

On the Intersection of Somatechnics and Transgender Studies

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Abstract The relationship between transgender studies and somatechnics has been generative. In this reflection on the intersection between somatechnics and transgender studies, the editorial collective of the *Somatechnics* journal provides a brief outline of what has been accomplished in the latter through an engagement with the former. This reflection is not intended to be an exhaustive review of trans*-somatechnics relations. Instead, here we highlight topics and modes of study that are indicative of critical interest in trans* matters at this time and how these matters intersect with our related areas of research. We outline how the somatechnical understanding of transgender as relational and constitutively realized through particular kinds of sociopolitical contexts explains the critical purchase of somatechnical investigations to trans* matters. We also cover somatechnics and transgender studies' engagements with technologies of mobility, race, and coloniality as well as media. We suggest that work in the journal on somatechnics and transgender studies constitutes a trans-substantial dialogue that trans*-identified scholars make specific via their contributions to social sciences and the humanities.

Keywords somatechnics, transgender studies, race, coloniality, flows, bodies, technologies

In this reflection on the intersection between somatechnics and transgender studies, the editorial collective of the *Somatechnics* journal provides a brief outline of what has been accomplished in the latter through an engagement with the former. That is, what kinds of transgender studies have been made possible through a somatechnics approach to bodies and technologies? This reflection is not intended to be an exhaustive review of trans*-somatechnics relations (for that we encourage readers to peruse the journal at length!). Instead, here we highlight topics and modes of study that are indicative of critical interest in trans* matters at this time and how these matters intersect with our related areas of research. In his seminal book, *Black on Both Sides*, C. Riley Snorton (2017: 2) theorizes “trans” as “more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival,” which intersects with “blackness” as signifying “an enveloping environment and

condition of possibility.” As a collective comprising cis-gender, queer, white scholars, the authors benefit from social categorizations that enable mobility across critical, political, and geographical terrain. Some of us write from Indigenous Country as a result of the transportation of economies, peoples, and racial ideologies across oceans and lands, which have enabled contemporaneous positions of white settler privilege. We are conscious of the possibilities and limitations enabled by our engagement with transgender studies. Our comments here build on the important contributions trans* scholars, activists, and artists have made to the pages of *Somatechnics*, and we hope that our somatechnics work offers a space for trans* voices, experiences, and theories, particularly for Indigenous and trans* peoples of color.

The relationship between transgender studies and somatechnics has been generative. Informed by an understanding of the body (soma) and technology (technics) as constitutively interdependent (see Sullivan 2014), *Somatechnics* publishes work in a variety of disciplines that examines the body-technology nexus. Somatechnics as a methodology and theory has been purposefully left to construction by its different applications. That is, there are no founders or foundations for somatechnics as such. Scholars, activists, and educators participating in the Somatechnics Research Network and themed symposia were encouraged to define the concept through the productive relations of their work in a move that we would now, with Karen Barad’s 2007 *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, call an onto-epistemological move of knowing-in-being. *Somatechnics* in some sense codifies the term and by way of publishing and marketing exigencies offers a definition in the journal blurb. In practice, somatechnics research is improvised by critical attention to queer, feminist, and critical race matters and applied to explicate how bodies are technologized and become the site for politics, performance, philosophy, media, design, sport, medicine, law, education, and environment, among other assemblages. For the purposes of this reflective piece, Nikki Sullivan (2014: 188) offers a useful definition of *somatechnics* as investigating how the body is “continuously engendered in relation to others and to a world.” Iris van der Tuin and Holly Randell-Moon (2019) explored this engendering further in a recent editorial on the somatechnics of social categorizations in which the socially informed methods of identifying and differentiating bodies can be usefully understood as somatechnical. Sullivan (2014: 188) continues their definition of the term by suggesting:

The categories of being that are integral to our (un)becoming-with, and the orientation(s) that shape them, are somatechnological (rather than simply natural or cultural, internal or external to us, enabling or oppressive). For example,

transgender, like forms of bodily being commonly presumed *not* to be technologically produced, is a heterogeneous somatechnological construct that comes to matter in contextually specific ways and in relation to other discursive formations.

