnecessary intersex surgeries as the flipside of the same coin of trans*/intersex justice.

David A. Rubin

Department of Women's and Gender Studies

University of South Florida

Religion and Joy

The audacity to imagine trans*/intersex-religiosity as joy can be mistaken for cruel optimism. In Lauren Berlant's terms, "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. . . . These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (Berlant 2011). Religion can and has been leveraged as an extension of state power to produce docile bodies that serve racial capitalism. But religion is not inherently pernicious; it becomes harmful if an obstacle to the good life it promises. When dislodged from capitalist humanism, trans*/intersex-religiosity facilitates time and space for reorienting what constitutes a good life through rupture, interruption, and alternative imaginaries.¹

Trans* theory, the study of religion, and confessional theology would benefit from more than a restrained tolerance of one another; each is complex and invaluable to the others. Before exploring this possibility, it is worth noting that affective resistance to this proposition might indicate an attachment to neoliberal individualism. The ongoing interrogation of sovereignty through an exposure of meritocracy and liberty as falsehoods, ironically meets religion with anxiety. Under this regime, one is presumed foolish to believe that one exercises autonomy under capitalism and equally irrational for failing to do so within religion. As scholars of religion and secularism have demonstrated, this perspective reproduces a colonial hierarchy that elevates enlightened atheism above monotheism, animism, superstition, and so on (Masuzawa 2005; Mahmood 2011; Chidester 1996). Might attachment to self-control impede the chaotic embrace of religious rapture?

Susan Stryker (2019) writes, "Most fundamentally, both transness and religion can and do function as the basis for a new semiosis—and a new sociality—predicated on nondominant epistemological, ontological, and cosmological premises." *TSQ* volume 6 issue 3 explores uses of religion for trans* theory and vice versa. Here, I press further and propose an embodied, affective exploration into frightful territory of earnest faith or belief. Typically, the study of religion analyzes human productions without commentary on divinity or otherworldliness. For this reason, many of us limit our scholarship to a handful of dimensions such as ritual, material objects, sacred texts, and so on. A more radical posture would allow for the possibility of excess beyond humanism—monstrosity,

animality, nonlife, and, perhaps most controversially, divinity (Jackson 2020; Snorton 2017; Jørstad 2019).²

What appeals to religious persons who participate in repetition through ritual is misdiagnosed and pathologized. Religiosity can serve a role that resembles that of food in working-class families:

Food is one of the few stress relievers and one of the few sites of clear continuity between children and parents. Moreover in scenes of economic struggle kids take on parental stress and seek to find comfort where the parents do as well. . . . So in the sociality of eating the complexity of maintaining dependency identifications can be simplified, providing ordinary and repeatable scenes of happiness, if not health. . . . These pleasures can be seen as interrupting the liberal and capitalist subject called to consciousness, intentionally, and effective will. (Berlant 2011)

In their book *Cruel Optimism*, the late Berlant demonstrates how obesity's rhetoric moralizes malnourished obesity as a failure of the working class rather than exploitative political economic structures. For religious folk, religion, like food, is necessary for life. It offers communal comfort and transcends three-dimensional capture. To denigrate "unhealthy" forms of food or religion is to miss the motivation and compulsion to return to consume and be consumed. Experiences of "self-abeyance, of floating sideways," which Berlant uses, apply also to ecstatic religiosity. Song, dance, shout, and being slain in the spirit might similarly be embraced as, "a relief, a reprieve, not a repair" (Berlant 2011). It need not have a telos. In fact, folks like myself would say that religious sociality offers a break, a cut, a temporal and spatial shattering of the oppressive world orders and structures that bind it.³

To understand Berlant's concept of "slow death" at the hands of religion or food requires an expansive spatial and temporal vision.⁴ Trans*/intersex-religiosity offers an embodied, sensorial, affective experience of alterity marked at once by jouissance and euphoria within new space-time dimensions. Perhaps a less frightening invitation might be to receive religion as an immersive science-fiction experience in which one's world is jolted out of order, perspectives are expanded, desire is recalibrated, and relationality is restructured. Octavia Butler's *Bloodchild*, for example, is replete with genres not foreign to biblical literature. Intuition and impasse operate much like prophetic figures. If science fiction invites readers to explore new world orders, trans*/intersex-religiosity moves in the opposite direction—it acts on us in erratic and intractable waves. To inhabit trans*/intersex-religiosity is to risk engaging forces beyond the political and social structures of this world, which have the potential to inspire new notions of a good life un beholden to capitalism. This does not ensure upward mobility,

social equality, or impermeability. Rather, the allure for religious folks like myself is that trans*/intersex-religiosity can reorient our relationships to time and space and also acknowledge actors beyond humanity.