This somatechnical understanding of transgender as relational and constitutively realized through particular kinds of sociopolitical contexts explains the critical purchase of somatechnical investigations to trans* matters. Notable trans* special issue themes have featured in the journal, including “Trans Temporalities” (Fisher, Katri, and Phillips 2017) and “Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies” (Keegan, Horak, and Steinbock 2018a), along with significant individual articles (Bremer 2013; Sundén 2015; Weaver 2013). These self-identified “trans” topics do not account for the diversity of approaches to bodies, gender, embodiment, technology, and representations that fall within the purview of transgender studies. Aside from the intentional work of defining (or purposely not defining) the parameters of both the journal and somatechnics as a methodology and theory by, for example, planning special issues to intervene in emerging interdisciplinary conversations and areas of theorization, the selection of books to be reviewed forms another mode of engagement for an academic journal. A survey of the book review editor’s mailbox over the past few years provides insight into how authors and publishers position *Somatechnics* in terms of scope, as well as (inter- or trans)disciplinarily and politically. Our book review editor, Caitlin Janzen, has been very fortunate to receive a wide range of new books on trans* theory and identity published over the past few years. In fact, it is evident based both on the books we receive from publishers and the reviewers we have been privileged to feature, that *Somatechnics* is increasingly considered a venue for trans* theorization. This is in part due to our lineage as a research network founded in 2005 at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, and based at the Institute for LGBT Studies at the University of Arizona in the United States during the 2010s, and partially due to those past issues mentioned above. In any event, it is a designation that we nourish by providing a space of engagement for the ideas and propositions put forward in these new developments in trans* theory.

These engagements are at least two-way discussions. In the strongest reviews, not only are the arguments of the book authors’ brought forward, but the reviewers (trans*-identified writers and theorists themselves) write back to the authors in a trans-substantial dialogue, pushing the arguments beyond their original problematics (both in context and communities) and insisting on an even deeper intersectional analysis that is responsive to anticolonial, antiracist, and critical dis/ability movements. For example, in a review of Aren Z. Aizura’s *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (2018), Nael Bhanji (2020) reiterates the author’s analysis of destination gender-reassignment

surgery as a form of “biomedical tourism” (Aizura), writing, “Mobility is not a universal right but a neoliberal fantasy that has material effects. Delimited by the differential positioning of bodies, and constrained by the realities of capitalism, the allure of transsexual reinvention is always already haunted by the specter of racialized otherness.” Similarly, in the same issue of *Somatechnics* C. L. Quinan (2020) reviews Toby Beauchamp’s (2019) *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices*. Again, the ethical implications of homonormative and transnormative politics and desires arise, this time in the strategies of transgender advocacy groups. Quinan (2020) highlights Beauchamp’s analysis of how the inability of “some mainstream transgender rights organizations . . . to address how the policing of gender is intertwined with that of racial difference” results in “strategies and approaches that actually reconsolidate US nationalism and allow for increased policing of those who fall outside normative categories.” As Beauchamp’s analysis illustrates, the surveillance technologies exacted on and resisted by gender-nonconforming bodies have been perfected through centuries of practice on colonized, racialized, and disabled bodies (on this, see Simone Browne’s [2015] pivotal *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*).

While the above books and reviews point to the enduring life and death necessity of theorizing the trans* body as it is made visible through inscriptions of gender, race, class, and dis/ability, there is a contemporaneous indication that the body is just the beginning in the future of transgender theory. In *Going Stealth* as well as in Cael M. Keegan’s (2018) *Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender*, which was reviewed in *Somatechnics* by Atalia Israeli-Nevo (2019), trans* is extended beyond the corporeal to do more than identity work. In both books, trans* is skillfully employed as an analytic. In Keegan’s reading of the Wachowski sisters’ filmography, trans* is innovatively expanded into an immersive aesthetic experience. Thus Keegan (2018: 6) “evol[es] the cinematic sensorium in the same manner that trans* disrupts, rearranges and evolves discrete genders and sexes.” As his reviewer, Israeli-Nevo (2019: 414), identifies, however, “throughout the book it seems that it can also be the other way around; through his reading, one can start to engage in the notion of cinema as a technology of trans*. Keegan’s sensorial reading invites us to feel differently the trans* body.” Hence trans* technologies, trans* epistemologies, trans* aesthetics, and trans* analytics are at once sutured to, borne out of, and enacted on bodies (some more than others), and yet they are not confined to the corporeal.

The increasingly “anticolonial turn” in the book reviews is illustrative of a critical inquiry into the racialized assemblages that inform transgender studies but also the critical purchase of somatechnics for understanding the racialized constitution of bodies. The first issue of *Somatechnics*, entitled “Combat Breathing: State Violence and the Body in Question,” suggests that Frantz Fanon’s

critical corpus encapsulates how “the indissociable relation between technologies and bodies is always bought into uncompromising focus” (Perera and Pugliese 2011: 1–2). As the editors Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese note, “To be on the receiving end of state violence is always to be reduced to a body in question” (2). Returning to Snorton’s account of the movement of trans* into blackness, the somatechnics of race and whiteness demarcate the racializing assemblages and function of coloniality in biopolitically producing bodies for state violence. At the same time, somatechnics’ understanding of bodies as performed and lived in movement can also illustrate the experiential modes of refusal to these forms of violence and outline how bodies and communities have always existed outside biopolitical state vectors. In a later editorial for *Somatechnics*, Randell-Moon (2019) discusses how Jasbir K. Puar’s *The Right to Maim* (2017) offers somatechnical insights into the intersectional capacitation and debilitation of bodies which are tied to racialized biopolitics. In her discussion of the relationship between trans* bodies and the right to maim, Puar (2017: 56) distinguishes between trans becoming and becoming trans in the following way: “Trans becoming masquerades as a teleological movement, as if one could actually become trans” in a “linear telos, as a prognosis that becomes the body’s contemporary diagnosis and domesticates the trans body into the regulatory norms of permanence.” Becoming trans* highlights the “impossibility of linearity, permanence, and end points” (56). As with her previous work on homonationalism (2007), Puar asks queer scholars and activists to consider what is at stake in the incorporation of queer and trans* rights into state recognition and who is able to embody “progress” as a signifier of state benevolence. In the settler colonial context from which Randell-Moon writes as a “beneficiary” of state violence, and which recently “celebrated” marriage equality, what does it mean to have identity recognition yoked to a state that continues the failure to recognize Indigenous sovereignties? During the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, the Sistergirls of the Tiwi Islands and other Indigenous trans* and queer peoples contested the terms of state equality by pointing out how the transmission of the survey was in English and the presumption of a home address for receiving it posited a particular kind of Australian subject as a respondent to state address (Noyes 2017). This activism highlights how Indigenous and First Nations sovereignties, relations, and identities remain paramount and critical to livability as trans*. The strand of somatechnics work focused on coloniality and critical race studies may prove helpful for disclosing how transgender studies and subjects emerge from specific geographical and historical locations that are “the product of a largely . . . settler culture” (Aizura et al. 2014: 308).

And yet it must be acknowledged that there is also a version of somatechnics that focuses on questions of gender and sexuality, including in intersections with

transgender studies, that leaves somatechnics racially unmarked with an assumed whiteness. The journal has so far published only one article by a self-identified Indigenous author, and, despite the provocation of the first issue, investigations of Indigenous-specific matters remain marginal in the journal. As the current editorial collective, we have addressed the white focus of somatechnics by diversifying the editorial board to include more scholars of color and Indigenous scholars. We are committed to producing multifaceted and rich discussions that both consider race as a primary technology that engenders the body through its enactments of difference, and consider how technology is always already equipped with both racializing and imperialist functions. We look forward to analyses that imagine possibilities for recoding and harnessing technology for the aims of resistance and resurgence.