Trans*/intersex-religiosity is an embrace of abject vulnerability without safeguards against exploitation. It makes us susceptible to manipulation. Here I am challenging an imagination that limits that dynamic to human relationships by considering the stakes for merely criticizing the problematic features of religion. It is to see a pathology rather than to interrogate technologies of diagnosis. On the June 7, 2021 podcast *Finding Our Way* intersex activist Sean Saifa Wall exclaims, “We treat doctors like God!” Faith in medicine as religion and practitioners as divine is an exercise in cruel optimism. “Prioritizing the difficulties associated with being trans*, the medical establishment has also excluded the possibility that being trans* may bring joy to one’s life” (Schuster 2021). As Iain Morland argues in this issue, medical interventions prioritize normalization defined in cisheterosexual terms over and against pleasure, joy, and even function. Conversely, trans*/intersex-religiosity offers joy insofar as it points to modes of being without definitive terms for those ways of existing, thereby evading an arrest of what is possible.

Michelle Wolff

Religion Department

Augustana College, Rock Island, IL

The Pieces in “The Intersex Issue”

The contributions to this special issue attend to shared histories of harm inflicted on intersex and trans* people, as well as strategies for coalition building. A number of authors featured here critique the gaze—especially the medical gaze—that seeks to regulate intersex and trans* bodies. In order to identify the mechanics of captivity and explore alternative imaginaries, in this special issue scholars, activists, artists, and pedagogues unpack various dimensions of regulation and tensions and commonalities among intersex and trans* communities. Taken together, contributors propose constructive possibilities forward by innovatively engaging the sciences and arts to dislodge ontological and epistemological sticking points.

The issue begins with challenges to medicine that simultaneously call for demedicalization. In “Intersex Surgery between the Gaze and the Subject,” Iain Morland moves beyond prior scholarship to investigate the motivations of intersex surgery. For Morland, surgical interventions focus not on genitals but on visual interpretations. In ways reminiscent of Kessler and McKenna’s (1978) famous analyses, he suggests that subjectivity is an effect of the gaze. Morland recognizes medical arguments as inherently tautological, as the impetus to see

sexual difference is imposed on intersex children and how they view their own bodies. Thelma Wang similarly explores the failings of scientific interventions, focusing on the so-called intersex brain. Wang examines the “trans-intersex nexus” within neuroscientific research in order to expose the mechanics of medical authority. The use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) technology essentializes intersex and trans* patients to reinforce normativity and transform the brain from a cultural metaphor, Wang explains, to an object of research. Focus then shifts to activism that holds medical practitioners to account for their harmful practices, featuring an interview with Sean Saifa Wall and Pidgeon Pagonis of the Intersex Justice Project (IJP). From the IJP’s historic win at Lurie Children’s Hospital to critiques of the ongoing role of race and class in state-legitimated violence, Wall and Pagonis theorize intersex and trans* collaborations for the future.

The ubiquitous role of colonialism and legislation of trans* and intersex subjectivities loom large in this special issue. In “Strange Tensions: Legacies of the Colonial Racial History of Trans Identities and Intersex Subjectivities,” Quincy Meyers explores how trans* and intersex subjectivity are rooted in colonialism, slavery, and the ungendering of Black flesh for capital. Decentering whiteness and drawing on Hortense Spillers and C. Riley Snorton’s concepts of captivity and fugitivity, Meyers argues in favor of establishing bodily autonomy oppositional to the “cis gaze.” Grounded in the work of Dean Spade, Suzanne Kessler, and Audre Lorde, Jennifer Yusin’s contribution emphasizes justice with intersex and trans* joy. Yusin illuminates the connections between the law and normativity, arguing that legibility within the law forestalls the actualization of systemic change. Alternatively, Yusin suggests turning to a body of poetic knowledge wherein the erotic demarcates spaces of intimate knowledge and transforms silence into language.

Creativity in various contexts motivates a number of the contributors in their interventions. Katie Goss analyzes Lucia Puenzo’s 2007 film *XXY* in order to generate alternative forms of creativity that center intersex as plastic and therefore resistant to neoliberal discourse and regulation. Goss recommends a “more-than-binary corporeality” for coalition building among intersex and trans* persons. Collective bodies, Goss explains, form an ecosystem of alliance through the transness of biological life. If the classroom lies in a creative space between scholarship and activism, pedagogy is vital to calls for resistance and change. Inspired by womanism and collaborative thinking with Saifa Sean Wall, Mel Michelle Lewis offers readers a rich notion of Intersex Justice Pedagogy that is developed in this contribution. In this critical intervention, Lewis stresses the importance of embodied knowledge and decolonial and intersectional approaches to teaching and learning as liberatory praxis for intersex people of color. Important contributions from artists based in Mexico, Chile, South Africa, and the United States

are also interspersed throughout the issue. Images and artwork by Jazz Bell, Adió Al Futuro, Toto Duarte, Gabrielle Le Roux, and Michelle Wolff include collaborative portraits, abstract paintings, photographs, and illustrations. Taken together, they suggest that artists have much to contribute to expansive conversations about intersex activism, teaching, and scholarship.

In sum, the contributors to “The Intersex Issue” extend new analytical frameworks and rethink the terms of subjectivity and sociality in myriad ways. We intentionally chose provocative contributions from established researchers and especially from a new generation of scholars, activists, and artists who are imagining intersex and trans* engagements, entanglements, genealogies, and temporalities anew. We hope you find a range of dynamic opportunities to rethink inherited and ingrained assumptions and knowledges in these pages. We are grateful to all the contributors, the general editors at *TSQ*, especially Francisco Galarte and Abraham Weil, and brilliant *TSQ* editorial assistant Tania Balderas, for helping us to curate this collaborative intellectual space and, we hope, many more to come.

The Editors

Michelle Wolff is an assistant professor of religion at Augustana College where they teach courses on ethics, religion, race, gender, and sexuality. Wolff’s manuscript on intersex scholar-priest and activist Sally Gross (1953–2014) is in process. Their most recent article, “Companion Sex Robots: Racialized Household Economics,” in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, received the 2021 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza New Scholar Award Third Place.

David A. Rubin is associate professor of women’s and gender studies at the University of South Florida, coeditor of *Queer Feminist Science Studies: A Reader* (2017), and author of *Intersex Matters: Biomedical Embodiment, Gender Regulation, and Transnational Activism* (2017), as well as numerous articles and essays.

Amanda Lock Swarr is associate professor of gender, women, and sexuality studies at the University of Washington. She is coeditor of *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (with Richa Nagar, 2010), author of *Sex in Transition* (2012), and recipient of the Sylvia Rivera Prize in Transgender Studies. Her forthcoming book is *Envisioning African Intersex: Challenging Colonial and Racist Legacies in South African Medicine*.

Notes

1. The term *humanism* here is a shorthand for what Elizabeth Povinelli describes as late liberal geontopower in *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. She defines this as a social project whose purpose is to keep an arrangement of accumulation in place through

the specific governance of difference and markets that stretches across human and nonhuman forms of existence (173). In other words, the population not the people, or demos, are the collective political subject in Western liberal democracies and some people are structured as noise within this framework (132–33). Alternatively, she suggests mutual coconstituting interpretation of ecosemiotic readings where all forms of existence, living and nonliving, semiotize (134). In so doing, Povinelli distinguishes her project from the Anthropocene, to which I am adding here attention to the religious, or divine.

2. Intersex activist Sean Saifa Wall recommends, “We have to confront our own monstrosity.” June 7, 2021 interview on the podcast *Finding Our Way*.
3. Religious trans* and intersex persons “undermine state and church regulation of sex as public property. Again, this is compatible with the Galatians account of baptism, which challenges coercive identity politics grounded in nationality, gender, or social status. By starting from baptism, trans* theology invites social buy-in without the pitfalls of human rights rhetoric.” See Wolff 2019: 98–110, 105.
4. “The phrase *slow death* refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in the population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence. The general emphasis of the phrase is on the phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality.” See Berlant 2007: 754–80.