What is transmitted through a somatechnics lens delimits particular areas of focus and draws attention to modes of communication and representation. In their editorial introduction for “Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies,” Cael M. Keegan, Laura Horak, and Eliza Steinbock (2018b: 1) offer that cinema engenders bodies that “touch each other, constitute each other.” In outlining cinematic relations as trans*, the editors, as we understand it, are suggesting that trans* as somatechnics forms assemblages that (however temporarily) orient bodies to screen. Such work is productive for understanding media technologies and their flows. In Randell-Moon’s field of research in media and communications, terms such as *convergence*, *seriality*, and *transmedia*, for instance, constitute an accepted form of grammar, but their theoretical genealogy as linked to cultural notions of biological variation, incorporation, and divergence could be further unpacked. Accounts of transmedia rarely probe the genealogies and orientations of what “trans” means in terms of media being sent “across” systems and formats. As Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008: 11) argue, there are many different ways of conceiving “trans,” each with political implications for how this substrate engenders relations. They suggest that “trans-” “marks the difference between the implied nominalism of ‘trans’ and the explicit relationality of ‘trans-,’ which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix” (11). How might trans- methodologies then account for the relationships engendered by the trans-ing process of spreading media across spaces and the cultivation of particular media audiences therein? (see also Chen and Olivares 2014).

Our mentioning of a “trans-substantial dialogue” above captures on many levels what transgender studies brings to the humanities and social sciences in the widest sense possible, and to somatechnics research specifically, and what it is that trans*-identified scholars make specific via their contributions to special issues, journal articles, and conversational (critical and creative) book reviews. The study

and theorization of the body-technology-world relationship in trans- (including trans*) keys can help deepen our scholarly understanding of transmedia but also other phenomena such as transgenerational, transnational, and even transdisciplinary flows. Indeed, how might trans- methodologies account for the relationships engendered by the trans-ing process of disseminating technics, subjects, or discourses across spaces and through time, and the cultivation of particular classified technologies, bodies, or identities therein? Somatechnics and transgender studies are about the dialoguing across human-human, human-nonhuman, natural-cultural divides that are internal or external to us, and that may be enabling or oppressive, in various milieus and environments. Such dialogue seeks to radically upset the long-treasured dichotomies of organic and technological, then and now, us and them, by occupying a space of imbrication, entanglement, and mutuality.

Van der Tuin has written previously about trans-substantial dialoguing across identitarian domains, a form of dialoguing that we, as an editorial collective, engage in both among ourselves and in our work with authors and reviewers. In *Generational Feminism: New Materialist Introduction to a Generative Approach*, van der Tuin (2015) reflected on reading and affectively relating to Stryker's 1994 article "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," a relating that was based on trans-substantial dialogue. Stryker's critical engagement powerfully transmits the point about the need to horizontalize somatechnically produced inequalities. Notably at a crucial point in the original text, the creature learns to position itself in relation to stories of European imperial and colonial discovery, weeping "over the hapless fate of" the "original inhabitants" of what are now known as the Americas (Shelley 1993: 92). These elements of self-subjectification reiterate how settler colonial logics underprop somatechnical constitutions of the self and relations with others. Van der Tuin wrote about Stryker's text as addressing the performativity of boundary-work, as acting as a reminder of where lines are drawn and how Stryker and her readers are all implicated in such boundary-work. Echoing Sullivan's somatechnological enablement and oppression, we learn and reflect on the fact that "boundary-work closes down as it opens up. In fact, even in its oppressive nature, a closing-down is never final" (van der Tuin 2015: 7). Readers of "My Words" are affected by Stryker's style, her courage, and the engagement with her own body, the emergent bodies of those who identify as trans*, the body politic, and Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Previously, van der Tuin testified that this affection got her going, that it is part of a "generative force that infuses the feminist archive" (7–8) by way of what she would call, with her *Somatechnics* colleagues, a "trans-substantial dialogue."

Caitlin Janzen is a PhD candidate in sociology at York University. Her current work brings together feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies to explore the aesthetics and ethics of aggression in the feminine. Caitlin has published in *Hypatia*, *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, and *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*.

Holly Randell-Moon is senior lecturer in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies, Charles Sturt University, Australia. Her publications on popular culture, biopower, and gender and sexuality have appeared in the edited book collection *Television Aesthetics and Style* (2013) as well as the journals *Feminist Media Studies*, *Social Semiotics*, and *Refractory*. Along with Ryan Tippet, she is the editor of *Security, Race, Biopower: Essays on Technology and Corporeality* (2016). She is coeditor of the journal *Somatechnics*.

Iris van der Tuin is professor in theory of cultural inquiry at Utrecht University. Trained as a feminist epistemologist and working as an interdisciplinarian, Iris works at the intersection of philosophies of science and the humanities (including science and technology studies), cultural theory, and cultural inquiry.

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