References

- Adair, Cassius, Cameron Awkward-Rich, and Amy Martin. 2020. “Before Trans Studies.” *TSQ* 7, no. 3: 306–20.
- Aizura, Aren. 2017. Introduction to “Unrecognizable: On Trans Recognition.” Special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3: 606–11.
- Aizura, Aren Z., Trystan Cotton, Carsten Balzer/Carla LaGata, Marcia Ochoa, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz. 2014. Introduction to “Decolonizing the Transgender Imaginary.” Special issue, *TSQ* 1, no. 3: 308–19.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2007. “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency).” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4: 754–80.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bermon, Stéphane, and Pierre Yves-Garnier. 2021. “Correction: *Serum Androgen Levels and the Relation to Performance in Track and Field: Mass Spectrometry Results from 2127 Observations in Male and Female Elite Athletes*.” *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 55, no. 17: 1.
- Boellstorff, Mauro Cabral, Micha Cárdenas, Trystan Cotten, Eric A. Stanley, Kalaniopua Young, and Aren Z. Aizura. 2014. “Decolonizing Transgender: A Roundtable Discussion.” *TSQ* 1, no. 3: 419–39.
- Chase, Cheryl. 1998. “Hermaphrodites with Attitude: Mapping the Emergence of Intersex Political Activism.” *GLQ* 4, no. 2: 189–211.
- Chidester, David. 1996. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Chu, Andrea Long, and Emmett Harsin Dragar. 2019. “After Trans Studies.” *TSQ* 6, no. 1: 103–16.
- Cohen, Cathy J. 1997. “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ* 3, no. 4: 437–65.
- Davis, Georgiann. *Contesting Intersex: The Dubius Diagnosis*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

- Eckert, Lena. *Intersexualization: The Clinic and the Colony*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Ellison, Treva, Kai M. Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton. 2017. "We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans*/Studies." *TSQ* 4, no. 2: 162–69.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2000. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2012. *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*. New York: Routledge.
- Finding Our Way Podcast*. 2021. "Breaking Binaries and Intersex Justice with Sean Saifa Wall." Season 2, episode 8. <https://www.findingourwaypodcast.com/individual-episodes/s2e8>.
- Gill-Peterson, Jules. 2018. *Histories of the Transgender Child*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Grabham, Emily. 2007. "Citizen Bodies, Intersex Citizenship." *Sexualities* 10, no. 1: 29–48.
- Hartmann, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, Zakiyyah. 2020. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jørstad, Mari. 2019. *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, NonHumans, and the Living Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Judd, Bettina. 2014. *Patient*. New York: Black Lawrence.
- Karkazis, Katrina. 2008. *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Laurent, Bo, dir. 1997. "Hermaphrodites Speak!" Rohnert Park: Intersex Society of North America. Video, 30 min.
- Lugones, María. 2007. "Heterosexuality and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." *Hypatia*, 22, no. 1: 186–209.
- Magubane, Zine. 2014. "Spectacles and Scholarship: Caster Semenya, Intersex Studies, and the Problem of Race in Feminist Theory." *Signs* 39, no. 3: 761–85.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2011. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Malatino, Hil. 2019. *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morland, Iain. 2009. "Introduction: Lessons from the Octopus." *GLQ* 15, no. 2: 191–97.
- Morland, Iain. 2014. "Intersex." *TSQ* 1, nos. 1–2: 111–15.
- Mphahlele, Mahlatse. 2021. "'It's Bull': Former Olympic Champion Caster Semenya Blasts World Athletics." *Sowetan Live*, September 24. <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/sport/2021-09-24-its-bull-former-olympic-champion-caster-semenya-blasts-world-athletics/>.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2016. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Richardson, Sarah S. 2013. *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rubin, David A. 2017. *Intersex Matters: Biomedical Embodiment, Gender Regulation, and Transnational Activism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- schuster, stef. 2021. *Trans Medicine: The Emergence and Practice of Treating Gender*. New York: New York University Press.
- Snorton, C. Riley. 2017. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Steinmetz, Katy. 2014. "The Transgender Tipping Point." *Time*, May 28.
- Stryker, Susan. 2019. "General Editor's Introduction." *TSQ* 6, no. 3: 279–82.
- Stryker, Susan. 2020. "Institutionalizing Trans* Studies at the University of Arizona." *TSQ* 7, no. 3: 354–366.
- Wolff, Michelle. 2019. "A Diptych Reading of Christ's Transfiguration: Trans* and Intersex Aesthetics Reveal Baptismal Identity." *Theology and Sexuality* 25, nos. 1–2: 98–110.